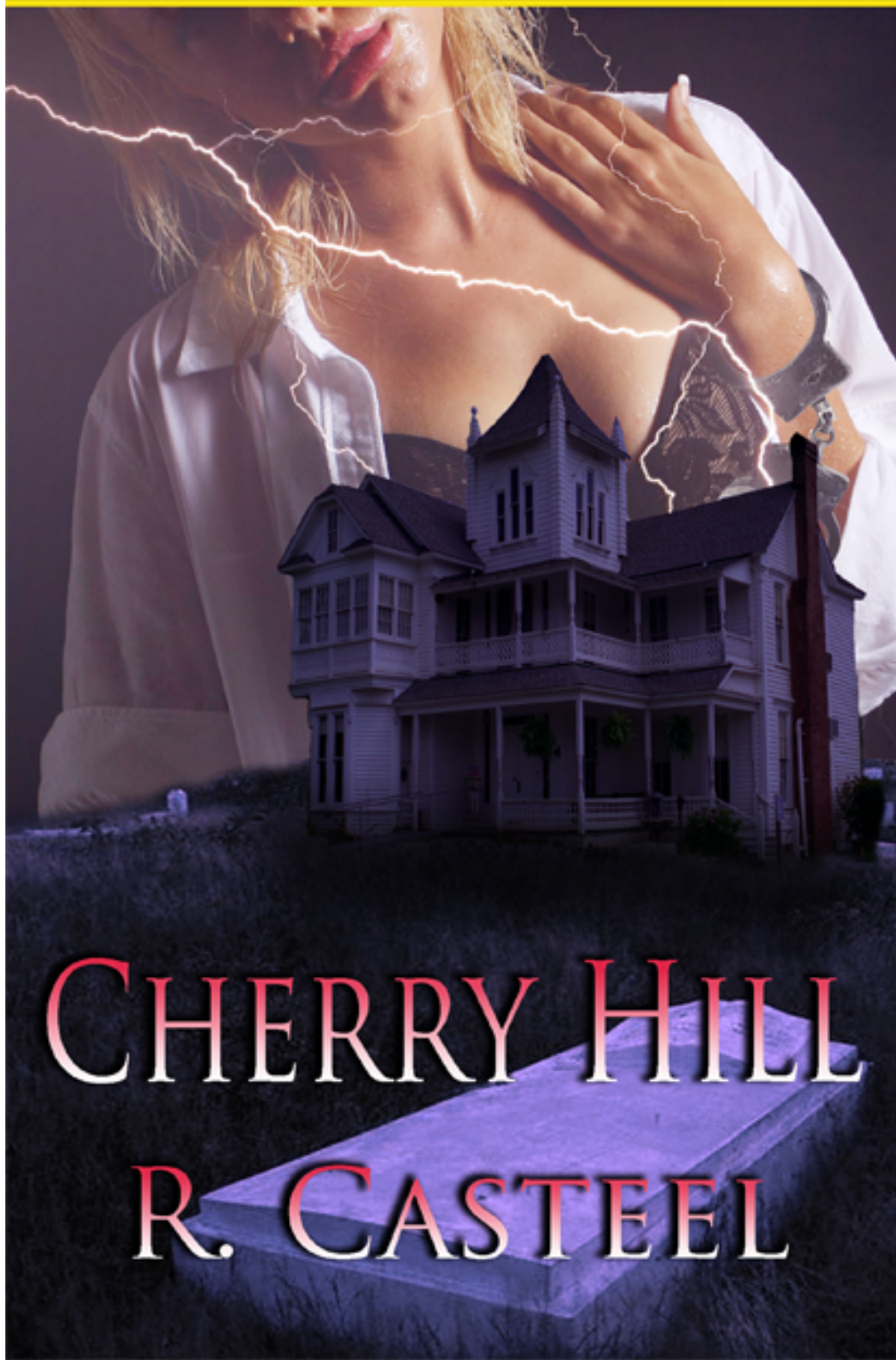


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



CHERRY HILL
R. CASTEEL

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Cherry Hill

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CHERRY HILL

R. Casteel

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Chapter One

Renée Evans sat parked in front of the locked gates at the end of Cherry Hill Lane. Trees bowed and swayed before the storm and the wind buffeted her vehicle. Lightning split the sky. She flinched as the brilliant flash silhouetted the old run-down mansion.

There had been a foreboding chill about the place when she had last visited her grandfather as a little girl. Now, at twenty-seven years of age, that same feeling crept over her.

Renée gripped the old skeleton key and opened the car door. Rain lashed at her face as she stepped out and before she had a chance to fully open her umbrella, it was ripped from her hands and disappeared into the night.

"Damn you, Grandfather, and your cursed will!" she shouted against the wind.

Shielding her eyes from the wind-driven rain, she made her way to the gates. She had serious doubts that the rusty old lock would even open. Sure enough, the key was useless, she was soaked and the nearest hotel was on the other side of town. Not that she had the money for a hotel. It had taken every cent she could scrape together to get here.

It didn't matter that she had a bank account with fifty thousand dollars sitting in it. If she spent one lousy dime on anything other than the house, the will would be broken and she would be left with nothing.

Renée turned away.

The lock fell open and the gates swung wide. She swallowed against the lump of fear that rose to choke off her air. Renée ran to her van, climbed in and locked the door. She sat behind the wheel staring through the windshield at the open gate and the unkempt, overgrown grounds beyond.

There is a logical explanation, there just has to be. Locks and gates didn't just open by themselves.

"What am I doing here?" she asked herself for what must have been the hundredth time. She knew the answer. An ironclad will bound her to the estate as securely as if she were shackled in leg irons.

Renée drove through the gate and made her way along what once had been a beautiful driveway. Tree branches scraped the roof of her van. Weeds and trash flashed through the glare of headlights and struck her vehicle. She gripped the steering wheel in white-knuckled tension.

The dark shadow of the mansion loomed before her.

She climbed out of the vehicle and rushed to the front door. Using the key provided by the attorney, Renée unlocked the door to the mansion.

At least this key works. She wasn't all too sure if she could have handled another self-opening lock.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside. A wave of stale, dry, musty air hit her full in the face. From somewhere upstairs, a loose shutter banged.

Renée jumped.

With the aid of her flashlight, she found the wall switch and turned it on.

"Damn, I knew their promise to have the power turned back on was too good to be true." With the way her luck was going the water faucets would prove the same result. "What else can go wrong tonight?"

Her flashlight dimmed and went out.

"I shouldn't have asked."

Her frustration mounted. Renée went back out to her van and grabbed her suitcase and the small backpack she had prepared for just such an emergency.

Back inside, she removed a candle from the pack and lit it. The small flickering light added dim, dancing shadows to the already surreal atmosphere inside the huge room.

White sheets covered the furniture like large ghosts ready to leap to life and shout "Boo!" If they did, the estate be damned, she was out of there—for good.

Renée shielded the flame and slowly made her way through the lower part of the house, checking each room before climbing the stairs. She wasn't sure what she was looking for or what she would do if she found it. That is—if she knew she found what she didn't know she was looking for.

She laughed at the illogical circle her tired brain was taking.

Renée passed the door to the master bedroom. Grandfather died in that room. If it took a year to redo the old house, she would wait and do his room last. She wasn't superstitious or anything, but there were some doors to her past that were better left unopened—at least for now.

After sixteen hours on the road, she felt dirty. There might not be running water in the house, but as long as it was raining outside she would have a bath. Even a cold shower was better than nothing.

Renée made her way downstairs and headed toward the back door. If she remembered anything good of her early childhood, it was the partially sheltered back patio. Misbehavior in the house resulted in banishment from the house. It soon became a refuge from the evil lurking inside.

She undressed, took a bar of her favorite lavender-scented soap and stepped out into the rain.

* * * * *

Warren Bailey sat on the windowsill half listening to the squeaking bed springs, the moaning and screams from the next room. The rest of his attention was focused on the old mansion.

A dim light briefly showed in a window. It disappeared only to show again from a different room.

A few minutes later, the bedroom door opened and he turned his eyes away from the window. Jim walked naked across the room toward the kitchen. Through the open door, Warren watched Jim's girlfriend open the dresser drawer and remove a large purple dildo.

"You want to take over?" Jim asked. "Tina's wore me out."

"So what else is new?" Warren chuckled.

Tina gave him a sensuous smile and a clear view of the action as she slipped the dildo between her legs.

"If the whole football team can't satisfy her, what makes you think I can? Besides, I don't like sloppy seconds." Warren turned his gaze back toward the old house. "There's a light in the old Duryea place."

"Must be the new owner. Rumor has it the old man's granddaughter was coming home." Jim came over to the window. "She sure picked a hell of a night to get here."

"That place is sure run-down." Warren watched as the light appeared in an upstairs window. "They say the old skinflint fired the help and became a recluse."

"It wasn't for lack of money," Jim scratched his balls and stroked his cock, trying to resurrect some life into it for another go-around with Tina. "I heard the bastard was loaded."

"Pooh Bear," Tina called from the bedroom. "Come back to bed and I'll suck some life into it."

"Hey, Warren," Jim whispered. "Know where I can borrow a football team for a couple hours?"

He patted his pockets. "Sorry...fresh out," he said as he grinned.

Jim groaned, "Coming, love."

Warren chuckled.

His brother made his way back to the bed without bothering to close the door. If there was one thing Tina liked better than sex, it was having someone watch her having it.

Tonight, she was going to be disappointed. His interest was on the Duryea place and how the new owner might further his own plans.

Here he was, twenty-three damn years old and his father treated him like a novice fucking rookie who didn't know which end of a hammer to use. He was also damn tired of the verbal abuse on the job. Something had to give before it came to World War III between them.

Lightning split the sky, and in that moment Warren found himself staring at perfection.

What Tina had failed to do with her dildo or the live exhibition coming from the bedroom had been instantly achieved with one flash of lightning on a dark, stormy night.

Warren Bailey Jr. became aroused to the point of discomfort.

The light beyond the window began to move and he knew his chance of seeing the woman again was gone.

Squeaking bedsprings brought his thoughts back to the present and he glanced over to the door. Tina knelt on the bed and Jim was doing her doggie-style. He shook his head almost in disgust. He and Jim were a lot alike, but in one aspect they differed greatly. If he had a woman like the one next door, he'd be damned if he would share her with anyone.

Warren stood up and left, quietly closing the door behind him. Silently, he wondered about the mystery woman and if she had a man to keep her warm and safe at night. Not that he would ever have the chance, but what the hell—it didn't hurt to dream.

* * * * *

Renée felt exhilarated and alive for the first time in... Damn, she couldn't remember. *Has my life become so dull that a bath in the rain seems so wonderful? Or was it standing naked under the eyes of the man in the window next door, knowing you could see him but he couldn't see you?*

Whichever it was, it wasn't enough to get her past the first bedroom she found, throw off the cover and wrap herself up in the blanket.

Tomorrow was another day.

Melinda Evans reached out to her while Luther Duryea, with an evil grin and a sadistic laugh, held her back. His fingers bit deep into her mother's flesh. Blood trickled down her arm and there was nothing Renée could do.

She woke in the middle of the night disoriented, cold and wet. Her sheets, damp from her own sweat, were wrapped mummy style around her body. The old nightmare that had woken her became all the more real as she struggled in the pitch-blackness to free herself.

With the tangled sheets removed, she drew the discarded spread around her and sat on the bed with her knees drawn up to her chin. Exhaustion pulled heavily on her eyes. Renée fought against sleep, lest the nightmare return.

* * * * *

The slam of a vehicle door brought her awake. Renée scooted off the bed and began pulling clothes from the suitcase with all the care of a tornado. An engine roared to life and she heard the vehicle drive off. She ran to the window in time to see an electric company pickup drive out of sight.

"Better late than never," she sighed. "Now, if someone would be so kind to turn the water on."

From the bathroom across the hall, the clamor of banging pipes, hissing air and the sputtering of water echoed through the quiet upstairs.

Renée ran to turn the water off and then went downstairs.

"Where do I begin?" In the light of day, the house appeared ten times—no, a hundred times worse than it had under the dim glow of her candle.

When her mother had disappeared, Grandfather told her, "If you have an ounce of Duryea blood in your veins, this will make you a better person."

She wasn't sure if cleaning up the pigsty would make her a better person or not. More likely, by the time she finished with the house and yard she would be ready to dig him back up just for the pleasure of killing him again.

The one thing she remembered about the place was how spotless it had been, hence another of the many reasons for her banishment to the patio. 'Course back then, almost everything she had done came under one reason or another for a visit outside.

"It's not going to get done by standing here looking at it." Renée went out to her van and hauled the vacuum and cleaning supplies inside.

Three hours later, the doorbell rang.

"Who the hell could that be?" She looked down at her dirty jeans, brushed back a lock of damp hair and went to the door.

A man wearing a city utility uniform greeted her with a stern frown.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"Are you Ms. Evans?"

"Yes, I am. What seems to be the problem?"

He tore a pink sheet of paper from a pad and thrust it at her.

"What's this?" Renée began reading. "Why the hell am I receiving a citation?" she bristled.

"It's against the law for a property owner to turn on their own water."

"I have no idea what you are talking about. My water was turned on the first thing this morning and I assure you, I didn't do it. First off, I don't even know how it's done."

"I've heard that one before and it doesn't hold water." He laughed at his own joke.

Renée wasn't laughing—she was boiling mad. "I swear I never turned the water on."

"Maybe it was one of your resident ghosts," he smirked.

She wanted to wipe the grin off his face with her dirty mop.

"You did know the old place is haunted, didn't you?"

Renée laughed, "If you mean strange, I would agree with you. Getting back to this citation," she held the paper up, "isn't there something we can do about this?"

"Well," his eyes slowly traveled over her body and his lips took on a lecherous grin.

She slammed the door in his face. "Damn!" Renée stomped her foot. *Insolent swine.*

From somewhere inside the house came a noise that sounded mysteriously like low laughter and a chill crept up her spine.

Old houses make noises all the time.

Renée wiped a strand of blonde hair out of her face and tossed the citation on the hall table.

Haunted, she laughed at the idea. "If you don't like a clean house, Mr. Ghost, you can kiss my ass."

The rickety ladder swayed as she climbed it. Near the top, Renée picked up her washrag to clean the window. Water trickled down the window, leaving small etchings of mud upon the glass.

Several minutes later, she came down the ladder and stood looking at the clean window. "Last one, and this room is done."

"Hello, Ms. Evans."

She whirled around to see a man standing in the doorway. "Who the *hell* are you, and what are you doing in my house?"

He took a step toward her and extended his hand. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. I'm Billy Jacobs, your grandfather's lawyer. My friends call me BJ."

I'm sure they do, Renée thought as she ignored his hand. *Probably stands for Blow Job.*

Mr. Jacobs slowly lowered his arm. "I was hoping we could become close friends."

His white-toothed smile reminded her of a dog just before it bit you. "Mr. Jacobs..."

"Please, call me BJ." He lifted his arm.

Is this idiot going to try and shake my hand again?

His fingers trailed down her bare arm.

Renée fumed. "Get out, and the next time you come here, make sure you knock."

He chuckled. "Don't be unreasonable, *Renée*. After all, I control the purse strings to a lot of money."

The way he said her name almost made her gag. "That's right, Mr. Jacobs, and that is all you control. I am *not* part of the bargain." Renée turned her back on him. "You can show yourself to the door."

Renée repositioned the ladder and went back to work. Her fingers gripped the cloth and her knuckles turned white. She heard the soft click of the front door and breathed a long sigh of relief. The more she thought about the insolent Jacobs, the more aggravated she became. Something about the man made her skin crawl.

A thread from the old rag caught on the bucket handle. She jerked it loose and became unbalanced. Renée felt the ladder going over and jumped, only to have the bucket of dirty water dump all over her head.

“Dammit!” she wiped her face and spit the foul-tasting crap from her mouth. Water pooled around her feet and spread across the floor. “I just spent six hours cleaning in here and now look at it.”

She frowned at the sound of loud knocking on the front door. “Now, who the hell could that be?”

Chapter Two

"Get your lazy ass out of bed!"

Warren lifted an eyelid and his father's hazy figure swam into view.

"I don't care what time you got in after a night of drinking and whoring, it's time to go to work."

Warren closed his eye and groaned.

"Dammit, boy!" his bed shook as his father kicked it.

"All right, I'm getting up." Warren swung his feet out of bed.

"I swear to God, the better part of you and your brother ran down your mother's legs. I just can't understand it. Wastin' all that time on computer games when he could be making a living doing *real* work."

"Like you, Dad?" Warren pulled on a pair of old work jeans.

"Hell yes, like me. And you could be doing the same if you put your mind to it, instead of hanging around with Jim and that slut Tina."

"What galls you more, the fact that he makes more money than you, or that he gets more..."

The smack across his face stopped his comment in mid-sentence.

"You watch that mouth of yours, boy. I'm leaving in fifteen minutes. If you ain't in the truck, you can by God walk to work for all I care."

His father stomped out of the room and down the stairs. "Thank God your mother ain't around to see how fucked up her boys have become. It's all her damn fault anyway, babying you two like she did. I swear..."

Warren shook his head and finished dressing. It was going to be one of those days where nothing he did would be right, and anything that happened at work was sure to be his fault – even if he wasn't there.

With exactly one minute to spare, he was sitting in the truck waiting. He waited some more and watched the minutes tick by. His fingers drummed on the door.

"Typical bullshit mind games." He spat blood out the open window and examined his split, puffy lower lip in the side mirror.

Ten minutes later, Warren Sr. came strolling toward the truck. Just like he figured, his dad had that infuriating little grin he had come to hate with a passion.

He opened the door and climbed in behind the wheel. "You got your tool belt?" He started the truck and put it in gear without waiting for a reply.

"Would it make any difference if I didn't?"

"Nope," he backed out the drive and headed down the road. "It will still take you most of the morning to mark the bows on the load of studs we got in yesterday."

"Why is it always my job to mark the studs? Let Mike or one of the other apprentices do it for a change."

"That way when it's time to mud the walls, I'll know whose ass to chew if the sheetrock is fucked up. You can just get that surly look off your face. When I think you are ready to tackle a job on your own, I'll tell you."

"That's bullshit and you damn well know it." He braced himself for another backhand. "I've been swinging a hammer since before I could spell it."

"You wouldn't last a week out on your own or working for someone else," his father scoffed at the idea. "You don't have a clue as to what it takes."

Warren stared out the window and silently fumed.

After several long minutes, his dad spoke.

"If you think you are so damn smart and know so much, check with the new owner of that run-down Duryea place on Cherry Hill Lane. Damn place needed a match put to it a long time ago."

"Maybe I will."

His dad laughed and turned into the driveway of the new home they were building.

"How did you know the new owner had moved into the Duryea place?" Warren opened the door.

"Boy, where the fuck's your head at this morning? We just drove past the place." His dad got out of the truck and picked up his tool belt. "Get started on those studs."

"I know what I have to do. You don't have to remind me every five minutes." He climbed out of the truck and walked over to a large stack of lumber. Warren began sighting down each board, marking the direction of the crown, and separating the good boards from the crap the lumberyard was passing off as Grade Two materials.

The rest of the crew showed up and started grabbing tools. Soon the air was filled with buzzing saws, the *rat-a-tat-tat* of hammers and the *ker – thunk* of the air gun.

A shadow fell across the board he was marking and he looked up.

"I haven't got time to wait for the lumberyard to deliver more of this crap. Take the truck and bring back twenty two-by-six and thirty two-by-four studs." Warren Sr. turned to walk away. "Don't be all day about it either."

"Ya'sah, Master," he mumbled under his breath. "Bend over and I'll show you where you can put them."

Warren dropped the two-by-six, tossed his tool belt into the truck and left the worksite with a squeal of tires as he turned onto the road. The cell phone rang and he smiled, knowing who was calling even as he picked it up.

"G'dammit," his father yelled, "I'm taking the next set of tires out of your paycheck."

"Make up your mind. Do you want to me hurry, or just don't take all day?" he asked.

"Be back after lunch. With as little as you do around here, I won't even know you're gone."

"Whatever." Warren clicked off the phone and then dialed the lumberyard. He felt sorry for the apprentice who was going to be on the receiving end of his father's fragile temper, at least until *he* got back.

"Hello, Bill?" he slowed down as a light turned yellow.

"I've been expecting your call." Laughter filled his ear. "Did the old man throw a fit over the load of studs we sent out?"

"Need you ask?"

"No, but you know how it is. We don't have time to cull the bad boards or we wouldn't get anything done around here."

"I'm on the way. I'll see you in a few." Warren turned the phone off. The light turned green and he worked his way through the traffic.

* * * * *

With the last of the boards loaded onto the truck, Warren glanced at his wristwatch. If he went straight back to the worksite, everyone would be down at the local café. Even dear ol' dad, who normally brown-bagged his lunch, would be forced to eat out.

Today, a slight detour was in order.

A few minutes later, he drove through the gate and up to the Duryea house. Up close, the place looked even more run-down. This would be no weekend repair. Even with a good crew, it would take a month or more just fixing what was visibly wrong on the outside.

Are you sure you want to do this on your own? As quickly as the doubt came, a vision of the new owner—naked in the storm—flashed across his memory. It moved him out of the truck and to the front door.

Warren knocked and heard a muffled oath from inside. "Sounds like someone else is having a bad day."

The door opened. Her full luscious lips turned down into a scowl and sparks of anger flew from her green eyes. Wet, dark blonde hair lay plastered to the side of her head.

"Are you going to say something or is this a game of twenty questions?"

Warren stared at her nearly transparent T-shirt.

"I haven't got time to waste, so I'll give you my answer. No! Whatever it is you are selling, I don't want any." She started to close the door.

"Wait!" Warren found his voice and tried begging. "Please, just one moment of your time. I'm Warren Bailey and I was wondering if you could use some help around here?"

She looked past him to the company truck parked in the drive.

"It's my dad's truck." Warren looked over her shoulder and spotted the overturned ladder and bucket. "I'm not out drumming up business for him."

"What makes you think I'd hire some kid off the street?" Her mouth lifted into a sassy little smile.

Her words irked him and he bristled. "I'm twenty-three and I've been around construction since I could pick up a hammer."

"You and your father have a falling out or something?" The extent of her anger seemed to lessen and she leaned against the door.

"Or something." Warren lifted his fingers to his lower lip. He really didn't want to discuss family matters with a total stranger.

"If I were to hire you—and I said *if*. What guarantee would I have that once you and dad patched up your differences, you wouldn't leave me high and dry?"

Her choice of words brought his attention to her damp, disheveled state, and he laughed. "I promise you that's not likely to happen, but if it did, I wouldn't leave you high and dry. I'll at least toss a bucket of water on you first."

She lifted her hand and fingered her wet, dirty hair and then pulled her shirt away from her skin where it outlined her breasts to perfection. A twinkle brightened the green in her eyes, her lips twitched and she laughed.

"When can you start?"

Her laughter was like a soft, rich wine and flowed over him. Her words filled him with a sense of giddy joy.

"Is tomorrow soon enough?" he asked.

She flashed him a wide, white smile. "Tomorrow morning it is."

"Thank you, Ms..." he paused, realizing he didn't know her name.

"Evans," she extended her hand, "Renée Evans, and thank you for stopping by."

He shook her hand. "I'll see you in the morning." Warren gave her a wink and walked back to the truck feeling like he was on top of the world.

Back in the truck, he slapped the dash. "Just wait 'til I tell the ol' man the news. I'll show him."

His stomach growled, reminding him he hadn't eaten yet. He opened his lunch box and looked at the same old peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "Hell with this."

Warren closed the lid, grabbed his dad's lunch box and tore open the wrapping of a thick ham and cheese.

The others weren't back from lunch. He unloaded the truck, checked the prints and started nailing together a window header. At the sound of a truck turning in, he looked

up. His dad hopped out, opened his truck door and grabbed his lunch box. Warren smiled.

"Warren!" his dad yelled. "Where the hell is my lunch?"

"Didn't figure you would need it after going to eat with the men." He positioned a board, picked up the air gun and fired another nail. *Ker – thunk*.

"That's your problem, you never think," his dad raved. "Did you even bother to check the blueprints for the correct size of header?"

His fingers tightened around the handle of the nail gun. "No, I pulled the measurements outta my ass." *Kerr – thunk. Kerr – thunk*. Warren fired two more nails.

The other men avoided them like the plague. He lifted his eyes from the header, saw their side glances and raised eyebrows.

"Don't get smart mouthed with me, *boy!*" Warren Sr. bellowed.

"What are you going to do, Dad?" Warren leapt to his feet with the nail gun clinched in his fist and his finger still holding the trigger down. He whirled and faced his father. "Are you going to smack me around like you did Mother?"

The veins in his dad's neck stood out like dark blue pulsating cords. His face turned red, his fist shook and then his eyes dropped to the nail gun. "Get out," his father grunted through clinched teeth. "I've had it with you. Get your things and get out of the house."

"With pleasure." He stepped around his father.

"You'll come crawling back when you find out what the real world is like."

"Shorty didn't." Warren smirked.

"Shorty's a fucking drunk!" his dad yelled.

"Ever wonder why your men get shitfaced every Friday night, Dad?" Warren walked toward the truck.

"Don't even think about it," his dad warned. "That's for company employees only."

He lifted his arm, his hand closed into a fist—except for one finger. "Just getting my tools."

"Make sure that's all you take."

Warren snatched up his hand tools, stuffed them in his belt and started on the long, twelve-mile walk home. The extra weight hung heavy on his hips. Sweat beaded on his face and slowly trickled down his neck and back.

Chapter Three

Renée stood the old ladder upright, examined the broken leg and sighed. "I think it's time to see about replacing you." She carried it outside and added it to the growing pile of trash.

She went back inside and wearily climbed the stairs. In the bathroom she turned the water on, pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it into the corner. Her shorts and panties followed.

"Damn," she mumbled as she checked the water temperature. "I sure hope that Warren kid knows something about plumbing."

It seemed to take ages, but the water slowly grew warmer. Renée stepped into the old tub and pulled the curtain around her.

The hot spray pelted her. Muscles she hadn't used in ages screamed in protest as she stooped over and picked up the bar of soap. Lavender-scented steam surrounded her, easing the tension in her shoulders and neck.

"What was I thinking by hiring Warren?" Renée questioned her sanity. "This isn't a job for some green kid. Hell, even I know when I'm about to get in over my head."

"Did that ever stop you?"

Renée whipped the curtain open and looked around the small bath for whoever had spoken.

"Who's there?" she clutched the towel in front of her.

"Just great, now I'm hearing frigging voices when there's no one here but me."

Renée turned the water off, stepped from the tub and hung the wet towel over the shower curtain rod. As she walked into her bedroom, she had the feeling of being watched.

A cool breeze caressed her wet skin. A chill crept up her spine and settled like a cold hand upon her breast. *I don't remember opening the...*

Renée turned her head. The sheer curtain hung lifeless over the closed bedroom window.

Must have been a draft. She padded across the room, leaving a trail of damp footprints on the wooden floor, and looked out the window. Neither leaf nor blade of grass moved in the yard.

She felt confused and for the first time – vulnerable.

A sense of urgency to leave came over her. Renée pulled on the first things she could find, picked up her keys and practically ran from the house.

"Now, if I just knew where I was going?" she mumbled as she drove out the drive.

Three blocks from the house, she noticed a man wearing a tool belt, walking along the side of the road. "He'll know where I can find a ladder."

With a quick glance in the mirror to check for traffic, she did a U-turn, pulled up beside him and rolled down the passenger window. "Excuse me, sir."

He stopped and faced the car.

"Warren! What are you doing walking? Come on, get in."

"Thanks." He removed the tool belt, opened the door and dejectedly dropped into the seat. "I'm headed home."

"What's wrong, Warren? You look like you just lost your best friend." She pulled back into the lane of traffic.

Warren sighed. "Dad and I had a fight. It's been building for some time," he paused. "He fired me before I could tell him I quit."

Renée knew the difficulties of working for a parent only too well. "Then there won't be a problem. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Well, actually – that is the problem. I don't think I'll be able to do your work now."

With a quick jerk of her head, she looked at him. "But you said –"

"I was counting on Dad letting me use some of his extra tools, but that is out of the question now." He gave her an apologetic look. "I've also got to find a place to stay. I should be able to use my brother's couch for a couple days."

"He threw you out of the house too?" The insensitivity of it appalled her.

"Yes." His voice held an icy edge of bitterness. "It's *his* way or the highway."

"I'm sorry, Warren." She reached over and laid her hand on his arm. "It must have been difficult."

Warren gave her a weak smile. "We survived, at least Jim and I did. Turn left at the next light."

"Jim – your brother?" Renée pulled over into the turn lane and slowed as the light turned yellow.

"Yes, my younger brother. He escaped a coupla years ago after landing a great job designing computer games." Warren chuckled. "Dad still has a hard time dealing with it."

"What about your mother?" Renée saw the dark shadow of resentment and loneliness drift across his eyes. His chiseled stone expression settled on his face.

The traffic light went green.

"Dad gave her a choice years ago. One day we came home from school... Take a right at the next street. Third house on the left."

She pulled into the drive of a split-level home.

He opened the door. "Thanks for the lift."

Renée acted on impulse. "Warren, wait. You need a place to stay, and I still need someone to help with repairs."

Warren stopped halfway out of the van. "What are you suggesting?"

"Live at my place. Consider it part of your wages." She watched him for some kind of reaction.

"The offer is tempting, but I still don't have any tools."

The sensual heat radiating from his eyes surprised her.

Renée felt naked, stripped of her clothes before his gaze. "I'll furnish the power tools and whatever you need. When the job is finished, they're yours."

He blinked. "You're crazy. You have any idea how much tools run?"

She laughed, "Consider them a boner, ah—a bonus." Renée felt the heat rising up her neck at the slip of her tongue.

To cover her embarrassment, she leaned over and stretched out her hand. "Do we have a deal, Warren?"

His eyes dropped, widened, and for several seconds, Warren stared. A sharp intake of air caused his nose to flare and his broad chest to expand.

Oh my God! The realization of her loose blouse gaping open at the top scandalized her. *He must think I'm throwing myself at him.*

His hand clasped hers. "It's a deal."

"Good, I'm glad." Unnerved by the blatant sexual gleam in his eyes, she lowered her gaze and wished she hadn't. His tight jeans outlined the thickening bulge of flesh in his groin.

"Well, I breast get moving before the old man gets home and gives me hell."

Renée wasn't sure if he realized what he had said, but she caught the Freudian slip. Typical male, Warren's brain was being deprived of blood as his erection grew harder.

"Do you want some help? Packing goes faster with two." Without waiting for a reply, she turned the key, opened the door and stepped from the van.

Now why in hell did you ask him if he needed help? Isn't it enough you're giving him a job and a place to stay? You're throwing yourself at him.

I am not, she argued back.

"Sure. Sooner I get out of here the better." Warren headed for the house.

Renée followed him to the door. *Nice ass, firm – and much too young!*

Warren paused with his hand on the door. "I need to warn you. Dad's not much on housecleaning."

"I'll survive." *It can't be that bad.*

She gave him a sweeping gesture with her arm. "Lead on and let's get packing."

He opened the door and Renée went inside. She couldn't stop the involuntary gasp as she viewed the room at the bottom of the small landing.

"I did warn you," he smiled.

Empty beer cans and a pizza box sat on a stained, cluttered coffee table. Several cans littered the floor along with old newspapers and magazines. She tried to ignore the open page of a men's magazine.

Renée didn't need to be closer to see what the woman in the picture was doing on her knees.

"My room is this way." He led the way up a small flight of stairs and down the hall. *What have I let myself in for?*

An audible sigh of relief escaped her lips as she followed Warren into his room. It wasn't spotless, but neither was it cluttered like the rest of the house. She glanced at the rumpled sheets of his bed and could almost envision him climbing out of it.

Naked of course, she mused. A man like Warren would sleep nude.

Warren's eyes darted about his bedroom as if seeing it for the first time. "You have a sexy smile."

"Thanks, I think." She turned her face away. "Where do we start?"

"Does this embarrass you?"

"No—yes, a little," *but I don't think nearly as much as it does you.* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Warren open a closet door and hurriedly pull out a large duffle bag.

"Did you have a boyfriend where you came from?" He tossed the duffle bag onto the bed.

"Why do you want to know?" She didn't want to talk about her ex-boyfriend or their relationship, which left her feeling—*nothing*.

"Just a simple question." Warren started pulling clothes from the closet. "You can start on the dresser."

Renée opened the top drawer and stood staring at neatly stacked white underwear.

"Are you going to tell me, or should I guess?"

"Yes, there *was* a boyfriend," she admitted.

Being in Warren's room, packing his clothes and talking about Winston made her feel uneasy, like talking about ex-lovers right after having sex.

A picture came to her mind of her and Warren, naked in bed and having wild passionate sex. Renée picked up the underwear and jammed them into the duffle bag.

"He never told you that you have a sexy smile?"

"No," she whispered.

"Then the man was either blind or an idiot."

If she admitted that Warren was right it would reveal too much about her own lack of fulfillment in the relationship. Renée said nothing, silence broken only by the opening and closing of drawers filled the room.

In the bottom drawer, Renée found several condoms. Seeing them, she was confronted with his sexuality. Her hand hovered near them.

Should I pack them? She struggled with the decision. *If I don't, he may ask me where they are – if I do, he may think I want sex with him.*

Renée grabbed the small packages as if they were hot potatoes and jammed them into the bag.

"That should do it." He reached over, lifted the heavy bag off the bed and his eyes dropped to the drawer she had just emptied. "Sorry, I should have told you before. The stuff in the bottom drawer is my brother's."

He stood so close to her, she could smell the sawdust mixed with the sweat of hard work. Instead of being repulsed by it, Renée found it turned her on more than any expensive cologne Winston had ever used.

"What about the rest of *your* things?" She pointed toward the radio and stack of CDs.

"I'll get those later." Warren picked up the suitcase in the other hand and started toward the door.

"He won't throw them out?"

"No, he'll keep them just like he did Jim's things. Dad won't accept the fact that Jim won't be moving back here. He kept all of Mother's things until the divorce went through. Then he got drunk and burned everything on the front yard."

She opened the front door for Warren and placed her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"It was a long time ago, as they say, 'water under the bridge'." Warren walked out the door and she followed, closing it behind her.

Warren tossed his luggage behind the seat of his maroon Chevy Z-71 pickup. "If you want, we can stop and get some of the tools on the way to your house."

"Good, I need a ladder anyway. The one I was using this morning broke."

"Is that how you ended up all wet?" he laughed.

"Afraid I didn't make a very good impression when you stopped by." Lightened by his banter, she joined in his laughter.

"I thought you looked very...alluring."

His compliment flowed over her like smooth silk and she felt flustered. "You know the way, I'll follow you."

Renée hurried to her van, climbed in and backed out the drive.

Here she was, an educated woman with a degree and this kid could have her on a sexual meltdown with only a word.

Warren pulled out and she followed him down the street.

This was it, no turning back. Warren was actually moving in with her. What had she been thinking to even suggest it?

She wiped her sweaty palms on her shorts and turned the air-conditioning on high. The cold air bathed her face but did nothing to lessen the heat and dry the wetness where she needed it most – between her thighs.

