

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



*Ghost Wind*  
CHARLOTTE  
BOYETT-COMPO

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Ghost Wind

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# ***GHOST WIND***

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

### *Acknowledgement*

Special acknowledgement to Deputy Sheriff Thomas E. Kriegel of Poweshiek County for his invaluable assistance. Thank you so much, Tom. I truly appreciate it.

## Chapter One

Traffic was speeding past, rocking Lanelle Durant's car where it sat in the breakdown lane of I-80 east of Newton, Iowa. It was close to sundown on a cool October night and the hood was up to alert passersby there was trouble, but for the last hour she'd sat watching people buzz past without anyone even slowing.

"Welcome to the heartland," Lannie mumbled to herself and glanced down at her cell phone. Adding insult to injury, the thing had run out of juice before she could call the auto club.

Slumping in her seat as cars and trucks continued to whiz past her, she thought of taking out her laptop and working on the novel she'd started weeks ago and hadn't touched since she left California, but her Muse didn't seem especially interested in doing any writing. To people like her who made their living from spinning tales for others to read, distractions proved to be the strongest cause for writer's block. With her mind jumping from one problem to another lately, it had been hard to concentrate. She hadn't written anything she considered good in over a month, and until she was settled in to her new home, she doubted she'd be changing that situation any time soon.

A lumbering semi swooped past but the big rig was slowing, its brake lights coming on as it maneuvered to the side of the road ahead of her.

"You can always count on a knight of the road," Lannie said. She had grown up in the cab of her father's semi and had a fond spot for truckers.

He wore black cowboy boots, a black cowboy hat, black jeans and a black T-shirt beneath a buckskin-fringed jacket as he came walking toward her car. He wasn't a handsome man by any woman's stretch of the imagination, but there was something about him that just oozed sexual confidence. It might have been the cocky smile that lit up a pair of devilish blue eyes.

Lannie turned the key in the ignition and pushed the button on the window to lower it. She smiled up at the trucker as he sidled to the car, tipping his hat in greeting.

"Got a bit of trouble, little lady?" he asked with a deep Texas drawl.

"The engine light came on and it just coasted to a stop," she said.

He nodded, pushed the side of his jacket aside and reached for a cell phone clipped to his belt. "You ain't far from Grinnell and I've got a buddy who owns a garage back there. He won't jip you, if you know what I mean." He punched in the number with his broad thumb then put the phone to his ear.

Lannie listened to the trucker giving the particulars to his buddy then smiled at him when he ended the call. "I really appreciate this, Mr...?" She held out her hand.

"Boogs," he told her, taking her hand in a firm, calloused grip. "Just Boogs. Putting mister to my name is like dressing a sow up in a crinoline." He grinned, giving her a better view of a front tooth capped in gold.

"I'm Lannie and I am really grateful you stopped, Boogs. I've been sitting here for what seems like forever."

"Iowa has highway assistance vans but looks like they ain't been out this way lately." He squatted down beside her car, his beefy hands on the windowsill. "Ain't never a trooper around when you need one either, but you go twenty miles over the speed limit and, dadburn it, there they are!"

She laughed at his woesgone expression. "Well, thanks, Boogs, but you don't have to wait with me. My daddy was a trucker and I know how you guys like to keep to your schedules."

The trucker shook his head. "If it's all the same, I'd rather stay 'til Carlton gets here." He took off his hat and scratched the top of his nearly bald head. "Back about '92 I came highballing along 80 and see this young lady bent over the hood of her white car. I started to stop and help her out, but I was late as it was. I didn't stop but another trucker did." He replaced his hat. "Turns out she was a student at Grinnell College and was on her way back to school. They found her nine days later down in Missouri. They reckon that trucker who stopped must have killed her, but to this day nobody knows for sure." He shook his head. "I see that car and that young lady in my dreams now and again. Haunts me something fierce that I didn't stop and help her out, so if it's all the same to you, I'll just keep you company 'til old Carlton gets here."

Lannie felt a chill run through her. "I appreciate you staying, Boogs."

"Ain't nothing," he mumbled and stood, his bones popping. He braced his hand on the top of her car. "You just traveling through, Miss Lannie?"

She smiled at the title he gave her. Having been born and raised in the South, she recognized the hand of his mother in his politeness. Even though he had a good twenty years on her, he would show her the proper respect taught to him by his elders.

"I've been living out in Los Angeles but I'm heading home to see about relocating," she answered.

"Where's home?"

"You'd never guess I'm from the South. I lost my accent a long time ago but Albany, Georgia's home," she replied. "Well, actually Colquitt, Georgia, but I'm sure you've never heard of it."

"Can't say that I have, but I know where Albany is. I had a brother who was stationed at the Air Force base there back in '65." He glanced up the road and pointed. "Here comes Carlton. He'll go on down to the Kellogg exit then cross over and come back for you."

"Do you have any guess what could have happened to my car?" she asked.

"Which engine light was it what came on?"

Lannie blushed. "A red one," she replied sheepishly. She didn't want to admit the light had been coming on and going off repeatedly during her trip from California.

Boogs grinned, and in the lowering sunlight his gold tooth gleamed. "Well, was it making any funny noises before it stopped?"

She shook her head and didn't lie when she answered. "And it had been running just fine."

"Could have been the oil pressure light," he said, scratching his jaw. "Or the engine temperature light. Since you let the window down, I don't reckon it could be your alternator or battery 'cause you had some juice there. It's more'n likely Murphy's Law, Miss Lannie," he said. "What can go wrong usually will."

A dark green wrecker came rolling slowly by and pulled in front of Lannie's car. The driver backed up close to her car then got out. "Howdy, Boogs," the elderly man with mutton chop sideburns, a scraggly beard, wearing a scruffy, oil-stained baseball cap that had seen far better days, nodded to Boogs. "Long time, no see, you old coot."

"How's it going?" Boogs asked. "Miss Lannie, this is Alton Spivey. He's Carlton's brother. He'll take good care of you and if he don't..." Boogs reached behind him and pulled out his wallet, removed a business card and handed it to Lannie. "You let me know how these ole boys treat you."

Lannie took the card. "Thank you, Boogs. It's been a real pleasure meeting you." She shook hands with him.

Alton snorted and rolled his eyes. "Been flirting with the lady, have you, Boogs?"

Boogs clapped the elderly man on the back then tipped his hat to Lannie. "You take care now, Miss Lannie. Safe traveling to you."

"May the road rise up to meet you, Boogs," she said.

He had started to walk away but stopped then looked back at her. "And may the wind be always at your back, Miss Lannie," he replied then tipped his hat again and went back to his semi.

"Couldn't have said your fare-the-well any better to him," Alton commented. "That's the Irish blessing, it is."

"I'm Irish," Lannie replied.

"Aren't we all?" Alton asked with a wink.

\* \* \* \* \*

Riding in the musty cab of the wrecker alongside Alton later, Lannie asked if there was a car rental place in Grinnell.

"Nope, but Carlton has some used cars out behind the fillin' station. He most likely will loan you one if'n you ask," Alton answered. "Reckon you'll want to check into a motel first thing, so I'll drop you by one. We've got four on the main drag."

"Do you have a preference?" she asked.

"I surely do," he stated, nodding emphatically.

"Then I'll leave it up to you," she said.

"You had supper?" he inquired.

"No, and I'm starving," she said.

"For fast food or a good meal?" he queried.

"A good meal," she said.

"Kelcy's it is then," he said, and plucked his cell phone from the dash. He thumbed in a number. "Hey, Nadeen, it's Alton. Got us a little lady what broke down on the interstate and she's hankering for some good food. What's the chance of getting her a table?" He listened then glanced at Lannie. "How 'bout twenty minutes?"

Lannie agreed that would be fine.

"Okay, Nadeen. I'm gonna take her to the motel first then I'll drop her by your place, and when she's done, you can give me a call and I'll pick her up."

The next morning, the phone on the bedside table rang and Lannie fumbled to pick it up. "Hello?" she replied groggily.

"Miss Durant?" a gruff voice inquired. "This is Carlton Spivey. Sorry to have waked you up."

"That's okay," Lannie said, pushing up in the bed. "How's my car?"

"Well, I wish I could tell you it's something I could fix right quick. Truth is, you got a blown engine, ma'am," he said.

Lannie squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh damn," she said. "I can't afford a new car right now."

"It's repairable, ma'am," Carlton said. "I've done some checking around this morning and I can do it for a right reasonable price."

"What are we talking about, Mr. Spivey?"

"I can get you a rebuilt engine and install it in about five days for less than two thousand dollars," he answered. "And I stand behind my work."

Two thousand dollars would cut into Lannie's savings—savings earmarked to put a major down payment on a house—but she liked her car. Quickly she went over her options and didn't see any alternative.

"Okay, Mr. Spivey. Go on ahead and fix it."

"Alton said you need a car to get about with. I got a '99 sedan I can loan you. Ain't much to look at but it runs like a dream."

"I'd really appreciate that, Mr. Spivey. How much..."

"Oh ain't no charge for the loaner. The car's part of the package, ma'am. Me and Alton will bring you over the car a bit later on this morning."



True to his word, as soon as Lannie had gone downstairs to the motel office to partake of the complimentary continental breakfast, the desk clerk handed her a set of keys and pointed out the window to a red sedan.

"Any interesting sights around town?" she asked the desk clerk as she took a sip of her coffee.

"Not many, but there's the college and the new downtown upgrades," the woman said, leaning on the counter. "Downtown streets look real good."

"What about around Grinnell?"

"Well, there's the Meskwaki casino up in Tama if you like to gamble."

Lannie shook her head. "I'm not a gambler." She took a bite of her doughnut.

"You could go over to Newton," the woman said. "That's about ten miles west on Highway 6." She thought a minute. "There's Rock Creek State Park right off Highway 6 on the way to Newton. You could go by there or you could do what my folks did when they came up from Kansas to visit me. They drove around the countryside and looked at farmsteads."

For some reason that notion appealed to Lannie. She had a new camera and had taken quite a few photographs on this trip. She asked how to get to the state park, thanked the desk clerk for her time and then went to her room to retrieve her camera. As she started to leave again, she glanced at the phone. Biting her lip, she stood undecided for a moment. Heaving a sigh, she decided she should call her cousin in Georgia to let her know she'd be arriving a few days late.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mary Nell, it's me," Lannie said as she sat perched on the side of the bed.

"Why hey, Miss Zetta. How you doing?" her cousin asked in a strained voice.

An uneasy chill wiggled down Lannie's spine. "Is he there?"