* * * * *

Warren sat behind the wheel and caught his smug reflection in the rearview mirror as he watched Renée's van behind him. He had to admit, for the day starting out like shit, he had come out smelling like a rose.

"Now all I have to do is deliver the goods." Years of his father's conditioning brought self-doubts crashing down on top of him.

What makes you think you can pull this off? Hell, Shorty was a better carpenter drunk than you'll ever be, and he didn't make it.

A traffic light changed to red. Warren slammed on the brakes and came to a screeching halt.

Renée stopped within inches of his back bumper. He saw her shaking her head. "Great, now she thinks I'm an idiot too."

He watched her in the side mirror. Her ex-boyfriend was a *schmuck* to let her come here all by herself. Renée Evans was a piece of work, choice prime-cut female, and sexy as hell.

She had been enchanting last night in the storm. The vision of a goddess viewed from a distance. Up close and personal, when her blouse had fallen open, her firm perfect breasts and dark rose-tipped nipples were almost more than he could stand.

Warren shifted in the seat. He couldn't stop his reaction—then or now. Maybe actually living under the same roof with her, he would grow used to her presence and not have a damn hard-on all the time.

I might as well count on winning the lottery.

Renée honked.

The light had changed and he sat there daydreaming. "Way to go, dipshit!" he cursed his own stupidity and took his foot off the brake.

Warren pulled into Home Depot. He found a spot to park, got out and waited for Renée.

Leaning against the fender of his truck, he watched her approach. He liked her confident stride, the smooth, gentle sway of her hips and the way the muscles in her legs rippled beneath the skin. He lifted his gaze to her breasts. *Living under the same roof could easily be more difficult than doing the repair work.*

"You're sure about the tools?" Warren pushed away from his truck.

She walked beside him toward the entrance. "You need them to do the work, don't you?"

"Yes." Just being near her again lightened his mood and gave him confidence.

"Then I'm sure about the tools." She gave him a smile.

"Tell me something—why don't you just move to a motel or something and hire a crew to come in and get the job over with?"

Renée sighed. "Believe me, Warren, I wish I could."

"What's stopping you?" The automatic doors opened and they went inside the huge warehouse.

"Grandfather's will."

He caught the bitterness in her voice.

"It's all laid out nice and legal. I have to live there, I only have so much money to spend on repairs and every penny must be accounted for."

"Or?" Warren probed.

"Or the estate will go to charity."

He took a shopping cart and headed toward the tools. "Isn't there some way to contest the will?"

She laughed. "I tried. I worked for one of the largest law firms in California. It can't be broken."

"The *bastard*." Warren spoke without thinking.

"I couldn't agree more."

He felt like a kid at Christmas. Every time he selected a moderately priced tool, Renée put it back on the shelf and took the higher quality item.

"No arguments," she warned. "I know what I'm doing."

He glanced at a large, professional grade table saw and wished he hadn't as she instructed the salesman to add it to the growing list.

"Okay, I'm done," he said with relief. "We can go." Even if she didn't keep track of the cost, he had. There was another, more urgent reason to leave. The store manager had been hovering over Renée for the last half-hour.

"You might be, but I'm not," she smiled. "I still need gardening tools."

Warren balked. "I don't know anything about gardening."

"You're in luck. My father ran his own nursery and landscaping service. I grew up with dirt under my fingernails."

He placed himself between the store manager and Renée as they walked down the wide aisle.

She finished picking out the tools she needed and smiled at the manager. "I'm done. Thank you for all your help."

"It was my pleasure," the man beamed. "I'll take this up front for you."

At the checkout counter, she didn't bat an eye when the clerk read off the staggering total. Renée filled out a check and flashed the manager a warm, sensuous smile.

Outside, the bed of his truck filled quickly with boxes as the store manager helped them load. "Thank you for shopping at Home Depot, Ms. Evans." He handed her his business card. "If there is anything else you need, please call."

"I think you made a new conquest." Warren watched the man head back to the store.

"Money talks." She went to her van.

"I'm sure that's all it was," he said sarcastically.

Renée stopped and turned around. "What else could it be?"

"Nothing," he mumbled. "Nothing at all."

He opened the door, got in and slammed it shut.

Chapter Four

Warren carried the last of the tools and supplies into the empty spot of the three-car garage. There were two vehicles parked with a thick layer of dust on the covers.

He walked over to what appeared to be a sports car. "You aren't curious about what's underneath?"

"Haven't had the time to look." Renée came over to stand beside him.

"Do you mind?" He reached down to pull the cover up.

"Go ahead."

Warren lifted the cover over the fender and, trying to raise as little dust as possible, slowly inched it across the hood. A bright red fiberglass body began to appear.

"Wow!" He felt the adrenaline of excitement surging through him. "Just as I thought, a '73 Corvette T-top."

Renée's face turned white, her eyes grew large and she started backing away from the car.

"Renée," Warren dashed toward her. "Renée, what's wrong?" He grabbed her by the shoulders. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"That's...my...mother's car," she stammered.

"So, it's her car." Her eyes were still glued to the Corvette.

"She's...dead."

"Maybe your grandfather wanted you to have her car?"

She turned her face to him and her eyes were a swirling tempest of blue and green. "She died..."

"Yes, Renée, you told me that already."

"...in a car crash almost twenty years ago." She turned her face back to the car as if making certain it was still there. "In *that* car."

"Maybe your grandfather had it repaired."

"No, I remember...it was totaled beyond repair." She brushed off his hands, walked trance-like back to the car and touched it. Her fingers trailed over the low-slung fender, up the windshield and across the removable hard top. "The car exploded on impact."

He reached her side and placed his arm around her waist. "I'm sure there's an explanation. It was a long time ago."

"He *lied*," she spit the word out like it was poison. "The bastard lied to us." Almost pleadingly, she focused on his face. "Why?"

Renée had the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen, but right now they were angry and brimming with tears.

"I don't know, Renée." Warren felt something inside him twist itself in two at her anguish and pain. He pulled her into his arms and held her. "I wish I did."

"It's been twenty years." Her whisper crackled with heartbroken emotion. "I miss her like it was yesterday."

"I know, hon." She was no longer a grown woman whose firm breasts pressed against his chest. He held a frightened child whose world had been turned upside down. "I know."

Renée was vulnerable, and he fought to control his reaction to her being in his arms. With each heartbeat, he found his resistance slipping.

"I'm sorry," she straightened and took a half step backward. "I didn't mean to come apart like that."

Warren lifted his hand to her face and with his thumb, gently brushed a tear from her cheek. The hypnotic pull of her eyes and the tug on the heartstrings of his soul became more than he could withstand. Warren drew closer and softly kissed the damp spot on her cheek.

"No apologies necessary."

"With a father like yours, how did you get to be so kind and understanding?"

He moved away and flashed what he hoped was a sassy grin. "How did you get to be so beautiful?" He went out to his truck and lifted his bags from the back. "Show me where to put my things, then I'll look at what you want done first."

"Follow me." She led him into the house and up the stairs. "I'm not sure where to start," she laughed, "other than that banging, squeaking shutter I keep hearing."

Walking up the steps behind her gave him a view he definitely appreciated. Her mention of squeaking reminded him of his brother's bedsprings and a different kind of banging.

He took a deep breath and could swear that he caught the scent of her heavy female musk. His grip on his luggage tightened. At the top of the stairs, she turned down a long hall. A narrower set of stairs led up to the third floor.

"This is the room I'm using," she stepped to the door across the hall. "You can use this room."

The door opened to a spacious room with a double bed, dresser and large ornate armoire. Made from dark cherry, all the furniture looked to be over a hundred years old.

"The bath is two doors down on the right. We share, so remember to knock first."

"Damn," he snapped his fingers. "That takes all the fun outta sharing."

She laughed, a gleam lit her eyes and her left eyebrow arched in a teasing, sensuous quirk. "Yes, it does."

* * * * *

Renée leaned against the doorjamb, not sure why she was engaging in the light bantering with Warren. Something had happened in the garage.

"I haven't been shopping yet and there's nothing in the house to eat. Put your things away and meet me downstairs. You might as well go with me to make sure I don't get anything you don't like."

His brows scrunched together, his head turned slightly to the left and his mouth took on a funny slanted scowl toward his right ear. "Why should you care?"

Warren quickly turned his face away and she realized he had spoken without thinking. With startling insight, another piece of the puzzle surrounding him fell into place.

"I'm not your father, Warren."

"Well, duh, I can see that." He busied himself with unpacking.

"I mean—I don't want you to feel uncomfortable here." *This isn't going well.* "I don't want to make any personal decisions that will cause you to resent staying here." *For a lawyer, your arguments really suck.*

"I'm grateful for a place to stay." He ignored her, refusing to meet her eyes.

"I'll be downstairs when you're done." Renée walked back down the hall, mentally adding another man to curse for his inconsiderate, pigheaded existence. Warren Bailey Sr. deserved the number three spot, right behind Winston.

She went back out to the garage, skirted the pile of tools on the floor and stood beside her mother's sleek sports car.

"If you didn't die in a car wreck, then what happened to you? Why didn't you ever write or call?" Warmth enveloped her like a soft cocoon, only to be snatched away moments later by a breeze that chilled her to the bone.

Renée heard the nerve-grating squeak, the slam of the shutter and what sounded like soft crying.

"There you are. I've been looking for you."

She jumped at the sound of Warren's voice.

"Did you hear it?" she tried to keep her voice calm. "Did you hear the noise I was telling you about?"

"I heard it, but I don't think it's a window shutter. It sounds like it's coming from inside the house—more like a door upstairs."

"Whatever it is, *fix* it." She left the garage with a hurried step. "I don't know about you, but I'm starved. Let's go."

Renée climbed into her van, started the engine and waited impatiently for Warren to get in.

"Why don't we stop on the way and grab a bite to eat?" he asked as he pulled the door closed.

"Believe me, I wish I could," her fingers tightened on the steering wheel, "but it's out of the question." She drove down the drive and stopped at the gate. "The will..."

"To hell with your grandfather's damn will," he interrupted her. "My treat."

Sounds too much like a date. We aren't dressed to go out. He's too young. Renée quickly gave herself reasons to object. "Warren, I can't allow you to take me to dinner."

"If you're worried about your clothes, don't..."

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught his rather blatant scrutiny of her. She resented his looking at her like she was the main course of the meal he had in mind. Yet her skin warmed to the sensuous caress of his gaze.

"I'm not suggesting we go downtown to wine, dine and dance the night away."

An evening of candlelight, soft music, dancing and watching the sun come up from the top of the Sears Tower in downtown Chicago flashed before Renée. The fantasy was so real she blinked and shook her head to dispel it.

Renée pulled out into the street. Her stomach growled.

Warren laughed.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked.

"Whatever your heart desires." At his soft whisper, barely heard over the engine noise, Renée turned her head slightly. Her heart did a somersault and landed in the turbulent sea of his blue eyes.

She forced her eyes back to the road. "You couldn't afford it."

"Maybe not, but one day I'll be able to." Renée heard the resentment in his voice at her unthinking comment. "For now, follow your cravings as far as a twenty will take you."

"The last of the big spenders," she grinned, trying to dispel his anger. "What happens if I go over twenty dollars?"

"We'll have to do dishes."

Renée lifted her right hand from the steering wheel and examined the red, chapped skin. "Well, gee, wouldn't want to ruin my manicure now, would we? How about a little South of the Border?" She turned her signal light on, slowed for traffic and then turned into the parking lot of a remodeled store. "Or we can have chicken."

"Good choice." His voice seemed deeper, more sensuous and a little strained.

They got out and he followed slightly behind her. She looked over her shoulder, and instantly wished she hadn't. Warren had a grin on his face and his eyes were glued to the denim-clad curves of her ass.

Taco Bell's slogan took on a whole new meaning as his molten gaze turned up her heat.

She tried to blame Warren for acting like an over testosterone-charged teenager, but her own reaction wasn't any better. If she became any wetter she would need to use a tampon.

"Enjoying the view?" she whispered when Warren opened the door.

"Perfection in motion is *hard* to resist."

Renée felt the heat flush her face. She hurried to the counter, pointedly ignoring his soft chuckle. She tried to come up with a smart reply, but each one that came to mind could end up making matters worse.

"Are you going to order or stand there all day looking beautiful?"

"Shush," she giggled. "I'm thinking."

She focused on the lighted overhead menu and quickly placed her order. After Warren paid for their food, she couldn't help but notice the near empty billfold he placed back in his pocket.

He wasn't kidding about being broke. Yet he insisted on eating out. Renée took their cups over to the machine and filled them. "Why?"

"Why what?"

Warren stood close that his breath blew hot across her skin. "Ah..." *Think, girl, don't blabber like an idiot.* "Why don't you take the drinks and find a table. I'll wait for the food."

"Don't forget the catsup and the hot sauce." He strode off in a swagger and sat down where he could still watch her.

Renée took one of the small paper cups, placed it under the spout of the catsup dispenser and pushed down on the plunger. A heavy stream of catsup hit the cup and bounced out. She gasped as it splattered her face.

Furious with herself at her clumsiness, Renée picked up the tray and carried it to the table.

Warren took one look at her and burst out laughing.

"Oh, shut up," she snapped. Renée started wiping her face. "I'll be right back. I need a mirror."

"Here, let me help you." He took a clean napkin and reached for her face.

Renée froze.

Warren's calloused fingers brushed across her cheek and down her neck to the edge of the low-cut blouse.

Her skin tingled where he touched her. Never had a seemingly innocent gesture felt so — intimate.

"There," he smiled, "I think I got it all."

Renée lowered her gaze and licked her suddenly dry lips. "Thank you."

They ate in a strained silence that blocked out the noise around them. She jumped as their fingers touched while reaching for the same packet of hot sauce. From under lowered lashes, she watched the muscles in his jaw and neck flex with each bite.

Renée finished eating and reached for a napkin. He captured her hand in his, drew it to his mouth and licked her fingers clean.

She couldn't breathe.

Her body's need for air became so great that she took a deep, ragged breath. Her tense muscles relaxed and Renée felt a fresh flow of wetness soak her thong.

It's too late for a tampon.

"Are you ready?" Warren appeared calm and in full control of his emotions.

"Yes, whenever you are," she replied.

He stood and picked up the tray.

Appearances were deceiving. The outline of his erection against his jeans was plainly visible to everyone in the restaurant. Her eyes darted from his crotch to those around them.

Renée couldn't believe it. No one was looking. Nobody seemed to notice.

Am I the only one looking at his cock?

Warren smiled.

Oh no! He knows I'm looking. She was mortified at being caught crotch watching. *Maybe I could drop something and crawl under the table looking for it.*

Her legs felt like rubber as she stood and somehow managed to follow him out the door and to her van.

"Would you like to do something, maybe see some of the city?" Warren's question caught her off guard. "There's an all-night grocery not far from here. We can stop on our way home."

What would we do if we went home now? The bulge in his pants flashed in her mind. "That sounds good." She answered quickly. "You drive."

She climbed into the passenger seat. Warren closed her door and rounded the front of the van. Renée buckled her seatbelt as he slid behind the wheel.

"I'm not really dressed for a night out. Where are we going?" Renée kept her eyes on the skyline as the heart of the city drew closer.

Warren weaved in and out of traffic. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise."

He turned off the highway and onto the congested streets of downtown Chicago.

Chicago, like any other sprawling metropolis, never slept. Neon lights flashed in a blur of colors from storefronts. Buildings towered above her, seeming to reach the sky. The city pulsed around her with energy and excitement.

A few minutes later, after Warren parked the van, she found herself walking along the Navy Pier. The Ferris Wheel dominated the sky with its swinging seats and its hundreds of lights. A throng of people milled about the pier, some in large groups while others in pairs strolled hand in hand or sat at one of the many outdoor cafes and took a break from their hectic world.

They might have been in a crowded public place, but every time her hand brushed his or she caught him looking at her, it was as if they were alone. Renée resisted the desire to take his hand in hers and at least appear like normal people.

"Hey, Renée!" Warren, with laughter in his voice, pointed down the pier. "Look."

She turned her head. A group of women wearing black T-shirts were coming toward them. Sprawled across their breasts in large, bold white letters were the words *Got Sex?*

"I see it," she laughed, "but I don't believe it."

"They're certainly getting plenty of attention."

The sea of people parted amid laughter and the bright flash of cameras as the women moved along the crowded walkway.

Renée watched them with envy as they displayed a bold confidence that she was far from feeling.

"Would you like to play a round of miniature golf?" Warren asked with a slight nod of his head toward the golf course.

Now that is something I can do, she smiled. "Only if you're ready to get your butt whipped."

"So, you think you're pretty good," he smirked.

"I've batted a few balls around before." The double entendre smacked her up the side of the head the minute she spoke. Renée hurried toward the entrance to the golf course to keep Warren from seeing the flush that crept up her neck.

She looked over her shoulder, "Are you coming?"

"Not yet." Warren gave her a hot, predatory sexual glare. His eyes traveled slowly down to her feet and back to her face. "I want to grab a beer. Do you want one?"

"Sounds good." Standing on Chicago's famous Navy Pier, she felt stripped of all her clothes. Renée glanced around nervously, but the only person paying her any attention was Warren.

She had little doubt which balls Warren would like to put in the hole of his choosing. *He's got a long wait. This golf course is closed.*

Chapter Five

Warren found grocery shopping with Renée to be rather enjoyable. Especially when pushing the second cart behind her. When she walked, her cute ass wiggled from side to side. Every time she bent over to pick up something off the lower shelves, he kept waiting for the seams of her shorts to split.

However, Renée did have a bad habit when shopping, one which had his frustration level rising. He watched as she picked up a can, read the label and then read the labels of two more brands of the same item. *At the rate we're going, it will be sunup before we finish.*

He leaned on the basket, exhaled a long sigh and glanced at his watch. It was midnight. *Cute butt or not, this is the last time.*

"Don't be blaming me for being late. It wasn't my idea for going the best two out of three games." She gave him an *I told you so* smirk.

"You hustled me that first game," he accused.

Renée laughed and her eyes sparkled as she squatted beside his cart. "Yeah, and you fell for it."

"If my memory serves me, it was your idea to stay and watch the fireworks."

Warren glanced down and forgot about the time or the other shoppers squeezing by. He tried to look without being too obvious, then he attempted to avoid looking at her altogether, but his eyes kept coming back to feast on the delicious view of her breasts.

"They were beautiful, weren't they?" She turned her head slightly and jerked it back to stare at the can in her hand. A red flush crept up her neck.

"Warren," she whispered rather loudly. "Would you try to control your adolescent hormones? This is a public place. Stop staring at my breasts."

"Stop flashing them at me and I will."

"I am *not* flashing my breasts at you." Her whisper was louder than before.

He caught the shocked expression of a little white-haired shopper as she scurried past them. Two other women were giggling and whispering together while casting side glances in their direction.

"If those aren't your breasts, then whose are they?"

"Warren," Renée jumped to her feet. The color in her face changed to a deeper red. "Please, stop. You're embarrassing me."

Her hot breath fanned his cheek. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Well, you should be." She turned to walk away.

He stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Renée, I lied. I'm not sorry. You're just so damn beautiful when you blush, I couldn't resist teasing you."

"I don't appreciate it." Her eyes held him captive as they changed from green to blue and back again.

Warren let go of her arm. "Now who's lying?"

He took the can of pineapple from her hand. "Is this the brand you want?"

Renée stood rooted to the spot, with her mouth slightly open, looking like she had just been slapped.

He put the can in his cart and pushed it down the aisle.

She opened her mouth to deny Warren's accusation. The lawyer in her examined the evidence.

Plead the Fifth. She hated it when witnesses refused to tell the truth for fear of self-incrimination, but self-preservation forced her to do the same.

Renée took hold of her cart and slowly followed Warren. At the end of the aisle, she looked in the cart and frowned. "Where the hell did this come from?" She picked up a can of processed, chemical-laden meat.

She snatched up another item and read the label just to make sure. *Did I grab the wrong cart?* Renée whirled around looking for an unclaimed, half-full cart of groceries, or someone who looked as confused as she felt.

I wonder who put these in here.

"Warren!"

He came back around the end of the aisle pushing his cart.

Renée folded her arms across her breasts. "Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"Uh," his head swiveled from side to side as his right hand dropped to his crotch and fumbled with the zipper of his jeans. "Notice what?"

"Stop playing with yourself in public," she rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. *Men!* "Did you think I wouldn't notice these things you put in the basket without me knowing?" She picked up a can of processed meat and held it out to him.

Warren's nose wrinkled and he frowned.

"For your information, Renée, I can't stand the crap."

"Then why put it in the basket?"

"Why are you so certain I put it there?" He leaned toward her, his arms resting on the handle of the cart. "Did you check it for fingerprints?" he smirked.

"No." Sarcastically, she changed the pitch of her voice. "I didn't check it for fingerprints."

"It appears a crime has been committed. Should I call 911?" He took his cell phone off his belt.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I'll just put them back on the shelf."

"Don't go past the pineapple." He still had that damn smirk on his face.

"Okay, smarty, why shouldn't I go past the pineapple?"

"I think the items of question in the basket are located between us and where you flashed your breasts at me."

"Oh, you – you..." Renée spun her basket around and stomped off. Warren's soft laughter followed her down the aisle.

"That man is absolutely impossible," she mumbled. "It must have been a moment of insanity when I hired him. Of all the egotistical, pigheaded, chauvinistic men I have ever met that man has to be the most infuriating..."

She hadn't seen the transition coming, but it smacked her between the eyes. Just where, and when, had Warren ceased being an inexperienced kid?

Renée stopped at the end of the aisle and slowly turned the cart around. Warren still stood at the other end, right where she had left him. She had walked right past the pineapple to end up standing by the fruit wraps.

Now I'm really in for it. As Renée started back down the aisle, she prepared her defense by taking a Strawberry Fruit Wrap from the shelf. At least now she had an excuse for not stopping at the pineapple.

She began putting items back on the shelf.

One moment Warren stood there watching her and the next, a girl with short, curly blonde hair was wrapped around him.

The crash of broken glass reached her ears. A sharp pain shot through her ankle and the strong, pungent odor of jalapeno peppers surrounded her, burning her eyes and nose.

Renée looked down at her feet and the blood as it flowed from around a sliver of glass imbedded in her skin.

Suddenly, Warren was kneeling on the floor, ignoring the mess and broken jar. "Don't move, Renée. I'll get this out and stop the bleeding."

"Get out of the way, Warren." The blonde pushed him aside. "That's not a fucking splinter you're dealing with. Jim, run over to the pharmacy aisle and get me some bandages, Betadine, peroxide and tape. Warren, let's find a chair for the lady to sit on."

He started to leave.

"Where the hell do you think you're going? Pick her up and carry her."

"I can walk," Renée protested in vain as Warren's arms lifted her from the floor. She had no choice but to put her arm around his neck and hold on.

"Hush," concern dripped like honey from his lips. "Tina knows what she's doing..."

Tina! Now she had a name to go with the body. She realized with a start that with her lacy bra and sheer white blouse, the woman left very little to the imagination.

The store manager came running. "Is she all right? Should I call 911? Here, sit her on this chair."

"I'm fine. Really," Renée spoke before anyone else could.

"Are you a doctor?" Tina looked up from where she was tending her leg.

"No, I'm a lawyer."

"I assure you, Ms.," the manager pleaded, "we have good insurance here."

"It figures," Tina shook her head and pulled the glass out.

Renée grimaced at the pain. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm an LPN. Don't tell me how to do my job and I won't tell you how to practice law."

"Is she going to be okay?" The nervous store manager hovered over them. "Is she going to live?"

"It's a fucking scratch." Tina gave the store manager a perturbed frown. "Of course she's going to live. Warren, be a dear and get the lady some water. She's looking a little pale."

"I'm fine, Warren," Renée placed her hand on his arm. "Really, I am."

She looked up at the man Tina had addressed as Jim. "You must be Warren's brother. I can see the resemblance."

"You mean we look alike?" Jim's eyes widened, his jaw dropped and he looked at Warren. "No wonder Tina keeps trying to get him into bed."

Renée felt a sudden surge of relief.

"Don't let my brother fool you," Warren laughed. "If it wears pants, Tina will try to take it to bed."

"There you are," Tina winked and smiled. "You'll be good as new in a couple days. "Are you going to introduce us, Warren, or are you keeping the lawyer all to yourself?"

"I'm Renée Evans. I just moved into the old Duryea place and Warren will be helping me do the repairs."

Jim gave his brother a strange look with a raised eyebrow. "Does dear ol' dad know about this?"

"We parted company this morning—permanently. He told me to pack my things and move out."

Jim pursed his lips and whistled. "That explains his phone call earlier asking for you. You going to be needing the couch?"

"Not this time, thanks." Warren placed his hand on Renée's shoulder. "I have a place to stay."

Jim and Tina looked at each other and smiled.

Renée felt like crawling out the door. "I had the extra room and he wouldn't have to drive to work."

"He wouldn't have had to drive far at any rate." Jim said with a knowing smirk. "I live right behind the Duryea place, second floor apartment."

"That's odd." She remembered the dark silhouette of a man sitting in the window while she took her rain shower. "Warren failed to mention that little detail."

"If you feel up to it, Renée, we need to finish our shopping." Warren was smiling, but his eyes glared at Jim.

"As Tina said, it's only a scratch." She stood, leaned over and gave Tina a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for coming to my rescue. Once I get the place presentable, you and Jim will have to come over for dinner."

"We'd love to," they both spoke at once.

Renée took the cart, headed down an aisle comparing labels. "It was you, wasn't it?" she asked, Warren.

"What are you talking about, Renée?"

She turned to face Warren. "Last night during the storm. You were sitting in the window."

"Ah—which window are you referring to?" His face remained expressionless, except for his eyes. They twinkled with merriment.

"Don't play games with me, Warren." She stepped closer. "You know damn good and well which window—your brother's."

"You know something, Renée." He lifted his fingers and stroked her cheek. "When you're angry and you pucker your lips like that, they make me want to kiss you."

Renée jumped back. "You wouldn't dare." She looked around to see if anyone had heard them.

"Well, not now I wouldn't." Warren pushed the cart on down the aisle.

She told herself she didn't want Warren to kiss her, but for some strange reason, she was disappointed that he hadn't at least tried. "What changed your mind?"

"You're too far away."

"I'm *what!*" she blurted out. Renée hurried down the aisle and grabbed Warren by the arm. "If you think for one minute that I'm going to let you maul me in a public place just to satisfy your fragile male ego..."

Warren placed his finger over her lips to silence her. "For your information, I would never maul a woman in public or anywhere else, and what few girls I've had the privilege to kiss never worried about when or where."

"My, my, but aren't you the conceited one," she smirked.

"I see it as self-confidence." His head tilted slightly and his right eyebrow arched. "Shall we see who's right?"

"No!" She pushed past Warren and continued down the aisle. *How much had he seen from the window?* The unanswered question lingered in the back of her mind

Chapter Six

Renée pushed her overflowing cart to the checkout lane and began placing the items on the conveyor belt.

"You two have a large family?" The clerk's eyes widened and she started passing the items in front of the scanner.

Renée smiled. "No, I just moved in and the cupboards are bare."

"Where did you move to?" she asked.

"The Duryea place," Renée continued to empty the cart. "I inherited it when my grandfather passed away."

The girl stopped smiling and passed the same item three times in front of the scanner. "Sorry." She voided the items from the ticket.

"You're—*living* there?" The girl seemed shaken and grew irritated with the scanner when it missed a package of sliced meat.

"Is there something wrong with the house that I should know about?" Renée emptied the first cart and began on the second.

"Have you seen any," the clerk glanced around nervously, "*ghosts*?"

Renée laughed. "Heavens no," she stifled a yawn. "I admit it's a little creepy, but I assure you, I haven't seen Casper or any of his friends."

The clerk ran the last of the groceries through the scanner and read off the total.

Renée handed her a check, waited for the receipt and pushed the cart outside.

Warren helped her load the groceries into the van. Each time their fingers touched or she brushed his arm, it made her that much more aware of his nearness. An underlying tension crackled between them.

She took the keys out of her purse and dropped them.

Warren bent over and snatched them off the ground. "I'll drive."

If he was looking for an argument, he was going to be disappointed. She went around to the passenger side, opened the door and pulled herself into the seat with an exhausted grunt.

"Tired?" Warren started the van and backed out.

"Passed that point somewhere between the paper towels and the laundry soap." She leaned her head back against the seat.

The possibility that Warren had seen her nude, even from a distance, launched a torrid conflict of mixed emotions. Renée closed her eyes and found herself in a court of law.

"Warren, did you know Renée Evans was going to be staying at the Duryea estate before the night in question?"

"No, I did not."

"What were you doing sitting in your brother's window on the night in question?"

"I was watching the storm."

"Are you sure it wasn't for the purpose of spying on Ms. Evans?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Your Honor," Warren's attorney jumped up, "I object! It's already been determined my client didn't know she was going to be there."

"Sustained," the judge's voice loomed large in the courtroom.

"I'll rephrase the question. Warren – once you realized someone was at the mansion on the night in question, did you keep watching in hopes of seeing that person outside, nude in the rain?"

"Your Honor," the defense attorney fumed. "I object to this line of questioning. Warren Bailey is not accused of being psychic, nor does he claim to be and that is the only way anyone could have known in advance the events before they transpired."

The judge sighed, "Sustained."

The prosecuting attorney frowned his displeasure. "Mr. Bailey, when you were watching the storm, what else did you see?"

"I observed Ms. Evans outside, taking a shower in the rain."

"How was she dressed?" The attorney's eyes took on a predator's gleam.

Warren smiled. "She was taking a shower, she wasn't dressed."

"Ah-ha!" She slapped her leg with her left hand. "How long did you ogle Ms. Evans?"

"I didn't ogle her."

"Your Honor, the defendant is being combative and refusing to answer the question."

"Mr. Bailey," the judge leaned forward. "How long did you observe Ms. Evans while she was outside?"

"Don't forget nude, Your Honor."

The judge flashed the prosecuting attorney a warning glare and the pencil in his hands snapped.

"I observed Ms. Evans for maybe five seconds when a flash of lightning lit up the area at the back of the house."

"What were your thoughts when you saw her naked?"

"Renée, we're home." Warren gently shook her.

"Answer the question," she muttered.

"What question?"

Warren slipped his right arm under her legs. Renée's arm went around his neck as he lifted her out of the seat and her head fell naturally into the hollow of his shoulder.

Hot, moist air fluttered against his neck. Each step jostled her right breast against him.

At the door, he fumbled with the keys while trying not to wake Renée. He heard a soft metallic click.

The front door opened an inch and stopped.

Warren took a quick step backward and waited. He wanted to run, but he couldn't with Renée in his arms. To leave her alone with whoever or whatever was inside the house wasn't an option.

His heart pounded in his chest as he pushed the door further open. He had the strangest sense of being invited inside, but that was crazy. They were alone—or were they?

With the precautionary flip of a light switch, Warren surveyed the room.

He felt slightly foolish, but thankful there was no one waiting in the shadows. *What could I have done, thrown a sleeping Renée at the intruder?*

She snuggled against him, her hot breath kissed the underside of his jaw and he felt the hard pebble of her nipple pressing against his chest. Thoughts of intruders and ghosts quickly faded. *I know where I'd like to throw you.*

As a carpenter there were times, whether to hold a board, reach for a nail or just to wipe the sweat from his eyes, when a third hand would've been appreciated. While carrying Renée up the stairs, Warren found another use, adjusting his hard-on to a more comfortable position.

Bang!

The noise startled Warren. He paused with his foot in midair and then he slowly lowered it onto the next step. The old stairs creaked with their combined weight.

Warren reached the top of the stairs and turned toward her room. He tried to open the door, but for some strange reason the knob wouldn't budge.

Damn it, Renée, why did you lock your door?

He turned around and opened the door to his room. The heavy thud of his boots on the hardwood floor seemed unusually loud. Warren gently lowered Renée onto his bed.

Her top slid up, exposing the underside of her breasts. With each breath, one dark-pink nipple played peek-a-boo at the edge of the fabric. He stood beside the bed, his hands shook, and his fingers ached to caress her. Renée's breasts weren't what he would consider large, like Tina's, nor were they small, girlish.

They were perfect.

'Course, he already knew they were from the fabulous view at the grocery. Desire for Renée, greater than he thought physically possible, welled up inside him.

He had to touch her, even if it were only to remove her shoes. His fingers trembled as he untied and removed first one shoe and then the other. The brief contact with her flesh only made his need more intense.

Warren sat at the foot of the bed, picked up her left foot and began to gently massage it.

Renée moaned. The corners of her mouth lifted into a sensuous half-smile of contented pleasure.

"Oh, Winston," she mumbled in her sleep. "That feels wonderful."

His fingers stopped kneading the sole of her foot. *Winston? Who the fuck is Winston?* Anger flashed through Warren, dumping a bucket of ice water onto the flames of his desire. He dropped her foot back onto the bed and stormed out of the room.

Warren stopped abruptly in the hall. Her bedroom door stood open. A woman who could have been Renée's twin sat on the bed. She wore a long, dark blue evening gown, which appeared to have had the bodice ripped. Her left hand held the material together. A bright silver bracelet encircled her raw and bloody wrist.

Warren blinked.

She was gone.

He rushed into the room only to find it empty. "What the hell?"

A door slammed, only this time much closer. He thought he could hear a soft whimper, like a small kitten or – a woman crying.

He paused to listen, trying to figure out from where the sound came. *This floor, Warren tilted his head, or third floor?* He couldn't tell for at one point it seemed to be moving all around him in the walls, ceiling and the floor beneath his feet. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. *I don't believe in ghosts.* He hurried from Renée's room. "I don't believe in ghosts," he repeated aloud.

The woman had been so *real*. Yet people didn't just disappear into thin air.

He started to wake Renée but stopped at his door. *Just suppose for a moment, he reasoned within himself, that ghosts do exist, and the woman I saw was – is a ghost. What could I say, "The funniest thing happened while you were sleeping, Renée, I saw a ghost who looked like you"?* Warren shook his head.

The truth of the matter, it didn't matter what he told her. She would laugh him out of the house and he would be forced to sleep on his brother's couch.

Now more than ever, he had to stay right where he was. Sooner or later, Renée would realize the place was indeed haunted. *When that time comes, and she doesn't have Winston around to protect her...* Warren smiled as he turned from the doorway and headed back downstairs.

He carried the groceries in and began putting them away. "I sure wish I knew where she wanted this stuff put."

As he lifted another item toward the open door of the cabinet, he felt a gentle tug toward another shelf. Warren looked around but didn't see anyone. The same thing happened with the next item, only this time to a completely different cabinet.

"This is freaking weird," he whispered. "Suppose I wanted to put this here?" Warren ignored the pressure on his arm and put the canned soup next to the corn.

Ever so slowly, it slid across the shelf.

"Okay," he caught the can as it teetered on the edge of the shelf, "I'll put them where you want them."

Did ghosts have feelings? He wasn't sure, but as he yielded to her, he felt something akin to receiving a smile from a complete stranger, just for holding open a door.

"Why me?" *Maybe I'm going nutso. I'm talking to a damn ghost.* "Why not Renée?"

He really didn't expect an answer and wasn't sure what he would do if she spoke to him.

A picture came to his mind, like a daydream, of him carrying Renée up the stairs and massaging her feet. Along with the daydream came the desire to touch and possess her. Warren felt embarrassed to have this ghost who in life had been a beautiful woman know of the hard-on he had just at the thought of Renée.

With a sudden start, he looked around the kitchen. Time seemed to have stood still, but apparently he hadn't. All the groceries were put away in neat, orderly rows with their labels facing forward.

"Who are you?" he finally found the nerve to ask.

The sudden, slamming door caused Warren a moment of regret.

She was gone. He might never know, or had she in someway told him the answer as to why she revealed herself to him?

Tomorrow is another day, he thought as walked through the large dining room. Warren climbed the stairs with a slow, bone-weary step. Too many things had happened to attempt sorting them out tonight. There was some peace of mind knowing that the ghost wasn't out to harm him.

He looked in on Renée, covered her with a blanket and went across the hall to sleep in her bed.

The door was locked.

He turned around and leaned his back against the wall. "Not again." With a heavy sigh, he pushed away from the wall and checked the other doors only to find them also locked.

Warren went back to his room and tossed the other pillow onto the floor. Ghost or no ghost, if he were to share a bed with Renée, it was going to be at her invite. He stretched out on the floor.

"Good night, Renée," he whispered, "and good night, my lovely ghost—whatever you are."

* * * * *

"Oomph." A foot in the stomach brought Warren out of a sound sleep. "Watch where you're stepping."

"Eeek!" Renée yelled at the same time. "What are you doing sleeping on the floor of my bedroom?"

"Look around you, Renée. This is my room, yours was locked last night, or would you rather we had shared the same bed?"

"That'll be a cold day in hell." Renée marched across the hall, opened the door and with a scowling backward glance went into her room. The door slammed shut.

"Great." He flopped his arm over his eyes. "Just *fucking* great."

A few minutes later, he heard her door open. Her heavy footsteps went down the hall, and the bathroom door opened and shut with a resounding blow.

Water pipes clanged and rattled in the walls. The thought of Renée slipping into the shower with the steam wrapping her naked flesh in a sensuous cloud caused a stirring of his loins. He had a vivid imagination and he let it run, joining her beneath the hot pulsating spray.

Warren heard the door open, close and her footsteps in the hall. As soon as she shut the door to her room, he jumped up and hurried to the bathroom. He leaned forward over the stool, supporting himself with one arm while forcing his aching cock to point downward.

"Ahh," he sighed with relief.

The door opened.

"Oops!" Renée quickly closed the door. "Sorry." He heard the soft laughter in her voice. "I didn't know you were up."

He was up all right, and it was all her fault for looking so damn sexy in the morning with her hair falling around her shoulders in an unruly mass of waves and soft curls.

Warren rinsed the sleep from his eyes and went downstairs where he found Renée surveying the cupboards. Something told him, by her slow shaking head and her hands resting on her hips, that she wasn't happy.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I appreciate your trying to help, but from now on, you might want to stick to what you were hired for." She opened another cabinet door. "Typical male, just throw the things on a shelf and forget it."

He started to protest, "I didn't..." *What the hell?* The neat rows were gone, and everything looked like he had just shoved it out of sight and closed the doors.

Renée opened the fridge and her displeasure exploded. "Christ! Warren, if this is how you lived at home no wonder your dad threw you out. Look at this frigging mess." She stepped aside. "I've a mind to kick your ass out myself. I want this shit cleaned up—now!"

The milk jug lay on its side and half the contents covered the shelves. The twelve-pack of sodas sat on the now-crushed egg carton and long streamers of yellow egg yolk joined the mess. Somehow, the half-gallon of ice cream that he had put into the freezer was now in the crisper coating the fresh vegetables with thick chocolate goo.

"This is coming out of your pay." Renée gave one last look at the mess. Her downturned lips trembled as she left the room.

Warren heard the back door open and then silence.

Would his ghost from last night do this? She couldn't, not after the meticulous way she had guided his placement of every item. Then if she hadn't, who had? The answer unnerved him. It was the only possible explanation.

There was another ghost in the house.

Chapter Seven

Renée wielded her hoe with a vengeance.

As a lawyer, she had to go not only with facts but also her gut instincts. At the moment, her stomach was tied in knots.

The weeds gave way with great reluctance. Working with the soil and getting her hands dirty normally gave her a feeling of tranquility. Today, however, it only caused more aggravation.

She vaguely remembered being carried up to bed in Warren's strong arms. Had he given her a foot massage or had it been a pleasant dream?

Winston had been good at massages. In fact, the more she thought about Winston, the more she realized that was about the only thing he did in—or out—of bed that pleased her.

The hot smoldering looks Warren had given her in the store were enough to curl her toes. Catching him trying to pee with an erection—she laughed again at the sight—made her realize he was every inch a man. Oh, what a man he was, especially when she compared her brief peek at Warren to her ex.

Everything she had learned to date about Warren told her that he wouldn't purposefully be cruel. She could overlook the spilt milk and the broken eggs, but losing her half-gallon of Godiva French Silk Chocolate Ice Cream. That had been the last straw on her frazzled nerves.

Renée lashed out at a stubborn patch of weeds, sending them and dirt flying into the air.

She had blown it with Warren and wouldn't blame him if he chose his brother's couch over her bed. Well, not hers "categorically speaking" but—Renée felt a flicker of desire. Or was it curiosity at actually sharing a bed with him?

"I'm...not...going...to...be...accused...of...robbing...the...damn...cradle!" She enunciated every word with a vicious swing of the hoe.

The years between their ages loomed before her much like the unkempt grounds of the estate. She could change the latter with hard work, determination and a sizable check to the local nursery. Unfortunately, there wasn't a damn thing she could do about the former.

Time flew by, as it always did when she got close to her first love. She was always amazed at the process of life. Even as a small child, she would sit for hours waiting for the first green shoot to poke its little head out of the ground. The estate grounds were a long way from being ready for new plants, but she was making headway.

She went inside to get a drink. The clean, spotless fridge showed no sign of the morning's disaster. Renée opened a cupboard, unprepared to see the familiar rows with the label of each can facing the door. Each door she opened, the contents were placed as she or her dad had been doing, and the way her mother had before she left.

Some of the old bitterness crept in. Aside from her pictures, she had very few memories of Melinda Evans. Her dad had insisted on keeping everything in the house just the way it was before she suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from their lives.

Refusing to even consider remarrying, Father had tried to fill both shoes in the family. She supposed he had done a fair job, but there were some things a mother was better suited for, especially when a daughter reached puberty.

Renée shook the haunting memories aside. How had Warren known where each item should be placed and onto which shelves? In court she had learned to anticipate the answers to her questions. She didn't like any of the ones that came to mind, not if they remotely connected Warren Bailey with her grandfather or his will.

What other likely answers were there? Honest answers—*none*. What she did have was enough coincidental, circumstantial evidence to begin building her case.

She followed a loud whining roar to the garage. Here, the noise was deafening. Warren stood behind the running machine amid flying sawdust and wood chips. It was useless to compete with the noise, so she leaned against the doorjamb and waited.

Warren looked up, nodded and continued feeding the board through the hungry wood-eating monster. When the board was all the way through, the sound level dropped immensely. He flipped a switch and it died.

He removed his ear protectors and safety glasses. "Something I can do for you?"

She glanced over at a stack of wood.

Warren laughed, "You didn't hear the delivery truck."

"Obviously not." Renée pushed away from the jamb. "May I ask what you are working on?"

"The back set of stairs isn't safe to use." He picked up the board that he had just finished running through the machine and placed it on the floor away from the rest.

"I don't remember buying that one." She pointed to the large wood-eating monster.

"You didn't," Warren smiled. "You rented it this morning."

Renée folded her arms under her breasts and instantly regretted the move. Warren's eyes dropped to her chest. She didn't miss the slight widening of his eyes or the almost imperceptible twinge at the corner of his mouth.

"You're mighty liberal with my money." Her first instinct was to drop her arms but that would mean he'd won.

"It's a lot cheaper than buying a planer this size." He placed another board on two roller stands. "Was there something else you needed?" Warren reached for the ear protectors.

"I may have found a way to break Grandfather's will."

Renée didn't have to wait long for his reaction. "Really, that's great! Anything I can do to help?"

I thought you might be interested. "Just keep up what you're doing."

He gave her a wide grin, covered his ears and flipped the switch on.

Even with the garage doors open, the overpowering whine caused her to wince.

His enthusiasm seemed genuine, but she was onto his little game.

You could be wrong. The little inner voice that she trusted in the courtroom, which had helped her win her first big case and a junior partnership in a prestigious law firm, cautioned her.

Not this time, she felt like yelling. *Why not? He wouldn't be able to hear a bomb if it went off beside him.*

"Kiss my ass, Warren!" Renée dropped her arms, turned and went back to the kitchen. The noise, so persistent that she felt it resonating in the floor, followed her through the house.

The clock showed an hour had passed when the noise finally stopped. Her body still vibrated. It was worse than being at a rock concert all night long.

"Is it lunch time already?"

Renée jumped at the sound of his voice and whirled around, right into Warren's arms. "You startled me."

He had removed his shirt. Sawdust clung to his damp skin. Her brain seemed addled as her body responded to her breasts pressed against his chest. She needed to move but her feet refused to obey. The tape measure on his tool belt pressed intimately between her legs. At least, she hoped that's what it was. Slow, steady warmth filled her belly and flowed downward.

She forced her arms to push him back. "Please don't sneak up behind me. If you're hungry..."

His eyes lowered and lifted back to hers. They held a wickedly sensuous gleam. Her mouth went dry and she licked her lips. "I made some sandwiches. They're in the fridge."

"Thanks." Warren stepped away, opened the fridge door and grabbed a ham and cheese.

He opened the door to the servants' stairs and the damp, musty odor of rotting wood spilled out into the kitchen. It didn't seem to bother Warren as he took a bite of his sandwich and stepped through the door.

She started to turn away when he stuck his head back out and grinned. "Was that the left cheek or the right?"

"What was that...?" She felt heat explode up her neck and flood her face. His wide, laughing grin only made her embarrassment worse. "You *heard* me?"

"Modern technology is great," he winked. "Those new sound suppressors keep out all the harmful noise, but lets you hear what is being said around you."

"I'll try to remember."

He disappeared again only to lean back into the kitchen. "Oh! One other thing, next time you issue an invitation like that one, be prepared to drop your jeans and bend over. I don't like the taste of dungarees."

"Oh! You!" She picked up a wet dishrag and hurled it across the room. Warren easily ducked out of the way. She was ready and had a second, sopping missile on the way when his face reappeared.

"You missed."

Splat! The second dishrag smacked him square in the face.

"Gotcha," she held up both hands and crossed her index fingers. "Truce."

Warren grinned and wiped away the soapy water. "For now." He tossed the rag at the sink and quickly ducked back out of sight.

Renée heard him climbing the stairs. "Be careful, Warren!"

"I will."

Moments later, she heard a sickening sound of breaking wood and a muffled oath. Her heart leapt to her throat in panic. "Oh my God! Warren!"

Renée dashed for the open door and looked up. Warren lay sprawled on the steps with one leg missing. From mid-thigh down, it was under the stairs. She started up.

Warren held up his hand, "Stay where you are, Renée." His face grimaced in pain.

She ran up the stairs and knelt beside Warren. "Don't move. Where's it hurt?" She ran her hands along his leg where it stuck through the wood.

"I don't think it's broken, just scraped." Warren shifted, trying to ease the pressure.

"One hell of a scrape," her hand came away covered with blood.

"Here," he handed her his hammer. "Pry the step up so I can get my leg out."

Renée took the hammer. "Maybe I should call 911."

"I don't need an ambulance, just my damn leg freed. If you're not going to do it, give me back my hammer."

She held it away from him. "Anyone ever tell you you're a typical, stubborn-ass male?"

Warren grinned. "Who am I to argue with a woman holding a hammer?"

Renée laughed, stuck the claws under the board and pried up. "At least you aren't a stubborn dumb ass. Those kinds are worse."

"I suppose you have met one or two of those."

He tried not to show any discomfort, but she saw the muscles in his jaw tighten and the twitch in his eye. "I've met one or two. Sorry, I've about got it."

"Take your time, I'm not going anywhere."

"Shut up and lie still." She took a better position under the step and again applied pressure. The nails pulled free and she lifted the board away from Warren's injured leg.

He turned over and pulled his leg out from under the stairs. "Thanks."

"I've got a first-aid kit in the van." She walked beside him as he limped down the narrow steps. Her hip brushed his tool pouch. Their bare arms touched and her skin tingled with awareness.

"Was Winston one of them?" he asked.

They were at the kitchen door and Renée froze. "How do you know about him?" He seemed amused at her question, which irritated her more. "Answer me. *Dammit!* How do you know Winston?"

"You talk in your sleep." His grin widened.

"I do not," she fumed.

"Do too."

Warren was laughing at her. She could see it in his eyes. Renée whirled around and stomped out of the kitchen. "Get out of those jeans and lie on the table."

"Do *what!*"

"You heard me, buster. Shuck those pants." Renée went outside to her van, found the first-aid kit and headed back to the kitchen. There was an extra bounce to her step. One she was hesitant to put a name to.

She reached the kitchen door and stopped. "I thought I told you to get on the table."

"This isn't necessary." Warren fidgeted nervously from one foot to the other.

"I'll determine what's necessary or not." She stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. "Either on the table or I'm taking you to the emergency room."

Warren gave her an exasperated, rolling eyes to the ceiling, I-don't-believe-it look and removed his tool belt. With a scowl and a heavy sigh, he unsnapped his jeans and dropped them to his knees.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he smiled.

"Not in the least." She tried to keep a straight face but failed miserably. She was enjoying the view. Warren probably didn't realize it, but his undershorts were thin to the point of being indecent. Not that she was complaining.

"Yeah, right," he sat on the table, stretched out on his stomach and waited.

She crossed the room to stand beside the table. "That's a nasty scrape and you have a large nail stuck in you that will have to come out. Warren, let me take you to the ER."

"Do what you have to do, but no hospital." He turned his head to look at her. "I'm serious."

"Okay, but this is going to hurt."

"So tell me something I don't know."

She started at the calf and worked up his leg, cleaning the scraped, bloody skin. The muscles in his leg felt like quivering steel beneath her fingers.

The nail had gone deep. "Warren, this —"

"Stop yapping about it and pull the damn thing out."

Her hand shook as she reached for the rusted nail.

She heard his sharp breath. His fingers tightened into fists 'til his knuckles turned white and the muscles in his butt cheeks constricted into rock-hard quivering flesh. Renée marveled that he hadn't cried out from the agony as she pulled the long nail from his thigh.

"Is your tetanus shot up to date?"

"Yes," Warren forced out through his clinched teeth.

"It's out." She showed him the nail. "What do you want me to do?"

Warren took a couple of deep breaths. "There's a bottle of peroxide behind the seat in the truck. Oh, bring my phone in too."

Renée went out to his truck and opened the door. She moved the seat and a packet of pictures fell out. The same woman posed naked in every shot. Some of the poses were tasteful while the majority went from provocative to hard-core close-ups of the woman's spread vagina, with and without a dildo.

She shouldn't have been shocked, but she was. Not of the pictures themselves, but that they were in Warren's truck. Had he lied to her about the magazines at home and about Tina? Guys didn't keep nudes of their brother's girlfriend lying around in the back of their truck.

Something bothered her about all of it. Why the charades at the store? Why not admit she was his girl?

Renée picked up the pictures and placed the packet back into the truck. She found the peroxide and started to close the door when she remembered the phone.

Back inside, she found Warren lying on his side trying to examine the injury to his leg.

"Here's your phone."

Warren quickly dialed a number and waited.

"Hey, Jim. Is Tina working today? Good, I need you to bring her over to the Duryea place. Bring her EMT bag with her. Dammit, tell her to get her ass dressed. I'm not dying, but I did have a slight accident."

"Slight my *ass*." She grabbed the phone out of his hand.

"Jim, this is Renée. It was more than *slight*. He *refuses* to go to the hospital."

She turned the phone off and gave Warren a satisfied smirk. "Your brother and Tina are on the way over."

Less than a minute later, she heard a car come to a screeching halt followed by two slamming doors. Renée started to go to the door but Tina opened it and came in.

"Warren!" Tina hadn't bothered to get dressed other than throwing on a robe, which had come untied and hung open.

"He's in here," Renée stood open-mouthed and watched as the young woman ran bare-ass naked across the room with her robe fluttering behind her like some caped crusader from an adult comic book.

"Hi, Tina. You didn't need to get dressed up just for me." Warren barely looked at Tina before he turned his gaze back on her.

Renée felt the warmth clear to her toes. She knew what he wanted and it was something she couldn't give.

Chapter Eight

Warren saw the concern in Renée's eyes and her denial with her crossed arms. The cold steel of Tina's scissors touched his skin. He knew what she was going to do.

With three quick snips, he felt the material of his shorts disappear.

Renée's eyes widened in surprise and for a brief moment he thought he saw desire. Her arms tightened beneath her breasts, pushing them higher under her blouse. Her weight shifted from one foot to the other. She was ready to bolt out the door.

White-hot flame traveled up his leg as Tina began where Renée had left off. He gasped and tried to hold still.

"Renée, hold his leg still while I finish cleaning this scrape," Tina ordered. "Jim, I'll need you too. Take his feet. If macho man wants to do this the hard way, it's no skin off my ass."

Renée swallowed, licked her lips and slowly rounded the table. "What do you want me to do?"

"Grab hold of his ass and hold him still." He could hear the laughter in Tina's voice.

"Like this?" Her fingers gently touched his upper leg.

"No, I need to clean there," Tina moved Renée's hands. "Here, now hold tight."

Renée's fingers were firmly wedged in the crack of his ass, less than an inch away from his balls. His heart slammed into overdrive. If it was Tina's desire to increase blood flow to help clean out the wound, she had only half succeeded. All his blood was being redirected.

Warren shifted on the hard, wooden table.

"Dammit, Warren," Tina bellowed. "Hold the fuck still."

Renée's fingers slid lower and she jumped.

"What the hell did you jump for, Renée?" Tina laughed. "You touch a snake? Warren, you got a woody?"

"Shut up, Tina." *I should've gone to the damn hospital.*

"How about that, Jim. Warren's got a woody. I haven't seen a Warren Woody since we all played doctor as kids. Maybe we should turn him over to see how much he's grown."

"Dammit, Tina. I'm warning you. Aaaahhhhhh!" The fire took his breath away and lifted him off the table. "You sadistic bitch!"

His body twisted trying to get away from the excruciating pain. Warren landed on his back with Renée sprawled half on top of him.

"Wow," Tina laughed. "You've really grown."

"Renée, if you get any closer, you can kiss it," Jim snickered.

Warren felt her hot, panting breath on the head of his cock.

"Kiss it! Kiss it!" Tina chanted. "You haven't got a hair on your pussy if you don't kiss the eye of that snake."

Would she? He held his breath. Would Renée take up Tina's challenge?"

Warren gasped, his body jerked as her full luscious lips placed a butterfly kiss on his aching, throbbing cock. He felt like he was about to explode and further embarrass both Renée and himself, if that were possible.

"I'll be damned," Tina squealed. "She did it, Jim! Man, I'm so wet it's running down my leg.

"Come on, Renée, you can have the rest later. I want to finish playing doctor, go home and get laid."

Renée pushed up with her arms and stood. She turned her head slightly away from Tina and Jim. Crimson flushed her neck and cheeks. The tip of her tongue appeared and traced her mouth. Her gaze shifted to meet his.

It was like she turned a switch, one minute raw, blatant desire turned her eyes to gold, and the next—nothing.

"Well, I've done all I can do," Tina washed her hands and belted her robe. "Renée, keep an eye on that puncture wound and anything else that might *pop up*," she laughed.

"Warren, behave yourself and stay off that leg for a couple days." Tina grabbed Jim's arm and led him out the door. "Come on, Pooh Bear. Let's go home and fuck."

A strained silence hung in the air between them. If he had a pair of pants, it might ease the tension. "Renée," he cleared his throat, "I'm—sorry about what happened. Tina is a little rough around the edges, but she means well."

"Is she always that...?" She struggled for the right word.

"Open," he suggested.

She avoided looking at him. "Yes."

"Only around her close friends or lovers." Warren started to swing his feet from the table.

"Were *you* ever her lover?" Renée stood by ready to help.

"Is this where we exchange morbid stories about past relationships and how they failed?" He eased his weight onto both feet and felt a moment of sharp pain. "Are you going to tell me about Winston?"

"I'm not discussing my past relationships, with you or anyone else. Do you need some help, Warren, or are you too macho to ask?"

"I'm fine—for now," he forced a smile to his face. "If you would help me up the stairs, I'd appreciate it."

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Renée put her arm around his waist. "None of your friends are going to know a silly, weak female helped put you to bed."

He laughed. "You're not weak or silly. And as far as my friends go, they would be envious as hell."

She paused at the foot of the stairs. "Why, thank you, Warren. That's about the nicest compliment I've received in a long time."

"I'm going to see that you don't wait as long between them." He winced as he put strain on his leg.

"Why would you care?" Renée whispered.

Warren turned his head and looked deep into her ever-changing blue-green eyes. "Because you deserve them."

The fullness of her breast rested heavy on his arm. He felt the wild, racing beat of her heart. They reached the top of the stairs and her labored breathing matched his. The pain in his leg faded, replaced by an ache deep in his soul.

"I want you, Renée," he blurted out as they entered his bedroom. "I have since the moment I first saw you."

She glanced downward. "I noticed." Her eyes misted over and swirled in a tempest of blue and green.

Warren eased onto the bed.

She gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. "I'm not ready for a new relationship." She stepped away from the bed and hesitated at the door. "If you need anything – yell."

He closed his eyes and listened to her footsteps recede down the hall. Almost imperceptible within his mind came the whisper of padded feet within his room. She was close, very close. Was he dreaming? Warren peered through the slits of his eyelids.

She sat on the foot of his bed. Her smile was warm, comforting, but couldn't mask the pain and anguish in her face. The shimmering image let go of the torn dress and reached out to him. The top fell away to reveal her creamy-white, perfect breasts. A chill crept along his skin as her hand passed through his flesh.

Then, as quickly as she had appeared – she was gone.

What did she want? Who was she?

"Renée!" he yelled. "Renée!"

He heard her rush up the stairs. The sound of her steps was louder but could've easily been those of his ghostly visitor. It was then he knew.

Renée came into the room. "Yes."

Warren tossed the blanket over his nakedness. "Sorry." He patted the bed beside him. "Please, sit with me for a few minutes."

"Are you in pain?" She crossed the room and sat at the foot of the bed.

"Tell me about your mother."

"Why?" She leaned back, leery of his question.

He couldn't blame her, but he had to know for certain. "If I know a little about her, it might help me get a feel for the house."

"She didn't live here."

Warren picked up on the defensive tone in her voice. "I think she did."

"What makes you so sure? Did my grandfather's lawyer fill you in on the morbid little details of my family?"

"You'll probably think I'm crazy, but—I *feel* her presence in the house." Warren held his breath, waiting for a response.

Renée laughed. "Yeah, you're crazy as a pet coon." She got up to leave and reached the door.

"You know, Renée, she was a beautiful woman, and she loved you very much."

She stopped dead in her tracks and slowly turned around.

"If we can find an old photograph of your mother twenty years ago, I bet you two could pass as sisters."

"How do you know that?" She took a cautious step back toward the bed and then another. "Please, tell me."

"Her spirit lives within this house, Renée."

"You mean her ghost," she scoffed.

"Yes."

Renée whirled around and stomped out of the room.

Over the *rat-a-tat-tat* of her feet as she flew down the stairs, he heard soft crying and felt the anguish of her mother's tortured soul. Warren reached up and wiped a tear from his cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I tried."

Renée retreated to the small brick patio. The iron furniture had long ago rusted away. Gone too was the small table with the large umbrella. Weeds grew in the cracks between the bricks. Flowers no longer lined the beds with their rainbow of color or sweetened the air with their sweet perfume, but it was still her refuge.

The day seemed like a nightmare from which there was no escape. Were it not for Tina's dare, and her own reckless behavior, she could put it behind her like a bad hair day at the office.

Renée moistened her lips with her tongue and tried to convince herself it was her imagination. There was absolutely no way she should still have Warren's musky taste on her lips but she did.

So why did I kiss the head of Warren's cock?

She, Renée Evans, was responsible for her own actions. She couldn't blame them on Tina, Warren or even Grandfather—not this time. Temptation to do something zany and unexpected had overridden her sensibilities. Her undoing and the contributing evidence to motive—the small, clear drop fluid forming before her eyes.

I wanted to.

The answer shocked her more than the act itself, or that Tina and Jim were watching. It disturbed her even more than Warren's bizarre comments about her mother's ghost living on the estate.

Now she felt branded. She carried his mark for the world to see, if it knew where to look. Renée hid it, locked it away, lest it fuel her desire and consume her and those around her. Maybe on some cold, lonely winter's night, she would unlock the secret chamber and let the memory keep her company and bring her warmth.

The tinkling sound of breaking glass sent Renée rushing back inside. On the floor of the large living room, she found the eight-by-ten of her and her father with its frame broken, the glass shattered and the picture ripped.

"Renée, what broke? Are you okay?"

She rubbed the moisture from her eyes and raised her head from the picture. "My picture fell."

Warren, his chest quickly rising and falling, leaned against the doorjamb. Sweat beaded on his face. Her eyes betrayed her and dropped to his groin. She laughed, "Do you often wear your shorts backwards?"

His hand dropped to the front of his shorts and he ran his fingers along where the opening should have been. "I thought they felt weird," he smiled.

"You should be in bed."

Warren walked with a limp to where she knelt on the floor. "Damn."

"It was sitting in the middle of the table," her voice broke. Renée felt another tear form and threaten to fall. She quickly turned her head to keep Warren from seeing her cry.

She heard his muffled grunt as he sat beside her with his injured leg stretched out in front of him. Renée jerked her head around. "Warren, your leg."

Her betraying tear fell.

"I'm fine, which is more than I can say for you at the moment." Warren put his arm around her.

"How could this have happened?" She focused on the two halves of the picture, torn down the middle, separating her and her father. "Who could be so cruel?"

"Go ahead and let it out, Renée. You don't have to be strong all the time."

She felt her lower lip quiver. "Why not? You are."

"No, I'm not. When I'm around you, Renée, I'm weak as a kitten."

Renée turned her face into the hollow of Warren's shoulder. "This house is *evil*. I hate it."

"It's not the house, Renée," he whispered into her hair, "but what's inside it."

"My mother was not evil." She leaned away from Warren. "She loved my father, I know she did."

Compassion filled Warren's eyes and he silently nodded.

"She didn't do this." Renée held up the two halves of the picture.

"No," he shook his head in agreement. "She didn't."

"Then who?" Just as quickly as she asked the question, she knew. *Who separated her parents? Who hated her father with such fanatical passion?*

"I think you know."

"He caused the destruction in the kitchen, didn't he?" she asked.

She felt Warren's sigh. "I know your mother didn't."

"He's not going to ruin my life *again*," she vowed.

His fingers gently stroked her hair. "Not unless you let him, Renée."

"Then I'm not going to give him the satisfaction." Renée put more conviction in her words than she was honestly feeling. She couldn't show weakness in front of Warren, not when he thought her so strong.

If he can break a picture and create chaos in the kitchen, what else can he do? "He can't physically harm us – can he?"

"I don't know, Renée." Warren gave a gentle tug and she gave in, allowing him to pull her into his arms. "I don't know."

"Promise me something, Warren." She snuggled closer within the circle of his arms. "Promise me you won't leave until this is over."

"My lovely Renée." He kissed the top of her head. "I've already made that commitment in my heart. Now I'm making it to you. I won't leave, no matter what happens, until you tell me to go. You have my word on it," he held up his pinky finger.

"A pinky promise." Renée hesitated, knowing what came next, and then slowly locked her pinky with his. "You can't break one of these."

He tilted her chin up. "You have to seal the promise."

She gave her lips to him as a token, a bond of promise. Renée felt his hunger as his lips moved over hers. The next step was total surrender.

Renée broke the kiss. "It's getting late. I'll help you up the stairs."

As she helped Warren climb the steps, she tried not to notice his bulging, semi-aroused cock. At his door, Renée turned.

"Goodnight, Warren." She entered her room and closed the door.

"Goodnight, Mother," she whispered.

"Hey, Grandpa," Renée lifted her middle finger to the ceiling.

"Up yours."

Chapter Nine

Maybe telling Grandpa to shove it wasn't such a good idea. Renée groaned as she heard noise coming from downstairs. She swung her feet out of bed. "Grandpa, you might not need any sleep, but I do. You want to roam this house—fine, but there's going to have to be some ground rules."

She belted her robe around her and held up a finger. "No more tearing up my things."

Renée opened the door and stepped into the hall. Warren's door was closed. She held up another finger. "I don't have time to clean up after your tantrums, so no more of this bullshit like yesterday."

As she went down the stairs, she held up another, "No noise before eight a.m." More sounds were coming from the kitchen. Renée glanced at the time. "You aren't listening very well."

She headed for the kitchen. "Oh, there is one last rule that I must insist on." Renée spoke louder, just in case Grandpa was hard of hearing as well as being dead. "Stay the hell out of my bedroom and the...."

"Warren?"

The aroma of bacon cooking brought a growling complaint from her stomach. She spotted steam rising from the coffee decanter. "What are you doing?"

"Morning." He grinned and poured a cup. "Sugar and cream?"

"Please." He was laughing at her. She could see it in his eyes and the twitching at the corner of his mouth.

Looking at his lips brought back last night's kiss. *Don't think about it...not unless you're ready to end up in his bed.* She forced the memory from her thoughts and locked it away in her secret chamber.

Renée took the cup from his hand, sniffed the rising steam and carefully took a sip. "Thanks. Mmm, that's good. You haven't answered my question."

"I thought it pretty obvious. I'm fixing breakfast. Should I set another plate for dear Grandpa?"

"For future reference," she glared at him over the rim of her cup, "any attempt at humor before my first cup is finished will *not* be appreciated. Why are you fixing breakfast?"

"I don't know, maybe because I'm hungry and I thought you might be too." He picked up a plate and handed it to her.

"I'm perfectly capable of cooking in my own house." Renée sat her cup down, leaned against the counter and began eating.

"Good, we can share." Warren looked at the table. "Something wrong with the chairs that I should know about?"

"I don't know. Is there something wrong with leaning against *my* counter in *my* house if *I* want to?"

"Renée, finish your coffee." Warren carried his plate over to the table, pulled out a chair and then sat down with his back to her.

She picked up her cup. "Mind if I join you?"

He pushed a chair out. "It's *your* table."

"Warren," she sat and put her elbows on the table, "I think we got off on the wrong foot this morning.

He stood, took her cup and refilled it and then sat it back down in front of her. "I don't have a wrong foot, just the usual left and right."

She started to speak when he pointed to the cup and held up two fingers.

"Can we start over, please?" she asked.

"Would that be before the coffee, the rules for Grandpa..."

"Are you always so hard to get along with in the mornings?" she interrupted.

"...or before the kiss last night?"

"Let's don't go there, Warren."

"Why not?" He set his fork down and rested his chin in his clasped fingers.

"Thank you for being there and understanding," Renée lowered her eyes, "but the kiss was a mistake."

"Was it?" he questioned.

Why had he brought up the kiss? Why couldn't he have forgotten about it? She took another bite trying to delay her answer. "Yes."

"Look at me, Renée." He reached across the table and with two fingers gently lifted her chin. "Tell me to my face the kiss meant nothing. You can't, can you?"

"Can we discuss something else?"

He let go of her chin. "We can talk about whatever you want, it's *your* house."

His smirk irritated her, not because he was right but because he knew that he was right.

"How is your leg this morning?" She changed to a safer topic and tried to concentrate on her breakfast. "I noticed you aren't limping as bad."

"Sore."

She drummed her fingers on the table. "You should probably take it easy for a couple of days."

"Why?"

Renée was ready to scream. She scooted the chair back, stood and picked up the dirty dishes. "So it can heal."

"I'll take it easy if it will make you happy," he promised.

"Thank you." She carried the dirty dishes to the sink.

"Gee, that wasn't so difficult, now was it?"

Renée turned her head and looked over her shoulder. "What wasn't?"

"Saying 'thank you'."

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. He was laughing at her again, or as she suspected, still. "This is going to be a *long* summer."

"We could make it a long *hot* summer with a kiss before coffee every morning," he wiggled his eyebrows.

"Don't press your luck," she warned with a wiggle of her finger. "You might find it a little short."

"Well, if you kiss it, I'm sure it will grow."

She felt her neck and face getting warmer. "Don't you have something to do?"

"You said take it easy today," he stretched his leg out onto the other chair. "I'm taking it easy."

"Take it easy someplace else. I have work to do."

Renée heard his chair scoot across the floor as he stood and his footsteps as he approached. He stopped behind her but she refused to turn around.

"I wash dishes too," he whispered at her ear.

"Out," she pointed to the door, "before I throw this at you." Renée wadded up the wet dishrag.

He chuckled as he limped away. "You'd miss me."

She tossed the wet cloth. Warren ducked out the door and the dishrag left a wet spot on the wall.

His laughter brought a smile to her lips.

Renée finished cleaning up the kitchen and, when she didn't hear anything from Warren, went back up to her bedroom to get dressed.

She tossed her robe onto the bed and her black teddy followed. "Wonder what Warren would have thought had he known how little I had been wearing at breakfast?"

A series of poundings came from downstairs followed by silence, and then more poundings. Renée tugged a pair of shorts over her hips and grabbed a shirt. She was halfway down the hall before she got it pulled down over her breasts.

The pounding grew louder as she neared the kitchen.

Renée opened the door to the narrow back stairs and stood there with her hands on her hips. "That doesn't look like taking it easy to me," she scolded.

Warren grinned and went back to tearing out the steps.

"If you aren't going to listen to me at least tell me what I can do to help."

He pulled up another step and tossed it on the growing pile of wood just inside the door. "I don't suppose you'd consider staying out of my way as helping."

"No, I wouldn't," she replied with a touch of cockiness. "It's my house."

"That's what I was afraid of." He winced as he straightened his injured leg. "Take my phone, hit redial, and find out where the dumpster is."

"What else?" She folded her arms under her breasts and as quickly dropped them. "Would you stop staring at my breasts, Warren?"

"Sure, when you stop wearing them."

"Ha, ha. Funny. I hire a carpenter and get a comedian."

"If you insist on helping..."

"I do."

"Dammit, would you let me finish a sentence? You can carry that trash outside." He turned his back to her and started on another step.

Renée made the call and hung up. "The dumpster should be here any minute."

She picked up an armload of wood, carried it outside and tossed it on the growing pile of rubbish. The front of her shirt was covered in filth.

Warren took one look at her and broke out laughing.

"Not one damn word," she warned with a shake of her finger and bent to pick up another load when she heard the loud engine noise of a large truck.

"Must be the dumpster," she smiled. "You are worrying for nothing. Everything is going to work out."

"Hello! Anyone home?"

Renée went to the door. "May I help you?"

The man was wearing a white construction hardhat and he held a clipboard in his hand. "I'm Benjamin Ableman with the Department of Building. I need to see your building permit, please."

"Excuse me?" she smiled. Inside she was seething with anger.