"You'll never guess who showed up at our door this morning, Miss Zetta," Mary Nell said. "You remember Lanelle's husband Trey Durant? Well, he's here waiting for Lanelle to arrive from Los Angeles."

Lannie hung her head. "I'm sorry, Mary Nell. I didn't think he'd come after me."

"That man is crazy," her cousin stated in a low voice. "He's been demanding to know where your furniture is being stored and if you have a house already set to move into." She lowered her voice even more. "George just about punched him in the nose twice now."

"Where is he staying?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Mary Nell said. "It sure isn't going to be with us. Where are you calling from?"

Afraid her ex-husband might be listening in on the call, Lannie lied. "I'm in Oklahoma but my car broke down. I'll be here a few days while the garage finds me an engine."

"Where in Oklahoma?"

Lannie froze for it was Trey's angry voice that had come thundering over the line. She started to hang up but realized she owed her cousin and her husband a tremendous debt for having to put up with Trey and his demented behavior.

"Trey, leave Mary Nell and George out of this. I'm not coming down there until I know you are back in California so you might as well leave now."

"I'm not going anywhere, you goddamned whore!" Trey bellowed. "I—"

Lannie slammed the receiver down, her heart pounding in her chest. She hated confrontations and she'd had enough of them over the five years she was married to Trey to last her a lifetime.

Grateful she'd told Mary Nell she was in Oklahoma, she prayed her cousin hadn't stepped forward into the future by having caller ID installed on her phone. It wouldn't do to have Trey show up in Iowa with his soul-shattering insults and quick fists.

More fear drove through her and she snatched the phone up, punched in directory assistance and when the operator came on the line, asked for the phone number of the Dougherty County Police in Albany. When the call went through, she explained to a helpful desk sergeant what might be transpiring at Mary Nell's house.

"We've been divorced almost six months now and I had to have a restraining order taken out against him but that's only good in California. I'll have to get one issued there in Albany," she told the man. "He's really dangerous and I don't want Mary Nell and George to get hurt."

After taking down the information regarding the restraining order and the need for it, the policeman told her he knew the Burnhams well. "I went to school with George," the policeman said. "He can take care of himself but I'll send someone right out there, ma'am."

"Thank you, Sergeant, and would you do me a favor, please? Would you ask whoever goes out there if he would please let Mary Nell know I'll call her at Aunt Bethel's house after church on Sunday?"

"I sure will. Don't you worry none. We'll handle things on this end."

When she hung up, Lannie sat on the bed and stared into space, hating Trey Durant more and more as the minutes passed. Every bruise, cut, lump and break he'd given her over the years seemed to come alive and throb as she sat there. Violent to the point of being deadly, her ex-husband had a temper that erupted quickly and with painful results for whoever had awoken it. She doubted he'd dare attack George—like most cowards he feared other men—but Mary Nell was a different matter.

Swiping away tears she didn't realize she was shedding, she clamped her teeth together and rose from the bed. She made up her mind she would put Trey out of her

thoughts. There was nothing she could do but sit and worry about what her crazed ex-husband would do next, and she'd done more than her share of that already. Grabbing her camera and car coat, she left the room, her jaw set and eyes hard.

There was a decided nip to the air as she climbed into the loaner car the Spivey brothers had left for her. Although the interior was clean, it still had the dusty, moldy scent of a used car and she frowned, easing the windows down to let in fresh air. Stopping at a convenience store to top off the gas tank, she purchased two lemon-scented hanging air fresheners and hung them from the rearview mirror to help with the stuffy smell inside the car. She also grabbed a soda, a packaged ham and cheese sandwich, a bottle of salsa and big bag of corn chips to snack on as she drove.

Following the desk clerk's directions to the state park, Lannie turned off Highway 6 and onto North 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue East. When the road T-boned into an intersection—one side paved and the other covered in gravel—Lannie frowned. There was no sign indicating which way she should go to reach the state park. Logic told her the paved side but with a shrug, she turned right onto the gravel, hoping to find something interesting down that road.

Winding her way along the dusty gravel way, Lannie was thoroughly enjoying the rural countryside. Like most people, she had thought Iowa to be as flat as a fritter until she began driving across it. She had been pleasantly surprised that the state contained beautiful rolling hills undulating with quilt-patterned pastures and stitched with a wide variety of farm animals and intriguing silos. She pushed all thoughts of Trey out of her mind and concentrated on absorbing what she was seeing. Her active writer's mind began taking mental snapshots of the scenery she passed.

She might have missed the turnoff to the state park for it wasn't well marked. Just a two-board sign saying State Park along another gravel road named Jewel Street. What had garnered her attention was the white farmhouse that sat a little ways back from the road.

"Oh baby," she whispered, for the Victorian farmhouse was like something out of her sweetest dreams. It was a design about which she had fantasized for most of her adult life.

She turned down Jewel Street and started up a small hill, braking at the crest to look up at the house where it sat amidst a forest of scraggly overgrown bushes, now bare of leaves. Two tall red maples like blazing torches stood to either side of a deep wraparound porch, making the steeply pitched green metal roof stand out against the white of the house.

Three-storied, the house sported a tall turret with a conical roof. Bay windows adorned each story of the turret and a large picture window sat beside double entry doors. A small dormer window looked out from the third floor. Intricate woodwork ornamented the porch and shutters, the eaves and gables of the structure and a wide porch swing hung from the exposed beams. There appeared to be good-quality vinyl siding on the house, but it was in obvious need of a good steam cleaning.

Enclosed in a tall chain link fence secured by a large padlock, the property looked as though it had been deserted for quite some time. Glancing to her left at the open vista that rippled with a harvested field of cornstalks, she knew the house would have a wonderful view from the gingerbread porch.

Wondering why such a lovely old home would have been deserted, she longed to get out of the car and climb the fence, but the dense thickets of bushes and shrubs between the fence and the porch—not to mention the heavy padlock—discouraged her.

She stared longingly at the house for a few more moments then drove on over the hill. As she came down it, she saw the little country cemetery on the right side of the road a few hundred yards past the vacant house.

Stopping at the entrance, she sat there looking at the overhead white iron sign that said Rock Creek Liberty Cemetery. Intrigued by what looked to be very old grave markers, she pulled into the U-shaped entrance to the cemetery. The pathway in was nothing more than two worn strips of gravel bracketing a grass median but it was well maintained and easily navigated.

Cleanly kept, the pioneer cemetery was surrounded by a wire mesh fence, and from the looks of the two gates across the semicircular pathway leading into and out of it, the little country burial ground most likely was locked after dark.

Lannie got out of the car, pulling on her car coat for there was a stiffening breeze blowing from the open field across the gravel road from the cemetery. Clouds were building to the southwest and there was a hint of moisture in the air. Snuggling the coat's collar up against her neck, she began walking through the gravestones.

For over an hour she surveyed the markers then looked off to the east where rolling hills dipped lazily behind the wire fence. The trees were spectacular in their fall foliage and she strolled over to the fence to get a better look at the valley beyond and a farm house sitting far off to the north of the hills. She was about to turn away when she noticed two gravestones that lay outside the perimeter of the fence, on the property upon which sat the deserted house.

Barely viewable through the thick bushes growing up around them, it was the stark white of the slabs against the weeds that had drawn her attention. Over the markers grew a large white oak tree with spreading branches—some of which dragged against the slabs, scraping across the surface like skeletal fingers.

She walked over to that side of the fence to see if she could read the markers but was surprised to find the slabs bare of any lettering. Why, she wondered, would someone go to the trouble of providing a burial slab but leave it unmarked? And why would the two graves be outside the borders of the cemetery proper on what must be private property?

Curiosity got the best of her and she scaled the fence—ripping a hole in the leg of her jeans.

"Shit," she said, looking down at the tear in her clothing. Sighing heavily, for the jeans were practically new, she dusted off the rent in the material and shook her head. "That's what you get for trespassing, Lanelle," she chastised herself.

Hoping nothing deadly was slithering along the ragged prairie grass surrounding the graves, she went to stand over them. Around her, the wind moaned through the black walnut trees and set the few remaining leaves on the arching branches to rustling.

There was no indication at all of who could be buried in that place so she turned to look at the side of the farmhouse. From that angle she could see the wraparound porch ended in a screened room that faced what had to be a gorgeous view of the little valley beyond with its vibrantly colored ashes, maples and beech trees. Once more she looked out across the road to the west side of Jewel Street, admiring the wide-open space and the privacy the farmhouse had.

It was then she noticed the For Sale sign half hidden amidst the rambling bushes that had overtaken the front yard of the farmhouse. Handwritten in red letters on a weathered white board, the sign looked as though the ravages of the harsh Midwestern weather had half torn it down over time. It wobbled back and forth as the wind pushed against it and, as she watched, finally fell to the ground to be buried among the underbrush.

For the longest time she stared at the place where the sign had fallen. Brought up to believe nothing ever happened without a reason, she had the strongest notion she had been meant to find this house out in the middle of nowhere. As though it had been an omen, she had been shown the For Sale sign only moments before it disappeared into the underbrush. Chewing on her lip, she looked about the property and knew she would find peace here. She knew she could do her writing without interruption and that appealed to her. But not as much as thinking perhaps her ex would have a hard time finding her in the boondocks of Iowa.

Nodding at her thoughts, she turned to retrace her trip over the fence but the glint of metal made her snap her head around. The sun had taken that moment to pop out from behind the scudding clouds overhead and had shone its light on something hanging from one of the oak's branches. Carefully making her way through the dense clusters of weeds encroaching on the grave slabs, she looked up at a medallion dangling from a golden chain.

Swinging in the breeze, the chain was snagged on a twig, the medallion twisting and turning back and forth. By jumping up a few times, she was able to reach the chain and pull it off, thankful the chain didn't break in the process. With the necklace clutched in her palm, she stumbled against the tree as the first drops of rain began falling. Looking across the road, she saw the clouds had darkened considerably and now flashes of lightning could be seen.

Stuffing the necklace into the pocket of her jeans, she climbed carefully back over the fence, making sure she did not do more damage to her clothing. She had to sprint to her car for the rain started in earnest.

As the rain slashed brutally down on the windshield of her borrowed car, Lannie fished in her pocket for the medal. Opening her palm, she saw three initials on the back of the medallion—R.B.D.—engraved into the gold in block letters. Turning the medallion over, she found it was a Saint George medal with the saint sitting astride his mount as he slew the dragon with a broadsword.

Tracing the design with her index finger, she felt a chill spread up her arm and shivered. A ferocious boom of thunder shook the ground beneath the car and she turned fearful eyes to the storm. Hanging the medallion attached to its gold chain over the rearview mirror, she cranked the car and drove slowly out of the cemetery, retracing her trip out to Highway 6.