"Miss, don't play games. Unless you are planning on turning this dumpster into one hell of a planted pot, I need to see a building permit or else..."

If a snake could smile, Renée knew what it would look like. She put on her courtroom face. The one she wore when she knew everything was lost but still had to put on a good front.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize one was needed to do minor repairs." Renée stood in the doorway, blocking his entrance.

"If you need a dumpster this size," he pointed to the large, steel box being set in her driveway, "then the repairs are not minor."

"Hello, Ben." Warren's voice held a cautious edge. "What brings you by?" He walked up to stand beside her.

"Hello, Warren. I was in the neighborhood and saw the dumpster being delivered. I didn't realize this was your dad's project. I don't see his truck."

"Ben, you must have missed your bowling game with my dad last night, or you would know he and I parted company."

Renée caught the twitch of muscles in the inspector's face and the gleam in his eyes.

"Are you doing the repair work, Warren?"

"Ben, you already know the answer, so why ask?"

"I need to see your license and the work permit," he demanded with hand outstretched.

Warren leaned against the jamb and shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, Ben, a little detail I must have forgotten."

"I have no choice but to shut you down until you get both." He mimicked Warren's shrug. "Nothing personal, Warren," Ben winked. "You know the rules."

"Yeah," Warren's voice tightened with suppressed emotion. "I'm beginning to."

Renée took hold of his hand and gave it a light squeeze.

The inspector's eyes shifted and dropped. His puckered lips and raised brows showed his surprise.

"Mr. Ableman, I hired Warren as a handyman. If I'm not mistaken, I as the home owner can apply for a permit."

"Under normal circumstances, you're correct," his smile irritated her all the more, "but in a house this size there are just so many areas where a kid doesn't have the necessary experience. For safety's sake, I'm going to recommend a denial for permit. At least until Warren here can get his contractor's license," he turned and walked back to his car.

"Well, that's that," Warren sighed.

"You think your dad is behind this?" She forced herself to let go of his hand.

"He and my dad go back a long way." He watched the inspector's car roll down the drive. "I'm sure Dad waved a red flag knowing Ben would do the rest on his own."

Dejected, Warren went back to the kitchen and stood there with his hands on his hips, looking at the boards just inside the stairs landing. His knuckles turned white and the muscles in his neck began to bulge.

"Warren," she lowered her voice to hopefully head off the pending explosion.

"Fuck me!" Warren's arm lashed out. The force of the door slamming shut rattled dishes in the cupboard.

"So that's it?" she asked. "You're going to roll over and play patsy for your old man?" Warren turned to leave the room and she stepped in front of him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Face the facts. As long as I remain working here, we're both screwed."

"Where's the man who told his boss to take the job and shove it?" She poked Warren in the chest with her finger. "You were going to show him and everyone else that you have, excuse me, *had* what it took. Go ahead," she moved aside, "stick your tail between your legs and go crawling back to your old man like a whipped puppy."

He moved but not out the door. Renée didn't think he would hit her, but as angry as he was at the moment, she wouldn't want to bet on it. She felt the urge to back up, away from his hostility, but forced herself to stand there, nose to nose with Warren.

"Okay, Miss Know-It-All, fancy pants, educated lawyer," he whispered. "Come up with a solution."

Renée took a slow, deep breath and her breasts brushed against his chest. His eyes flashed his awareness of the contact. She was suddenly and unexplainably hungry. Starved was a more accurate description, only it wasn't for the aroma of breakfast still on his breath.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth.

His lips were what a double hot-fudge sundae would look like to a person on a no-carb diet. She fought the temptation and slammed the door on her growing desire to kiss him. For with Warren, one more taste of his desire and her self-imposed diet would be over.

Maybe he should leave. The thought crossed her mind. *It would be safer that way.*

She forced her eyes up away from his lips. "They don't think you have what it takes to make it. Prove to them that you do."

"How?"

Renée curled her toes to the point she felt pain. She had to stay focused.

"Get your contractor's license."

They stood there, silent, staring into each other's eyes. The ticking grandfather clock seemed to get louder as did the hum of the refrigerator.

He dropped his eyes and turned away. "It's not that easy, Renée."

"I didn't say it would be easy, Warren. It all depends..."

"On what?" he leaned against the kitchen counter and poured the last of the coffee into a cup.

"How badly you want it and what you are willing to give up to get it."

Warren lifted the cup to his lips. "Are we still talking about the license?" His eyes bored into hers with a deep longing.

"Is there something else you want besides proving to your old man that you can do this?" She waved her arm around the room.

"Yes." Warren took another sip but didn't lower the cup.

"It's not whether you succeed or fail, but if you have the guts to try."

He seemed to think about it for several seconds. Warren set the cup on the counter, reached out and pulled her into his arms. Any thought of resistance faded as his lips found hers in a kiss that again curled her toes for an entirely different reason.

Her heart pounded beneath her breast and butterflies fluttered within her stomach. The passion of his desire spread through her like wildfire and burned all her excuses for holding back.

Warren broke the kiss and she sucked in a deep breath of cool air. He stepped back and she felt confused.

"Where are you going?" she asked as he walked away.

"To find a copy of the building codes."

A few minutes later, Renée heard a vehicle pull up to the house. "I wonder what he forgot?"

Several minutes went by and when he didn't come in, she went out to the garage looking for him.

"Oh! It's you again," she snarled. "Why the *hell* are you snooping around in my garage, Jacobs?"

"Good morning to you too, Renée," Jacobs flashed her a toothy grin.

It would've been better if you hadn't showed up.

He picked up the skill saw. "I just wanted to see how you were spending my money."

"Your money!" She saw three different shades of red.

"These are mighty pricey tools, Renée. I don't know if I can justify the expense."

"Where do you get off saying it's 'your' money?"

He laid the saw down. "You're right, Renée. It's our money that I'm looking out for."

"There is no *our* nothing. Not now. Not ever." She slowly crossed the open space of the garage. "And the only way that you will ever get *my* money is over my dead body."

There was something evil about his smile and the gleam in his eye.

"I hope it doesn't come to anything as drastic as that, my dear."

Her stomach tightened. She felt a burning sensation in the center of her chest. Renée tried to take a deep breath, but it felt like a giant hand squeezed her lungs.

"You don't look so good, Renée. Aren't you feeling well? Maybe you better lie down and rest. Why don't you let me help you up to bed?"

"Don't—touch—me." She held up her hands to ward him off. "Get out—now!"

"I think you better let me help you, Renée," he drew closer.

"So-help-me-God! If you touch me, I'll claw your fucking eyes out."

His eyebrow arched. "I could take that as a threat and have you arrested."

"Take it however you want to. But take it—and your ass—off my property."

Jacobs gave a mocking bow. "As you wish, my dear, for now," he turned to leave. "I'll come back when you are feeling more congenial."

Renée ran out the back door, leaned over the brick patio wall and promptly heaved her breakfast.

I can't tell Warren about this. She turned the spigot on and splashed cold water on her face. *If I do, he'll take matter into his own hands.*

Renée heard Warren's pickup pull into the drive and she ran back into the house.

Warren came in carrying three large books and laid them on the table. She had fretted that he might change his mind about preparing for the contractor's license.

"Thanks for giving me the kick in the ass I needed," he gave her a wink.

"That's my specialty, ass-kicking lawyer and gardener extraordinaire. Is there anything I can do to help?" Renée asked as she examined the books.

"You can keep the coffee pot filled and throw a few scraps of food my way from time to time."

"Oh goody," she picked up the book on plumbing codes. "This will come in handy."

Warren laughed. "Studying that won't make me a plumber any more than reading a flower catalogue makes a gardener."

"Are you questioning the ability of my green thumb?" Renée tried to make a threatening face and held the book as if she was going to throw it at him.

"No, I'm trying to make a point." He reached out to take the book from her hand but she held it behind her back.

"I'm not a mind reader, Warren." *What am I doing? I might as well take my clothes off and throw myself into his arms.* She laid the book on the table. "What's your point?"

"You grew up with, as you put it, 'dirt under your fingernails'. I had sawdust under mine. If you want to study this," he picked up the book she'd laid down, took her wrist with his other hand and placed it in her open palm, "and fix the plumbing yourself—knock yourself out." On his way out the door, Warren grabbed the other two books from the table.

"I'm an educated woman. I can do this." She plopped down in a chair, opened the cover and began reading.

Twenty minutes later, after re-reading the same page three times and struggling to stay awake, she closed the book.

Renée found Warren in the small library sitting in one of the two overstuffed chairs. He was either sound asleep with his eyes open or totally engrossed in the book he was reading.

The library held no fond memories. Grandpa's study had been off limits as a child. She had given the room a cursory inspection and quickly left, not to return, even to uncover the furniture. There had been a feeling of being watched.

Now she understood. Grandpa did not want her in the library. Not then, not now, and unless she could exorcize his ghost from the house, not ever.

The thick carpet muffled her steps as she crossed the room and removed the cover from the other chair. "If you'll stand up a second, I'll remove the cover from your chair."

She waited for some type of recognition or response of some kind. Renée observed his ever-changing expressions as he read. As his eyes darted back and forth across the page, his eyebrows would scrunch together or one of them would arch in a what-the-hell-is-this look. Those she could understand.

It was his damn grin that threw her balance off.

"Warren?" Renée reached out and touched his shoulder. "Excuse me."

His head snapped around and up. "What?"

She held up the other cover and then gave a tug to the one he was sitting on. "The chair cover."

"It's fine, thanks." He went back to reading.

She didn't know whether to laugh or scream. "Warren, stand up," she demanded in her strongest courtroom voice.

Warren stood. Renée jerked the cover off the chair. "Sit!"

Renée stifled a laugh as he took his seat like an obedient puppy. *I wonder if he would bark.*

Chapter Ten

The sun had barely turned the sky to an orange-tinted pink when Renée tore into her gardening with pent-up fury. Warren's obsessive behavior chewed away at her nerves. The heavy, dark circles under his eyes caused her concern. For the last week, he had been up before her and gone to bed long afterward. This morning, she found him sleeping in his chair with the electrical codebook open and lying on the floor beside him.

There was a positive side to this, for which she was thankful. With Warren in the library, Grandpa's presence wasn't as strong. She felt somehow – safer. Well, as safe as she supposed one could feel with poltergeist activity an almost everyday occurrence.

Renée paused in her attack on the hard ground of the neglected flowerbed. She now had proof that her mother's spirit lived here too. She thought about that first morning when she absently set a cup of coffee on the table out of Warren's reach and it began to move, sliding across the surface to stop inches from the edge. It was nothing she could prove in a court of law, but she knew.

She renewed her slashing at the stubborn weeds. Her mother's love and affection had been kept from her childhood. Now it was bestowed yet again on another. Renée wanted it. It was hers by right. "It's not fair!"

"Are you going to take a break?"

His voice caused her to look up. Warren stood within the low walls of the brick patio.

The afternoon sun had begun to cast shadows across the ground. "Sorry, I lost track of time."

"I figured I better rescue the hoe," he teased, "before you wore it out."

"Ha, ha, ha," she gave him a sarcastic laugh. "What brings your nose out of the books?"

"The cook took a day off and I was starved."

At his mention of food, Renée felt a disapproving growl. "I forgot lunch too, didn't I?"

"I never noticed," he grinned.

"You wouldn't," she snapped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Warren still had that stupid grin plastered on his face.

"For the last week, you haven't even noticed if I was alive or not. I waited on you, brought you coffee and food and I didn't even get a 'thank you'."

"Oh really," he crossed his arms and lifted his hand to his chin. "Mmmm, let's see, do you know how many times you set the coffee cup out of my reach, on purpose?"

"I didn't think you noticed," she began to feel sorry for her snappish comment.

"Or the number of times you sneaked into the room without saying anything?" he continued.

"Warren, you wouldn't understand," she started to go on and stopped. On a table made of sawhorses and a couple of wooden planks, he had a full meal prepared and ready to eat.

"I couldn't allow myself to get sidetracked—by anything. This," he swept his arm toward the food, "is my way of saying *thank you*."

"Why now?" His gesture had punched all the right buttons and she was on a four-star guilt trip."

"I'm ready to go for the license," he smiled. "Well, as ready as I'm going to get from reading."

"Then it's time to celebrate." Renée started to go in. "I'll just be a minute to change."

"The food will get cold." Warren reached out and stopped her with a gentle touch on her arm.

"I'm filthy," she argued.

"There's nothing wrong with honest dirt," he countered.

"Very well," Renée picked up the garden hose and cleaned her hands. There was no need to plead her case. She didn't have a strong defense and Warren knew it. She allowed herself to be seated and then he did something that caught her totally off guard.

Warren served her.

"This isn't necessary, Warren. I..."

He stopped her mid-sentence with a spray of flowers. "I know, you're a very capable woman."

"Thank you, Warren." There wasn't a hell of a lot she could say in the face of his thoughtfulness or the trouble he had gone through.

She began eating but noticed for all his supposed starvation, he only picked at his food. "Is something the matter, Warren?"

"I never asked for your mother's attention, Renée."

Renée put her fork down. "I never said you did."

"She's been very unhappy."

"Really? Well la-di-dah, tell her to join the club." Old resentments died hard and Renée bristled. "If she's been so friggin' damn sorry, she could've come home where she belonged."

Warren sighed, and she strained to hear his soft whisper, "I don't think she could."

"I suppose she is talking to you now too," she quipped.

"Sarcasm really doesn't become you, Renée." His gentle reproach caused her to instantly regret her outburst.

"So I've been told," she apologized.

"Was your mother ever in jail?"

"What?" Renée got choked and started coughing. "Not that I know of. Why would you ask such a thing?"

He looked ill at ease and she pressed him further. "Tell me."

"I'm not sure what it means or how to say this..."

"Try in English."

"Did you have your morning cup of coffee?" he asked.

His smile defused her anger and she burst out laughing. "I guess I deserved that. I sense this is difficult for you, so I'll shut up and listen."

With tongue in cheek, Warren raised an eyebrow.

His hesitation to continue prompted her to lift her arm and extend her hand. "Pinky promise." She felt a fleeting moment of disappointment when he didn't respond. Renée lowered her arm and clasped her hands together.

"Most of the time, I only feel your mother's presence. First time I actually saw her, I thought it was you, except for..." he took a deep breath and exhaled through his mouth.

"Go on, Warren," she reached out and grasped his left hand. "I'm listening."

"Renée, she wears a single handcuff around her wrist."

"A handcuff," she leaned her head closer. "Are you sure?"

He continued as if he hadn't heard her. "I think it's been there for a long time."

"What makes you think that, Warren?" His slumped shoulders, tilted head and his exasperated scowl caused Renée to close her mouth, lift her fingers to her lips and pretended to zip them shut.

"Her wrist is badly bruised and bloody."

"Warren, that is the craziest thing I have ever heard," she scoffed. "Whatever you've been smoking, you need to change brands."

He pushed his half-eaten dinner away. "I'm sorry I mentioned it," he said as he shoved his chair back and stood.

"Warren, sit down—please." When begging didn't work, she tried a different approach. "You have to admit this is a lot to take in, especially for someone who two weeks ago didn't believe in ghosts."

"Apology accepted." He sat, pulled his chair back to the table and reached for his plate.

"I didn't apologize."

"Well, it sounded like one to me."

"Well, it wasn't," she countered.

"Will you concede it possibly should have been an apology?" Warren pleaded.

"Oh, all right," she smiled. "I'll accept that and declare this debate over and officially a draw."

"A draw my ass." Laughing, he leaned back in his chair. "I won that hands down, and you know it. Face it, Renée," he leaned forward and the front legs of the chair sounded like pistol shots as they hit the bricks. "You don't like to lose."

"You're right," she picked up her fork and continued eating. "I don't."

Renée looked at Warren's smug, boyish smile. She felt she knew more about him in a week than she ever did in the year she went with her ex-boyfriend. Warren made her laugh. He excited her physically and, she was forced to admit, emotionally as well. It was a shame that he was so much younger than she.

"You're so quiet, Renée. What are you thinking?"

"I was..." *Oh shit. Think, girl. Say something, anything but the truth,* "thinking how good a shower is going to feel." She lifted her glass to her lips.

"I imagine it will," Warren's devilish grin gave her warning, but not soon enough. "Why do you think I seated you downwind?"

She spewed water across the table. "Are you implying I stink?"

He leaned across the small, improvised table and sniffed the air.

"I'll get you for that, buster." Renée pushed away from the table.

"Where are you going?" His eyes were warm and inviting. Laughter, the kind that had you grabbing your side and wiping tears from your eyes, bubbled below the surface.

"I'm going to take that shower now," she started for the house.

"What about the dishes?"

She kept walking. "I remember you saying, and I quote, 'I do dishes too'."

"But I cooked the meal," Warren protested.

"Ahh, that is true." She turned around at the door. "I forgot to thank you for a delicious meal."

Renée ran inside and lightly up the stairs. She couldn't remember when she last felt the freedom to laugh at herself. To have dirt between her toes and, she examined her fingers, even under her nails. How had she managed to convince herself that working among the city's corporate, prestige-seeking and ladder-climbing stuffed shirts was *living*?

It might be for some, but it had taken an old run-down estate, two ghosts and a young carpenter to make her realize that there was more to life than a courtroom.

Renée pulled her shirt over her head, "*Phew-wee!* Warren was right, I'm ripe," and dropped her shorts on the floor. She placed her hands under her breasts and gave them a slight lift. "Not bad for a twenty-seven-year-old."

As she turned sideways in the mirror, she noticed the slight beginnings of what would be a mid-life bulge that she had been fighting with health clubs, spas and fancy diets. "Maybe now that I'm no longer planting my ass on a chair all day, I can finally do something that will show results." *But first, I've got to keep that man out of the kitchen.*

"When did you change, Warren, or did I?" Renée stepped into the tub, adjusted the water temperature and pulled the shower curtain closed. "Ahh," she groaned as the hot water beat against her tired and aching muscles. The water turned brown around her feet and she kicked the rubber stopper out of the way.

She applied a liberal capful of shampoo to her hair and worked up a full head of lather when the water went teeth-jarring, stone cold and then stopped. "Dammit!"

Renée pulled the curtain open, squinted through soap-covered eyes and screamed. She jumped from the tub and fumbled with the doorknob, trying to wrench the door open.

Cold hands crept along her skin.

The door finally opened. Renée burst from the bathroom, went screaming down the hall and ran into a solid brick wall. In horror, she felt it surround her and hold her captive. She fought the monster, which held her in its grasp, kicking and hitting at it with all her strength.

Chapter Eleven

"Shhh, I've got you. Calm down. Nothing's going to harm you—I'm right here, you're safe now."

She began to sob against his shoulder. "He was there—in the bathroom—sitting on the toilet watching me take a shower. When I tried to run, he put his hands on me. God, it was awful."

"It's all right now, Grandpa's gone," he whispered. "He can't hurt you."

"Are you sure?" she asked with a sob.

She stood in the hall with his arms wrapped tightly around her. Renée felt his every heartbeat, every rise and fall of his chest, and the slight pause in his breathing.

Warren sighed. "Not with absolute certainty, no."

Renée snuggled against his strength. The coarse material of his shirt rubbed her nipples and sent hot flashes of desire spiraling downward. "I'm getting you wet."

"I won't melt."

You might not, but what about me? She giggled. "I'm naked."

"Really," he exclaimed in surprise. "I never noticed."

"Liar, liar," she giggled again, "pants on fire."

"Good thing my clothes are wet." He leaned back and kissed her forehead. "You need to finish your shower. You still have soap in your hair."

"I'm not going back in *there* by myself." She stiffened at the idea of being caught alone again. "It was one thing knowing he was in the house. It's different now knowing, he can," she shuddered, "touch me. You're coming too."

"Renée, are you sure?"

The hard bulge of his erection pressed against her. She resisted the urge to rub against the front of his jeans. "I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

Warren's laugh was low and sensuous. "This isn't just about Grandpa anymore—is it?"

I need Warren. Need him to drive away the horror of Grandpa's touch. "Grandpa," she whispered, "can go to hell."

Warren lowered his head and his lips touched hers. The smoldering embers of desire, started by his first kiss so many nights ago, burst into flame. His tongue sought entrance and she welcomed the deeper intimacy of the kiss.

After all, it's just sex.

Any lingering doubt about what she wanted went down the drain the moment she kissed him. Her hands pulled at his shirt and then slid underneath to rake and claw his back. Warren released her, ripped his shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor.

She took his hand and half-pulled him down the hall. At the door, she hesitated and looked in. Renée squared her shoulders. "I can do this."

"You don't have to." Warren squeezed her fingers.

"Yes, I do."

The door slammed shut in her face.

"Damn you!"

Renée tried the doorknob and put her shoulder to the door. "Warren, I don't care how you do it, but that door is coming off its hinges – tonight. I'll be damned if a ghost is going to keep me out of my own bathroom."

He almost laughed out loud at her standing in the hall, her hands balled up into fists and resting on her hips. "I'll be right back with the tools."

Halfway down the hall, he heard the quick slap of bare feet on the wooden floor. He looked over his shoulder to see Renée, her breasts bouncing with each step, running to catch up with him.

She grabbed his arm. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

A few minutes later, Warren stood ready to take Grandpa on. He tried the door only to find it was still securely fastened.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he held up the battery-powered saw and squeezed the switch.

Renée flinched at the high-pitched whine of the whirling blade.

Warren smiled. "It makes no difference to me."

The door swung open.

Warren took his hammer, removed the hinge pins and set the door in the hall. "There, that's one damn door he won't be able to lock."

He held out his hand. "Ready?"

She stepped into the bathroom. Her fingers trembled as she unsnapped his jeans, lowered the zipper and shoved the material over his hips.

He inhaled sharply when she traced the outline of his hard-on through his undershorts. Warren pulled her to him and sought her lips in a demanding kiss. With a quick swoop of his arm, he picked her up, stepped into the tub and set her down. His old thin shorts ripped as he hurriedly pulled them off.

"You're not in a hurry, are you?" She ran her fingers down his chest.

"I've dreamed of us like this." He placed his hands gently over her breasts. "Wondered what it would be like to touch you here," he lowered his right hand, trailing his fingers along her skin, "and here."

She moved, breaking the contact between them, and turned the water on.

Warren pulled the curtain closed. *What the hell did I do wrong?*

Renée adjusted the water and lifted the plunger, sending the water over them in a fine spray. "Would you wash my hair, please?"

"I'd love to." He lifted his hands to her shoulders and worked his fingers through her dark blonde hair.

Renée backed up against him. His knees nearly buckled as she sandwiched his cock between the tight cheeks of her shapely ass.

"Mmmm," she moaned. "That feels good."

Warren couldn't agree more but he found it impossible to speak.

"Easy on the hair," she gave a playful slap on his leg. "I said, '*wash it*', not pull it out."

"Sorry." He relaxed his grip and she bent at the waist to turn the water off. It took all his willpower to keep from burying himself in her silky depths.

Renée lifted her hands to her hair and squeezed the excess water into the tub. She threw the curtain open and reached for a towel with one hand as she pulled him from the tub with the other.

"Who's in a hurry now?" He snatched a towel from the rack.

"The less time I spend in there the better." She entered his bedroom.

"Does that include all bathrooms, or just this one in particular?"

Renée shrugged her shoulders and began drying off. "They're all the same to me." She looked up at him, her hands stilled, and she looked away.

"You're making me self-conscious." The blush started on her neck and slowly rose to her cheeks. "Haven't you ever seen a woman dry herself?"

"Sure," his voice was little more than a harsh whisper, "but none as beautiful as you."

Renée dropped her towel. "Yeah, right." She turned the bedcovers down.

Warren closed the short distance between them, gently took her arm and pulled her against his chest.

"You're just saying that so you can have your wicked way with me," she breathed against his lips.

"Is it working?"

Her arms slid around his neck as her lips met his.

"I'll take that as a yes." He lowered her backwards onto the bed.

Renée leaned her head back and Warren nuzzled her neck. He slid down her body and kissed first one nipple and then the other. He drew the dark bud of flesh into his mouth.

"Ahh!" she moaned in a long exhaled breath. Renée's hands moved feverishly through his hair and over his shoulders. Her fingers played an erotic tattoo that excited him further. The sharp edges of her nails left a trail of fire dancing across his back.

With his left hand, Warren covered her right breast and gently squeezed. His fingers closed around her nipple. She began to writhe beneath him. He stroked her skin with his right hand, dropping to her hip and down along the outside of her leg. As his fingers started back up along her inner thigh, she pulled his arm up.

Warren moved to her other nipple. "I want to touch *you*, to feel your wetness..."

"No!"

Renée pushed against his shoulder, guiding him down the length of her body. He scooted off the bed and knelt between her legs. Warren smiled. There was touching, and then there was *touching*.

Warren exhaled and his breath stirred her soft thatch of curly hair. He kissed her inner thigh and inhaled the scent of her sensuous musk.

Renée squirmed on the bed, "Warren—*please*." Her fingers twisted his hair and she pulled his face into her moist heat.

The pain from nearly having his hair ripped out of his scalp combined with the grinding motion of her slick, wet pussy against his mouth gave Warren an intoxicating rush. His tongue licked her swollen clit and then delved deeper into her pulsating flesh.

A little voice inside his head began to scream for air. Warren had to breathe, but every time he backed away to take a hurried gasp, Renée pulled on his tortured hair. He managed to turn his head and gently nip the flesh of her tender inner thigh. A fresh wave of pain radiated from his head.

I'm glad she doesn't have hold of my ears. The stray thought and the mental picture of her holding his torn, bloody ears in her hands gave Warren a moment of concern.

Her deep sensuous moans began to change, increasing in pitch as well as volume. She relaxed her death grip on his hair and her fingers began to massage his scalp. Suddenly, Renée was playing with his ears.

"Warren!"

He sucked harder on her engorged clit.

"Please!"

Renée slid a hand over his face and gave him a slight push. He reluctantly backed away. Her fingers moved seductively over his lips. Warren captured a lingering finger and sucked on it, drawing it into his mouth. She gave a gentle tug and like a fish on a hook, he followed her retreating finger up the length of her body.

Her face was flushed and the dusting of gold specks in her bluish-green eyes glistened, ablaze with passion.

She stopped level with her breasts and with a soft, wet *pop*, pulled her finger from his mouth. Warren watched with bated breath as she drew a wet ring around the nipple of her left breast.

His throat tightened. He drew in a slow, ragged breath. Warren followed the circular path of her finger with his tongue and then gently kissed the dark pink center.

"Ahhhhhh!" Her body trembled beneath his.

Warren drew her hard, distended flesh into his mouth, teased her with his tongue and raked his teeth across her nipple. Renée's body nearly levitated from the bed. She wrapped her legs behind his butt and grabbed his hair with both hands.

"Yes!" Her hot breath exploded against his scalp.

He closed around her again, holding her nipple captive in the small gap between his front teeth.

Renée jerked his head up before he could release her. He saw the flash of pain in her eyes before she sealed her mouth over his and her tongue demanded entrance. The strength in her legs surprised him as she tightened them and pulled him into the hot, silky depths of her sensuous flesh.

Her tongue ravished his mouth in a thought-robbing conquest. She used her legs like jackhammers, driving him deeper inside her with each thrust of her hips.

Suddenly, Renée was on top of him with her head tossed back, her mouth open. He grabbed her bouncing breasts and squeezed. Steel-hard bands of pulsating flesh clamped down around his cock. Warren's vision blurred. His lungs burned. Every muscle in his body tightened as he met the driving, downward thrust of her hips.

"Ahhhh!" A white-hot surge of liquid heat centered in his groin. The force of his climax lifted his shoulders off the bed and slammed him back onto the sheets.

Her fingernails dug into his legs. Renée stiffened and fell forward. Her nipples ground against his rough palms as Warren supported her weight with his arms. He slowly lowered her to his chest and wrapped his arms around her. Her hot, panting breath bathed his shoulder.

"Oh, *wow*!" Her nipples pressed against his chest as she wiggled into a different position. "*Wow*." Renée snuggled into the hollow of his shoulder and kissed his ear.

Renée had given him the most rewarding, wildest and satisfying sex he had ever experienced. He hoped there would be many such passionate nights. Warren smiled and rubbed his tortured, sore scalp—even if it meant going bald.

"Only a two-'wow' climax?" he chuckled. "I'll have to try harder next time."

He felt drained, content to lie right where he was with Renée stretched out beside him, and at the same time ready to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

She started to move and Warren pulled her back beside him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm not going anywhere. *We* are going to the bathroom. I've got to pee."

"You're a big girl. I don't need to hold your hand while you go to the bathroom."

"Yes you do," her hot breath teased his skin. "When you're around, Grandpa leaves and goes elsewhere." She kissed the hard pebble of his male nipple and then drew it into her mouth. "Are you," she was destroying his concentration to think let alone talk, "and Grandpa on speaking terms now?"

"Ouch!" he yelped. "You bit me."

"You didn't hear me complaining about a few tiny, insignificant bite marks, did you?" She gave him another nip. "You're such a wuss."

"Bite me again and I'll show you wuss," Warren gave her ass a playful slap.

She scampered off the bed, grabbed his arm and pulled. "Please!"

"Okay, I'm coming, don't pee your panties," he swung his feet from the bed.

"Ha, ha, ha, very funny." She took his hand and half dragged him out the door and down the hall to the bathroom.

He leaned against the doorjamb and waited. Renée looked around the room, rolled her eyes to the ceiling and finally closed them.

"Warren, turn around. *Please!*" Her neck and face started turning red. "I can't pee with you watching me."

He started to back out.

"Don't even think about it." She threw the roll of toilet paper at him.

He caught the roll, laughed and turned around. Almost instantly he heard the tinkle of running water.

"Okay, Warren. May I have the toilet paper?"

"What paper?" he slowly turned around. "Oh, this roll?"

"Yes." Renée held out her hand.

"You threw it. Why should I give it back?"

"Because I need it now."

"You need this whole roll," he tossed it up in the air and caught it again, "to wipe one little wet pussy?"

"No," her shoulders slumped and her stomach shook. "I need a small piece of it."

He tore off half of a small square and handed it to her.

Her breasts shook. "Not that small," and her laughter reached her face.

"I don't know." Warren cocked his head sideways. "You might waste it, then you'd have to buy more and your lawyer might wonder why."

"I'm not going to waste any. Please, I need to wipe."

"Just to make sure you don't..."

"No, you can't watch," she interrupted.

"You're right, I'm not," he watched her sigh with relief. "I'm going to wipe for you."

The muscles in her legs went on instant lockdown. "No!" She covered the small visible patch of hair with both hands.

Renée's face turned pale, her eyes widened and became fixed on something far away. For a brief second, he saw a small child as they filled with the hurt of betrayal, and—fear.

Warren handed her the roll of toilet paper.

Renée snatched it from his hand and clasped it to her breast.

He turned around and waited.

The toilet flushed. She reached past him for her robe and washed her hands.

"Renée..."

She stepped in front of him and silenced him with a finger on his lips.

Warren kissed her finger. "Renée..."

"I don't want to hear how *sorry* you are or any foolish declarations of love." She turned away. "Warren, you're good in the sack, we had great sex, but..."

"I'm going back to bed." He felt used.

She gave a slight nod and walked beside him back to his room.

Damn you, his lips moved in silence. *If you weren't dead, I'd kill you myself.*

Renée crawled into bed without removing her robe and turned on her side away from him. Warren sighed, slipped between the sheets and lay there waiting for sleep to block out his thoughts.

I thought she was different from Tina and the others. Maybe Dad was right. They're all takers. They suck a man dry, crush him and then move on to another easy mark. You want me to be a carpenter, I'll be a carpenter. You want me to be your gigolo...

* * * * *

Renée turned onto her side away from Warren and closed her eyes, but sleep eluded her grasp. A tear leaked out from under her eyelid, slowly rolled down the side of her nose and dropped onto the pillow. She loathed her inability to put the past behind her. It was irrational to blame Warren, but she did.

The bed shifted, Warren's arm curled around her waist. "Want to talk about it?"

"No," she whispered.

Another tear followed the first and fell to her pillow. She felt Warren's sigh on the back of her neck.

"Don't *hate* me, Warren."

He kissed her shoulder. "I could never hate you, Renée."

The way he spoke her name, almost reverently, twisted at her soul. It was like—he really cared. Winston's snide "Grow up and get over it" still hurt.

Do I dare trust another man? Something inside Renée told her Warren was different, but one night of fantastic sex wasn't going to have her airing any more of the family's dirty laundry.

Warren's body heat warmed her back and the underside of her breasts. She felt the muscles in his arm tighten against her skin. The fresh horror of her nightmarish memories began to fade, pushed aside by his comforting strength and quiet non-

demanding acceptance. Renée lifted his hand to her lips, kissed his palm and then placed it over her breast.

Wrapped in the secure cocoon of his arm, she exhaled a long slow breath and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Renée slowly opened her eyes and felt a moment of panic.

What am I doing in this bed? She moved and the unaccustomed soreness between her legs proved that last night's wild ride hadn't been a dream. Neither, then, was her encounter with her grandfather's ghost.

"Warren," she whispered. Renée reached behind her and felt only the sheet. "Warren!" She jumped out of bed, dashed from the room and with her robe flapping behind her ran down the stairs. "Warren!"

"I'm in the kitchen."

She made a beeline for the sound of his voice and didn't stop until she was in the safety of his arms. Renée's breasts pressed against his bare chest.

"My, my," a female voice chuckled. "What have we here?"

"Tina," Warren growled, "shut up."

"Fuck off, Tina." Renée gave her her most intimidating courtroom glare.

"Whoa!" Tina's head jerked back like she had been slapped, she blinked, and her eyes darted between the two of them. "Pardon my ass for breathing."

"On one condition."

"And that would be?" Tina asked.

"Pour me a cup of coffee."

"Please," Warren added for her. His chest shook with suppressed laughter. "She's a little testy before her morning fix."

Warren kissed the top of her head and she nuzzled the hard pebble of his male nipple. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Tina's amused smirk.

Warren stood in her kitchen wearing nothing but her apron. The thought ran through her head that she should feel some embarrassment, at least a little, but he showed no apparent concern about Tina's presence, so why should she?

"Thanks." Renée wrapped her fingers around the hot mug and turned in Warren's arms. "You're forgiven for showing up in my kitchen before daylight."

"Don't blame me. The kitchen light was on." Tina raised her eyebrows and looked accusingly at Warren.

"You don't expect me to cook breakfast in the dark, do you?"

"Well, now that you're here, you might as well pull up a chair and eat." Renée stepped away from Warren, tied her robe closed and reached for another plate. Her arm stopped, frozen in midair as she noticed the tray set with service for two and a freshly picked bouquet of yellow dandelions and purple wild flowers.

His thoughtfulness and the effort he had gone to surprise her left her stunned, momentarily at a loss for words. Then the reality of what he had done hit her. "Tina, I think you should go."

She picked up the glass, which held the flowers. The image of her grandfather's ghost, hovering over Warren's bed, drifted across her mind. Her fingers tightened, her knuckles turned white, and the flowers shook.

Tina looked at her as if she had sprouted horns and a forked tail.

Warren looked confused.

"Sure, no problem. I need to be getting home anyway." Tina walked backwards toward the door as her eyes darted between them.

At the quiet click of the front door closing, Renée relinquished her hold on the building anger. "Damn you, Warren!" She hurled the glass through the air.

"What did I do?" He glanced helplessly at the wet spot on the wall and the flowers on the floor, amidst the broken glass.

"You really don't have a clue?" She plopped down in a chair.

"Ahh—you don't like dandelions?"

"Are all men naturally dense at birth, Warren?" She sat with her feet spread apart and her hands resting on the sides of her hips. "Or does puberty cause it?"

"Naw," he sat down opposite her, "it's from all that beating-off we did before we discovered pussy."

In spite of her anger, she chuckled. "That must be it."

"Now, what did I do that I shouldn't have?" Warren reached out and took her hand.

Her first reaction was to jerk it away, but to give him credit—he was trying. "Did you hear anything I said last night?"

"Was that during the most amazing sex I've ever had," he wiggled his eyebrows, "or after?"

Is his flattery real, or just a tactic to change the subject? "After."

Warren lowered his eyes, turned his head and glanced over at the flowers. "I just wanted to show you how special last night was for me."

His shoulders dropped, a small muscle twitched at the side of his mouth and his oh-so-kissable lips drooped into a dejected frown. Renée gave his fingers a squeeze.

"It—was a sweet gesture, but suppose while you were outside picking the flowers, or down here fixing breakfast Grandfather had chosen that time to pay a visit?"

Warren looked up. "I'm—sorry. It won't happen again."

Renée leaned over to give Warren a soft, *you're forgiven* kiss. At the touch of his lips against hers, all of the energy from her fear and anger exploded into a consuming wave of passion. Her heart began to beat wildly as his tongue sought and gained entrance to her mouth.

His hands were on her face, neck, and then pulled at her robe. She broke the contact between them in order to fill her heaving chest with air and give him unrestricted access to her breasts.

The intensity of his passion-fired gaze lifted her off her chair. Renée let her robe fall to the floor as she lifted her left leg and straddled his lap. She felt the straining bulge of his erection press against her.

"What are you hiding in the pocket of my apron?" She rocked her hips back and forth against him. "Hmm," she watched the muscles in his face tighten, "it's hard."

"Yes, it is." Warren's voice was low and husky.

Renée placed her hands on his chest. The wild pounding of his heart beneath her fingers matched her own.

"Is it...edible?"

Warren groaned. "It could be."

"It's a vegetable," she wiggled against his apron-shrouded cock, "and it's a cucumber."

"No," he gasped and leaned his head against the back of the chair, "not a vegetable."

"Then it must be protein." Renée took a sausage link from the plate and lifted it to her mouth. "It's too big to be one of these." She slowly licked the grease from it. "Maybe a Polish sausage."

She bounced up and down on his lap. Warren's head bobbed on his shoulders like a shaken rag doll. "Oh goody, I just love those when they're big, plump and juicy." Renée ripped the apron from between them.

She tossed the piece of sausage onto the table, reached down and ran her finger along his ridged length. A clear drop of fluid flowed from the bulbous tip and onto her finger. Renée lifted her hand and licked her finger.

"I don't think this one's ready. Maybe we better put it in *my* oven."

Renée rose up, placed the head of his hard penis between the wet folds of her vagina and lowered herself back onto his lap. She kept her muscles tight, using her weight to force his shaft deep inside her.

"Ahh," they both groaned, though Warren's cry sounded more like pain than pleasure.

Her hands went to his shoulders. The muscles in his back and arms quivered. Warren could easily dominate her, and she admired his strength in letting her be in control.

Winston was such a wimp. Along with the unwanted thought of her ex-lover came the realization it had been especially true of their sex life. *Winston had to prove his manhood every time we had sex by being "the man".*

She leaned forward. Her breasts flattened against his chest. "I love how you fill my oven," she whispered.

"It's a very nice oven but," his sensuous chuckle tickled her ear, "we need to lubricate the door so it opens easier next time." His teeth nibbled on her earlobe and she turned her head. Warren sucked on her lower lip and then took her in an open-mouth, tongue-probing, toe-curling kiss.

Renée began to rock her hips to the rhythm of his tongue. The one motion fed off the other 'til they consumed her in a feeding frenzy.

Beneath her thighs, she felt the rock-hard muscles of his legs as he met her driving thrusts. This was sex at its finest, sex as it should be. Fast, furious and spontaneous with no commitment and uninhibited by empty declarations of emotional baggage.

She closed her eyes and leaned back, trusting Warren to hold her and not let her fall. Her movement changed the angle of his penetration and sent a shock wave of pleasure rippling over her.

"Ahhh!" she gasped and opened her eyes to see the kitchen light dancing on the ceiling. Everything around her seemed to happen in slow motion. She felt every heartbeat as it pounded against her ribcage and echoed in her ears. Warren's animal-like grunts and harsh breathing mixed with her own to fill her head with a sensuous roar.

His strong capable hands held her suspended somewhere between heaven and earth when a strange, eerie chill surrounded her. Suddenly, she was floating and looking down at their sweat-drenched bodies locked together at the hip. Only—now she felt detached, as if she were watching Warren as he made love to someone else.

"I see your mother is still attracted to men beneath her station in life."

Renée turned her head to see her grandfather's evil grin.

"Like mother like daughter," he shook his head. *"You should have stayed here with me. I could have spared you from degrading yourself with an ignorant hired laborer."*

"I would rather have died than stay with you!" she screamed.

"Your mother," he looked down at the scene in her kitchen, *"it saddens me to say, felt the same way. Come, granddaughter, you've debased yourself fornicating with trash. I'll give you a bath and clean you up."*

"No!"

Warren fought for control, waiting to climax with Renée. She seemed to be focused on the ceiling. He shifted his eyes upward.

An apparition of an elderly male floated near the kitchen ceiling. Then he saw a second one, more transparent, and barely discernable as Renée's mother. The two ghosts seemed to be arguing.

His climax took him by surprise and he pulled Renée into a tight embrace. Her violent shudder nearly ripped her from his arms.

"Oh, wow!" He sucked in large gulps of air. "That was something else.

"Renée?" For just having had wild sex, she was breathing mighty calm.

"Renée?" He focused on her still, unmoving breasts and closed eyes.

"*Renée! Oh my God!*" Warren shook her and her head flopped from side to side. His fingers dropped to her wrist where he searched frantically for a pulse.

Chapter Thirteen

Warren fought against the panic that rose like a thick black cloud before his eyes. He quickly laid Renée on the floor and checked again for a pulse, this time using the artery in her neck.

His heart raced out of control. His last CPR class was a long time ago—he was about to do something he hadn't done in years.

Warren closed his eyes. "Please, God, let me do this right." Tears flowed down his cheeks as he gave three short compressions of her chest.

"Come back to me, Renée," he pleaded. He tilted her head back, covered her mouth with his and gently filled her lungs with two breaths of air.

"Don't you dare die on me, Renée!" He gave her three more compressions and watched her breasts rise with each breath.

Warren was ready to give another chest compression when Renée's body jerked, her eyes slammed open, and she gasped.

"Thank God, you're back!" he scooped her up and held her close. "I thought I'd lost you."

"I was beginning to think I wasn't going to make it." Renée wrapped her arms around him and held on tight. "Grandpa didn't want to let me go."

"I saw the bastard and your mother floating near the ceiling while we were making love." Puzzled by her statement, Warren frowned. "What does he have to do with what happened to you?"

Renée leaned away and Warren met her troubled gaze. "What makes you so sure it was my mother you saw?"

He was even more confused. "Is there *another* ghost in the house I don't know about?"

She shook her head, "Not that I'm aware of. What I mean is, were you able to see this ghost clearly? Did you see the handcuff on her wrist?"

He shrugged, "No, but—"

"I don't understand any of this, but one thing I do know for certain—it wasn't my mother," she leaned into him and whispered in his ear, "it was," he felt her shaking, "*me*."

"That's—"

"Impossible," she spoke his thoughts. Warren hoped that she couldn't read any more of his thoughts or follow his thinking through the twisted paths of what was and wasn't impossible.

Renée leaned away from him and looked around the kitchen. "Before I inherited this nightmare, I would've said the idea of ghosts was impossible."

Warren released a long, slow sigh. He shook his head in agreement. "And if one ghost wasn't enough trouble, we had to end up with two."

She tried to smile, her lips twitched and she wiped her eyes. "At least one ghost won't cause any trouble. My mother wouldn't hurt a soul."

He pulled her back to lie against his chest. *Yeah, right. She just caused more damn trouble than she's worth.* Warren held back his thoughts on dearly departed mother. "I'm sure you are right, Renée."

"You don't believe me—"

"I've never met your mother," he paused, "in the flesh."

She turned around to face him and crossed her legs. With her elbows on her knees, Renée rested her chin on her clasped hands. "Now you're laughing at me."

"I am not."

"You are too." She leaned backward and placed her arms behind her with her palms flat on the floor. "I can see the laughter in your eyes."

Although it had been only a few short minutes since he had been buried deep inside her, he found himself responding to the wanton sensuous position of her on the kitchen floor.

"For your information, Warren Bailey, it was Mother who came to my rescue from Grandfather."

At the mention of her mother, his impending erection shriveled and died. *Well, duh! How do you think you got in that situation to begin with?* "I'll be sure to give her my undying gratitude the next time I see her."

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm?" she grinned and started to rise.

Warren jumped to his feet to help her. "Maybe a little."

"I'm fine, Warren, really I am." Upon reaching her feet, she swayed.

He wrapped his left arm around her waist as he pulled out a chair for her. "Sure you are."

"Okay, so maybe I'm a little unsteady on my feet, but it's because I stood up too quickly." Renée sat in the offered chair. "Thanks."

She took a deep breath, flinched and gently rubbed between her breasts. "Damn, feels like I've been run over."

"Sorry," he whispered. Warren slid his fingers through her hair. "I guess I got carried away."

Renée lifted her eyes to his. "I'm glad you were here."

"Me too," he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. *How could I live with myself if she had died?*

"What's on the schedule today?" Renée lifted her hand to his face and trailed her fingers across the short stubble of his whiskers.

"Hmm, I'd say a shave was in order first off."

"It's still early. We could always go back to bed." Her voice purred with seduction.

And give your mother a chance to invite herself in for another intimate visit. Not only no, but hell no!

"It's time I started earning my keep around here," he winked. "I thought I'd check out the roof and try to fix those leaks before it rains again."

"May I suggest something?" The corners of her mouth twitched.

"You can suggest anything you like." *Doesn't mean I'll agree to it.*

She reached between his legs and playfully fondled his balls. "You might want to get dressed first."

How was it possible to have her words bring relief and at the same time, regret? In an exaggerated bow, he offered her his arm. "May I escort you to your chambers, my lady, for more suitable attire befitting the day's activities?"

Renée took his arm and slowly stood, "Thank you, Warren."

Her nipple grazed his arm. The all-too-brief touch sent a jolt of desire straight to his groin. They started side by side up the stairs to her second floor bedroom. He sucked in his stomach and drew in a quick breath. The touch of her hip and leg against his was driving him over the edge of self-control.

"Warren?" her voice crept into his thoughts.

"Yes, Renée." He turned his head and looked into her eyes, bright with the swirling fires of passion.

"Zipping your pants might be difficult," she opened her mouth and licked her lips. "I could take care of your problem. That is, if you wanted me too."

Her implication was perfectly clear and there was nothing he would like better. They entered her bedroom and he stopped dead in his tracks.

"What's the matter?" she purred.

"*Nothing*," he replied.

Her eyebrow arched and her mouth quirked sideways, "Yeah, right. The way you were staring holes in my bed, I assume this particular *nothing* is sitting on it."

Warren clamped his teeth together as the intensity of his anger deepened.

"What does Mother want?"

"How the fuck do I know?" he exploded. "She's your damn mother, you ask her."

Renée's head jerked back as if he had slapped her and he instantly regretted taking his frustration out on her. *Open mouth – insert foot.* Warren berated himself.

She spun around, marched over to her dresser and dug out a pair of jeans and a tattered T-shirt. As she pulled it past her breasts, he noticed the faded lettering on the front. "I'm not on PMS."

Renée lifted her foot to pull on the jeans. In her haste, she lost her balance and started hopping around on one foot as she tried to push her foot through the unyielding fabric.

"I'm 100% BITCH!" The back of her shirt brought a chuckle that he failed to smother and it earned him a scathing glare.

"Renée, I'm sorry."

She toppled backwards onto the bed, lifted both legs toward the ceiling and pulled her pants down to her cute little ass. "A little late for sorry, isn't it?"

The tantalizing view reminded him of the promised blowjob before her mother made her unwanted presence known.

With her feet back on the bed, she used her legs to lift her butt and slide the material past her hips. "Don't ever use that tone or language in connection with my mother again. She's gone," Renée ran her hand over the bedspread, "isn't she?"

"Yes," he sighed with relief.

The mattress squeaked as she swung her feet over the side, slipped her shoes on and stood. "Aren't you going to get dressed?"

Renée followed him across the hall but turned her back to him as he dressed. "Ready when you are." It was going to be a long day.

"Anything I can do to help?" She started down the hall and he fell in beside her.

Yeah, stay the hell out of my way. "We'll be outside, I don't think Grandpa will bother you in the daytime."

"In other words, stay out of your way."

The sharpness of her words pricked his guilty conscious like a long splinter. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Warren shifted his eyes and saw her infuriating smirk. "You must be hell in a courtroom."

"I can hold my own."

He laughed, opened the door to the garage and waited 'til she walked through.

"So, where do we start?" she asked.

"We?" With a disgusted shake of his head, he crossed the concrete floor to his tools before he turned toward Renée. In his best Tarzan imitation, he beat both fists on his puffed up chest, "You garden, me roof."

Warren bent over, picked up his tool belt and buckled it around his waist.

Renée balled up her fists and stomped her feet. "You...you..."

"Renée, you're stuttering," he managed to keep from laughing at her again but couldn't stop the tremors from his voice.

"Warren Bailey, you are without a doubt the most conceded, self-opinionated, and...and..."

It appeared that she was struggling to find another worthy adjective. "Go on," he prompted her to continue.

"Dinosauric male chauvinist that I've *ever*," she spat the word out like it was a bad taste in her mouth, "had the displeasure of knowing."

She was sexy as hell when aggravated. Warren purposefully goaded her further. "Don't you mean prehistoric?"

There was only one thing that kept him from saying to hell with the roof repairs, throwing her over his shoulder, and carrying her caveman-style back up to his bed. He didn't trust her mother.

"That too." She snatched a shovel from the wall rack so hard that the handle slapped her on the side of the head.

"See what you made me do!" Renée rubbed the offended spot.

Warren lifted his hands, pointed his index fingers back toward himself and arched his eyebrows.

"Yes, you." She stormed out of the garage.

He almost felt sorry for the weeds.

Renée walked obstinately out the door without turning around. Something about Warren, whether they were making love or in a heated argument, made her feel like the *Bionic Woman*, and she couldn't take the chance of him seeing her revitalized spirit.

Did that mean that, *he* was her *Six Million-Dollar Man*? Delicious, sensuous warmth began to radiate from between her legs and flow through her body. From her peripheral vision, she saw him emerge from the garage with his left arm through the rungs of a long extension ladder balanced on his shoulder.

Renée leaned on the shovel handle and sighed with longing. Six was such a mediocre number.

An old Shania Twain song, "Man! I Feel Like a Woman", popped into her head and she began to hum the tune as she turned back to the years of neglect in what had once been a beautiful and well-kept yard. She kept one eye on where she placed the business end of her shovel and with the other on Warren as he leaned the ladder against the house.

With deliberate and meticulous care, he anchored the feet of the ladder, making certain it was level and safe. Warren grabbed hold of the rope and pulled. The extension began to rise in the air. Higher and higher, it went. She pictured in her mind the corded muscles of his arms and shoulders as they overcame the ladder's weight, just as they had been when he carried her up the stairs.

The top of the ladder barely reached the roof's edge. She wanted to stop Warren. Renée chewed on her bottom lip even as her mind screamed out how ludicrous this was. It was too dangerous. Fixing the leak could be done later.

Renée was enough of a realist to know that saying *anything* would only make him the more determined to reach the roof, come hell or high water.

"Men!" she mumbled under breath.

Warren reached the center of the ladder. It swayed under his weight, but undaunted, he continued as if he were on a stepladder instead of twenty feet in the air. Her eyes followed him up each rung. He scrambled over the roof's edge, stood and gave her a big wave.

Renée breathed a sigh of relief and waved back.

Like a cat, he crawled across the roof, checking for broken tiles and joints. One false step and the fall from thirty feet—she tried to put the thought from her mind.

Warren moved back to the ladder and swung his leg over the side of the roof. With one foot on a rung, his other foot followed over the side.

"No!" she screamed. Renée tried to run. Her feet became tangled in the wild vines and weeds. She extended her arms to catch herself as she fell.

"Grandpa!"

The base of the ladder kicked back away from the house.

"No!"

Chapter Fourteen

Renée watched in horror with her mouth open in a silent scream that deafened her mind.

Warren clawed at the tiled roof and his feet kicked the air. His fingers caught the edge of the rain gutter and his body slammed into the wall with tremendous force. The gutter shook, twisted, and the sections next to Warren pulled away from the eave and crashed to the ground.

She heard the sharp, metallic grating screech of nails as they pulled slowly from wood. The end of the gutter dropped and Warren bounced like a cork at the end of a fishing pole.

Renée pushed herself from the ground, kicked her feet free from the undergrowth and took off in a dead run for the house.

"Hold on, Warren!" A rose vine reached out and its thorns ripped across her face. Tears welled up in her eyes and her vision blurred. "I'm coming!"

In slow motion, the gutter swung lower. His feet touched a windowsill on the third floor. Warren let go and the gutter instantly fell to the ground.

"Don't move. I'll get the ladder." She tried to pick it up, but with the extension all the way out it was impossible.

"Take your time, Renée. I'm not going anywhere."

She took a moment from her fight with the ladder to glance up at Warren and flip him the bird.

"You'll have to shorten the ladder first," he chuckled.

Renée stood with her feet spread and her hands resting on each hip. "If you hadn't been so pigheaded and refused my help, this wouldn't have happened."

"Oh, really." Warren leaned a shoulder against the house. "You think you could have prevented what happened."

"Yes," she stated with more bravado than conviction.

Warren's outright laughter irritated her even more, but as she replayed the accident in her mind, she knew he was probably right. *Especially with the aggression Grandpa's ghost had shown*, the thought raised the question, *Why?*

Renée glanced around nervously.

"If you're looking for help, there isn't any around."

"I was wondering where the *son of a bitch* disappeared to." She turned her attention back to the unyielding ladder.

"Did Grandpa leave the building?" he asked.

In exasperation she shook her head. "No, Elvis did."

"Smart ass." His reply brought a smile to her lips.

Renée raised her voice. "You don't think it jumped out of the ground by itself, do you?"

"I hadn't taken the time to consider how it happened."

The tension came off the extension lock and it snapped open. "Aww, damn," she grabbed her right hand with her left and cradled it to her chest.

"Renée! Are you hurt?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. "No, I enjoy having my finger mashed."

She stood and went to the end of the extension. Her finger throbbed. Its pounding rhythm shot up her arm. Renée picked up the end of the ladder and shoved.

"When I get down, I'll kiss it for you."

"I'd tell you what you could kiss," she looked up, "but you'd probably enjoy it."

He gave her a wide smile.

He's laughing at me, maybe even thinking about where he'd like to kiss me. One thing's for certain, she thought, I'll definitely enjoy it – wherever he kisses.

Just thinking of all the erotic places he could kiss her released a flood of sensual heat between her legs.

Renée pulled the ladder into place, lifted the end above her head and began to walk the ladder into an upright position. *Damn, Warren made it look so easy.*

The end of the ladder slowly lifted in the air. At about a forty-five-degree angle the muscles in her arms and legs quivered, and her back felt ready to break under the strain.

"Come on, Renée," Warren encouraged. "Just a little more and you've got it."

"Yeah, right," she mumbled through gritted teeth.

"You can do it, just –"

"Warren!" She stepped aside, dropped the ladder, and it crashed to the ground.

"I'm just trying to help."

"You want to help," she doubled over with her hands on her knees and took several deep breaths, "just shut the hell up."

"Renée..."

She lifted her head and glared a warning at him.

He lifted his hands, palms out. "Okay." Warren pulled the thumb and forefinger of his right hand across his mouth and then folded his arms across his chest.

Renée repositioned the ladder and once again started lifting it toward the side of the house. All of a sudden, it got easier as if someone were helping. She swiveled her head but there was nobody there, yet she felt an eerie presence.

When it was straight up in the air, she balanced the ladder and reached for the rope that would lift the extension. The ladder wobbled and she gripped it tighter. Renée wondered how she was going to hold the ladder and raise the extension at the same time. She looked up at the narrow window ledge where Warren was precariously perched.

True to his word, Warren hadn't uttered a sound. In fact, he seemed totally unconcerned over his predicament.

She felt a slight pressure on her hand. Startled, she jerked her hand away and fully expected the ladder to fall. To her surprise, it remained upright and steady without so much as a wobble.

Renée quickly glanced up to the window ledge. Warren was grinning, his lips pressed tight in suppressed laughter. He turned his eyes away from her and looked out over the grounds.

The pressure on her arm returned, pushing her hand toward the rope. Within inches of the rope the pressure stopped—the rope moved, lifted and fell across her fingers. Renée pulled on it, but she couldn't pull hard enough to lift the extension with one hand,

In desperation she looked back to Warren.

He frowned, shook his head and held up both hands.

"The ladder will fall."

Warren put both hands together and pretended to pull the rope.

"Okay, you win, but if a window gets broken, it's coming out of your damn pay." Renée loosened her grip on the ladder and slowly opened her fingers.

The ladder seemed anchored in concrete.

Renée took hold of the rope and with both hands slowly began to raise the extension. She waited with bated breath for the ladder to come crashing down. *Probably right on top of my dumb ass or through a window.* The extension locks clicked over another rung and the ladder started to lean.

"No!" she screamed as she dropped the rope and frantically reached for the ladder.

Warren laughed out loud and she shot him a scathing glance. He immediately clamped his hand over his mouth but didn't stop the laughter.

With both hands on the ladder, she was confused to find little if any weight pulling against her. It was almost like—like it was being lowered slowly toward the window ledge where Warren waited.

"You think this is funny, mister. When you get down, I'll show you funny," she warned. "I'm going to kick your ass."

He held up his hands and opened his eyes wide while his mouth formed a large "O".

"You'd better be scared."

The ladder touched the side of the house. He stepped off the ledge onto the rungs.

"This just proves I'm right. You are without a doubt the most stubborn male species of the human race I've ever met," she scolded as he came down the ladder.

Warren stepped off the ladder and she launched herself at him with her fists raised. "You ever pull a harebrained, dumb stunt like that again by yourself," Renée started beating on his broad rock-solid chest, "and I swear to God, I'll leave your dumb ass up there."

Renée ignored her tears of relief rolling down each cheek as she railed at him. "You have any idea how damn scared I was?" She punctuated each word with a blow of her fist. "Well, do you?"

His lips were sealed, pressed firmly together.

"Dammit, Warren, quit playing games and say something."

Before Renée had time to blink, his lips covered hers in a demanding, almost savage kiss. She parted her lips to protest and his tongue filled her mouth. Her arms snaked around his shoulders and her fingers wove themselves through his hair.

He finally broke the kiss and she drew in an erratic breath. "Damn you, Warren," she whispered. "Don't even think that you can smooth this over with a simple kiss."

Simple, she thought as she buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder, there was nothing simple about it. Hell, I'm hanging all over him and we're outside in broad daylight.

"Can I try again?"

"No," she jerked her head up, "you can't. I'm still mad at you."

"You're beautiful when you're mad."

"Stop trying to change the subject," she demanded. "I didn't want you to kiss me." *Liar*, her heart accused. "An apology would do for starters."

"I had to have a kiss first." Warren pulled her head back down to his shoulder.

She didn't have the willpower to resist. "Why?" she whispered.

"My lips were sealed, and your kiss was the key to unlock them." His words, as silly and corny as they were, warmed her heart and she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Warren," she dried her eyes on his shirt, "promise me you'll get help before you go back up on the roof."

"It'll cost more money." His hands moved sensuously across her lower back.

"I don't care." She kissed his neck and felt the strong beat of his pulse beneath her lips.

"Okay, Renée, I'll rent a lift and hire some help before I go back up."

She lifted her head to look into his face. "Promise?"

His lips descended toward hers. "I promise."

Warren's first kiss had been hard and demanding, whereas this kiss had the depth, passion and desire to curl her toes. It was chocolate marshmallow fudge, lip-smacking good. It ended all too soon and it left her wanting more.

He dropped his right arm, turned slightly and looked up at the damage.

"Grandpa sure made a hell of a mess this time," she sighed. "You could have been killed."

"I think," he lifted his hand and slowly ran his fingers through his hair, "that was the idea."

"Surely not," she gasped. "I know Grandpa was a son of a bitch, but murder?"

"Why not?" Warren laughed. "You're the lawyer, think about it. It would be the perfect crime. Even if you could prove it, you can't arrest and convict a ghost."

"But why? What would he have to gain?" She knew the answer as soon as she asked the question.

He looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

"That's it," she turned and started toward the door. "It's not worth it, Grandpa. You fucking pervert! You win!"

She took three, maybe four steps when Warren's fingers clamped onto her arm and spun her around. "Let go, you're hurting me."

His fingers loosened their vise-like pressure. "I said, *let go*." Renée tried to pull away, but he held her fast.

"Promise not to run away half-cocked, and to listen?" There was something about his voice that caught her attention. Maybe this strong, forge-hardened steel strength of resolve had been there all along, but she hadn't noticed it before.

Renée slowly nodded her head. Warren let go and she rubbed the circulation back into her arm.

He held up a finger in front of her nose. "First off, you're not going to quit."

She started to object when his finger landed across her lips.

"You've never quit anything in your life —"

"How do you know?" she mumbled from behind his finger.

Warren gave her a very perturbed scowl. "I can find some duck tape."

With a cold, calculated glare, she pressed her lips together. It was no idle threat, and she knew that he would use it too.

"Much better. Now, as I was trying to say before I was rudely interrupted." His fingers gently cupped her chin. "You didn't get through law school by quitting, and I'm not going to let you start now."

Renée kept quiet, preparing her defense.

He chuckled. "I can read you like an open book. You're wrong. I do have something at stake here. I haven't poured my sweat and blood into this place just to see you piss it away."

"Another reason you can't quit," his face tightened and his eyes narrowed. "You'll have a nice, fat bank account if you go back to your fancy office, plush carpets, and crawl back into bed with the boss' son. Whereas..."

Renée bristled. Even if what he said were true, and it was, Warren's last remark was hitting below the belt. She raised her hand to slap him, but at his warning glare let it drop to her side.

"I end up crawling back to my old man with my tail between my legs. That, Renée, is something I will *never* do."

"Even if Grandpa kills you?" she breathed a soft whisper.

"We won't let that happen," he spun on his heels and walked away with strong, determined steps.

She hurried to catch up with Warren. "How can you be so sure?"

"Between the three of us, your grandpa hasn't got a chance to succeed." He opened the door to the garage.

"Three?" she questioned.

"You're forgetting *Mother*." He said the word like it was a bad taste in his mouth and he was trying to spit it out.

"What does Mother have to do with all this?" She stepped halfway through the door and stopped, blocking Warren's entrance.

"Come on, Renée," he scoffed. "Use that brain of yours. How come I didn't fall? You surely don't think one small nail in rotten wood held my weight. Did you stop to wonder how you got the ladder up the second time or the extension raised?"

She leaned heavily against the doorjamb. "I did wonder, even suspected, but at the time I was more concerned for your safety."

"Are you going to let me in, or do I have to go around to the back door?"

"Sorry," she moved out of the way. "Why do you think Mother interfered?"

Warren entered the garage and headed for the kitchen. "How the hell would I know?"

She followed him into the kitchen. "I didn't ask what you know, only what you think could be her motive."

In thoughtful silence, he got a glass, filled it with water and took a long, slow drink. She watched his throat move up and down with each swallow. Water spilled from around the lip of the glass and dripped onto his chest.

The desire to lick it off was overwhelming and she moved closer.

"Maybe," Warren spoke at last, "it's for the same reason that Grandpa is trying to get me to leave."

He laughed at her confusion.

"You've lost me."

Warren sighed. "Maybe it's just as well."

"Damn you, Warren," she bristled. "Don't treat me like a little school girl."

He took one step and stopped right in front of her. "When we made love this morning and you suddenly found yourself floating near the ceiling, where the hell do you think dear ol' Mother was?"

Warren spun around and stomped out of the room.

The implication stunned her. Renée staggered drunkenly to the table and plopped onto a chair. She felt like crying, but the tears wouldn't come.

"Why, Mother?" She looked toward the ceiling. "Why?"

Chapter Fifteen

Warren felt about as low as slug slime and that was probably doing the slug a grievous injustice. *If I'd had more time to think, I could have handled it differently.* He exhaled a long sigh. What was done couldn't be changed. Halfway up the stairs, he stopped, sat down and with his elbows on his knees, rested his chin on his clasped fingers.

The hall clock began to chime and he checked his watch. "Lunch time—already?" There was something about nearly dying that made time seem to stand still. It was also damn tiring. He tried to rub the grit of exhaustion from his eyes when he felt a presence next to him. Warren slowly turned his head toward the opaque figure.

"Am I supposed to thank you for saving my life when you almost killed your daughter?"

Was it possible for a ghost to appear contrite? Her long face and turned-down mouth certainly gave that indication. "You just can't go kicking your daughter out of her body whenever you want to get laid."

She lifted her hand and reached out to him. The ominous pair of handcuffs still dangled from her wrist. His first thought was to jump and run but he refused to show any signs of fear. A chill touched his cheek and ran down his spine.

Her arm moved away from him and her finger pointed toward the kitchen. *My daughter needs you.*

Warren jumped, stumbled his way downstairs and looked over his shoulder. He was only slightly relieved to find her gone. "Where the *hell* were you when she needed her mother?"

The soft, far-off sound of a woman crying reached his ears. It seemed to be coming from the living room, and at the same time, every room in the house. Had Renée gone in there without him seeing her?

Warren went to check, but the room was empty. The low mournful sound, however, was clearer, more pronounced. The short hairs on the back of his neck stirred. Puzzled, he looked around, walked across the threadbare carpet and stopped in front of the fireplace.

It's just the wind coming down the chimney, he reasoned.

His stomach rumbled reminding him it was past lunchtime. He headed for the kitchen, half expecting to find Renee fixing something to eat. "What the...?"

He glanced out the window and chuckled. Renée swung a grub hoe with the force of a twenty-two-ounce framing hammer. Weeds and dirt flew in every direction. "So much for her needing me."

Warren went out the back door and crossed the brick patio. Not a leaf stirred under the hot summer sun.

Dark stains covered the back of her shirt and under her arms.

"Damn you, Warren Bailey."

Oops, he mouthed silently and started backing up.

"I took you in off the street, waited on you hand and foot while you studied for your license, and what do I get in return?" She swung the hoe and he felt the vibration in the ground. "Trouble, that's what I got. Nothing but fucking *trouble* from day one."

Warren knocked over an old jar and it shattered on the bricks.

Renée spun around. "What the hell do you want?" She held the hoe in a defensive forty-five-degree angle across her body.

"I, ah, thought you might need some help," he grinned.

"Does it look like I need any?" She scowled at him.

He was in trouble, no matter how he answered. "It's lunch time."

"If you're hungry," she turned her back to him, "fix your own damn food." She swung the hoe in a wide arc and it bit into the hard-packed earth.

Warren tried one more time. "Want me to fix you something?"

"No!"

Maybe, if I keep her talking... "Did you swear in court whenever you were angry?"

"I'm not *angry*."

Warren laughed. "You sure had me fooled."

Renée threw the hoe down and he made a hasty retreat toward the door.

It was locked.

"Shit!"

"What'd you do, lock the damn door?" Her agitated voice came from close behind him.

He gritted his teeth and very slowly turned around to face Renée. "No," he took a step toward her, "I didn't," he took another step, "lock the *damn* door." Warren stopped close enough to Renée that her breasts touched the fabric of his unbuttoned shirt.

The strong scent of fresh earth and sweat, tempered by her herbal shampoo and the soft, feminine fragrance he had begun to associate as being uniquely hers, kicked his hormones into overdrive.

"If you didn't, then who did? Wait, never mind." Renée sidestepped him and knocked on the door. "Mother, unlock this door!"

He turned around. "Maybe you should knock a little louder."

"Warren," she snapped, "shut up. Mother! Do you hear me?" She knocked harder. "Unlock this door right now!"

"I don't think she's listening."

"Warren." Renée used both fists to beat frantically on the door.

Afraid she would hurt herself, he reached over her shoulders, gently captured each wrist and folded her arms across her chest.

Instead of struggling, like he figured she would, Renée leaned against him with her head on his shoulder. "Why is she doing this? Mother knows I never liked being locked outside."

Warren held her, cradled gently in his arms. "I don't know, Renée, but I really think she loved you."

"You don't know anything about my family. Daddy was the only one who ever loved me."

A single tear landed on his arm and like the point of a hot knife, it penetrated deep into his heart. He wanted to tell her it wasn't true, but then he would have to admit he was falling in love with her, and he couldn't do that, not to Renée.

He wouldn't repeat the sins of his father.

"Quit talking crazy nonsense." Warren closed his eyes, took a deep breath and filled his lungs with her scent.

"Warren, what's the matter? You're shaking."

"Melinda Evans," he knocked softly on the door, "if you care for Renée, please unlock the door."

"Do you really expect that to work?" she scoffed.

Before he could answer, he heard the metallic click of the lock.

"That doesn't prove a thing." She moved away, turned the doorknob and entered.

"Sure it does," Warren followed her into the kitchen.

"It proves you talk to ghosts. Now that's crazy." She opened the refrigerator door and stood staring at the contents.

"You were talking to her too," he grinned.

"That's different." She pulled out the makings for sandwiches and set them on the counter.

Warren laughed, "How is that different?"

She slammed the refrigerator door. "I don't know. It just is."

He leaned against the counter next to Renée, slowly ran his fingers through her hair and tucked it behind her ear. "Could you prove your case in a court of law?"

"No," she barely whispered.

"Could you speak up?" He placed his finger beside her chin and turned her face toward him.

"Why? You heard me the first time."

"Because," he grinned, "your lips form the sexiest *no* I've ever seen," he leaned closer, "and if you say it again, I'm going to kiss you."

"Warren Bailey, are you trying to seduce me?"

"Do you want to be seduced?" he countered.

"Hmm," Renée tilted her head, "that is a most difficult question to answer and one which will require considerable thought. I move for a recess to formulate my response."

Her hot breath wafted across his face. Warren had difficulty speaking. "Motion denied. You will answer the question, Ms. Evans."

Behind those golden specks, a storm brewed in a turbulent sea of green. "Could you repeat the question?"

"Would you like to be seduced?" he asked.

With the tip of her tongue, Renée traced her lips, giving them a bright wet sheen. "Now?"

"Yes, now," there was barely an inch separating them.

"No..."

Warren closed the gap and covered her lips with a slow, soft kiss. "Final answer."

Her arms wound around his neck, "Final answer, n..."