*He watched her driving out of the cemetery, his amber gaze locked on her car as it turned the corner onto North 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue East and disappeared over the hill.*

*He slowly closed his eyes.*

*For a long time he stood there with his eyes shut, his mind centered on the fleeting glimpse he'd had of her face. It was a face he longed to touch. He wanted to place his lips against the soft-looking flesh of her lips and taste the sweetness he knew lurked there. He wanted to hold her in his arms, press her cheek to his chest and hear her soft breathing as he stroked her back. He ached for something he had not known for many years.*

*Opening his eyes, he stared out over the rain-swept cemetery and the one grave that had drawn him to it every day for the last sixteen years. He had lost track of the times he had knelt before that black marble slab, spoken softly to the one lying beneath the soil.*

*Pain lanced through his chest and he hung his head, a single tear slowly falling down his cold cheek.*

*Memories could be evil and his were destroying his immortal soul.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The rain was coming down in sheets so thick the windshield wipers were having a hard time keeping the glass clear. She dared not stop along the roadway but drove steadily—if slower than the speed limit—sitting hunched over the steering wheel. By the time she got back into Grinnell, she had a fierce headache. Before she got out of the car at the motel, she unhooked the chain from the rearview mirror and returned it to the pocket of her jeans.

Drenched by the time she ran into the motel lobby, she shrugged at the desk clerk's look of surprise.

"Welcome to Iowa," the woman said with a grin. "If you don't like the weather, hang around and it'll change in a heartbeat!"

"Man, it's coming down in buckets out there," Lannie commented.

"We've needed it but I don't recall the weatherman saying it was supposed to rain today." She snorted. "Can't trust weathermen anyway though, can you?"

Lannie's eyes widened. "I'll second that," she said. Her ex was a local TV weatherman in Los Angeles, and he was the last person she knew she could trust.

Heading for her room, Lannie stopped and turned to ask the woman if she knew of a good real estate agent in Grinnell.

"Found something that caught your fancy while you were out and about?" the desk clerk asked.

"Yes, I did."

"My neighbor sells real estate," the woman replied. "Want me to give her a call for you?"

"Would you?" Lannie asked. "Tell her I'm going to take a quick shower so if she could call in about an hour, I'd appreciate it."

"I'll call Jeannie for you then."

The shower felt wonderful as Lannie stood beneath the hot onslaught of the water. She lathered her net scrubber with gardenia-scented body wash and ran it over her arms and chest then down her legs. The scent soothed her as she bathed.

Half an hour later the phone rang. It was the real estate agent.

"Rock Creek area?" the woman repeated after Lannie explained about the property. "I'm not sure I know where Jewel Street is. I've only been in Grinnell about a year but I'll look into it and see what I can come up with."

"I'd really like to take a look inside if the property is still available," Lannie said.

"Let me see what I can find out. I'll call you later on this afternoon."

"If I'm not here, just leave word at the desk."

After she hung up, Lannie finished dressing and headed out once more. She stopped at the door, went back to the bathroom and plucked the Saint George medallion from the vanity top, slipping it over her head. It felt cold against her bare skin and the coldness sent a tingle down her spine.

## Chapter Two

Chief of Police Brad Wyngate looked up from his sandwich, did a double take and then watched the young woman who took the booth behind his at the West Edge Diner. As she started to sit down, she glanced at him, smiled and then slid into the seat. Reaching for his napkin, he hastily wiped his lips and hands, took a sip of his iced tea. He cleared his throat.

"Bad weather out there, huh?" he asked, gaining her attention.

"Only good for little ducklings," she replied with a grin.

"Or wrapping up in a blanket and reading a Lanelle Durant novel," he countered.

Lanelle laughed. "Only if you have nothing better to do with your time."

"You must be the lady from Los Angeles with the blown engine," Wyngate said.

Shaking her head, Lannie groaned. "Nothing gets by Grinnell's finest." She had noticed his uniform and had seen the police car outside.

"We are an ever-diligent group," he assured her. "And we're a friendly bunch. Care to join me?"

She arched a brow. "Are you going to grill me about one of my books?"

"No," he denied, waving a hand in dismissal.

"Okay then." She got up and sat down in the booth across from him.

"Brad Wyngate," he said, extending his hand.

"Traveling author," she returned as she shook hands with him.

"I lied," he said as he leaned over the table, still holding her hand. "I'm going to grill you about *all* your books!"

Lannie rolled her eyes. "That's entrapment."

"That it is," he agreed. He released her hand.

The waitress came to take her order and after she'd left, Lannie sat back in the booth. "I'm not accustomed to people recognizing me."

"We're an observant group too," he stated. He turned and picked up her latest book—*Winter Justice*—from the seat beside him and turned her photo on the back of the dust cover toward her.

"Oh no," she laughed, and held up her hands, index fingers forming a cross. "Get that thing away from me."

"Sign it for me?" he asked. At her exasperated look, a puppy-dog look came over his face. "Please?"

She laughed. "Oh all right, just don't break out the rubber hoses."



He slid the book across from her. "I believe it's your best work yet," he said.

"Thank you," she said, blushing.

Wyngate braced his arm on the back of the booth. "May I ask where you did your research into domestic violence?"

She scrawled her autograph on the title page then closed the book. "I volunteered in an abuse shelter," she answered then looked up at him as she pushed the book toward him. "I've also had some first-hand experience of the subject too."

The chief of police frowned. "Was that the reason for the divorce?" He looked sheepish for a moment. "I read it in some magazine."

Lannie nodded but didn't speak for the waitress had brought her pork chop meal. While salting her mashed potatoes and gravy, she answered him, her head down.

"Trey was a very abusive man. I had to take out a restraining order against him." She lifted her head. "I'm sure you are familiar with such things. It seems to be a growing problem in the U.S."

Wyngate watched her cutting her pork chop. He didn't answer for a moment as his gaze drifted over her short sandy blonde hair, light green eyes arched with long lashes and oval face. He made note of the mole at the lower right corner of her full lips and the slightly upturned nose that gave her face a pixieish look. His gaze dipped to her slender hands and well-kept nails then swept quickly over her bosom.

"Unfortunately it is and I've had more than my share of witnessing the aftereffects of domestic violence." He sat there seemingly relaxed with one arm on the back of the booth and his free hand toying with the iced-tea glass, rolling it around and around on its bottom edge. "My wife's father used to beat her mother regularly."

Lannie frowned. "And now?" She took a bite of her pork chop dredged through the mashed potatoes and gravy.

"They're all dead," Wyngate said, lifting the glass to take a sip. "All three of them."

Compassion flitted through Lannie. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Wyngate shrugged as he set the glass down on the table and resumed rolling it on its edge. "Her parents died in a car crash over around Altoona about four years ago, a month after my father slammed into the back of a log truck and was decapitated. Joan died back in '91." He pronounced the name as Jo Anne.

"How awful!" she gasped.

"They say things happen in threes. It just took a while with my family."

"Did you remarry?"

He shook his head. "Never felt inclined to." He lifted his glass, let a piece of ice fall into his mouth then set the glass down and pushed it away. "I married right out of high school and I don't recommend it."

A crack of lightning made them both jump.

Rain was drumming against the plate glass window beside the booth and the sky had taken on a dark gunmetal gray look. It had been raining off and on since Lannie had left the cemetery and was once again coming down hard. They both stared for a long moment at the sheets of rain flowing down the window then Lannie resumed eating.

"So you're on your way home to Georgia," the chief of police commented.

Lannie swallowed then took up her napkin to blot her lips before taking a long sip of her water. "Alton loves to gossip, doesn't he?" she asked with a little groan.

"That's life in a small town," he said with a chuckle.

She speared a couple of juicy green beans on her fork then popped them into her mouth. "I have already sent my furniture down there but I'm leaning toward looking into getting a place here."

His light brown eyebrows shot up and his dark blue eyes took on a speculative gleam. "Here in Grinnell?"

"No, over in Jasper County. Rock Creek actually," she replied. She took another bite of pork chop. "I found a house I'm dying to take a look inside."

"Where 'bouts exactly?" he asked. "I live out at Walnut View Acres and that's not far away."

"I remember passing it," she said. "There's a public golf course there, isn't there?"

He nodded. "And a darn good restaurant." He tilted his head to one side. "Would you care to try their menu tomorrow evening?"

Lannie paused with a cluster of green beans on her fork. She was surprised at his question. Things certainly moved faster in the heartland than she would have thought.

His high cheekbones took on a spot of color. "What I mean is I know the owner and could get you a table with a good view of the course," he said then ducked his head. "A really good table, especially if I'm with you."

She grinned. "I take it they light up the course at night for diners to see the greens."

The blush on his rugged face deepened. "They would if I asked them to," he replied.

Lannie liked the man's looks and his self-assurance. He was handsome with a shock of light brown hair cut short around his ears but worn a bit long on his neck. His dark uniform shirt with its two light blue patches on the sleeves was neatly pressed. His badge gleamed over the left side of his chest. With an engaging smile, strong white teeth and a faint scent of cologne clinging to him, he certainly wouldn't be something the cat dragged in. He also wore an unmistakable air of being a man in charge. His next words proved as much.

"I'll pick you up at the motel at six," he stated.

She presented him with an arched brow. "Pretty sure of yourself there, aren't you, Officer?" she teased.

"Life's too short for silly games," he said, lowering his arm from the bench's back and shoving his hand into his pocket. He brought out a money clip, peeled off a few bills and stuck them under the guest check beside his plate. "You have to strike while the iron is still in your bailiwick."

Lannie laughed. "And I'm the iron, huh?"

"Which house are you looking at out at Rock Creek?" he countered with a grin.

"It's on Jewel Street," she said and saw him frown.

"Jewel Street," he repeated, as though trying to place the location. "All the streets out that way start with a J—Jasper, Jade, Jonquil, Juniper."

"Someone obviously had fun naming them," she said.

He was still frowning. "I'm trying to remember how to get to Jewel."

"You know where East 125<sup>th</sup> Street North dead ends into North 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue East? To the left it's paved and to the right it's gravel?" At his nod, she told him about traveling east on the gravel road.

The chief of police blinked. "You don't mean the old house beside the cemetery, do you?" he asked.

"That's the one!" she said. She had finished eating and took up her napkin to swipe at her lips. "Do you know if it's still for sale?"

He was frowning, his eyes narrowed. "I'm sure it is. Bon and Varnie Van Homme bought the house at auction when the owner died escheat—without heirs—but never did live in it. Bon had a massive heart attack while they were fixing the place up and he and the missus moved down to Arizona so their daughter could look after them. They put the house on the market but haven't been able to sell it. They rented it out a few times but it's been vacant for about four years now."

"Have any idea what the asking price is for it?" she asked. She finished her water and shook her head no to the waitress' suggestion of dessert as the young woman slid her guest check onto the table.

His expression had changed. "I suspect you could pick it up real cheap if you were of a mind to," he said. "No one around here would touch that house with a ten-foot pole."

"Why is that?" she asked.

Wyngate scooted out of the booth, picking up his hat and coat from the seat beside him and retrieving the book she'd signed from the tabletop. "I've got to get back to protecting and serving the good folk of Poweshiek County," he said, shrugging into the coat. Standing beside the booth, Lannie estimated he was at least six feet two with broad shoulders and narrow hips snug in uniform pants he filled out very nicely.

"There are a lot of really nice homes in the area," he said. "Get a real estate agent to show 'em to you," he said, tucking the book under his arm and settling the hat on his head at a cocky angle. "I'll see you tomorrow evening"

Lannie just looked up at him as he walked away. She twisted around in the booth to watch him leave the restaurant then saw him run past the window to get into his car before the rain soaked him.

"Guess you caught the eye of our chief of police," the waitress said, stressing the first syllable in the word police.

"Do you know anything about Rock Creek?" Lannie asked the young woman.

"Used to go swimming out there when it was allowed but that's about it," the waitress said. "Whatcha need to know about it?"

Lannie shook her head. "I was just curious about a house for sale."

"Sorry, can't help you there."

"Thanks anyway." She picked up her purse and fumbled around inside for her wallet.

Shrugging, the waitress sauntered off, popping her gum like a teenager.

Taking a tour of the town during a downpour didn't appeal to Lannie but then again neither did going back to the motel to sit in a dreary room and watch the tube. She asked the man at the cash register how to get to the real estate office.

"Go east on six to the second red light and hang a right. The office is at the end of the block on your right, directly across from Saint Mary's church," the man replied.

Thanking him, Lannie left the restaurant, sloshing through a mud puddle to get to her car. Once inside, she shivered, started to turn the heater on but thought better of it, realizing it wouldn't put out much warmth—if any—during the short distance she had to drive.

She had no trouble finding the real estate office. Finding a place to park near it was another matter. She drove around the block twice before finally finding a place fairly close. Sitting there for several minutes, she realized the rain wasn't going to let up any time soon. Sighing, she settled back in the seat and stared into the large windows of the Saint Mary's Religious Education Center before which she'd parked.

Twisting around so she could see the church on the corner behind her, she swiped her hand across the window glass to clear away the fog of her breath. She studied the church's architecture, thinking the red brick building would be where she'd most likely attend services since she was a Catholic. She admired the rose window and the bell tower, impressed with the gothic architecture.

As lightning flared occasionally overhead and thunder rattled the windows of the car, she turned back around to watch the rain streaming down the windshield. It was a comforting sound but the weather was turning cool and her coat was damp. She looked down toward the corner and the lights glowing in the real estate office.

"You won't melt, Lanelle," she chided herself, reaching for the door handle.

She ran along the sidewalk, her feet splashing in the water.

The woman behind the desk looked up as Lannie came bustling through the door. She smiled. "Hi. May I help you?"

"I'm looking for Jeannie."

"You found her." She reached out a hand. "Are you Lannie?"

"Afraid so," Lannie said, shaking the woman's hand.

"Have a seat and I'll give you the rundown on that house."

Ten minutes later, Lannie sat back in the chair. "That's an unbelievable asking price. What's wrong with the house?"

Jeannie Dunlop cocked a shoulder. "The owners are anxious to sell. The price was reduced about a year ago but between you and me, I'm told they might accept just about any decent offer."

Lannie thought about the \$55,000 asking price. "I'd like to take a look at it. Is it possible to go out there today?"

The real estate agent's smile slipped just a notch. She glanced out the front window at the rain. "If you'd like."

"I know it's bad weather but I really am interested."

Sensing an obviously serious buyer, Jeannie waved away Lannie's words. "Not a problem. Just let me get my coat."

On the way out to the property, the real estate agent kept up a steady barrage of information about Grinnell and the surrounding communities. She was a high-pressure salesperson and had gone into super-sales mode.

"What do you do for a living?" Jeannie asked.

"I'm a writer," Lannie answered.

"Well, I don't know if the *Grinnell Herald-Register* is looking for columnists but I can give you the name of who you should contact."

Lanelle was looking out the window at the passing scenery and smiled. "Thank you. That would be nice."

"And what does your husband do?"

Feeling the woman's gaze settling on her bare left hand, Lannie admitted she was divorced.

"Me too," Jeannie acknowledged with a laugh. "We were married twenty-five years when..."

Tuning out the woman's voice as she gave Lannie a blow-by-blow of her problems with her ex—Dayton—Lannie kept her head turned away, her eyes on the Iowa countryside. When they pulled up to the driveway leading into the deserted property, she sat up straighter.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

"What?" Jeannie asked.

"I thought I saw someone standing at the dormer," Lannie said, squinting through the rain.

"Must have been the lights of my car flashing across the glass," Jeannie said, glancing at Lannie. "No one's lived in the house for a few years now."

Staring up at the dormer window, she saw nothing but the reflection of the storm in the glass up there and decided her eyes had been playing tricks on her.

"Who owned the house before the present owners?" Lannie asked, and when the real estate agent hesitated, she looked around at her.

Jeannie seemed to be making her mind up and when she spoke, she waved away her own words with a flick of her wrist.

"Look, I'd be remiss not to mention I could lose my license if I didn't tell you people around here believe the house is haunted," she said in a rush, fanning the air in front of her as though to dismiss the notion as being ridiculous. "That's why they can't even keep renters in it."

Lannie laughed. "Because it's beside a cemetery?" she asked. She shook her head. "I don't believe in that sort of thing."

"Nevertheless, there are those who say you couldn't give them this house," Jeannie commented.

"So tell me the story," Lannie demanded.

They were sitting with the front of the car pointed toward the house, the lights shining starkly on the heavy padlock. The real estate agent sat with her hands gripping the steering wheel at two and ten.

"The house was built by a man named Giles Devereux," she explained, pronouncing the last name as Dev-uh-rex. "That was in 1952 when he brought his new bride up from Louisiana after he inherited the land from a great-uncle. Two months after the completion of the home, Devereux returned to Louisiana to close out some business and was killed by a man who robbed him at knife point along Canal Street in New Orleans."

"How awful," Lannie commented.

"People felt sorry for the widow but once they met her, they left her alone."

"That doesn't sound like the hospitable people I've met here in the heartland."

"Well, Mrs. Devereux was a bit different and people hoped she'd leave."

"I take it she stayed."

Jeannie nodded. "From what I was told, she had nowhere else to go, no other relatives, and Devereux's people didn't think much of her."

"Do you know why?"

The real estate agent squirmed in her seat. "They say Julianna Devereux was a witch."

Nothing the woman could have said would have surprised Lannie more than that. She stared at her in the lowering afternoon light.

"I don't know where their money came from," Jeannie was saying, "but apparently she had enough to live on. There were a few farm animals and chickens for food. I guess she and her daughter made do."

"There was a child?"

"Born eight months after the wedding," Jeannie replied. "Phyllis, my boss, said she went to school with the daughter Madeleine." She lowered her voice. "It seems she had the same reputation as her mother and was generally ostracized at school, if you know what I mean."

"Children can be cruel," Lannie said softly.

"That's the gospel truth," Jeannie agreed.

"What happened to Mrs. Devereux?"

"She just up and vanished the winter Madeleine turned sixteen. Some say she went back to Louisiana and some say she drowned herself in Rock Creek Lake. They dredged the lake but no body was ever found and no one heard anything more about her. Madeleine gave birth to a bastard son a few months later."

"Does anyone know who the father was?"

Jennie clamped her lips shut for a moment and rolled her eyes. "Some say it was the devil himself who fathered Madeleine's child and that he took her mother with him when he left. If anyone knew the real identity of the father, no one spoke up. The boy shared the same fate as his mother where the townsfolk were concerned. He was treated worse than a leper at school. Twice he wound up in the hospital because boys beat the holy crap out of him."

"That is just terrible," Lannie said, her eyes flashing. "How could anyone in this day and age treat a child like that?"

"Small towns, small minds," Jeannie stated with a shrug. "It happens."

"Chief of Police Wyngate said the house was put up for auction when no heirs were found to inherit it. I take it all Devereux's relatives had died. What happened to Madeleine and her son?"

"Phyllis' son went to school with the boy. They graduated from G.H.S. back in 1986. Like I said, he had a hard row to hoe out here. I guess it got the best of him for he enlisted in the Army and left the very next day after graduation for boot camp. He was with the 101st Airborne in Iraq during Desert Storm when his mother fell down the back stairs. Apparently the wooden pole that served as a railing gave way and she broke her neck in the fall. That was in 1991, I believe. She was dead over a week before anyone found her."

"Oh my God!" Lannie gasped. "Who discovered her?"

"For lack of a better word, a client, but I don't remember ever hearing who it was," Jeannie said. At her companion's confused look, she explained how certain people came out to consult Madeleine Devereux when they needed their fortunes told or desired a

poultice or brew for what ailed them. "Many a woman went out there to get rid of something they didn't want, either outside or inside their bodies."

"She was good enough to doctor them with home remedies but not good enough to treat decently, I guess," Lannie snapped.

"That's about it," Jeannie agreed. "There were some who would have run her out of town on a rail, except her potions and the like seemed to work and—if truth be told—I imagine they were a bit afraid of her and what she might do to them."

Lannie reached up to touch the chain hanging around her neck for she was suddenly very aware of it. "What was the son's name?" she asked.

"I don't recall Phyllis saying," Jeannie answered. "But she did say he and his mother are buried on the property side by side." She pointed to the gravesites Lannie had seen early. "Right over there."

"On unhallowed ground," Lannie said. "And not in the cemetery right next door. From what I've read, that is where most witches are laid to rest."

"I don't know whether that was the reason or not but I guess it could very well have been." She cocked one shoulder. "That's another reason folks aren't interested in buying the house. Having graves in your backyard is pretty off-putting."

"Did her son die during Desert Storm?"

Jeannie shook her head. "He committed suicide when he returned home for his mother's funeral. They say he was beside himself with grief." She lifted her hand and pointed to the tall spreading white oak sheltering the two unmarked graves. "He hung himself from that very tree hanging over his mama's grave. I imagine that's another reason folks shy away from the place."