His kiss silenced her. He scooped her up, carried her out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"I'm a mess," Renée nuzzled his ear.

"I think you look sexy."

"I stink," she argued. "I need a shower."

He took a deep breath. "You smell sexy."

"Now I know you're nuts." She buried her face in his neck and laughed. "I'll let you wash my back."

"Do I get to wash the front too?" Warren passed the door to his room.

"No," she giggled.

Warren dropped his head and blew a big raspberry on the side of her neck.

Renée squirmed, laughed and kicked as he turned sideways to carry her through the doorway. He stood her in the tub and reached for the faucet.

"Wait, my shoes." She kicked them off, reached down and tossed them out. "Ohh," she shrieked. "That's cold."

Her T-shirt clung like a second skin. The cold water popped her nipples out like ripe berries. She pushed the plunger to stop the shower and turned the hot water on.

"You're going to pay for that." Renée pulled her wet shirt over her head and dropped it on the tiled floor. "Believe me, Warren," she popped the snap on her jeans, her eyes twinkled and a sensuously wicked smile spread across her face, "you will pay."

With her thumbs tucked inside her waistband, Renée tugged at the material. Her tight fitting jeans began to slide, revealing inch after tantalizing inch of her silky smooth skin.

Warren's fingers hovered, trembling near the snap of his jeans as Renée peeled the skintight material down each leg. His chest tightened, making breathing difficult. It didn't matter that he had made love to her last night and again this morning. Every time they kissed, it was like their first kiss. Each touch thrilled and excited him.

Seeing her like this, wanting, and waiting for him was... Words like *wonderful*, *fantastic*, *unbelievably incredible*, flashed across his mind, but they seemed so insignificant.

"Oh, *wow*," he whispered. It was funny how all the adverbs and adjectives could all be summed up into one little three-letter word.

"Are you going to get undressed?" She dropped her jeans next to her shirt.

He undid the snap, lowered the zipper and let his pants fall around his ankles. "Did I ever tell you how beautiful you are?"

"Hmm," her eyes dropped to his groin. "Looked sexy and smelled sexy, which I still find hard to believe, but beautiful, I don't think so."

"Well," he squatted down to untie his boots and pull them off. "I think you are very beautiful."

"Thank you."

Warren stepped out of his jeans and into the tub.

"You forgot your shirt." Her breasts pressed against him as she slid his shirt over his shoulders and gave it a toss.

He pulled the curtain closed. "Aren't we supposed to have water when taking a shower?"

Renée lifted her foot and used her toes to change the water from the faucet to the showerhead. "There, are you happy now?"

"As long as I've got you, I'm happy."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Warren wished he could take them back. Not that they weren't true, because they were, and they could change their relationship. Blame it on events of the day or the moment, with her breasts flattened against his chest and his hard cock pressed against her, he definitely wasn't thinking.

Renée turned away, picked up the soap and handed it to him over her shoulder. "I think you promised to wash my back."

Was there a subtle change in her voice? Had he indeed screwed up? If he could only see her eyes, then he'd know, but she had turned away too quickly.

With soap in hand, he started washing her shoulders.

"Ahh, that feels good," she purred. "Harder, please."

He shoved his hard-on against the crack of her sexy little butt.

"I meant my shoulders, silly," she laughed. "You're always hard down there."

He dug his fingers into the knotted muscles of her neck and shoulders. It was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate, especially with her hips moving in a slow circular dance. Warren's hands moved lower on her back and she bent over with her hands braced on the edge of the tub.

"Ohh, Warren, you have excellent hands and you are so good with your *tools*."

She accented the word "tools" with an up-and-down motion of her ass. Warren closed his eyes and his fingers tightened around her waist. "Is that all my tools—or do you have a particular one in mind?"

"Well," she laughed low and sensuously husky, "it's not *in* my mind right now."

He let go of her waist and repositioned his cock when she stood and turned around. Her gold-speckled green eyes swirled with passion.

"I think the back is done," she smiled in a devilish grin.

"I was just getting started." His hands were already busy building up a thick lather on her breasts.

"Oh, I know what you were about to do." Renée wrapped the fingers of her right hand around his cock. "When I'm ready for this hammer to pound my pussy, you'll know it. But first, I need my hair washed."

Warren pulled her roughly against him and covered her mouth in a scorching, tongue probing assault. Her arms went around his neck and she hung on for support. He broke the kiss and laughed. "Do you know what you are, Renée, behind that tough lawyer façade?"

"No, what am I?" She initiated the next kiss.

His knees became weak. "You," he groaned as she rubbed her thumb over the head of his hard-on, "are a big cock tease."

"I have to be a big tease," she slowly slid down the length of his bronze muscular body, "because you have such a big cock," and kissed the tip of his erection.

Chapter Sixteen

"You want me..." Warren groaned,

Renée kissed the head of his cock and ran her tongue over the satiny-smooth skin. The muscles in his legs quivered.

"...to wash your..."

With the tip of her tongue, she slowly licked Warren from the base of his cock to its large, beautiful head.

"...hair?"

She laughed, "Yeah, you know, that's when you put shampoo on your head and..."

"Why?" The tension in his voice brought a sly grin to her face.

"Because it's dirty." She ran the edge of her fingernail, gently from under the head of his cock and traced the blue vein down to his balls.

A shudder racked his body and he grasped her shoulders. "Why now?"

Renée lifted her head. "I figured as long as I was down here giving you head, you might as well be doing something – or is that asking too much?"

His eyes rolled up toward the ceiling as he reached for the bottle of shampoo. "It's your hair."

With the shaft of his cock firmly in hand, Renée slowly took him in her mouth and let the motion of his fingers set the pace. This giving out of a desire to do so, rather than being commanded to perform, gave Renée a heady rush of power. It also opened up a new avenue in which to view her own sensuality. She was doing this for one reason, and one reason only – she wanted to.

Warren worked the shampoo into a thick froth that coursed down her body as if they were extensions of his fingers. The soft white clouds massaged her shoulders, breasts and nipples in a lover's tender caress. A finger of bursting bubbles moved sensuously down her back and crept between the cheeks of her ass to playfully tickle her sensitive anal flesh.

The muscles in his legs trembled against her breasts. She felt each quickening beat of his heart as it pulsed through his hard cock. His fingers plowed and twisted through her hair.

It was a strange, different kind of pain that radiated from her scalp. It heightened the awareness of the water beating down upon her like wind-driven summer rain, of her lips molded around his hard pulsating flesh, and of her own intense pleasure.

"Stop," he gasped for breath, "or we'll never make it to the bedroom."

With one last final kiss, Renée gathered her feet underneath her and licked her way up Warren's still quivering stomach and chest. Her mouth reached the hard pebble of his male nipple and she nipped at it with her teeth.

"Ouch," he yelped. "You little wench."

Renée laughed.

Warren bent over, turned his head and latched onto her left nipple. Sharp lightning bolts of pain filled her breast and shot straight to her pussy. Her body shook, hot flashes swept over her, and her knees turned to jelly. Renée held onto his shoulders for support.

Warren held her. "I didn't mean to bite you that hard. I'm sorry." His fingers lightly caressed her cheek.

Oh! My God! What a rush. I just had one of the most intense orgasms in my life and he's sorry.

"You're trembling like a leaf," he kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, it won't happen again."

I have cum running down my legs and you're apologizing.

Warren kissed her eyes, nose and both cheeks before gently taking her lips.

She broke the kiss and nuzzled his neck. "The next time," she whispered in his ear, "you apologize for bringing me pleasure, I'm going to squeeze your balls 'til your eyes pop out."

She felt his laugh start down deep in his gut. He picked her up and spun her around. "You mean you had an...?" His face turned slightly pink.

"An orgasm." Renée kissed his neck.

"The only way it could have been any better," she let go of Warren, tipped her head back, and started rinsing the last of the soap from her hair, "is if you had been inside me."

Warren's eyes roamed over her wet, naked body with such an intense desire, it nearly took her breath away.

"You mentioned something about a bed. Maybe we could try for two in a row." Renée turned the water off and opened the shower curtain.

He took her hand as they stepped out of the old claw-footed tub. "Your bed or mine?"

"My bed is bigger," she smiled and tossed Warren a towel. "We'll have more room to play." She had almost said *our* bed. The word itself implied permanence to their temporary relationship. It didn't hurt to fantasize.

"Your bed it is." He stepped closer and began drying her back.

"Mmm, that feels good." Renée closed her eyes to savor the moment. The longer she kept them closed, the more erotic it became.

Warren finished her back and the towel moved to her hips. His fingers forced the rough material into the crack of her butt and moved lower. She spread her legs and braced her hands on the wall for support.

His finger moved slowly up and down the crack of her ass. Each time it reached her puckered flesh her body quivered and the muscles inside her vagina tightened.

"Turn around." At Warren's soft command, Renée turned and leaned her back against the wall.

The cold tile caused her to gasp.

Warren chuckled. "I'll warm you up soon enough."

He moved the towel up her legs and thighs and she quivered with a mixture of apprehension and anticipation.

"Spread your legs."

She shifted her feet. The old fears began to surface and she slammed the door on them.

"Renée, love, a little farther apart."

Renée bent her knees and slid down the tile wall. With her eyes still closed, it felt like she was falling. She resisted the urge to open them. Warren would catch her if she fell.

Something rough touched her between the legs. She inhaled sharply and held her breath. She had been expecting it, but it was still a shock when it happened. Warren dried her pubic hair and then his finger delved between the outer lips of her pussy.

Her head jerked back and she smacked it hard against the wall. Renée opened her eyes to find Warren on his knees and his face mere inches from her pussy. She grabbed his head with both hands, rocked her hips forward and shoved his face between her legs.

As his hot breath bathed her inner flesh, Renée found herself losing control – again. *This can't be happening. It's too soon. I've never climaxed twice in one night. Never!*

"Ohh! What are you doing to me?" The cheeks of her ass bumped and bounced off the tiled wall with an ever-increasing tempo. She pulled at his hair, but he locked his arms around her thighs and anchored his fingers into the crack of her ass.

"Oh God!" Her body had betrayed her. She couldn't stop. She wanted more. Renée went from pulling his hair to shoving his face deeper into the burning, needful flesh between her legs.

His tongue continued its assault on the inner flesh of her pussy.

Her legs turned to rubber and she began to slide further down the wall. Renée let go of Warren's hair to grab the vanity and the side of the tub for support. Her vision locked onto Warren's eyes as he looked up at her from between her spread thighs.

"Ahh!" The climax washed over her in a wave of molten heat. She lost her hold on the vanity and flung her arms out to stop her fall. Renée knelt panting for breath.

Warren picked her up and carried her to her bed.

"Look what you've done to me, Warren. You've turned me into a wanton woman."

His laughter reverberated through her body and then she found herself flying through the air only to land in the middle of her bed. She bounced once and he landed on top of her.

Warren's mouth captured hers in a wild, tongue-dueling kiss. With one swift thrust, he was inside her. Her back arched, she lifted her hips from the bed and took the full length of his hard cock.

She tasted the salty musk of her climax on Warren's lips and then on her tongue. Something inside her, a part of her that she had feared and kept locked away, broke out of its cage. In a wild frenzy, Renée licked his cheeks and sucked on his tongue. Her legs locked behind his hips to capture and hold Warren's hard, pounding cock inside her.

In complete abandon, she bucked and thrashed on the bed. Her fingernails raked across Warren's back. She didn't recognize her own voice as loud, lustful cries of passion flowed past her lips.

Warren's body jerked and slammed into hers, driving her into the mattress. Fire erupted deep inside her and took her over the edge.

"Ahhhhh!" The scream ripped from her throat as her climax consumed her and dropped her into a realm of shooting stars and blinding lights.

She lay still on the bed. Her breasts rising with each labored breath. Her arms and legs felt like lead weights.

Warren curled up beside her and flipped the sheet over them. "Do you feel like doing any more work on the yard?"

"No."

Silence, broken only by their breathing, filled the room.

"Do you feel like doing any work?" she asked.

He chuckled, "No."

"There's always tomorrow," she suggested.

"Tomorrow," he agreed.

"Are you hungry?" She ran her finger along the length of his arm.

"Are you?" he asked.

"No."

He kissed her breast. "Me either."

Shadows of afternoon crept across the floor. The old clock's chime broke the stillness. Warren's fingers drew lazy circles on her stomach. She breathed a long sigh of contentment and kissed his hair.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a drowsy mumble.

"No," she kept the playfulness from her voice.

"What's the matter?" Warren sat up in bed with concerned alarm on his face and in his voice. "Did I hurt you?"

"You didn't hurt me." She took his hand and kissed his fingers. "Okay doesn't come close to describing how I feel." Renée turned his hand over and kissed his palm. "If the way I feel were a crime, I'd have to plead guilty and smile all the way to jail."

"That good?" His smile widened. Warren lay down and pulled her over to him.

She laid her head on his chest. His heart beat strong and steady beneath her ear. "Better than good." She turned her head and kissed the hard pebble of his breast. "It's more like — *wow*."

The flat plane of his stomach rippled as he laughed.

"I agree. *Wow*."

* * * * *

Warren woke with an urgent need to piss. The strong odor of stale sex filled his lungs with every breath, and with little wonder, he felt as if a cream-filled donut had exploded in his face.

Renée moaned as he rolled from the bed.

He tiptoed from the room, cringing at every squeaky board. Warren looked up and down the hall. Not a ghost in sight, which really didn't mean anything. Renée's mother was good at popping in unexpected. At least she didn't yell *boo*.

Every time he moved his shoulders, he felt a stinging sensation across his back. Warren entered the bathroom, turned on the light and stared open-mouthed into the mirror.

Deep red lines crisscrossed his back. "Damn," he whispered. "That little hellcat did a number on you."

Warren lifted the seat, aimed at the bowl and sighed with relief.

He flushed the toilet and as he was washing, he noticed two deep purple marks, one on his left shoulder and the other on his neck. "Shit, I haven't had a damn hickey since high school. No wonder she wasn't hungry."

Warren turned around and jumped. "Dammit! Stop doing that."

Renée's mother stood in the door. Her ghostly smile widened and then she was gone.

"What am I supposed to stop doing?" Renée stumbled into the bathroom, sidestepped around him and plopped onto the toilet.

"Dammit, Warren," her arms flailed the air. "I hope you at least flushed it. My ass is wet."

"Sorry." He smothered his laughter at the sight of Renée sitting in the toilet. "Should I flush it now?"

"No!"

He saw the handle begin to move. "Here," he extended his hand to her, "I'll help you up."

"Thanks, but I can manage on my..."

The toilet flushed.

"Warren!" she screamed and took his hand.

Hysterical laughter overcame Warren and she pulled him off balance. "Damn you, Warren Bailey, this isn't funny. I told you not to flush the toilet. Pull my ass out *now*!"

"That's what's so funny," he braced his feet and lifted Renée out of the toilet, "I didn't flush it."

"Before or after I fell in?" Red-faced, scowling and dripped toilet water on the floor, she stepped into the tub.

"After."

"If you didn't then who...?" Renée's shoulders slumped.

"Was your grandfather a humorous man when he was alive?"

She placed her hand between her breasts. "My grandfather?" Renée looked at him as she turned the water on. "Humph," she snorted. "That old goat wouldn't know humor if he were sitting on it."

"Or in it," he added with tongue in cheek.

"Which leaves Mother dearest." Renée squatted in the bathtub and began washing herself from the waist down. "Was she here?"

"She popped in and left just as quickly." Warren's gaze went to her breasts, the thick patch of blonde hair between her legs and back again. The skin around her left nipple was chaffed and slightly discolored.

"I know what you're thinking, Warren. Forget it," she smiled and Warren's heart skipped a beat, "for the day anyway. I need that long to recuperate from yesterday."

Her smile faded and she looked down at the water flowing from the faucet.

"What's the matter?" He knelt beside the tub and gently trailed his fingers down the back of her hair.

"Why doesn't she show herself to me?" Her lower lip trembled.

"I don't know." Warren pulled her to him and she buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "I know when my mother left, 'course I was a lot older than you were, there was a time I didn't want to see her. I resented her leaving me – us."

"You don't anymore?"

He kissed her hair. "No."

"What changed your mind?"

"One day I realized why she left," he paused.

"And?" She urged him to continue.

"I forgave her."

Renée pulled away, stood and took a towel from the bar and started drying off. Her face looked set in stone. "I can't do that."

"You can't, or don't want to? There is a difference."

She tossed the towel aside and stepped out of the tub.

"Renée—"

"Warren," she interrupted, "you started out as my carpenter and you've charmed your way into my bed, but I draw the line at playing shrink and psychoanalyzing my childhood."

"I..."

She walked out of the bathroom.

"...wasn't trying..." his voice trailed off to a whisper, "to psycho anything."

He lowered the seat and sat on the toilet.

"*Shit!*"

He returned to her bedroom, only to find the bed empty. He stepped across the hall, opened the door and turned the light on. "Damn!"

As Warren got dressed, he tried to think where she might go in the middle of the night, somewhere she felt safe.

One place came to mind.

Outside.

Chapter Seventeen

Warren stepped out into the night. The brick patio lay in obscure darkness under a cloudy sky. He wasn't alone, of that much he was sure. Something or someone waited in the black shadows.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Grandpa had made one attempt on his life, could he be waiting for another try? The thought of Renée being out here with either her grandfather's ghost or an intruder sent chills running down his spine.

"I know you're out here," he whispered. "Where'd you go?"

Off in the distance, a dog barked. A siren's forlorn wail grew louder and then faded away. A sudden gust of wind stirred the weeds and, for a moment, filled the air around him with the sound of rustling leaves. Dirt and debris swirled around Warren as a dust devil crossed the brick patio.

He felt a soft tug on his sleeve and every muscle tensed. "You know, we really have to stop meeting like this. Why don't you take that old reprobate of a father and find someplace else to haunt?"

A slight pressure, almost like a cold hand in the small of his back, pushed him out into the yard. "This better be the right direction."

It guided him to the left, right, and after a short distance, the pressure lifted. Warren stopped.

"Renée, are you here?"

Time passed with the speed of a snail as he waited for an answer. "Okay, have it your way. I'm just going to sit my ass down and wait for you to get over your little snit."

Warren squatted down and found he was standing on bricks. He knew where he was. The old grape arbor was the perfect hiding place for a small child escaping the cruel world inside the house. He sat with his chin resting on his bent knees and his arms wrapped around his legs.

"Go away." Her voice came from mere inches away. In the dark, he had almost sat on her.

"Sorry," he chuckled, "no can do."

"You know something, Warren, you can be a real pain in the ass."

"At least you and my old man agree on something."

"Fine, you stay here and I'll leave." She started to get up.

Warren reached out and his hand cupped her bare breast. "What the hell! If you're going to be gallivanting around outside, you could at least get dressed."

"Hey, careful where you're grabbing. They're a little tender." She sat back down. "It's the middle of the night, just in case you haven't noticed."

Renée tried to scoot away from him, but he grabbed her ankle. "I noticed, now sit still."

"Why the hell should I?" she huffed.

"Because I asked you to."

"That's bullshit!" she smacked him on the shoulder. "You didn't ask, you ordered me to sit down."

He was glad she couldn't see his smile. "Same difference."

"Why you...you..." she sputtered as she shoved him over backwards, "that's a load of bullshit." Renée climbed onto his chest and held his upper arms.

"There's something else," he laughed. "You've really got to try to stop swearing so much."

"No thanks to you. A couple of weeks around you, and a nun would have to spend a year doing penitence." She wiggled her butt and her feminine heat soaked through his shirt. "Besides, what are you going to do if I don't?"

"Nothing that you probably wouldn't enjoy."

Renée grew still and slowly lowered her upper body onto his chest. Her voice lowered to a husky sensual whisper. "You're probably right."

Warren took her lips in what started as a tender kiss, but soon had the blood rushing out of control straight for his groin. He forced himself to slow down and broke the kiss.

"I'm glad you're not a nun."

She stretched out on top of him and laid her head on his shoulder. "Me too."

"Feel better now?" He breathed in her ear and felt her body vibrate with released tension.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do." She kissed the hollow of his neck.

"Are you ready to go in?" he asked.

Renée rolled off to the side and rested her head on his arm. "Just look at all those stars."

Warren scanned the sky for any indication of a break in the clouds. "Stars, what stars?"

She laughed. "Silly, you have to close your eyes. See them, beyond the clouds, with your mind. It's the way I look at this place. Right now it's pretty gray and dismal, but one day it will shine, just like the stars."

"That's some pretty heavy stuff, for a lawyer." He twirled a strand of her hair around his fingers. "Did they teach you that in law school?"

"Heavens, no," she breathed a soft sigh. "Dad's Wisdom 101."

Warren kissed her temple. "Sounds like a pretty smart man."

"In everything but personal relationships," her voice grew bitter. "Mother's leaving changed him."

Go easy, he cautioned himself. "He never got over it?"

"No." Renée sat up and hugged her knees to her chest.

She grew quiet and Warren's heart twisted in agony at her pain. He blinked and a tear rolled onto his cheek.

Warren swallowed, but the lump remained lodged in the back of his throat. He didn't trust himself to speak, so he gently pulled her back to lie beside him.

As he held Renée, the feeling of being watched persisted on the fringe of his consciousness. She thought they were safe, but he had his doubts. Having an enemy who wanted you dead was bad enough—having one you couldn't see was an entirely different matter.

Renée's slow, even breaths told Warren that she was sleeping. He wasn't far from joining her.

Run!

The word hammered through his head in an escalating scream. His eyes slammed open. Had he been dreaming? Had Renée yelled out in her sleep?

The presence he had felt earlier was stronger, hovering around them in a menacing, suffocating shroud. Warren broke out in a cold sweat as fear for Renée's life gripped his heart. He bolted to his feet and pulled Renée off the ground.

"Warren!" Startled, she tried to jerk away. "Have you gone nuts? Let go, you're hurting my arm."

"No time to explain—" At the gut-wrenching sound of splintering wood, he tackled Renée, hurling her to the ground as the heavy vine-covered roof of the arbor came down on top of them.

The loud crash and Renée's scream seemed to go on and on.

"Warren! Are you all right?" Her voice came from the far end of a long tunnel. "Talk to me, please."

"I think I am." He squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to clear the throbbing pain at the back of his head. "Are you hurt?"

"No. What happened, Warren? What caused the arbor to fall?"

"With the suddenness of it, and the warning, I'd say Grandpa was involved."

"What warning?"

"Your mother tried, but she was too late. Are you sure you're okay?"

"It's difficult to breathe."

"I'll try to move this off of us." His muscles strained and quivered against the weight of the arbor roof.

"Enough! Stop before you hurt yourself."

He settled back on top of her. "We're trapped."

Her rapid, shallow breathing bathed the side of his face. "What are we going to do?"

Warren heard the beginning of real fear in her voice. He sighed in helpless frustration. "I wish to God I knew. Maybe if we both pushed."

"It's worth a try."

He took several deep breaths. "*Now!*"

Renée pushed against his shoulders. "*It's moving—harder...*" His lungs burned, beads of sweat ran down his face.

She stopped pushing and dropped her arms.

Warren collapsed on top of her.

"Any other suggestions?" she asked.

"No," he admitted in defeat.

"I was afraid of that 'cause I *really* need to pee."

From his position on top of Renée, he could see the house. A light came on downstairs and then another. "I don't think ghosts have to pee, which tells me that Grandpa is celebrating our demise a little prematurely."

"Why?" She turned her head. "What's going on? Your fat head is in the way and I can't see anything."

"He's turning on all the lights. I thought you liked the size of my head."

"If I could get my hands around Grandpa's throat, I'd strangle him."

How does one strangle a ghost? He laughed. "I have something you can practice on."

"Warren! Warren, are you out here!"

Relief washed over him at the sound of his brother's voice. "Over here, Jim! Grab a flashlight from the garage!"

A few minutes later, he saw the beam of the light bouncing over the ground as Jim made his way toward them.

"Holy fuck!" Tina exclaimed.

"We heard the crash and when you didn't answer your phone we came to check on you." Jim flashed the light over the wreckage. "Are you two okay?"

"We will be, once you get this shit off of us," Warren grumbled. "Grab the cordless saw from the garage and start cutting."

"I'll be right back, don't go anywhere."

"Your brother is a real comedian," Renée quipped.

"I'm lucky I got all the—Christ, Tina!" Warren bellowed. "What do you think you're doing? Get the fuck off."

"I want to check your vital signs."

"We're talking and breathing, aren't we," he strained to take some of the pressure off Renée, "or we were until we got your fat-ass weight added on."

"Boy, that's ingratitude for you," she crawled off. "And when have I ever had a fat-ass?"

"Well, there's a first time for everything," he chuckled.

Jim returned and thrust the light into Tina's hands. "Hold this so I don't cut something I'm not supposed to."

The vibration of the saw blade never stopped as Jim cleared a path toward them.

When the last confining vine was cleared, Warren crawled to his knees and stood. Tingling pain shot up his left leg and it felt on fire. He staggered and Jim grabbed him.

"Tina, give Warren a hand, I'll help..." Jim turned his eyes away from Renée's nude body.

Tina laughed at his loss for words and Warren joined in.

"Thank you for coming to our rescue. Now if you will kindly give me a hand," Renée lifted her arm, giving Jim little choice but to help her off the ground.

Warren worked the feeling back into his leg as he limped toward the house. There was a hint of gray in the east as they entered the back door. Thanks to Jim, they had survived with only a few scratches and bruises.

"We better be off." Jim edged over toward the door.

Warren noticed that Jim was trying to avoid looking directly at Renée, but his eyes kept flickering over to her body. Hell, he couldn't blame his brother for liking the view. Renée Evans was one sweet package of a woman. He was proud of her for the way she didn't get all flustered at his brother seeing her nude.

"Forget it," Renée scolded. "You two are staying for breakfast."

"On one condition," Tina headed for the stove, "I'll cook while you get dressed. I'd hate to have to jack-slap Jim for not keeping his eyes where they belong—on me."

"It's a deal. Come on, Warren. We better go before Jim takes that banana out of his pocket and starts playing with it."

He looked over at his brother and laughed at his obvious discomfort. As he walked out of the kitchen with Renée, he leaned over and whispered. "Breakfast may be awhile. Tina loves bananas."

"Good, that will give me time to take a quick shower. 'Course, I could use some help getting all the dirt and pebbles out of my skin."

Warren smiled and wiggled his eyebrows.

"I said a quick shower, not a *quickie* in the shower."

"Damn," he dropped his shoulders and pouted. "Here I was hoping you would peel my own banana."

"Warren, honey." She snuggled closer, and with her free hand Renée ran her fingers over the bulge in his pants. "Trust me, this *ain't* no banana."

They reached the top of the stairs and Renée eyed the closed door to her grandpa's bedroom. This last escapade of his was the last straw. Maybe yesterday, she'd had an

overactive imagination, but after having the arbor fall on top of them, two such coincidences was one too many. This was her house and it was high time she took control.

She reached the bathroom, turned the hot water on and sat on the toilet. "Ahh!"

He chuckled. "If Jim and Tina hadn't showed up, we'd still be out there."

Warren's words echoed her thoughts. "I know. Very much longer and I wouldn't have made it. I must be getting old when taking a pee feels so damn good."

"Next time, he might get lucky and you'll never have to pee again."

Renée flushed the stool and stepped into the tub.

"I'm well aware of that fact." She tested the water temperature with her hand and pulled the curtain closed. "Do you have any suggestions?"

He stuck his head between the curtain flaps, "Yeah, get the hell out while we can."

She handed him the washcloth and turned her back to him. "That's not an option for me, Warren, but if you want to stick your tail between your legs and run—don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out."

"Dammit, I didn't say I was leaving. You asked for suggestions."

The hot water stung her scratches, but his hands on her back, shoulders and the firm curves of her butt soothed away the pain. "Then come up with another."

"Sorry, Renée, I can't think of any other viable solution to ensure your safety. I'm afraid I didn't take Ghostbusting 101 in high school."

"That's it," her enthusiasm picked up. "That's the answer."

"What is?"

She spun around, "Hire someone to come in and bust Grandpa. Warren, you're a genius." Renée threw her arms around his neck and gave him a hard kiss on the lips.

He gently pushed her back, breaking the kiss. "There's only one problem, well, two actually. Separating the phony ghostbusters from the real thing, if there are any, and then dealing with all their equipment and being underfoot twenty-four hours a day."

Her bubble burst.

"Oh, and don't count on the press not getting hold of it and all the publicity."

Warren was right.

Renée stepped out of the tub, snatched a towel from the rack and began drying. "There has to be some reason for all this. If we can find that reason, maybe we can find the way to get rid of Grandpa's ghost once and for all."

"Where do we start looking?"

His intense gaze started a smoldering heat to burn between her legs. "Whatever it is we're looking for, it's not down there."

Warren's eyes lifted ever so slowly. His pondering smile of appreciation caused her to take a deeper breath and stand a little straighter.

"Maybe not," his smile widened, "but we have to start somewhere."

"In case you've forgotten," she dried between her legs and Warren's eyes followed every movement of her hand, "Tina is fixing breakfast."

His chin dropped and his right eyebrow lifted in a "are you sure" kind of quirk. "At least she is supposed to be."

"If I know anything at all about Tina," he laughed, "it's more likely she's baking a banana."

Renée tossed her towel and it smacked Warren in the face. She turned, ran to her bedroom and started getting dressed.

"What are you doing?" He stood leaning against the doorjamb.

"What does it look like?" she pulled a shirt over her head. "I'm getting dressed."

She finished dressing, conscious that he watched her every move. Her palms grew damp and her fingers fumbled with the snap of her jeans.

"Need some help?" Warren's husky, low voice gave her a moment's pause.

"I'm almost done." Renée finished with the snap and then she sat on the bed to put her socks on.

"I could help you take them off and start over."

"As tempting as that sounds," she sprang from the bed, "you might not be hungry – for food but I'm starved."

Warren stepped out of the doorway, bowed slightly at the waist and swung his arm in a wide sweeping gesture. "Then breakfast it shall be."

He offered her his arm, "May I have the honor of escorting you downstairs?"

It was a silly gesture and it brought a smile to her face. That was one of the things she liked most about Warren, other than how he made her feel in bed. He made her laugh.

"Thank you, kind sir." Renée placed her hand on his arm and they started down the hall.

Renée stopped at the top of the stairs and again gave the locked door a contemptuous glare. Her disdain for Grandpa had been strengthened over the last couple of days to the point that just seeing the closed, locked door filled her with a surge of anger and renewed resentment.

"You're shaking," he placed his other hand on top of hers. "Maybe you should lie down. I'll bring you up a tray."

"Nonsense," she forced a smile and started down the stairs.

She heard wood squeaking and soft grunts coming from the kitchen. "Ah, Warren, that doesn't sound like bacon and eggs frying."

"Told ya," Warren laughed. "Come on, I'll cook."

"What about, ah...?"

"It won't even slow them down," he chuckled.

"Oh!"

Arm in arm they entered the kitchen.

"Oh my!"

Chapter Eighteen

Jim had his pants down around his ankles and Tina was nude, stretched out on the table with her legs up in the air and resting on Jim's shoulders.

Renée turned her back on the two. Heat rose up her neck. Her face felt flushed. She opened the refrigerator door and took out a carton of eggs. It mattered little that she couldn't see them for the sounds of their slapping flesh, grunts, ahhs, oohs and heavy breathing filled her head.

She didn't consider herself a prude, especially after being forced to watch porn movies with her ex-boyfriend. Jim and Tina fucking on her kitchen table was, however, different than watching a television screen. *A lot* different.

"You look pretty damn sexy with that red face." Warren whispered in her ear. "I bet that's not the only thing hot right now."

Renée pushed him away, closed the refrigerator door and moved to the sink.

Warren followed.

How did he know? She turned her head and saw the cocky knowing smirk on his lips. *I'm dripping like a leaky faucet.*

His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath. "Yeah, you're hot. All I'd have to do is touch you and you'd melt."

"Ah, I think you smell those two." She gave her head a quick jerk in the direction of her kitchen table.

"Baby, if I were blindfolded I could find you in the middle of a harem just by following my nose." Warren sniffed along her neck and gently blew in her ear.

Her legs trembled. She moved her head away, sidestepped around Warren and stood facing the stove with a direct view of her kitchen table.

Jim and Tina were still going strong. Tina's breasts bounced to the steady rhythm of his hips against her ass. Renée tried to look away, but her eyes kept coming back to the erotic scene on her table.

Renée momentarily closed her eyes. *I'm supposed to be making breakfast.* She picked up an egg from the carton.

Warren's fingers lightly touched her waist, trailed down the denim of her jeans and along the lower curve of her butt. Renée grasped the handle of the oven door with her empty hand as the muscles tightened along her inner thigh and her butt.

Jim's hands molded and squeezed Tina's large breasts. His fingers pulled on her nipples.

A hand crept around her waist, pulling her tighter against Warren's hard cock. His other hand moved slowly up her side. Renée arched her back as it covered her left breast. She opened her mouth, gasped and exhaled in a long, low moan.

Warren's fingers crept between her legs and pressed against the fabric of her jeans. Her whole body shook at the contact.

Her head fell forward and Warren's hot mouth sucked on her exposed neck. A dark blonde curtain of hair swayed beside her face as her body moved in tune with his.

A large brown egg, grasped in her white-knuckled fist, fascinated her. *Why am I holding an egg?*

Everything in the kitchen revolved around her egg – Jim and Tina, Warren's hands on her body, even the room itself.

Warren's fingers pressed harder, forcing the material of her panties into the opening of her vagina. A fresh wave of intense heat swept over her and the hand holding her egg shook.

Renée sucked in a breath of air in a half-strangled gasp. "Ohhh!"

"Harder, Jim!" Tina's cry broke through Renée's fog. "Oh! Yes! Fuck me harder."

Warren's hot breath roared in her ear and bathed her neck. His fingers rolled and pinched her sensitive nipples. A tingling sensation shot from her breast to her wet, throbbing pussy.

"Harder, Warren!" she echoed Tina's plea.

The increased pressure lifted her onto her toes. Renée let go of the oven handle, rested her elbows on top of the stove, and grabbed the back of it with her empty hand.

Her egg, now mere inches from her eyes, became blurred.

"Oh Warren!"

Renée's world exploded in a spray of warm yellow. A thick film covered her eyes, went up her nose and filled her mouth. She gagged, coughed and spit the slimy goo as she tried to breathe.

Warren's elbows landed beside hers. "I told you, you would melt." His hot pounding breath stirred her hair. "You broke the egg."

Renée closed her eyes as she basked in the inner afterglow of her climax and the pressure of Warren's body pressed close to hers. "It's your fault."

His low, husky laugh tickled her ear. "You have egg on your face." He fingered her hair. "Here too."

"I don't care." She summoned enough energy to lift her head and gave him a kiss.

Warren's fingers clamped around her arms and spun her away from the stove. All four of the gas burners erupted with tongues of blue flame.

The acid scent of singed hair instantly filled the kitchen.

"Oh! My God!" Tina screamed. "Warren, Renée, are you all right? What the hell happened?"

Renée examined her damaged hair and then looked up at Warren. His eyes were wide with concern and fear. "Thank you," she whispered.

"We're fine, Tina." Warren never took his eyes off her as he spoke to Tina. "You might want to get dressed."