*He could feel the shock flittering through Lannie at the older woman's words. He was experiencing her sadness, her compassion and it filled him with the first rays of hope he'd known in a long, long time.*

*He reached out to her with his mind. "Seek me out, sweeting," he whispered. "Know I am here. Know I am here for you. Find the truth of it, Lanelle. Take me out of the darkness and return me to the light."*

*Mentally, he trailed his fingers along her neck, caressing her gently. He sighed with the pleasure of touching her.*

Lannie felt a tingle coming from the medallion hanging between her breasts. There was warmth generating from the golden disk. She stroked the chain with her fingertips and the scent of gardenia wafted under her nose.

"Miss Durant?"

Flinching at the calling of her name, Lannie turned to the woman sitting in the driver's seat. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"



"It's let up raining and I'm going to get out and unlock the gate," the real estate woman replied.

"Oh yeah. Right."

Jeannie Dunlop got out of the car and picked her way over the brambles between the car and the fence. From the irritated look on her face, she wasn't happy about the situation, but when the padlock came free and she swung the gates open to allow the car entry into the property, she had a fixed smile on her face. She grunted when she got back in behind the wheel.

"There's a lot of cleaning up to do if you buy this place," the woman said. Putting the car into gear, she drove over the brush, the sound of it scratching at the undercarriage loud. "Just brambles," she assured Lannie.

"I hope they don't scratch your car," Lannie said, feeling guilty.

"All part of the job, sweetie," the real estate agent said, though her teeth were clenched as something scraped along the side of her car.

*He watched her get out of the car and step carefully through the thick undergrowth. Closing his eyes, he willed no branch to snag her, no thorn to touch her and no leaf to shed its moisture upon her. The woman beside her did not warrant his concern and he ignored her as well as the incessant chatter she insisted upon foisting off on the world.*

*Opening his eyes, he looked down lovingly at the woman stepping up on the porch and gently, reverently touched her with a soft, sweet breeze.*

When Lannie got out of the real estate woman's vehicle, she looked down to find cobblestone pavers half hidden in the grass underfoot. The curving pathway led from what was the driveway to the porch. Though it would take hours of edging, the pathway was a treasure and deserved to be lovingly cleared.

"The Van Hommes were going to put a detached garage in but never got around to it," Jeannie Dunlop told her.

"That's a must-have for sure," Lannie agreed, thinking a breezeway between the house and garage would be ideal.

"I don't believe anyone's looked at this house in ages," the real estate woman said as she stuck the key into the lock box to retrieve the house key.

"Sure looks that way," Lannie said as she looked around the porch. Though the paint on the posts and gingerbread was peeling in spots, the wood looked good and the floorboards beneath her seemed sturdy. She could imagine white rockers to go along with the swing gracing the porch.

With a slight squeak of protest the front door opened and the real estate agent reached into the pocket of her raincoat for the flashlight she carried.

The afternoon sun took that moment to shine brightly through the large picture window that faced the western vista. It lit the parlor with vibrant rays that showed faded wallpaper and a carpet that was thick with dust.

"Well, as you can see, this is the parlor."

For the next hour, Dunlop led Lannie through room after room, pointing out the highpoints of the house from a sheet of paper she had brought along. Taking her prospective buyer through the dual parlors downstairs—one to each side of the central hallway—she pointed out the space formed by the turret window.

"What a terrific place for a piano," she gushed. "Do you play by any chance?"

Lannie nodded. "Yes, I do, but you would never want to place a piano in the center of the three windows. That's a good way to warp your soundboard."

The other woman sniffed but made no comment. She led Lannie into the hallway and to the dining room, kitchen, butler's pantry and a small room that had been turned into a powder room.

Lannie stared in awe at the magnificent kitchen with its rich oak cabinets, ceramic tiled walls, breakfast nook set into a large bay window that was flanked by a cheery little fireplace done in dark yellow fieldstone and plenty of black granite counter space well-defined by a large island and cook top in the center of the kitchen. "I know this isn't the original kitchen," she observed.

"Oh definitely not. According to my sheet, when the Van Hommes bought the place, they did extensive remodeling in preparation of moving in. They put in a new heating and cooling system, a new roof, all new plumbing and wiring to bring everything up to code."

"We're talking a lot of money here," Lannie said.

"The sellers understand they are going to take a great loss on it, that's for sure." She opened the back door and stepped out onto the wide screened-in porch. "What a pity the gentleman had a heart attack before they could ever move in. Just imagine all that money wasted."

Lannie cast the woman an annoyed look for she had every intention of buying the house—had before she even stepped foot in it—and learning about the improvements already done was a pleasant surprise. Whatever it took, she was determined to buy this jewel of a house on Jewel Street.

Sweeping nearly the entire back of the house, the screen porch faced a high embankment that was covered with weeds and brambles. Lannie stood looking at it, thinking how wonderful it would be if the high ground were planted with wildflowers. An old twenty-eight-foot-tall windmill platform stood off to south side of the property. The six-foot-diameter fan turned lazily in the breeze with a soft creaking sound.

"There is a working well of course," the real estate agent said. "A new pump and housing was put in by the Van Hommes, but whoever buys the place will want to keep that windmill. That's worth some kind of money on one of the Internet auction sites."

"You better believe it," Lannie agreed, having no desire to sell anything on the Internet.

A swing sat at the north end of the porch but that was the only furnishing in the otherwise empty space.

Going back inside, Lannie looked out through the mullioned window on the door and imagined she could see the two unmarked graves at the north end of the property.

"Be careful on these stairs," Dunlop said, aiming her flashlight down the back stairs. "It's dark down here."

"Is that where Mrs. Devereux died?" Lannie asked softly.

"I suppose it was," the other woman replied.

Lannie shivered, imagining the faceless woman tumbling down the stairs to her death, perhaps lying there for hours, suffering, knowing help might not come. She felt her eyes prickle with tears. "I'm so sorry," she said softly.

"Beg pardon?" Dunlop asked.

"Nothing," Lannie mumbled. She kept a strong grip on the rail as she descended the stairs.

*He reached out to stroke a finger down Lannie's cheek to reassure her she was in no danger.*

*"You are under my protection, bien-aimé," he whispered to her. "No harm will come to you."*

Lannie put a hand to her face, covering her cheek with her palm for her flesh had begun to tingle. She stopped on the stairs, feeling the heat pulsing against her face.

"I hate basements and cellars," her companion said, snapping Lannie out of her inactivity.

The cellar was gloomy and musty with only a little light showing in through the ground-level windows, which were covered with batten shutters. A sump pump stood off to one side within the shadowed confines of the cavernous room that ran the entire length and breadth of the house. Bare wooden shelves gave mute evidence of the pickling and canning that had been done over the years since the house had been built.

The real estate agent swept the flashlight over an old coal bin and the boarded chute beside it. "Looks dry down here," she commented. "With the rain we've had today, that's a good sign." She led Lannie back up the stairs then through the dining room to the front stairs and the three bedrooms, two baths on the second floor.

"There were originally six bedrooms up here and only one bath," Dunlop said as they entered what was the master bedroom. "All the rooms were pretty small but Mrs. Van Homme designed the present configuration and it looks like she did a bang-up job."

Lannie had to agree. The master bedroom was large and airy with casement windows with a plush teal green carpet underfoot. A small floral rose pattern papered the walls and the oak woodwork had been lovingly restored, gleaming in the fading light from the western sun. The turret fit perfectly into the northwestern corner of the room and Lannie could imagine a loveseat angled in that space.

"Isn't this cute," the real estate agent said from the hallway. She was pointing to a little alcove under the stairs that would be perfect for a wicker bench. Indicating another set of stairs that led up to the attic, she took the stairs ahead of Lannie.

The third floor consisted of one large room with four dormer windows—one on each side of the room. Two recesses situated across from one another had been turned into large closets but one could easily be converted to a serviceable half bath. There was no carpeting here, but when Dunlop squatted down to swipe at the accumulated dust on the floor, the swath revealed a wealth of polished hardwood flooring.

"This would make a great writing room," Lannie said, going to each deep dormer to take a look at the view.

"I was thinking entertainment room but yes, it is large enough for most anything."

Lannie was visualizing placing her desk, shelving, file cabinets and a nice settee.

"Isn't that odd," Lannie heard the real estate agent say as she stood.

"What is?"

"I was noticing it downstairs and now here. There's plenty of dust but I haven't seen a single cobweb."

Lannie glanced around the room, surveying the window frames and glancing up at the ceilings. There were no delicate webs stretching anywhere. "That is rather strange."

"Very strange," Dunlop mumbled. "And I haven't had even a whiff of mouse."

"Mouse?" Lannie said, her brows drawing together.

"That's very common out in the country, dear," the agent said. "When the fields are combined, mice come in to make their home for the winter." She smiled. "They can get in even the smallest hole, believe me! That's why you see so many stray cats around farm houses."

"Well, I can guarantee you I'll have a cat or two," Lannie stated. "I don't like mice."

Dunlop's eyes lit up. "Then you are going to make an offer on it?"

"What is the asking price?"

"As I said, it has been reduced. The owners would like to get at least \$55,000 out of it." She cocked a shoulder. "The acreage alone is worth that."

"Then let's get back to your office and draw up the paperwork," Lannie said.

Jeannie Dunlop smiled hesitantly. "You're sure now? I've got a lot of other properties I can show you."

"No," Lannie said, trailing her hand along the chair rail above the wainscoting in the attic room. "This is just what I've been looking for. This place needs me."

The real estate agent gave Lannie a strange look but, seeing dollar signs floating before her, she let the odd statement pass. "Okay then. Let's get the paperwork rolling!"

*He stood at the dormer window and watched her drive off with the loud, brash woman who had brought her to him. His palm lay flat against the pane and around it shards of ice webbed out across the glass.*

*"Soon, bien-aimé," he said softly. "Soon I will make you mine."*

Lannie glanced back at the house before they turned the corner onto North 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue East. The dying sun's reflection was caught in the glass in a bright orange swath but once more she thought she saw someone standing at the dormer looking out. Her hand went to the medallion at her neck and she fingered the golden disk, experiencing a peaceful calm each time she touched it.

## Chapter Three

There wasn't anything worth watching on television that night so Lannie pulled out one of the paperback books she'd tucked into her bag and sat reading it as she munched on her sub sandwich and sipped lemonade without ice. Wrapped in a soft flannel gown, she lay propped against her pillows, thoroughly enjoying the vampire romance novel that held her captivated.

"Man, lady, I love your Reapers," she said with a sigh, mentally complimenting the author.

When her eyes grew too heavy to continue the mesmerizing tale, her left shoulder throbbing from holding the book, she reluctantly slipped the bookmark in to mark her page then laid it aside with a sigh.

"I gotta stop reading these things," she thought with regret. A mystery-suspense writer herself, she preferred to immerse herself in fantasies for relaxation and entertainment but the romantic love stories left her aching for something she—and millions of readers all over the world—would never know or ever have.

Twisting off the light above the headboard, she snuggled down into the comfort of the bed and turned over to her right side, her hands tucked beneath her pillow.

*He knew the exact moment she slipped from her world into the shadowy realm of his. The gentleness of her nature shone like a beacon in the undulating darkness that surrounded him. It called to him and he drifted toward it, his aching heart reaching out for peace it had never known.*

Lannie sighed deeply in her sleep and turned onto her back, one arm flung above her head, the other lying across her stomach. Her lips parted and she smiled gently.

The dream came like a slowly falling snowflake floating down upon the fertile plain of her subconscious. It landed tenderly and spread warm tendrils through her heart, wispy spun-crystal threads that buried themselves deep and took root.

"Remy," she whispered.

*"I am here, bien-aimé," he said softly.*

She opened her eyes to find him leaning over her, one hand braced on the wall above her head, the other stroking her cheek. Where his fingers trailed, warmth spread and seemed to settle in the very core of her.

His hair was midnight black, his eyes a deep golden amber that shone in the lambent light coming from the opening between the two halves of the drapery covering the windows. He was tall and broad of shoulder, the white shirt he wore with the cuffs folded to his forearms stretching tautly over a muscular chest and well-developed biceps. Through the opening of the shirt, she could see a thick mat of crisp dark hair.

He sat down on the bed beside her and smiled to reveal straight white teeth and full lips that made her ache to taste them.

"What would you have me do, *bien-aimé*?" he asked in a deep, sensually accented voice.

Lannie did not hesitate.

"Love me," she said, her heart in her pale green eyes.

"*Avec le plaisir*," he whispered.

As dreams often do, this one changed as swiftly as the wind pushing against the windowpanes. One moment she was dressed in her old flannel gown and the next she was bare to a heated gaze that brought a shiver to her body.

He stood beside her bed—never taking his eyes from her—as he began to slowly unbutton his shirt, tugging it seductively from the waist of the black slacks he wore like a second skin sheathing his long legs. He peeled the garment from his body, shrugging it from his shoulders as his pectorals bunched and rippled and his biceps flexed.

Lannie's mouth watered as his strong, tanned fingers went to the closure of his slacks. She swept her tongue over her dry lips and felt the blood heating in her lower body, her juices beginning to flow.

"*Vous êtes la femme la plus belle que je jamais ai vu.*" His words were husky and rife with a desire she had no trouble recognizing, even if she did not understand the words.

"I don't speak French," she said as she watched him tug down his zipper.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he translated in that sultry accent.

She shook her head for she had no illusions about the way she looked. When she would have protested his statement, he leaned over to place a fingertip to her lips.

"You are to me," he said. He moved his finger from her lip, down her chin, along her neck and then angled it to rest just above her heart. "Inner beauty can only be found here."

Lannie swallowed hard. All her life she had wanted someone to love her for who she was, for what she was, and not how that person perceived her or for what they could gain from knowing her. As this delectable man peeled aside the covers and slid into the bed beside her, she felt a lump that had been anchored in her chest for years slowly slip its mooring.

"Come to me, *bébé*," he whispered, sliding his arm beneath her head and pulling her gently to him.

For several moments they lay there like that, with Lannie's palm on her spectral visitor's broad chest, the covers pushed aside, his naked body dark against the white sheets. The fingers of his left hand coursed a lazy spiral on the cup of her shoulder while his right hand held hers captive.

"How is it I can see you?" she asked, tilting her head back to look up at his handsome face. "You are so real to me."

"It is because you are dreaming, my love," he replied. He reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Then I don't want to wake up," she said with a sigh.

He smiled and cupped her chin to bring her lips to his. His kiss was fleeting—like a gossamer web that touched her then parted—but it made heat pool between her legs.

"I want you," she said against his mouth.

"As I want you," he stated.

Easing her to her back, he sat up and turned, extending a hand to her to help her to a sitting position.

There were no more words as his hands fanned over her shoulders, his fingers curling along them to bring her body to his for a sweet, tight hold before he pushed her gently back and trailed the tips of his fingers down onto the perfection of her breasts—molding his strong fingers around the lush globes, arcing his thumbs back and forth over her nipples until they were hard little pebbles aching to be tasted. He weighed her breasts in his palms, squeezing lightly then lowered his head to flick his tongue delicately over the straining, engorged tips.

"Ah..." Lannie sighed, her eyes closed, head back as she offered her breasts to him in sacrifice. His mouth was hot and wet as his lips closed over first one nub and then the other—drawing lightly, grazed by the press of his teeth, lapped by a hot, wicked tongue before he drew the points deep into his mouth and suckled.

Though Lannie was no novice to sex, the sensations filling her body as her ghostly suitor plied her flesh with his hands and mouth sent shivers of delight racing through her. Her nerve endings were alive with electric pulses as he lapped at her nipples and swept his tongue over and around the dusky perimeter. She threaded her fingers through his thick curly hair and held him to her as he pulled at her breast.

Stretching out atop her, her midnight visitor nudged her legs apart until his lower body lay pressed intimately against hers. The hard ridges of his abdomen was seated at the very core of her and the lush mat of dark hair that grew on his taut body mingled with her own nether curls.

His hands were on her breasts—pressing them together so he could alternate his attention from one swollen peak without much effort at all. He laved her nipples until she was writhing beneath him, other parts of her body demanding his attention as well.

She thought she heard him grunt with laughter as he slid his lips down between the valley of her breasts and onto the flat concavity of her belly. He flicked his tongue into



the deep indention of her navel and she shuddered, her heels digging into the mattress as her hands tightened in his midnight curls. He was pressing kiss after kiss around that little chasm, and with each circuit, his mouth moved lower until his chin was grazing the wiry hair at the juncture of her thighs.

“Remy...” she whispered.

His elbows spanned her thighs and slipped between them, pushing her thighs to an unbelievable width before his mouth closed upon her clit and she arched her hips up with a gasp.

Once more she heard the laughter that sounded to her both mischievous and playful as his teeth clenched lightly on the most sensitive part of her anatomy.

Never had a man done this to her and the vibrations rocketing through Lannie were so overpowering, so exacting, she slammed her hands into the sheets beside her legs and grabbed handfuls of them. The combination of his moist mouth, his warm breath, the pressure his teeth were exerting on her clit, was driving her crazy. Her head whipped back and forth on the pillow and before she knew it, the undulating spasms of release were tearing through her, moistening her, making her body go rigid within a second or two, before she wilted like a delicate flower under the harsh sun.

He gave her no relief, allowed her no respite. Even as her body sagged from the intense climax, his fingers were sliding along her silken folds—spreading her, stroking her, his thumbs alternately traveling up and down on her clit. His tongue was at the opening of her channel and probing into her.

Lannie’s body levitated off the bed—meeting his questing tongue for him to impale her on its knowing tip. She shivered and her belly began to quiver as small little pants came from her parted lips.

Her spectral lover’s hands roamed at will over her upper body as he licked her between the legs. He pulled at her nipples and pinched them lightly, rolled them between his fingers and brushed the pads of his thumbs over their straining tips. As her breaths increased in volume and speed, he slid his hands beneath her hips and lifted her closer to his questing mouth, covering her clit to suckle it as he had her nipples.

“God!” Lannie exploded, and another intense climax shook her very foundation. The ripples of it shuddered through her and she was writhing like a woman possessed. Once more she sank down into that lassitude into which he would not allow her to stay. As his tongue stabbed at her clit, he slipped a finger into her wet heat.

Straining not to cry out again, Lannie was twisting the sheet beneath her, pulling at it, her hips rocking from side to side. His finger went deeper—was joined by a second—and when he turned his hand so his fingers touched that magical spot at the roof of her sheath, she came again in a flash that nearly drove her into unconsciousness.

Sweat rippled along Lannie’s body and even as she strove to reach out for the peace that would allow her body to cease its intense need, he withdrew his fingers and was sliding his shaft inside her to replace them, his fingers digging into her soft buttocks to lift her for his thrust.

He was huge inside her and filled her so completely she cried out with the sheer absolute perfection of the slide. She could feel his tip pressed against her womb and it was a feeling unlike anything she'd ever dared to hope, to want, to dream, of ever having. Here was a man who not only filled her most wicked dreams, here was a man whose body could do the same.

Moving in and out of her in long, sure strokes, he pushed deep and held. Pushed deep and held. Hefted her higher still against him and went in to the hilt, holding that hard pressure, that thick circumference, that pulsing tool, still within her. She could feel every inch of him stretching her and reached out to wrap her finger around his arms just above his elbows.

"Take me, Remy," she begged. "Please!"

She was looking up at him—at the underside of his strong chin—and when he lowered his face to look at her, she was struck again with his sheer male beauty. At the darkness of his skin, the thickness of his black hair, the mesmerizing gleam in his amber eyes. His gaze was locked with hers and when he began to move inside her with more force, with an increase in speed that made one of his dark eyebrows flick upward almost coyly, she felt the maleness of him to the very root of her being.

Lannie lifted her legs and clasped him around the waist, holding him as tightly as his hands were holding her ass. She arched her hips toward him each time he thrust down into her, their combined grunts as they took their pleasure sounding loud in the still room.

She knew the pleasure building within her would be unlike anything she could have ever dreamed. It was like a volcano with the magma bubbling and preparing to explode. Heat was curling around her limbs and centered between her legs. Pressure was coiled high in her womb, and with each thrust of his cock, she could feel the itch multiplying, aching to be scratched. He closed his eyes, his head fell back and she stared at the arch of his Adam's apple as he strained against her, his chest heaving with not breaths but power, and when that first ripple of release began, she dug her fingernails into his flesh above his elbows and hung on for what she knew would be a ride she'd never forget.

And it was.

Passion burst like a fiery display on the Fourth of July and rained twinkling lights around the periphery of her vision as she clung to him. She strained against him, pushing herself hard into his powerful ramming, impaling not only her body but her soul upon his. She exploded into myriad heated flashes that coursed down her legs to make her toes curl like paper put to the flame. Such intense enjoyment ripped through her that she screamed from the very force of it.