"*Fuck* getting dressed." Tina grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her around. "You still haven't answered my question. What happened?"

"I don't—"

"Grandpa made another attempt to hurt Renée," Warren interrupted.

Renée knew it was true. She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I saw the control knobs begin to turn. If I hadn't..." he shuddered.

"That's it, Warren," Jim stepped between them and Tina. "You two can't stay here any longer. It's getting too dangerous. The way I see it, you have two options. Move in with us or take Renée home with you."

"I'm afraid neither option is available for me."

"Not only no, but *hell* no!" Warren snapped.

"Dad stopped by the other day looking for you." Jim held up his hands, palm out. "Easy, brother, I didn't tell him where you were."

"I'm sure it wasn't to apologize." Warren turned his back on Jim. "He doesn't know how."

"No," Jim chuckled. "He's as stubborn as someone else I know."

Warren lifted his arm and flashed Jim the bird.

"He wondered when you were going to come to your senses and come back home where you belong."

"Come on, Renée," Tina snatched her clothes from the floor. "I've heard this family feud before."

Tina's gaze went from her face to the crotch of her jeans. "Besides," she laughed, "you have more than just egg on your face to clean."

Renée squeezed her legs together. In her climax she had soaked not only her panties but the crotch of her jeans as well.

Jim's eyes dropped to her jeans and she felt heat rise up her neck and flush her face. To make matters even worse, he winked.

She quickly followed Tina out of the kitchen, through the large dinning room, and started up the stairs. It felt sort of weird to be walking fully dressed beside Tina. There were dozens of questions she wanted to ask, but wasn't sure where to start.

"Those boys have been through a lot," Tina gave her a side glance. "You're a lucky woman, Renée."

Renée perked up. *Maybe I'll find some answers without asking questions. I don't want to seem too eager.* "Oh! How's that?"

"I've suspected for some time that there was a soft, passionate side to Warren. It took finding you to bring it out."

They reached the top of the stairs and started down the hall. "Have you and Warren...?" She wasn't sure why she needed to know, but she did.

Tina took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Relax, Renée, it was a long time ago. Mind you now, it wasn't for my lack of trying, or Jim's. He just wasn't interested. I was beginning to think something was wrong with him – until you showed up."

For some silly reason, Tina's information made her feel better. Renée smiled.

"I..." A chill swept over her and she shivered.

"Ahh! Damn!" Tina yelled as her head jerked backwards and she went crashing into the wall. "Mother fucker..." Tina pushed herself off the floor and leaned against the wall. "That hurt."

Renée heard the hard pounding of running feet from the first floor. She felt paralyzed, unable to move or speak.

Tina grabbed at her hair with both hands and then went flying down the hall toward the stairs. Tina hit the floor with a loud groan and slid to a stop at the feet of Warren and Jim as they reached the second floor landing.

Both men were breathing hard.

"I'm coming, Renée!" Warren ran halfway toward her, doubled over and was instantly propelled backwards through the air to land beside Tina.

"No, Grandpa!" Fear for Warren brought a strangled cry.

"I love him."

Grandfather turned. His evil face drew nearer. Cold hands wrapped around her throat and lifted her off the floor. Renée kicked at the translucent figure. The pressure increased, clamping off any protest or cry for help.

Everything was starting to blur when out of the fringe of darkness, there was her mother. Just as beautiful as the last time she had seen her.

His vise-like fingers released her.

Renée fell and lay in a crumpled heap gasping for breath.

As quickly as that, it was over. Grandpa was gone.

Warren had her head cradled in his lap. His strong, capable fingers gently brushed her hair back and trailed lovingly across her forehead.

"Hush, don't try to talk," he whispered. "You're safe now. Thanks to your mother."

"For how long?" Jim's question cracked like breaking ice. "When the hell are you two going to listen to reason? Take what you have and don't look back."

"Maybe you're right, Jim," Warren conceded. "Maybe it's time to count our losses before he finally succeeds in killing one or both of us."

"I'll lose the estate." Renée realized that there was something else she could lose if she stayed. Something far more important than the house and all of Grandfather's money combined.

"Who gets it if you're dead?" Tina began pulling on her clothes.

Renée sighed. "The lawyer will, or he gains control of it."

"Which amounts to the same thing." Warren helped her up from the floor.

"Let him have it." She looked into his eyes. All the weight and worry rolled off her shoulders. "It's not worth dying over." *Or losing you.*

The words flashed across her mind and she realized they were true. What had happened to all her objections, her common sense and logical reasoning? They seemed to have vanished as quickly as had her grandfather's ghost.

I love Warren! Had she blurted it out in a moment of fear? She felt her turmoil turn to calm and tranquility. *I love him! Wonder of wonders if it is true, but how can I know for sure? Hell, I'm not even sure what love is.*

"I'll get cleaned up, then we'll pack and get out of here."

"Jim, if you and Tina can throw my things together, I'll give Renée a hand packing hers." He followed Renée into the bathroom.

She had the water turned on and stood staring at the mirror. "I hate running like this, Warren. Damn him and his sleazy lawyer." Renée shot him an angry glare. "Not one damn, smart-mouthed comment about *me* being one too," she picked up a roll of toilet paper, "or I'll throw this at you."

With tongue in cheek, Warren chuckled, "I wasn't going to say a word, honest."

She shook the roll at him. "You better not."

Steam began to fog the glass and she grew quiet. "He really wants me dead." Renée adjusted the temperature. "Why?"

"I don't know."

Warren watched as she undressed and began to wash. "If Grandpa hadn't shown up, I'd carry you to bed and finish what I started downstairs."

"I'd like that." A wistful smile softened her face. "I'd like that a lot."

A few minutes later, she was dressed and had her clothes packed.

"There's one thing I have to do before we leave," Renée closed the latch on her suitcase.

"And that would be...?" Warren took the luggage from the bed and set it by the door.

"Grandpa's bedroom."

Of all the things she could have said, he hadn't expected this. "Why?"

"Do I need a reason?" she asked.

"After everything that has happened," he lifted her chin with his fingers, "I think it's foolish."

"Probably a stupid thing to do," Renée grinned. "I can't explain it with any rationality."

Warren saw the determination in her eyes. "I'm not going to be able to talk you out of it, am I?"

"No," her hair bounced as she shook her head.

"I was afraid of that." He exhaled a long sigh. "Let's do it and get it over with."

Jim stepped into the room. "Are you two ready?"

"Almost," Warren kissed her on the nose. "We have one last thing to do."

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like it?" Jim groaned.

Tina entered the room to stand beside Jim. "What aren't you going to like?"

Renée stepped away and squared her shoulders. "We're going into Grandpa's room."

"You're kidding," Tina gasped.

Jim rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "I knew I wasn't going to like this."

"Hello!" A voice shouted from downstairs. "Anyone home?"

Renée frowned. "Shit!"

"Who's that?" Tina asked in a hushed voice.

"Mr. Jacobs, the estate lawyer," Renée stomped out of the room.

"This should be interesting," Warren followed her out the door and down the hall.

Jim and Tina fell in beside him.

Renée stood at the top of the stairs with her arms folded across her chest. Her left foot tapped out a quick beat of aggravation. "Mr. Jacobs, I don't remember inviting you in."

"Good morning, *Renée*," Jacobs' oily voice reached Warren's ears and he gritted his teeth.

"The front door was open. You need to be more careful. Never know when some nut case or criminal might be lurking in the area."

"Or asshole lawyer," Warren whispered.

Renée turned her head and grinned.

"Actually, Mr. Jacobs, I'm glad you're here. It saves me the trouble of calling you."

The lawyer reached the second floor landing, looked around and sneered. "Were we having a party? You know the rules, Renée. I'm afraid I'm going to have to do an audit."

"We weren't having a party, party," Tina purred seductively. "We were having an orgy."

Jacobs' gaze traveled up Tina's body and lingered on her full breasts.

"If we had known you were interested," Tina gave him a sexy smile, "we could have borrowed an old yew from the stockyard."

It was all Warren could do to refrain from laughing as Mr. Jacobs' face turned beet red.

"Why you insolent bitch," he sputtered. "I'll sue your ass for that remark."

"What remark is that?" Renée asked. "I didn't hear anything. Jim, did you?"

The lawyer fumed and turned to leave.

"Before you go, Mr. Jacobs, I want the key to my grandfather's bedroom."

Warren watched the color drain from his face and a muscle twitched under his left eye.

"I'm sorry, Renée. It was your grandfather's express wishes that I dispose of his personal things myself, and I've been busy."

Warren saw the man's shifting eyes and nervous smile. Renée would eat this man alive in a courtroom.

"You know something, Mr. Jacobs," Renée got within inches of his face. "You don't lie worth a damn. Warren, break down the door."

Chapter Nineteen

"No!" Jacobs, the estate attorney, protested.

Warren gave the lawyer a big self-satisfying, kiss-my-ass smile and headed for the door.

"You don't have the right to do this." Jacobs raised his voice and flapped his arms. "Your grandfather..."

"Wrong," Renée poked him in the chest. "Under the terms of the will, I'm to make, and I quote, '...all repairs to the house and grounds'. Grandpa's room is part of the house, and if I have to tear down a door to gain access for repairs then that is precisely what I will do."

Warren reached the door and noticed a thin dingy yellowish-gray line all the way around the doorjamb. He knelt down and examined the bottom. "Mr. Jacobs, I'm curious, why would anyone glue a door shut and seal the bottom of it air tight?"

He put his shoulder to the door and pushed. "Jim, give me a hand here."

They put their weight into the door but it held solid."

"Why don't you try kicking it open?" Tina suggested.

Warren frowned. "Do you want to do this?"

He didn't wait for an answer but took a step backward. "Together on three."

Jim stepped back beside him, turned sideways to the door and squared his shoulders.

"One..."

"Don't hurt yourselves," cautioned Tina.

"Two..." Warren took a look at Jacobs' pale, nervous face.

"Three." They hit the door with their shoulders and bounced off.

"You know something, Mr. Jacobs," Jim shot a scathing glare toward the attorney, "you are starting to piss me off."

"Oops," Tina backed further out of the way.

"Do you know what happens when I get really good and pissed off?" Jim stepped between Renée and the white-faced Jacobs.

"N-no."

Warren had always wondered if his brother had inherited their father's temper. How many times had he seen that same stance, the balled fists and the wild, deadly glare?

Jim grabbed him by his coat lapels. "You're about to find out."

"Let go of me or I'll sue you." The lawyer, lifted upward, stood on the tips of his toes.

"Okay, I'll let go."

Jacobs flew through the air, hit the door with a resounding crash of splintered wood, stumbled into the room and fell to the floor.

"Jim!" Renée screamed.

A wave of dry, stale air rolled from the room, almost like it had been holding its breath for years and was finally able to breathe.

"Son of a bitch sealed the door. I just helped him unseal it."

Warren stepped through the broken door, froze and slowly backed out.

"What's wrong?" Renée asked.

"You don't want to go in there." He turned around, keeping himself between the door and Renée.

"I'm a big girl, Warren. Please step aside."

"What's the matter?" Tina stepped to the door, looked in and gasped. "Oh God!"

Renée tried to peer over his shoulder.

"It's your...grandfather, Renée." He tried to lessen the impact. "He's still in there."

Shock, revulsion, anger and disbelief flashed across her face with the speed of a laser light show.

He stepped aside and followed her through the door.

She took one look at the dark-leather, mummified corpse, walked over to Jacobs and slapped him. "You sick, perverted son of a bitch. Grandfather might have been an abusive, controlling bastard, but he deserved better than this."

Jacobs cowered before her onslaught.

"By the time I finish with you, Jacobs, the only law you will be practicing will be from a prison cell."

"If he lives that long." Jim's icy voice caused Jacobs to flinch and Warren saw real fear begin to creep in the attorney's face.

"Warren," Tina's voice cut through the tension, "take a look at this."

He crossed the room to stand beside her. "What am I supposed to be looking at, besides the obvious?"

"This," she pointed to a long tear in the mummified skin. "The rest of the body is intact, except for here, and look at this rib. It's been broken," she leaned over. "Whatever it was went all the way through."

"So he didn't die of natural causes?" Renée asked.

"I'm no pathologist," Tina sort of shrugged, "but this isn't rocket science. I can't tell you when he died or how but—I'd say no, he definitely didn't die of natural causes."

Warren watched Jacobs' eyes flicker. He followed the path of their movement to where a Civil War-era cavalry saber hung from a nail on another door.

"I think we have the how," he walked over to the saber, turned around and smiled, "and the who is quite obvious, Mr. Jacobs. What I can't figure out is why."

"You know nothing," Jacobs tried to maintain his innocence, "absolutely nothing."

"I bet this fits perfectly between the broken bones and matches the tear in the mattress underneath Mr. Duryea." Warren smiled. "Shall we see if I'm right?"

He reached for the saber.

"No!" Jacobs' agitated voice raised several octaves. "You don't know what you're dealing with."

"Why don't you," he lifted the saber from the nail, "tell me?" The old saber began to vibrate in his hand.

"Warren," Renée's eyes were wide with fear, "the blade, it's-it's—"

He looked down and the tip of the blade was turning a reddish-orange and starting to glow. As the glow got brighter, it traveled up the blade. The handle grew warmer.

The force within the saber pulled him toward the bed. The whole length of the blade glowed.

"Drop the blade!" Tina yelled.

"Warren, let go," Renée pleaded.

There was only one problem—he couldn't. The power of the blade controlled him. It lifted his arms into the air. He turned his face away from the heat of the blade.

"No!" Jacobs' tortured cry filled the room as the blade plunged downward into the mummified body of Mr. Duryea.

The handle of the saber cooled almost instantly. Warren let go and looked at his hands, surprised to find nothing, not even so much as a red mark on his skin. The reddish-orange glow crept lower on the blade, almost as if the fiery life were being sucked out of it.

The room and everything in it began to pulsate with energy.

Electricity crackled in the air. He tore his gaze from the bed. Renée's hair stood out from her head, as did Tina's and Jim's.

Billy Jacobs lay in a heap, writhing in pain on the floor with his hands clutched to his chest. His hair thinned and fell to the floor. His flesh grew tight as his body began to fill out and expand. Large sagging bags formed under his eyes and huge liver spots spread across the back of his hands and arms.

Jacobs aged a good twenty years right before their eyes. Years that were anything but kind.

"Wow!" Tina's exclamation about summed up his thoughts.

Jim did a double take and blinked his eyes. "Talk about being hit with an *ugly* stick."

"If I look like that when I'm old," Tina whispered, "somebody please—cover me with a flag, take pity on me and fuck me for Old Glory, cause that's the only way I'd ever get laid."

"Help me." Jacobs' voice was little more than a harsh crackling whisper. "I'm dying."

Renée knelt beside him. "Am I supposed to care?"

"He deserved to die, I don't." A fresh wave of pain flashed across his pudgy face.

"Why? What did Grandfather ever do to you?" she asked.

"He promised...that if I helped get Melinda away from her husband...I could have her." Sweat poured from his face. "Then he sent her away...wouldn't tell me where."

"So you figured if you couldn't have my mother, that you'd just wait around for me."

"Yes," his voice grew weaker. "Help me, *please*. I can't breathe."

A harsh rattle sounded in his chest, his eyes glazed over, and then he was gone.

Warren slumped against the bedpost. He looked from Jacobs to the body of Mr. Duryea. The once shiny saber had turned to dull, red rust.

An odd silence filled the room. Warren looked around. "Do you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Jim asked.

"The house," Warren moved away from the bed, "it's...different."

"I don't feel anything," Tina shrugged, "except hungry."

"Now that you mention it, you're right." Renée stood, stepped over Jacobs' body and took Warren's hand. "I feel it too."

They both turned toward the bed.

"He's *gone*." Renée's voice held a vibrant expectation of hope. "He's finally gone for good."

Warren pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "We don't have to leave."

A big smile spread across her face. "No, *we* don't."

"Now that we have that settled," Tina started toward the door, "I'm going to fix breakfast."

"Need some help?" Jim asked.

"No!" Tina stepped through the hole in the door. "Last time you helped in the kitchen, I didn't get anything fixed," she stuck her head back into the room, "and Renée ended up with egg on her face."

Renée looked around the room. "There's nothing more we can do here."

"Warren, if you and Jim will unpack the bags, I'll call the police."

"How are you going to explain all," Warren waved his arm around the room, "this?"

"Just as it appears," she looked down at the body of Billy Jacobs. "He had a heart attack when we discovered the body."

"Do you think they will buy it?" Jim asked.

"They'll believe that before they ever would the truth."

Warren laughed. "She has a point, brother."

Jim slowly surveyed the room and nodded in agreement. "That she does."

Twenty minutes later, the house was crawling with police in uniforms, detectives in suits and forensic specialists with their notebooks, cameras and specimen cases.

* * * * *

"Ms. Evans," the detective tossed a driver's license on the library table, "care to explain this?"

Renée stared at the picture of the younger Billy Jacobs. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"You're telling me that Bill Jacobs, a reputable attorney in Chicago, the man in this picture," he picked up the license and stuck it in her face, "is the dead man upstairs?"

She answered cautiously, "It could be his father."

"Jacobs's old man died years ago." The detective slammed the license on the table.

The detective was called away and gave Renée a few moments rest. She knew the drill, had seen it performed several times, and yet it was unnerving to be the subject of the investigation, the relentless questions and accusations.

"Have you reconsidered, Ms. Evans?" he asked as he came back into the small library. "Maybe now you would like to tell me the truth?"

She smiled. "Nice try, detective. We both know that's a trick question."

"We've confirmed what you told us. The fingerprints taken from the man upstairs match those on file for Mr. Jacobs." The detective watched her for any signs of emotion.

He thrust the license under her nose. "*Who* is this man?"

"He came to the house the day after I moved in and —"

"We've been through this before," he interrupted her, "and it got us nowhere. I've got to go, but I'll be in touch. Don't go leaving town without checking in first."

He picked up his notebook and left the room.

A sudden chill wafted across her and she shuddered.

She was not alone.

Chapter Twenty

Renée sat at the kitchen table pushing her late and very cold breakfast around her plate. Her eggs tasted like cardboard, the bacon sat too long in the grease and the out-of-the-can biscuits were dry and hard. All in all, it was about par with the rest of her morning.

She lifted her hand to cover a yawn. "You will have to excuse me. I'm going to bed."

Tina looked at her watch. "I'm going to have to do the same. I went on standby an hour ago. If I'm lucky, I'll get a couple hours sleep before they call me in."

"You go ahead." Jim gave her a kiss and a playful slap on the butt. "I'll do the dishes so these two can get to bed."

"That's not necessary." Renée pushed away from the table. "Besides, don't you have to go to work?"

"It's a deal," Warren smiled.

"I called in." Jim grabbed the last piece of bacon and stuffed it in his mouth.

"But, Warren, it's your turn to wash." She gathered her dishes, stood and carried them to the sink. "What reason did you give them?" she asked Jim.

"So, it was your turn to cook." Warren kissed her on the cheek.

"I told them that my brother's girlfriend's grandfather's lawyer had a heart attack under mysterious circumstances, and the police weren't letting anyone leave."

"I'm *not* his girlfriend," she protested.

"Okay," Jim smiled mischievously. "Next time, I'll just tell whoever asks that he's your live-in carpenter-lover."

"You *would* too." She had stepped into Jim's well-laid trap. He was forcing her to honestly examine her relationship with Warren.

Warren's fingers gently cupped her chin. "Being my girlfriend wouldn't be so bad now," he turned her face toward his, "would it?"

His thumb glided sensuously across her lower lip, making it difficult to think. Being more than a lover required emotional commitment. It meant going to the movies, holding hands and sharing the same bucket of popcorn. Sharing the good times as well as the bad, but hadn't they already done that?

Renée looked into his eyes and butterflies danced in the pit of her stomach. "No," she whispered. "I'd like that."

She wasn't sure which one moved, but then it didn't really matter. Warren was kissing her, she was kissing him and that...wasn't bad at all.

"Okay, you two. Knock it off," Jim growled. "Tina's gone and the sexual energy in this room is so hot, I'm getting hard."

"Come on, Renée," Warren steered her toward the door, "let's go before he changes his mind about doing the dishes."

They reached the base of the stairs when there was a knock on the door.

Renée heaved a sigh. "Now what!" She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

"You wait here while I see who the hell it is." Warren headed for the front door. "Probably that nosy lieutenant back to ask more questions. The only thing he didn't ask me this morning was how many times a week we have sex."

Warren opened the door and stepped back as a man, in his late forties or early fifties, barged into her house.

She could feel his hostility clear across the room.

"Hello, Dad." Warren folded his arms across his chest. "What brings you here?"

"Don't you fucking 'Hello, Dad' me, you sorry, ungrateful son of a bitch. It wasn't enough to run off in the middle of a major contract, hell no, you had to drag my name down into the mud too. I turned the tube on this morning, and do you know what I found? *My* name, plastered all over the damn news."

"Dad, that's enough." Warren lowered his arms. "I think you should leave."

"Everyone is laughing at me. My son, the gigolo." He looked around the room.

Warren's dad made eye contact with Renée and sneered. "How much is she paying you to fuck her?"

Renée gasped, not so much at what he had said but at the lightning speed of Warren's reaction.

His fist was a blur.

Warren's dad stumbled backwards and landed on his ass in the doorway. Blood covered his face and dripped onto his shirt. He had a startled, wide-eyed look on his face as he carefully examined his nose. "Damn, I think you broke it."

"I've been wanting to do that ever since the first time I saw you smack Mother around. You know what? It felt pretty damn good."

Warren's dad spit out a broken tooth, slowly got to his feet and smiled. "Glad to see you finally grew a set of balls, son."

Slow, steady clapping came from the kitchen door behind her. Renée turned around to see Jim leaning against the doorjamb. He was wearing one of her aprons and looked quite domesticated.

"I might've known that you would be around. Look at you," their dad scoffed. "You pussy-whipped –"

"At least I'm getting some." Jim shook his head in disgust, turned and disappeared through the door.

She felt sorry for Jim. All he wanted was acceptance for who he was.

Renée crossed the room to Warren's side and put her arm around his waist. "Mr. Bailey, to put it mildly, we've had a difficult night. I don't appreciate you bullying your way into my home and insulting my friends or myself. Please leave and don't come back unless you're invited."

Mr. Bailey ignored her. "Son, let me know if you need any help. I could probably spare a journeyman for a day or two if you get in a bind."

"You know what, Dad? You can keep your men and go to hell. If I need someone, I'll hire my own workers." Warren shut the door in his father's face and leaned his forehead against it.

Renée watched him through the sidelights around the door as he walked away. The man was pathetic. He reminded her so much of her grandfather all she could feel for him was pity.

She was about to turn away from the window when a rake handle came flying up out of the grass and smacked Mr. Bailey in the face. He doubled over in pain and turned around holding his nose.

Renée saw fresh blood dripping from his hands.

He stood up and stepped backward onto the rake tines. The handle smacked him in the back of the head.

Renée started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Warren peeked out the window.

"He stepped on the rake and got smacked with the handle – not once but twice."

"Didn't you put the rake up?" he asked.

She giggled, "Looks like someone got it back out."

Warren's dad reached down, picked up the rake and in a fit of rage broke the handle over his knee. He had the short half of the wooden handle in his right hand and threw it away.

She watched it sail end over end, hit the ground, bounce once and then come flying right back to smack him along the side of his head.

He dropped the other half of the rake, ran to his truck and with a squeal of tires, drove out of the drive as if the hounds of hell were on his heels.

"I don't think he'll be back," Warren laughed and gave her a hug.

"Not with the send-off Mother gave him." She returned the hug and gave him a kiss. "I'm going to bed before anything else happens. If that lieutenant shows up with any more questions, I'm *not* here."

"I'll be out in the garage. The noise shouldn't bother you."

She trudged up the stairs. "Once I get to sleep, you could tear the roof off over my head and I wouldn't hear it."

Renée went to her room, closed the door and crawled into bed without undressing. She knew Mother was there, she could feel her presence in the room. "Mother, if you

can hear me," a tear crept out from under her eyelid and slowly rolled down her cheek, "I love you."

* * * * *

Warren turned off the saw and shook the sawdust from his hair. The moans and groans of the old mansion, the slamming doors and the faint noises that sounded like rattling chains were gone.

It was amazing how a person could get so used to something that he no longer realized was there and then, in its absence, be profoundly noticed.

The quiet unnerved him.

He took the board from the saw, laid it on the stack of new flooring for the third level and went to check on Renée.

I wonder where her mother is. I haven't seen her or felt her around since she smacked Dad with the rake handle.

Warren reached her room and quietly opened the door. Melinda Evans sat on the edge of her daughter's bed, keeping a silent vigil.

He felt like a voyeur, or a peeping Tom. Warren backed out of the room, closed the door and turned to go down the hall.

Mother hovered within an arm's length of him.

Warren gasped in surprise. "Damn, I wish you wouldn't sneak up on me like that."

She lifted her arm and motioned for him to follow her.

Melinda floated down the hall about a foot off the floor. The ever-present handcuffs dangled from her wrist. She reached the broken bedroom door and turned to face him.

Please! The word filled his mind and tugged at his heart like the tune of a sad melody.

He followed her and entered her father's bedroom. She stood in front of the door where the saber had hung. Warren blinked and she was gone.

The door was locked.

"This man had a fetish for locks." He exhaled a hard breath. "Here we go again. If I had something I wanted to keep locked up," he looked around the room, "where would I hide the key?"

He checked on top of the door, behind pictures and under the edge of the rug. "Okay, it's not near the door," he muttered.

Maybe he kept it on him... The thought brought a moment of regret. The old bag of bones was at the morgue. Warren tried to remember if there had been a chain around his neck.

"Or near him."

Warren went through each drawer of the nightstand, shuffling the contents, but didn't find the key. He checked along the edge of the mattress and then moved to the other side of the bed.

You're getting colder. The sweet notes of her laughter drifted through his mind.

"I'm glad one of us is enjoying this."

Warren moved back around to the nightstand.

You're hot!

"I checked this."

The top drawer flew out and whacked him on the shin.

"Ouch! Okay, I'll check it again." Warren rubbed the spot on his leg with one hand as he pulled out a small, worn leather-bound book with the other.

"I'll be damned, *Poems* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning." He opened the cover and whistled. "Wow! 1850, this book must be worth a small fortune."

The key.

"Oh! Right." He sat the book down and took out an envelope.

No! Warren heard the anguish and tears in her voice. *Please, don't.*

Something inside him ripped apart. He felt her acute embarrassment. "I'll burn them later," he whispered.

The cool gentle touch of her lips caressed his cheek. *Thank you.*

His vision blurred and he rubbed his eyes against the sudden onslaught of tears. He stuck the envelope of pictures in his back pocket and continued his search for the missing key.

In the bottom of the drawer, he found a picture frame. He had been in such a hurry earlier that he hadn't noticed it. Warren started to sit on the bed but changed his mind and parked his butt on the edge of the nightstand.

"You were a beautiful lady, Melinda," he whispered. "Like mother, like daughter."

A cold blast passed through him. "Oh, wow!" he gasped. A shudder rippled through his body from head to toe. "That was too weird. Warn me before you do that again."

Warren looked at the picture of Melinda and young Renée and turned the frame over.

There were two keys, a large one for the door and a small round one, taped to the back of the frame. He realized what the second key was for, and that knowledge twisted his soul into despair. The black, cardboard backing of the picture became blotted with tears.

Warren hugged the picture to his chest.

"I have to be strong for Renée."

Yes.

He lowered the picture. His fingers felt stiff and unyielding, like wooden dowels, as he removed the keys.

Warren laid the picture down and moved slowly across the room. He inserted the key and unlocked the door but couldn't bring himself to turn the knob.

Open the door.

"No," he whispered and shook his head.

Please, Warren, open the door.

"When Renée wakes up."

I have something just for you.

He closed his eyes and breathed a long, heavy sigh.

Are you scared? You don't need to be. I won't hurt you.

"I know that."

Then open the door.

"Give it to Renée."

Laughter in the sweet melody of songbirds surrounded him. *You need to give it to her.*

He took hold of the old china doorknob and slowly turned 'til he felt the door move.

You don't have to come in now if you don't want to. Put your hand inside. That's it, a little further.

Warren felt something cold and hard pressed into the palm of his hand. She closed his fingers into a fist.

You can close the door now. I'm used to the dark.

"I'll bring Renée when she wakes up."

I'd like that – very much.

Touched by Melinda's trust, Warren closed the door. Only one question remained – would Renée accept the gift from him? The answer was as transparent and fickle as a ghost.

He stuck his hand in his pocket, dropped the object and went to check on Renée.

"Sleep well, my darling," he whispered. "Sleep well."

* * * * *

Renée woke from the strangest dream. Mother had been sitting on her bed, stroking her hair and humming an old childhood bedtime song. She swung her feet from the bed, stretched and went in search of Warren.

The house was quiet and shadows crept across the floor in the late afternoon sun. Dust hung suspended in the air and glittered like a million diamonds.

She would be so glad when the repairs were finished. It was almost useless to clean anything. It didn't matter how careful he was, how much plastic he hung, or how often he vacuumed, dust still filtered throughout the whole house.

As she went past a table, she stopped dead in her tracks and stared as an H appeared.

"Mother, just because it's dusty, you don't need to write in it."

E IS

"He is what?"

OUTSIDE.

Renée turned around and headed for the kitchen. "Thank you, Mother."

You are welcome, Daughter.

She whirled around so suddenly that her feet got tangled and she sat down hard on the floor. Her eyes searched frantically around the room for even the slightest glimpse of her mother.

Her fingers closed in tight fists and in frustration she pounded the floor.

Renée got to her feet and went to the kitchen. The aroma of hot food slammed into her and jump-started her saliva glands. Her stomach growled loudly in protest. It had been a long time since her unappetizing breakfast.

She found Warren sitting on the patio and staring out across the grounds. He appeared to be deep in thought. Did he regret his decision to stay? Was tonight to be their last meal?

She couldn't much blame him. They had both been ready to throw in the towel. Maybe he still was, which presented a problem. Somewhere along the way, he had become an intricate part of her life.

Renée approached him with great trepidation.

"I was about to wake you." There was something foreboding in his voice. "Dinner is ready."

"It smells wonderful." She came up behind him, put her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "I'm starved."

He stood and held out his hand. "Good, let's eat."

Warren smiled, but his eyes were shadowed with grief. His shoulders slumped as if he carried a heavy burden—alone.

Her apprehension grew.

"What's wrong, Warren?" She waited as he opened the door for her.

"Nothing."

Renée didn't move.

"Are you coming in?"

"After you tell me what's bothering you." She crossed her arms over her breasts.

"I told you –"

"I know what you told me," she bristled. "I don't believe you."

"We'll talk about it after we eat." He held the door open and with a sweeping motion of his arm for her to go through the door, he waited.

"We'll talk about it *now*." Renée stomped her foot.

Warren shrugged, "Suit yourself," and started through the door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to fix my plate, sit at the table and eat." The door closed with a thud.

Her jaw dropped. *Of all the damn nerve, I don't believe he closed the door in my face.*

The way she saw things, she was left with two choices. She could be stubborn and refuse to go in until Warren decided to talk, which meant she could be out here all night, or she could go eat. Her stomach's loud protest cast the deciding vote.

Renée opened the door and went inside.

His smug little grin infuriated her. "I didn't appreciate you slamming the door in my face."

He chuckled. "I didn't slam it."

"That's beside the point," she argued. "It was rude."

Warren had taken the time to fix a chicken casserole that looked as good as it smelled. His thoughtfulness softened some of her anger. She rounded the table and plopped into a chair.

"I apologize," Warren passed her the dish, "but further argument outside would have been a total waste of time and have accomplished nothing."

"Can we talk about it while we eat?"

"Thank you," he smiled. "We could, but I'm not going to."

"Is it something that I did?"

Warren laughed and for a brief moment his eyes brightened.

"Is it something you did?"

"Eat," he pointed his fork at her plate, "we'll talk afterward."

Renée began eating. "Hey, this is good."

"Thanks." Warren forked another bite into his mouth.

She decided to change her approach. "I had an unusual dream..."

His eyebrows lifted.

"...about Mother."

"Are you sure it was a dream?"

She hadn't actually considered it could be anything but a dream until now. *If it hadn't been a dream, she pondered the question, then why?*

Renée looked down at her plate, surprised to find it empty. "Wow, that was filling," she pushed the plate aside, placed both elbows on the table and rested her chin on her clasped fingers.

"Now, what is so weighty a matter that your eyes no longer smile?"

Dark shadows spread across Warren's face. Muscles twitched along his firm jaw and his eyes glistened under the kitchen light.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed his chair back from the table, stood and held out his hand.

Warren's excellent chicken casserole settled in her stomach like a ball of gooey, sour bread dough.

Renée stood and interlocked her fingers with his.

So, this is it. This is where he tells me goodbye. She felt like a condemned woman on her last walk down a dimly lit and lonely hall. Maybe I can throw myself at his feet and beg for mercy?

They reached the base of the main stairs going up to the second floor. She paused. *I don't remember there being so many steps.*

Renée felt a slight tug on her arm and turned her eyes on Warren. He gave her fingers a squeeze and silently pleaded for her to come with him. She squared her shoulders and slowly ascended the steps toward the second floor.

Warren's work boots landed heavily on the wooden steps and echoed through the house. The ticking of the grandfather clock sounded like the beat of a snare drum in a funeral march.

Did he want one last roll in the hay, for old time's sake? Was that why they were going upstairs? Was Warren actually no different from all the other men in her life?

She wanted to turn around, run down the stairs and hide under the old grape arbor. Only one problem—Grandpa had destroyed it.

They reached the top of the stairs. Renée turned toward her room and hit the solid wall of Warren's chest. "I thought..."

"Wrong room." He shifted his eyes to Grandpa's broken door.

"Is that what all this doom and gloom is over?" Relief and anger collided. "There is *nothing* in there I want. As far as I'm concerned, you can take it all out and burn it." She whirled around to leave.

"I found something of your mother's. At least, I think it was hers."

His announcement brought her to an abrupt halt. "What?"

"A picture and a book."

Renée slowly turned her head. "A poem book?"

"Yes."

"By Elizabeth Browning?" She held her breath in anticipation.

"Yes."

She ran through the broken door. "Where is it?"

"On the —"

"I found it!" Renée picked up her mother's beloved book and clutched it to her breasts. A lump formed in her throat, and the picture blurred.

"Your mother was a beautiful woman." Warren stood beside her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

Her hand trembled as she reached out and picked up the old frame. "I was seven." She bit down on her lower lip to stop the quiver. "This was taken just before—she left us."

Warren stepped in front of her and held her close. "She was forced to leave your dad."

"Mother could've come home if she'd wanted to."

"Renée, there's something else you need to see." He walked her toward the door.

"That's just a closet full of old clothes. Besides, it's locked."

"I found the key." He reached his hand out, slowly turned the knob and swung the door open.

"There's a pull chain, just inside the door. I'll get it." She pulled the switch and light flooded the room.

Renée screamed, turned and buried her face against Warren's chest.

Chapter Twenty-One

"I tried to tell you." Warren's voice broke under the emotional strain. "I didn't know how."

She leaned backward in his arms. "You *knew*!" His face blurred and she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Warren's eyes were closed. His tightly pressed, turned-down lips trembled. Tears trickled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Renée."