Her midnight seducer fell forward to cover her mouth with his lest another scream bring unwanted visitors to her room. He used what waning power he had to turn curious ears from their doings, to cause those surprised by her outburst to think they'd only imagined the sound.

Lannie grabbed at his body as he kissed her and dueled with his tongue as he swept it into her mouth. She inhaled the scent that was him and absorbed it into her skin, became as much a part of him as she could, unwilling to release him from her frantic hold.

He collapsed atop her, his weight such a blessed sensation she never wanted him to leave her.

"Sleep, *bébé*," he whispered against her lips.

Though she tried desperately to remain awake, Lannie felt herself drifting, sinking down into a blissful, calm and peaceful cushion that enveloped her with protective arms. Her last sound was a satiated sigh that came from her very being.

## Chapter Four

Lannie opened her eyes the next morning and smiled, exhaled softly. She lay there staring up at the ceiling, feeling relaxed and—oddly enough—loved. Memories of the lovemaking drifted across her mind. “That was one hell of a dream, Durant,” she said aloud.

She thought about her midnight lover with his killer good looks and his warm, knowing hands. Her cheeks burned as she thought of the liberties her phantom lover had taken with her body—liberties she’d never allowed her husband or any other man to take, liberties she had so thoroughly enjoyed.

“Remy,” she said, wondering from where she had dredged that sexy name. He had whispered in French to her and she thought perhaps some unconscious, needy part of her had supplied him with a name.

Black hair and eyes the color of rich topaz, she thought as she stretched. Dimples in his lean cheeks, a deep cleft in his strong chin, biceps and pecs and abs that any man would die to possess and any woman thrill to touch. A deep voice, a gentle touch, a body that knew its stuff—what more could a lonely woman want?

“Get a grip, girl. Men like that are found only in romance novels and fevered dreams,” she said on a long, heartfelt sigh.

She sat up and flung the covers aside, swung her feet from the bed and stuffed them into her terrycloth slippers. After using the toilet, she stripped off her nightgown and reached behind the vinyl curtain to turn on the shower. Spreading the bathmat on the floor, she shut the door and locked it—a habit she’d picked up from years of book signings across the country. Her toiletries were on the vanity, so after picking up her shampoo and razor, she slipped behind the curtain into the steaming water, sighing with pleasure as she ducked her head beneath the pulsing spray.

Ten minutes later she was shaved, bathed, shampooed and ready to take on the world. She twisted off the shower control and flung the curtain aside, reaching for one of the thick towels on the rack over the toilet. The mirror over the vanity was fogged, the room humid as she stepped out on the bathmat, wiping her face, but then she went perfectly still, staring at the mirror with her eyes as big as saucers.

*He was looking at her from the mirror, his amber gaze filled with heat as it swept down her naked body. She was so lovely, so perfect in every way, it made his heart ache. He ached to touch her again, to take her in his arms, to kiss her, to make love to her, but it was daylight and for now he was trapped between his world and hers by the glass of the mirror.*

"You're not real," Lannie said, staring at the wavering image in the mirror. She could make out his dark hair, his topaz eyes, the sensual half smile that made her belly clench. The white of his shirt glowed through the condensation on the glass, rippled like an image seen in water.

*"I am as real as you wish me to be, bien-aimé,"* he said softly.

The medallion around her neck pulsed warmly against her chest and Lannie sucked in a stunned breath. "Remy?" she whispered.

*"That is my name,"* he whispered in reply, his reflection flickering behind the steam.

So shocked by what she was experiencing, Lannie didn't consider her nakedness as she stepped closer to the mirror, reaching out a trembling hand to place her palm against the glass.

He put his hand up to lay it flat against hers, his full lips stretching into a sensuous smile. *"I can only hold this form for a short time but tonight..."* he said. *"Tonight I can come to you again."*

His image began to fade, his outline wavering as though someone had fanned their hand across the surface of the glass.

"No!" Lannie said. "Remy, don't go!"

But his face was no longer there in the mirror and only her palm print showed against the foggy glass.

For a long time she just stood there—shivering and expectant—but his ghostly face did not return and the fog slowly leached away from the glass, shrinking in on itself until only her crystal-clear reflection could be seen in the sleek surface.

Feeling bereft, feeling mired in quicksand, Lannie backed away from the mirror, the towel still clutched in one hand. Unhooking her chenille robe from the back of the bathroom door, she finally dropped the towel and thrust her arms into the sleeves, pulling it around her and belting it as her teeth began to chatter.

"You were seeing things," she told herself, but she knew that wasn't true. She knew perfectly well what she had seen.

Opening the door and going out into the other part of the room, she slumped down on the edge of the bed and stared at the wall.

She had seen a ghost. She knew it as surely as she knew her name. A ghost who had followed her from the old Devereux place, the ghost of a man buried there on the property, whose gold medallion she now wore around her neck.

Reaching up, she touched the medallion and it seemed to pulse within her fingers. The initials had read R.B.D. and she knew the R. and the D. stood for Remy Devereux. She wondered what the B. stood for.

Though the real estate agent had given her a capsulated version of what had happened at the Devereux property, Lannie knew small-town America well enough to know there would be someone in Grinnell who could give her a blow-by-blow of the

story. She'd be willing to bet dollars to doughnuts Alton Spivey would know everything she wanted to learn.

Scooting over on the bed, she leaned down and opened the nightstand drawer to take out the Grinnell phone book. It didn't take her long to find Alton's number and when he answered, she smiled.

"Can a lonely, stranded Georgia girl buy a new friend some breakfast?" she asked.

"Well, I already ate but I suppose I could wash down another cup of coffee and a hunk of pie," Alton said, and his voice said he was pleased she'd made the offer. "You want me to come pick you up?"

"I've got wheels," Lannie said. "What if I come pick you up?"

"I live too far out, darling," Alton said. "Why don't I come by the motel and you can drive us from there?"

"That sounds like a plan," Lannie agreed. "See you soon."

Hanging up, Lannie dressed, put on a bit of makeup and went to the lobby to watch for Alton. Though the day was gray, it didn't look as if any more rain would be following. The desk clerk assured her a lightweight jacket would be fine.

Alton pulled his rusted-out pickup truck into the parking lot and was getting out when Lannie came up to him. He smiled broadly. "Top of the morning, Irish," he said.

Lannie laughed. "Where are we going to get that cup of coffee?" she asked.

"You want breakfast or will pie do?" he countered.

"Pie and coffee sounds good."

"Happy Trail Grill then," he said, "up on Highway 6."

"I think I know where that is," she acknowledged.

"Well, what did you do yestiddy?" Alton asked as they headed north on West Street.

"I found me a house," Lannie said.

"Didn't know you was lookin'," Alton said. "Whereabouts?"

"At Rock Creek," she told him.

"Good place to live," Alton said. "Got me a bunch of friends what live out that way."

Lannie cast him a side glance as she stopped at a red light. "How long have you lived around here, Alton?"

"All my life," he told her. "All seventy-four years of it. Reckon I'll make it home." His muttonchops twitched.

Lannie laughed. "I guess you know everything there is to know about the area then, huh?"

Alton twisted around in the seat and gave her a narrowed look. "Okay, I knowed you wasn't invitin' me to eat 'cause of my debonair good looks," he said with a sniff. "What you after, darlin'?"

She barely made it past the next red light, looking in the rearview mirror to make sure no police had seen her run the yellow. "I just want to know the history of the place," she said. "I'm a writer and that's what writers do."

The elderly man studied her silently for a moment then nodded. "Reckon that's right and you done come to the factual source to learn the way of things. I won't BS you like some would."

"I didn't figure you would and besides," she said, flipping on her turn signal at Highway 6, "breakfast is my way of thanking you."

"Shoot," Alton said, flinging out a hand. "Don't need no thanks. It was the proper thing to do." He pointed to the alley that ran beside the Happy Trail Grill, telling her she could park on the side since the front was filled.

The eatery was full of older men who didn't look as if they were doing much more than shooting the breeze with one another. There was one booth left and Alton marched over to it, claiming it for theirs ahead of two other elderly men.

"Got me a hot date, boys," Alton said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Lannie smiled apologetically at the men who didn't return the smile but grumbled as they were forced to sit at the counter, tossing her a disgruntled look.

"Don't mind them old coots," Alton said as she slipped into the booth with him. "Don't do nothin' but sit around and talk about how, now their wives be gone, they ain't got nobody to cater to 'em."

"Their wives left them?" she asked.

"Up and died on 'em," Alton told her. "Only way them gals would have ever gotten free of the likes of them bastards." He leaned over the table toward her. "Some Midwestern men think the only things a woman is good for is seeing to their needs and slopping the hogs."

Lannie grinned as he leaned back. "That is an astute observation, I'm sure," she said.

"Damned right, it is," Alton said, and when the waitress came shuffling over, he ordered coffee for the both of them. When Lannie asked for pie, he agreed he wouldn't mind a piece himself.

"This is a neat place," she said, looking around the restaurant.

"Try their macho nachos," Alton told her. "They will stick to your ribs." He folded his arms over his scrawny chest. "Now what is it you are hankering to know, darlin'?"

Lannie shifted uncomfortably in the seat. "I bought the old Devereux place," she said, thinking that was all she needed to tell him and she was right. She saw Alton's wizened face pale just a shade and his scruffy mustache quivered.

"Well, that ain't the brightest move a body could have made," he allowed. "Didn't no one tell you that place has haunts running around in it?"

The waitress brought their coffee—steaming hot and fragrant—and placed it before them then went back for their pies. Lannie waited until she returned, replied they didn't

need anything else then when the girl had gone, she lowered her voice, looking Alton in the eye.

"What would you say if I told you I've seen Remy Devereux?" Lannie countered.

Alton stared hard at her for a moment then sniffed. "I'd say you ain't the first one what did," he replied. "Lots of folk have seen him."

"Tell me about Giles Devereux," she said. "Did you know him?"

The elderly man nodded. "I did. Met him only a couple of times when they was building his house but he seemed a nice enough sort."

"And his wife?"

A glitter entered Alton Spivey's eyes. "Well, now, she was another kettle of fish."

"I was told she was a witch."

Chuckling, Alton took up his cup and slurped from it before diving into his slice of blueberry pie. He cut off a piece with his fork and shoveled it into his mouth, talking around the food. "Depends on how you look at it, I guess. She was one helluva good-lookin' woman, I know that." He pointed his empty fork at her. "There's some who don't like a woman to look that good or to have their menfolk starin' at 'em. You get my drift?"

"The women were jealous of her," Lannie said.