All the years of anger, bitterness and loneliness surfaced. Her fingernails dug into her palms. "Damn you, Warren." She beat on his shoulders. "How long have you known?"

He looked at her with the saddest eyes she had ever seen. "I found the key this morning," he leaned his forehead against hers, "after you went to bed."

"Why," her voice broke, "did you go looking for the key?"

"I didn't. Melinda showed me where it was hidden."

Renée swallowed and slowly turned within the circle of his arms. "She was here when...when Grandpa was...?"

"Yes." Warren exhaled a forceful breath that stirred her hair. "Jacobs never knew she was here."

"What a horrible, lonely way to die," she sobbed.

Mother's body was in the same mummified condition as her grandfather's, minus the ripped skin and broken ribs. She was wearing the dress that she had worn for their last picture.

"I thought she stayed away because she didn't love me. Every birthday and Christmas, I'd wait for a card, a phone call or some little something from her."

Renée removed his arms from around her waist, kept hold of his hand and slowly moved to the side of the bed. "Oh my God! Warren, the bastard handcuffed her to the bed." She tore her gaze away from the manacles around her mother's left wrist.

A black hole opened up. She became lightheaded, dizzy, and her legs didn't want to support her. "I need to sit."

Warren helped her to the only chair, which sat between the bed and a small table.

A piece of torn wallpaper and a rusty nail lay on top of the table. She tried to focus on the faded, smudged words her mother had written, but they were a blur. "Warren, here, you read it."

He took the letter from her hand, moved closer to the light and began to read.

"My dearest Renée. I do not know if you will ever see this letter. It had been my sincere hope to one day be reunited with my family, but I fear now that will never happen. I think my father would have listened to reason, eventually, but all hope is lost. I'm dying.

"Something dreadful must have happened. It has been over three weeks since I last saw your grandfather or had anything to eat or drink. Now, as I lie upon my bed through the long days and nights, I think constantly of you, wanting only to hold you in my arms and tell you that I love you, now, tomorrow and for all the tomorrows that you will have to endure alone.

"I'm tired, will write more later – if I can."

Renée sat, rocking back and forth, with her hands covering her face.

Warren felt numb, as if his heart had been ripped out and torn apart. The heartache for Renée had to be insurmountable. He couldn't begin to fathom the pain she had to be suffering.

He knelt in front of her and wrapped his arms around her.

"I love you, Mother," she whispered over and over.

"Go ahead, love," his voice cracked. "Let it all out."

Melinda was close.

I want to hold my daughter. Please!

"Renée," he spoke softly in her ear, "your mother wants to hold you."

"How?"

"I don't know," he continued to gently rock her.

Through you, the words exploded in his mind.

"She – your mother..." He stumbled for the words.

"Please! Whatever it is," she pleaded, "I'll do it."

That's easy for you to say. The fear and uncertainty of the unknown made it difficult to swallow. *Okay, Melinda, but I'm only doing this for Renée.*

I know. Thank you, Warren. He gasped, and before he could change his mind, everything went black as a deep cold permeated his body.

"My dear Renée." Melinda's voice whispered in her ear.

She jerked back out of Warren's arms and looked around the room.

"Don't be frightened."

Warren's lips were moving, but she heard her mother's voice.

"Mother?"

"Yes, my darling," Warren's arms opened up to embrace her again. "I borrowed Warren's body for a few minutes."

"This is weird." Renée moved back into his arms, or were they Mother's arms?

"I'll tell you what weird is," she whispered. "It's been so long since I had a bladder to worry about, I'm not sure if Warren needs to go or not. If he does, he may be in trouble because I've never peed through one of these before."

The thought of Mother going to the bathroom for Warren broke the tension and strain. She laughed and cried 'til her side hurt.

"Please, Mother, don't go away again." She was holding her mother again after all this time. It didn't matter that this was Warren's body.

"I have to, my child. I wouldn't want to live in a man's body. Besides, if I borrow this one for too long, it could be fatal for Warren."

"Grandpa's gone," she argued. "You can stay in the house."

"When the handcuffs are removed – I'll be free."

"I won't remove them." Renée tightened her arms.

"My dear, selfish daughter. I've been here too many years. When the time comes, I have to leave, but I just had to hold you one last time and tell you how much I love you."

"I love you too," she sobbed.

"Now give your mother a kiss. Warren's waiting."

Renée kissed her mother goodbye and held onto her for as long as she could.

His body slumped against her and Renée knew her mother was gone.

"Warren, can you hear me?" Fear captivated her heart. "Please, say something."

"Wow, what a rush." He took several deep breaths.

"How do you feel?"

Warren glanced at her mother's body and then returned his gaze to her. His eyebrows momentarily lifted and his lips puckered. "In a word – violated."

"I'm sorry you had to go through it," she kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"I wouldn't have done it for just anyone," he smiled.

"Warren Bailey, if you're fishing for another kiss, all you have to do is pucker up." Renée trailed a finger down the length of his jaw.

She laughed at his outlandish pucker and gave him a quick kiss.

"Why don't you lie down and rest. It hasn't been an easy day for you." He handed her the small key that had been hidden behind the picture.

"For when the time comes," he paused.

"I know." With great reluctance, she took the key from Warren's fingers. "I think I'll just sit here for a few minutes, alone – with Mother."

"I'll make the necessary calls." He leaned over, kissed her forehead and left the room.

Renée groaned, "Won't the lieutenant be thrilled."

Warren's a good man, Renée. Mother's spirit sat on the bed.

He has a big heart, she heard her mother's laughter, *besides a big...*

"Mother!" she gasped. Flushed heat spread up her neck.

Don't play the blushing virgin with me. I've seen you two together. He pleases you, I'm glad.

"Yes, he does."

You love him.

Warren came back into the room. "The police are on their way."

Renée looked at the note from her mother. "That's strange, I don't see the pen she used."

Warren got down on his knees, "Maybe it's under the bed. I don't see it." He started to get up. "I'll grab a flashlight."

"Warren, look!"

The nail moved and then floated in the air. It stood poised upright with the rusty tip touching the paper. Suddenly, a bright red fluid flowed from the end of the nail. In the cursive style of her mother, the point moved across the paper.

Love always, Mother.

The words were no sooner on the paper than they began to fade to the same rusty brown as the rest of the writing.

A loud knocking on the front door reverberated through the house.

"That'll be the police." Warren gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I'll go let them in."

She nodded and reached out to touch the last two words on the paper. Acute sadness filled the chambers of her heart. After all the empty years of longing, her mother was once again to be taken from her. "Dammit, it's not fair."

Renée listened to the horde of footsteps coming up the stairs and gripped the key tightly in her fist, as if by doing so she could ward off the inevitable.

"Ms. Evans," the lieutenant stood in the doorway, "I'll have to ask you to leave the room."

She gave him a look, which she hoped told him where he could go and what he could do to himself once he got there. "Lieutenant, I would like to introduce you to my mother, Melinda Evans, whom I haven't seen in twenty years. I'm not leaving this room 'til she does."

"Try to be reasonable, Ms. Evans."

"The extent of my reasonability stops at that door." Renée stood and stepped out of the way.

"I could have you removed," he bristled.

"Yes, you could," she smiled, "but I wouldn't advise it."

"Ms. Evans, you are interfering with a potential crime scene." He motioned with his hand for her to leave. "Please."

"Crime scene," she looked around her mother's bedroom prison. "What crime scene?" *Damn, I'm crying again.* "My mother was handcuffed to this bed and starved to death when Jacobs killed my grandfather."

She wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand.

The lieutenant sighed. "Stand over here out of the way. Please."

Renée moved and the forensic team began taking pictures. She watched as one of them took a bottle, sprayed a fine mist over the area and then turned a light on.

The bed railing, edge of the bed and back of the chair sparkled.

"Ms. Evans, do you know what this is?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, it's illuminol." She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "It's used to detect the presence of blood."

The lieutenant folded his arms and then lifted one hand to his chin. "I don't think your mother died of starvation."

"There has to be another explanation for all the blood. Mother wrote a note, just before she died." Renée picked up the torn piece of wallpaper.

"Please don't touch *anything*, Ms. Evans," the lieutenant snapped.

The technician took the paper and read it. "I think I can explain where the blood came from, sir."

He sprayed the note with illuminol, hit it with light and the words leapt from the page in glowing green.

Renée gasped, her hand flew to her mouth and the room spun. Warren's arm appeared seemingly out of nowhere and curled around her waist.

"Lieutenant," the technician picked up the nail, "want to bet this is what she used as a pen?"

"No." The lieutenant glared at the technician and then at her. "I'll tell the boys from the morgue that the body is ready." He stomped out of the room.

"I apologize for the lieutenant's behavior, Ms. Evans." He put his things away and took out a key. "Sometimes he can be a real pain in the ass."

"Wait," her voice cracked. "I— May I..." Her lips trembled as she held the key out. "Please," she bit her lower lip.

He stepped out of the way.

The reassuring squeeze of Warren's hand gave Renée the strength she needed. "I can do this," she mumbled. "I have to do this."

As she reached for the handcuffs, her vision blurred and she closed her eyes. *Mother, I can't do this.* Her tears rolled like rain down her cheeks and burned the back of her throat.

Renée felt her mother's guiding hand upon hers. *Turn the key, baby. That's my girl.* The cuffs sprang open.

"I love you, Mother."

She turned and flung herself into Warren's waiting arms.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Warren wiped the sweat from his eyes, glanced at his watch and, for what was probably the hundredth time, looked at the empty spot where Renée kept her mother's car. It didn't seem possible that almost two months had passed since the funeral.

"Relax," Shorty laughed. "That hot little woman of yours won't get home any faster by you looking at the time every ten minutes."

"I know," he sighed, "but this is her big day with the law firm where that bastard Jacobs worked."

At five foot three inches, Shorty Lucas supported one of the biggest handlebar mustaches he had ever seen. Shorty was a hard worker, a good carpenter, but he was also sixty years old, a drunk, and had been living on skid row.

However, since coming to work for him over a month ago, his uncle had been sober.

"I got a letter from your mother." Shorty ran a piece of sandpaper across a banister spindle. "She asked how you boys were doing."

"Really?" Warren raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"She's gotten remarried, out in Vegas."

Warren took a deep breath and slowly nodded. "I hope she's happy."

"Sounded like it in the letter." Shorty closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the wood. An almost sensuous smile spread across his lips. "Warren, there are three things in life every man should experience."

"And those would be?" he asked.

"A good woman in his bed, a smooth piece of wood in his hands and an aged whiskey in his belly," his uncle laughed. "I lost one to breast cancer, had too much of the latter, and now — I've come back to where I started."

Shorty laid the finished spindle on the sawhorse. "She wants to come see you and Jim."

Warren thought the old bitterness had been put aside, but hearing of his mother's desires brought it all back like a case of heartburn that refused to go away. He walked to the garage entrance, leaned against the doorjamb and stood staring down the driveway.

Shorty came up beside him. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Why now, after all these years?" Warren slowly turned his head toward his uncle.

"She didn't say." Shorty laid his hand on Warren's shoulder. "You of all people know what she went through. You need to forgive her, Warren."

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled it. "I thought I had."

"Well, boy, did you or didn't you? Sitting on a fence is mighty hard on the balls. Make up your mind."

"You're right," he covered Shorty's hand with his. "Tell Mother that...I look forward to seeing her."

His uncle laughed, "Don't sound so damned enthusiastic about it."

Renée's red Corvette pulled through the gates and sped up the drive. Tires squealed on the concrete as she went around the curve.

"The way she's driving, something happened at the lawyer's office," Shorty chuckled. "Or she's so hot that I won't see you the rest of the afternoon. At least down here working, I don't have to listen to your bed springs playing Tchaikovsky's, *1812 Overture* half the night."

Renée slid to a screeching halt, threw open the door, and jumped out of the car. She took two steps, stopped and went back to turn the engine off.

"Did you get any tickets on the way home?" He pushed away from the door and stared toward her.

"Nope, outran them all." She jumped into his arms and kissed him. "I have good news."

"Here I thought you were just happy to see me," he pouted.

She kissed him again and stepped back. "That too."

"I take it everything with the law firm is straightened out." Warren took her hand and they entered the garage.

"Ms. Evans, you look radiant," Shorty greeted her. "I take it there was good news."

"Better than good, Shorty. We won! Most of the money that Jacobs stole, plus his investments, are being transferred over to me."

"All of them?" Warren asked in amazement.

"Yes!" She took his other hand and swung him around in a circle. "The stocks, bonds, an office space and even a warehouse."

"That's great!" Warren gave her another hug. "It's still hard to understand how he could take so much from the estate, even over twenty years."

"Jacobs planned on getting it all, one way or another." She sobered. "If it hadn't been for you, Warren, he might have succeeded."

"So how much are you getting, or do they know yet?"

"The auditor is still digging," she winked, "but it looks like somewhere around three million, give or take a couple hundred thousand."

The figure rolled over Warren in a shockwave. *She's rich – filthy, stinking rich. Where the hell do I fit into the picture now? It's been fun while it lasted, but who the hell am I kidding?*

"I have some more good news," she beamed. "They contacted my old firm and offered me a position as a junior partner."

Junior fucking partner! Those words drove a stake through Warren's heart and hammered the final nail in his coffin. *As soon as Renée gets around all those stuffed shirts with their Armani suits, she won't give me the time of day. I'm as good as outta here.*

Shorty tipped his head forward and lifted his shaggy eyebrows. "Sounds more like bribery for keeping quiet."

"Probably is," she laughed, "but who cares. I don't think they knew anything about Jacobs' activities."

"This calls for a celebration," Shorty beamed. "You two need to get out, kick up your heels and paint the town red."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, Shorty. What do you think, Warren?"

"I know the perfect place," Warren paused. "Ambria's."

Shorty whistled.

"What's Ambria's?" Renée looked from one to the other.

"That's where the well-to-doers, the movers and shakers of the city go to dine out." Shorty looked at his watch. "If you can get reservations this late in the day, I'll be surprised."

"I won't know until I check." He pulled out his cell phone.

"Before you do," Shorty cautioned, "you better see if you can find the appropriate attire."

"I've got to find a phone book," Warren hurried toward the kitchen door.

Renée turned from watching Warren leave. "I gather Ambria's is more than a casual business dress, coat and tie restaurant."

Shorty winked. "One of the classiest places in town."

"I'm going to kill him." She stomped her foot. "He knows damn well I don't have anything to wear."

"Now where have I heard that one before?" Shorty laughed.

Renée ignored the typical male lack of understanding and sympathy. "My hair's a mess and just look at my hands." She held them in front of Shorty's eyes.

Shorty quit laughing and his face took on a serious, almost rebuking scowl as he gently clasped her fingers. "You got these calluses and chipped nails by honest hard labor. Don't ever be ashamed of that."

He kissed the back of each hand. "Those are lovely hands. Now if I were younger..."

"If you were younger," Warren came back into the garage, "I'd kick your ass for hittin' on my woman."

"You'd have needed to bring a box lunch." Shorty gave her a wink.

"I got reservations for tomorrow night, nine o'clock." Warren came over to stand beside her and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"That means I had better go shopping, now that the restrictions on my bank account have been lifted." She gave Shorty a kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you boys later."

"Hey!" Warren shouted after her. "Where's my kiss?"

"You'll have to share with your uncle," she laughed and skipped through the door.

Where the hell do I go for a formal gown? Renée picked up the phone book.

"Hi, Renée," Tina panted for breath. "Warren told me...you had an emergency."

She looked down at the first-aid kit in Tina's hand and started laughing. "I do, but not that kind. Warren's taking me to Ambria's for dinner tomorrow night."

"This calls for drastic measures." Tina headed to the door. "Don't just stand there, girl, we're going shopping."

Renée groaned and mumbled, "If she shops like she fucks, I'm in trouble."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Warren paced the floor. The sharp *tap-tap-tap* of his black leather dress shoes on the hardwood floor kept rhythm with the old grandfather's clock. He paused at the foot of the stairs, looked at his watch and then up at the second floor landing.

"We have enough to do in this house without you wearing a damn hole in the floor," Shorty laughed. "She'll be down soon enough."

"I don't know why I let you talk me into this, Shorty." He pulled at the dark red Windsor tie and continued his pacing. "I didn't wear a damn monkey suit to my high-school graduation."

"I don't know why you're so dad-blamed nervous." Shorty wore an amused grin on his face. "Hell, you're just going out for dinner."

"That's easy for you to say." Warren reached an imaginary point on the floor and turned around. "You're not the one going."

Shorty pulled himself out of the easy chair. "You'll do fine," he winked. "Here, you might need this."

Warren caught the flash of green and Benjamin Franklin's picture as it went into the pocket of his jacket.

"I can't take your money, Shorty."

"Dammit, Warren, I'd still be sleeping off a hangover down at the mission if it weren't for you. You gave me a second chance and a man my age don't get many of those," Shorty huffed indignantly. "Why I even started going to AA meetings."

He started to reach for the money.

"*Boy!* You take that out of your pocket and you're going to have a fight on your hands." Shorty squared his shoulders. "Don't start thinking that you're too big to have your butt kicked."

"Okay, *Uncle*," Warren smiled and extended his hand. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, *Nephew*," Shorty shook his hand.

* * * * *

Renée slipped the greenish-blue, bandeau-style gown over her head. The chiffon floated over her skin like a soft cloud of sumptuous chocolate cream.

"You're going to knock 'em dead, girl." Tina gave her a beaming smile as she helped fasten a small cameo ribbon around her neck. "It was made just for you."

Renée ran her fingers down the gown. "I can't help feeling naked."

"That's because you're not wearing anything underneath it." Tina laughed as she tied the low back. "Just be careful how you sit."

Renée attached a small pearl earring through the lobe of each ear. Her fingers shook as she pulled out a small, flat, wooden case.

Tina laid her hand on her arm. "Are you feeling okay, Renée? You're shaking."

"Yes – no." She laid the box down and picked it up again. "I can't decide if I want to wear this tonight or not."

"That box looks a hundred years old," Tina leaned her head over for a better look.

Renée laughed. "Try the late 1600s."

"Really!" Tina's eyes widened. "Wow! What's inside it?"

"A bracelet," she separated the two halves of the case.

Tina gasped. "Oh! My God! It's beautiful. Is it pure silver? How old is it? May I?" She picked up the small, intricate silver bracelet. "There has to be a story behind this."

"It was...Mother's, and has been passed down from mother to daughter for generations." She took the bracelet from Tina. "Supposedly, this is the last piece of jewelry that a silversmith in Salem, Massachusetts, made before he was thrown into prison...and died."

"Why was he put in prison?" Tina whispered in awe.

"For being a witch." She found the hidden clasp release and the circle of silver swung open.

"You're joking," Tina's mouth fell open, "right?"

"Not according to the family folklore."

"Did he put a spell on it or something?" Tina's voice grew excited.

Renée sighed. "Or something."

"Don't keep me in suspense. Are you going to let me in on the family secret?"

Renée shook her head, "I've said too much already."

"Well, it's no wonder you're all jittery about wearing it with everything that's gone on in this house. But," Tina nudged her arm, "you need to make up your mind. Warren's waiting."

Six months ago, she pooh-poohed the story behind the circle of silver, but now she believed the warnings. They gave caution to what she was about to do.

Renée placed the band of silver around her wrist.

"Here, let me do it. The way you're shaking, you'll never get it closed." Tina secured the small lock and smiled. "If it is charmed or – whatever, may it bring you happiness."

"Thank you, Tina." Renée gave her a quick hug. *I pray you're right.*

Tina's eyebrows scrunched together. Her gaze riveted on Renée's wrist.

"Warren's already hooked," Tina winked. "You don't need a charmed bracelet."

She held up her arm. "He may be hooked but," she shook her wrist and the band of silver danced, "I might need a little help getting him in the boat."

Am I doing the right thing?

Renée stepped into her new, black high heels and wrapped the straps up each calf. She picked up her small clutch purse and turned to Tina. "Be a dear, run down the back stairs and call Shorty into the kitchen."

"Okay," Tina laughed and headed out the door. "I'll distract Shorty."

Maybe Tina's right.

"I don't need this," she whispered. She tried to take it off, but the hidden clasp wouldn't release. "Oh, well. I guess I'm taking you along after all."

Renée left the bedroom and headed for the stairs.

Warren heard her slow, hesitant steps in the hall. *It's not too late.* He ran his finger around the inside collar of his pleated white shirt. *You could still run.*

She stopped at the top of the stairs and smiled, "Sorry I kept you waiting, Warren."

He stood open-mouthed and stared at her like a dim-witted fool.

She started down the stairs.

Words failed him in the fear that if he spoke, this shimmering vision of loveliness would somehow vanish and disappear from before his eyes. He could relate to a dirty-kneed, smudged-faced gardener with wild, wind-blown hair. This sophisticated, glamorous woman scared the hell out of him.

His mouth felt as dry as an old prune. "It was worth the wait. You look lovely."

That's really great, Warren. A nice, safe, original comment.

"Thank you, Warren. You look rather dashing in a tux."

Renée reached the bottom step. He took her hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed her fingers. "I suddenly feel like a pauper in the presence of a beautiful princess."

Oh God! Where did that corny line come from?

"I was hoping for more than a kiss on the fingers," she laughed.

"You look so beautiful, I didn't want to smudge your makeup," Warren grinned.

She moved closer, her hot breath caressed his cheek. Her perfume tantalized his senses.

"As long as you're the one doing the smudging, I won't mind."

His free hand glided over her hip, up her side and across her breast. Passion, lust and desire exploded in a shower of gold within her eyes. He took her lips in an embrace that left him wanting more—a lot more.

The thought of what she wasn't wearing underneath her dress went straight to his groin. He shifted in a feeble attempt to make extra room in pants that were already too tight.

"Okay, you two. Knock it off." Tina wore a big smile as she came out of the kitchen. "I'm getting turned on watching you two make out. Don't you have to be somewhere?"

"The only time you're not turned on, Tina, is in your sleep." Warren took Renée's hand and started for the door.

"You might be surprised," Tina laughed. "Want to hear about my dreams?"

"No!" Renée and Warren spoke at the same time as they left the house.

* * * * *

The night was still young as they left the Nobel Fool Theater. The production of Steve Martin's *The Underpants* kept the audience in stitches. Warren's smoldering glance at her lap, when the heroine's panties ended up around her ankles, had created enough heat that Renée thought the layered chiffon skirt of her gown would melt.

His right hand rested on her leg and a finger slowly drew small circles on her thigh. "Keep your mind on the driving, please."

Warren shifted his head toward her and then quickly turned it back to the heavily congested street. The corner of his mouth turned up in an amused smile. "I'm watching the traffic."

"I know what you're looking at, but your mind is somewhere else." She loosened up her seat belt and turned as far sideways in the seat as she could.

"Do tell, where would that be?" his smile widened.

"Between my legs."

Warren's eyes momentarily shifted and dropped. His chest swelled. His nose flared. "I'd like to have something down there, but I can promise you this, it's not my mind."

"Is this where we crawl into the back seat for a quickie?" Just the thought of having sex while parked on the side of a busy street excited her. *I've been around Tina way too much.*

He glanced at his watch. "Sorry to disappoint you, but our table awaits us."

Warren pulled up in front of a building. He got out, went around the car and opened her door. "Shall we?"

"If you insist," she teased.

Warren handed the keys to a valet dressed in a red jacket and black pants. He escorted her up the steps and through the large double-glass doors. Persian rugs covered the marble floors and a large urn with a tall Kentia Palm stood guard duty on either side of black double doors.

Renée looked above the entrance. A single word, *Ambria*, was scrawled in large, black cursive on the granite wall. She tried to calm the horde of butterflies in the pit of her stomach as they fluttered in nervous anticipation of what awaited her inside.

Low, classical music greeted her as she stepped into the restaurant. The high ceilings gave the place a feeling of openness while the deep, dark-toned walls and floors and soft lighting spoke of intimacy.

"Bailey, party of two," Warren smiled to the maitre d'.

"If you would like to wait at the bar, Mr. Bailey, your table will be ready in a couple of minutes."

"Thank you."

A large Persian rug covered the floor in front of the bar. A row of square four-legged stools with burnt reddish-orange leather seats lined the length of the bar. She noticed several men glance their way, their eyes lingering on her as if they knew she wasn't wearing any panties.

Renée saw two stunningly dressed women give Warren a more than cursory look. She tightened her hold on his arm, thrust out her chest and gave them a warning smile. *Go ahead, you little hussies. Look all you want, but you touch and I'll claw your damn eyes out.*

Thankfully, Warren hadn't seemed to notice.

"They don't hold a candle to you," he whispered.

"Who doesn't?"

Warren chuckled. "Those two at the bar."

"Oh! Those two? What do I have that they don't?"

"Poise, charm, a beauty they could only dream about," he turned his head and gave her a sensuous smile, "and me."

Renée laughed, her butterflies settled, and as they passed the two hussies at the bar, she leaned closer and kissed him on the cheek.

"Warren, look," she pointed to where a large urn filled a mirrored alcove.

They walked over to it. On top of the urn sat a lamp with a small mermaid holding two poles, which curved outward at the top, and behind the figure stood another pole. Three seashells formed the lampshades for each light.

Renée watched Warren's fingers glide over the smooth polished surface of the mermaid in an almost sensual touch. His eyes caressed the figure in admiration.

She felt moist heat between her legs and her breathing deepened. "If you're a good boy tonight," she whispered, "I'll be your mermaid."

He turned his eyes away from the carved figure and gave her a slow, scorching appraisal from her toes to her head. She felt naked, stripped of her dress in one of Chicago's best restaurants.

Warren's arm curled around her waist. "With an offer like that, how can I possibly misbehave?"

The low husky tremble of his voice kissed her ear. "I'm sure you'll find a way."

His hand dropped lower to sinfully cover the cheek of her ass.

"Umm, excuse me, Mr. Bailey. If you will please follow me, I'll show you to your table."

The maitre d' looked embarrassed. Renée smiled and glanced over at the bar. One man drooled and the two hussies' chests heaved to the point she thought their store-bought boobs might pop out of their gowns.

They followed the maitre d' down two steps into the dining area and to a table set for two in a semi-isolated and very intimate setting. The flame of a candle danced in a small lamp. A bottle of wine sat in a bucket of ice.

"Enjoy your dinner," the maitre d' smiled and bowed slightly before leaving.

Almost instantly, a waiter wearing a black tux appeared beside their table. "My name is John, I'll be your waiter." He uncorked the wine and poured a small amount in Warren's fluted crystal glass.

With just the proper amount of style befitting the elegance of the setting, Warren swirled the wine, sniffed and tasted it. He gave a slight nod of approval to the waiter who proceeded to pour her wine and then Warren's.

"Thank you," she smiled.

John handed them each a menu. "I'll return in a moment for your order."

She looked at the menu and her head swam. "Warren, are you sure about this?" The corner of his lips turned up in a sexy half smile and he blew her kiss.

He picked up his wine glass. "To us."

"Is there an *us*?" she asked as she picked up her glass.

"I'd like to think there is." He waited for her to complete the toast.

Renée clicked her crystal lightly against his. "Then, here's to us," *and a new beginning*. Her eyes held his as they sipped the wine.

A few minutes later, their waiter returned.

"Are you ready to order?" he asked Warren.

She looked up, gave a slight shake of her head and then hurriedly scanned the menu that she had been looking at without really seeing. Her mind had been on Warren's toast and the silver bracelet around her wrist.

"Hmm, I think I'll start with the venison pâté, organic mesclun for the salad, and the marmitako. Warren, would you like to share the rib eye for two?"

He looked at her over the top of his menu. His hungry gaze gave her the impression that what he wanted wasn't on the menu.

"The rib eye will be fine."

"How would you like that prepared?" The waiter's eyes glanced back and forth between them.

"Medium rare." They both answered at the same time.

"And for you, sir. What will you have?" the waiter asked.

"I'll have the same."

Their waiter hurried off with their order.

Warren reached across the small table and lightly grasped her fingers. His eyes held an intriguing allure as he gently massaged her ring finger.

This is it! He's going to propose! Time seemed to stand still.

Light from the candle played across his face in soft flickering shadows. The music, barely heard over the low noises of silverware clicking on the china and the murmur of other customers, seemed to dim in volume even more.

It was as if the whole restaurant held its collective breath in waiting.

* * * * *

Renée felt confused and deeply disappointed. Dinner was over in what had to be the most romantic setting she could have ever imagined, and he still hadn't popped the question. If he had been waiting for privacy, they couldn't get any more private than they were right now.

They were the only ones left in the restaurant.

She caught one of the restaurant staff impatiently checking the time.

Warren paid the check and left a generous tip on the table. He stood to help with her chair.

Her mother's bracelet mocked her and her sentimental foolishness. "Where are we going?" She tried to smile as she stood.

An impish grin played upon his lips and danced in his eyes. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

Warren took her arm, escorted her out of the restaurant and into the noisy Chicago night.

"It's a secret."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Renée sat on a bench and removed her shoes. She laughed at Warren with his pant legs rolled up to his knees. Warren took her hand and they walked barefoot through the sand down to the water's edge.

A light breeze blew in from Lake Michigan and fluttered the layers of her skirt. She threw her arms around Warren's neck and the front of her formal rose to bare her pubic hair to the cool wind. Renée let go and pulled the fabric lower.

"Relax," he laughed. "No one can see you from the highway. See, they're not concerned."

A few feet away, she saw a naked ass and two pair of intertwined legs.

"Give you any ideas?" Warren grabbed her butt and gave a playful squeeze.

"Maybe."

They strolled further down the beach, the gentle waves lapped at her feet. She could no longer hear the rock music from Navy Pier. Even the sounds of the city seemed far away.

In a darker shadowed area, she moved away from the water's edge and stopped. "Take off your jacket."

Warren removed his jacket and she spread it on the ground. "Now sit down."

She straddled his legs, slowly sat in his lap and kissed him. Renée reached between their bodies, undid his trousers and pulled his hardening cock from his shorts. With a slight shift of her weight, she rose up and positioned the head of his cock within the wet folds of her vagina.

Renée lowered her weight taking his full length deep inside her. She shuddered.

"I had hoped this was the reason you didn't wear panties tonight."

"It does have its advantages." She tightened and relaxed her muscles to the rhythm of the waves as they crashed upon the shore. Her body swayed in the strong winds of passion as they blew over, around and through her.

Warren lowered her top. The cool night air bathed her bare breasts and then the heat of Warren's mouth ignited the sky with brilliant fireworks.

"Oh!" Her fingers tightened in his hair. She pulled him closer. "Yes!"

His mouth left her nipple and she whimpered.

"Do you know what you are doing to me?" He pulled her mouth down to his.

His tongue filled her mouth and danced with hers.

"I hope I do," she replied when he finally broke the kiss.

Renée pushed his head back down to her breast.

Warren suckled first one breast and then the other. His teeth gently grated across her sensitive flesh.

Bolts of passion-charged lightning rocked her body. She lifted her hand to her mouth to stifle a loud moan.

The waves of Lake Michigan pounded in her head like heavy ocean surf. The brightly lit skyline blurred and the buildings appeared to sway from side to side.

Warren's arms tightened around her. The fire of his passion consumed her.

She was falling.

Renée found his lips and devoured his mouth in a wild kiss. The turbulent waves of her climax crashed over them both and carried Warren along with her in its wake.

His body trembled in tiny aftershocks after their lovemaking. The raspy rush of his harsh breathing surrounded her in a warm cocoon.

She smothered his face with kisses and threaded her fingers through his hair.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love you?" Warren buried his face into the hollow of her neck.

"Yes, but don't let that stop you from telling me again." Renée kissed the side of his head.

Warren chuckled, "Once isn't enough?"

"No," Renée whispered and then gently nibbled on his ear. "Once is never enough."

"I'll try and remember."

I hope you do, Warren – I hope you're around to tell me every day – for the rest of my life.

"We need to be going." He leaned slightly away and kissed her lips.

"Do we have to?" Renée sighed with regret, stood and adjusted her dress.

Warren brushed the sand from his pants and shook his jacket.

He encircled her waist with his arm and they left the tranquil breaking waves and headed toward the concrete jungle and the noise of a city that never slept.

Instead of heading back to the car, he led her further into the city.

Warren halted in front of a glass door and knocked.

"It's almost daylight..."

He lifted his finger and gently placed it on her lips. "I promise, this is the last stop."

A moment later, a security guard appeared and unlocked the door.

She started to protest when Warren took her hand and pulled her inside. He led her across a deserted semi-dark lobby to an open elevator, stepped inside and punched the top button.

Renée sighed, leaned against Warren and closed her eyes. She didn't know where they were and she was too tired to care. All she wanted to do was go home, soak in a tub of hot water, and sleep until Monday morning.

The elevator stopped, the door opened, and he gave her a kiss, "We're here."

"Great, now can we go home?" She stepped from the elevator and forgot about her aching feet as she gazed upon the city spread out like a giant carpet of multicolored lights.

"Oh! Wow!" She ran to the ledge. "It feels like we are on top of the world."

"Close enough," he laughed and gently grasped her fingers. "It's the Sears Tower."

One moment there was a dim glow in the east and the next, the sun seemed to explode into the sky in a brilliant ball of red-orange flame. "Warren! Look!"

She turned to find him on his knees beside her.

The sunrise forgotten, Renée gasped. She covered her mouth with her other hand.

"I love you, Renée Evans." Warren slipped her mother's engagement ring over her finger. "Will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Epilogue

The late afternoon sun filtered through the splendor of the fall foliage. A cool, light breeze caused dim shadows to dance wildly about the new grape arbor. Warren and Renée sat cuddled up in the swing as little baby Melinda resisted her nap and played with the colored beads on the front of her stroller.

A bright red leaf floated by just out of reach. Melinda giggled with excitement, flailed her arms and kicked her blanket off in an attempt to capture the elusive new toy.

Renée shook her head and sighed. "I swear I'm going to sue the hospital."

"What for?" Warren slowly rocked the swing back and forth.

"For switching our baby with this battery-powered, bunny look-alike. It would be nice to have the model that actually turned itself off." She moved Warren's arm from around her and swung her feet to the ground.

"She's got you trained," Warren chuckled. "She kicks it off, you cover her up."

Renée shivered as a chill invaded the arbor. "Warren," she whispered, "look."

Melinda stared wide-eyed up at the roof of the arbor with her little arms outstretched. The end of the blanket slowly lifted in the air and tucked itself snugly around her feet.

Apprehension sent Renée's heart racing.

Her tiny fingers curled as if holding onto something. Melinda jabbered in baby talk for a moment, closed her eyes and was fast asleep.

Warren pulled Renée back against his chest and wrapped his arm around her.

She turned her head. His amused grin broke the tension and she laughed.

"Thank you, Mother."

About the Author

Romance Author R Casteel retired from the US Navy in 1990. He enjoys the outdoors, loves to scuba dive, and is a Search and Rescue Diver. With twenty years of military service, which included experience as flight crewman, search and rescue, and four years as a Military Police Officer, it is of little wonder that his books are filled with suspense and intrigue.

As to his ability to write romance, Gloria for Best Reviews writes "I had thought Leigh Greenwood was the only man who wrote wonderful romance...I was wrong...Rod Casteel is right there too!"

Mr. Casteel lives in his hometown of Lancaster, Missouri, and would love to hear from you.

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