"And her not giving two hoots up a willow tree for any man but her own," Alton said. "That woman loved that man and when he got killed, she all but withered on the vine. My guess is she mourned him to the day she ceased to breathe."

"Do you believe she killed herself?"

Alton nodded. "I surely do. Most folks do, but how she went about it and where she went to do it is anybody's guess." He cut another hunk of his pie. "Wasn't out in Rock Creek, that's for sure. Giles is buried down in Louisiana and I'll lay odds that's where she went to do herself in."

"And her daughter Madeleine?"

Chomping his food, Alton drew his brows together. "What about her?"

"Do you know who the father of her baby was?"

"They say it was the devil," Alton whispered in an eerie voice then chuckled. "I'd say they was partially right."

"Who was Remy's father?"

"Jacob Bartlett's oldest son Raegin," Alton supplied. "The Bartlett farm is up the road a ways from the Devereux place and Rae was always sniffing around Maddy's skirts even when they was knee-high to a tadpole. He pestered that gal something fierce." He scraped the last of his pie from the saucer and turned his head to look longingly at the pies sitting behind a plastic caddy on the counter. "Didn't never own up to being the boy's papa but everybody knew he was."

"Is he still alive?"



Alton nodded. "That man is too ornery to die," he said. "He's one of the hate-fullest bastards in Jasper County."

"Do you think he loved Madeleine?" she asked softly.

"He lusted after her and to his way of thinkin', I'm pretty damned sure he thought it was the same thing." He snorted.

"What about Jacob Bartlett?" Lannie inquired. "Did he ignore Madeleine and her son like Raegin did?"

Harsh frown lines made deep grooves in Alton's weathered face. "Jake Bartlett was a son of a bitch, pardon my French. He was as mean as his son is ornery. Knowing him—and unfortunately I did all too well—he most likely threatened the Devereux girl and warned her not to try to get nothin' out of the Bartletts. Hell, he'd have let 'em starve to death out there if he'd had his druthers."

"He didn't fear Madeleine or her mother then?" She got the waitress' attention and pointed to the pie case, holding up one finger.

"Hell, no!" Alton scoffed, smacking his lips as the girl lifted the plastic cover and took out another slice of pie. "Only thing Jake feared was a bad crop or sick cows. That's stuff that would have cost him in the pocketbook."

"Did you know Remy?" she asked, searching his eyes.

The waitress brought the pie and Lannie asked for refills on their coffees. When she had left the ticket on the table and was gone again, Alton dove into the pie as though he feared someone would try to grab it from under him.

"Yeah, I knew the boy," he said, scooping up a big chunk of the blueberry treat. "He was quiet like his mama but there was a fire burning there in them strange eyes of his'n. Even when the other boys ganged up on him, he let 'em know he'd been in the fight too, though he always lost." He chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "Five boys on one ain't good odds no matter if the one being whopped was Remy's size."

Lannie had folded both hands around the coffee cup and now looked down into it. For a split second she thought she saw Remy's face hovering there but it was just the reflection of the light coming in from the large plate glass window.

"Where was it you thought you saw him?" Alton asked as he took another bite of pie.

"In the dormer window in the attic," she answered, not looking up at the old man. She wasn't about to tell him about her other encounters with the phantom of Remy Devereux.

"That's where most folks say they see him," Alton declared. "Except those what have rented the house and they say they'd see him sitting on the back porch in the swing, just sitting there crying with tears running down his cheeks."

Lannie looked up. "Mourning his mother?"

Alton shook his head. "Mourning Joan Wyngate," he answered. "She was the love of his life."

A frown creased Lannie's forehead. "Why does that name ring a bell?"

"It might be 'cause you're having supper with her widower at Walnut View Acres tonight," Alton replied.

"You mean Brad Wyngate's wife?" she queried, surprised. "Remy was in love with her?"

"The sun rose and set on that little girl for him," Alton said, pushing the empty pie plate away from him. "He fell for her when they was in middle school together."

"Did they date?"

"Lord, no!" Alton said, eyes flaring. "Chuck Patterson would never have let his only child date the witch's spawn."

"So Remy loved her from afar, so to speak," Lannie said.

Alton turned his grizzled head and looked out the window. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

She didn't think the elderly man would answer but then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled dollar bill. "I got the tip," he said. "Let's you and me go for a ride."

Lannie took the check and glanced at it to make sure a dollar was a fair offering to the waitress. Deciding it wasn't, she got up and went to the cash register to pay the bill, leaving the girl another dollar in with what was owed.

Outside again, she noticed that Alton had a strained look about him as they got into the car.

"Where are we going?" she asked, getting behind the wheel of her loaner car.

"Back up and go through the bank parking lot then turn right. We'll go out to Ahrens Park to finish up our conversation."

Alton was silent all the way east on Highway 6, and when Lannie parked where he showed her at the recreational complex and turned off the car, she noticed his hands were shaking.

"Gotta have a cancer stick," he told her, and opened the car door.

He led her to a pavilion, lighting up as he walked.

"Those things will kill you, Alton," she said quietly.

"Don't I know it," he said with a laugh, threw a skinny leg over the bench of a picnic table and sat down, bracing his arms on the sticky top.

"Have you tried to quit?"

"Nah," he said, drawing deeply on the odorous tube. He plucked a stray piece of tobacco off his tongue and flicked it away. "Gonna die from somethin' anyways."

A light breeze wafted under the pavilion and Lannie hunkered down into the comfort of her jacket. She could tell Alton was gearing himself up to talk and she gave him the time he needed. When at last he began to speak, it was in a soft, hesitant voice as though he didn't want anyone to hear what he had to say.

"You see, darlin', it was like this," Alton told her. "Remy was a good boy. He had his mama's looks, what with that thick black hair of his and them devilish yellow eyes. Girls would stare at him and sigh over him, but not a one of them was brave enough to give him the time of day. They was scared of his mama, you see."

"Did he have any friends?"

"None that I ever knew about," Alton replied. "Had plenty of enemies though, mostly boys who took exception to the way their girlfriends was ogling Remy."

"It must have been a hellish time for him," she said.

"Reckon it was and him mooning over what he couldn't have would have added to that hell, I suppose."

"You mean Joan?"

Alton bobbed his head and put up a wrinkled hand to scratch at his scruffy jaw. "He was smart as a whip, Remy was, and made straight As all the way through school. Hardly ever missed a day neither, except for the times he was in the hospital. Made that Honors Society thing and even graduated valedictorian at G.H.S. Like I say, he was a right smart lad. Won a college scholarship, but turned it down to go in the Army."

"Do you know why?"

"His heart was broke, that's why," Alton said.

"Joan," she stated.

"Joan," Alton agreed. "Because Remy was so smart and because he had a flair for that sort of thing, he was on the debating team and so was Joan, who was just as smart as him. They were often partnered together on the team, much to Brad's dislike. Joan graduated second in their class, by the way."

"Brad told me he and she married right out of high school," Lannie said.

"The very next week," Alton stated.

Lannie sighed deeply. "Why didn't she go to college?"

"Chuck wouldn't let her," Alton said. "Didn't believe in girls getting fancy educations. Girls are supposed to get married and raise kids, not fill their heads with what he considered foolishness then go out and get a job and work."

"Oh I see," Lannie said. "Her father was a chauvinist."

"He was a prick, excuse my French, and his wife nothing more than a doorstep," Alton snapped. "Hell, he and old man Winston, Brad's papa, had those two kids all but married by the time they was in grammar school. It was just a given they'd marry since Winnie and Chuck were closer than milk in a sow's teat. I'll bet they're playing checkers in hell together at this very minute."

"Did Joan love Brad?"

"There are those who swear she did, but there are those who say she loved Remy Devereux. Not that she would have ever been allowed to have him. Winnie would have seen to that, even if Brad hadn't been in the picture."

A cold chill slithered down Lannie's back. "Was there bad blood between Remy and Brad?"

Alton snorted and flicked away what was left of his cigarette. "Darlin', saying there was bad blood between them two boys is like saying it gets cold at the North Pole. They hated each other from day one. Brad was the reason Remy never got picked for any of the teams at school, though that boy could outrun, outthrow and outjump every other boy who ever suited up for G.H.S. You add that to the fact Winnie was the superintendent of schools, and there was no way Remy would have ever been allowed to play ball with the others. He had to content himself with being an academic jock instead of lettering in basketball or track."

"So Joan loved Remy but she was obligated to marry Brad. They all graduated in 1986 and the very next day Remy is on the way into the Army and a week later Brad and Joan are married," Lannie said. "Five years later—if I remember correctly what Brad told me—Joan died and so did Remy's mother. Which one died first?"

"Maddy died first," Alton said. "It was Joan what found her."

Lannie gasped. "Oh my God! Really?"

"It was her who called the Army and set the wheels into motion to have Remy brought home. The Gulf War was winding down so it didn't take long for them to ship him home. I heard Joan met him at the bus station in Newton and drove him to the funeral home." The old man shook his head. "That wasn't the smartest thing that little girl ever did."

"Why?"

Alton hesitated a moment then seemed to make up his mind. He fused gazes with her. "Brad was a deputy back then and he had a reputation—still does for that matter—of being a hothead. He took exception to Joan getting involved in calling the Army in the first place and let her know it in no uncertain terms. When he heard she went over to Newton to pick up Remy, he went through the roof."

"Was there trouble?"

"Great Lord Almighty, was there trouble!" Alton said. "Brad went out to the house and lit into Remy like there was no tomorrow, but this time around he didn't have none of his friends to back him up. It was just him and Remy, and although Remy had left Iowa a boy, he'd come back a full-fledged Army Ranger with all the training that elite position entails."

"Oh man," Lannie breathed.

Alton nodded. "Remy wiped the floor up with Brad that day and sent the deputy packing. The next day he buried his mama and two days after that, he was standing at Joan's casket at Smith Funeral Home shaking like a man ten times his age and looking even worse." He fumbled in his pocket for another cigarette, shaking the pack to pop one up then grabbing it with his lips. "Joan's death destroyed Remy Devereux."

"How did she die?" Lannie asked, feeling goose flesh pebbling her arms.

Lighting his cigarette before answering, Alton had to cup the flame around his lighter to ward off the brisk wind. He inhaled deeply then blew a plume of smoke into the air.

"She drowned in her bathtub," Alton said. "Took her own life, they said. She took a bunch of sleeping pills, washed 'em down with a couple of glasses of wine and just slipped beneath the water." He thumbed the ash from his cig. "I guess if you gotta go, that ain't such a bad way to do it."

Lannie tilted her head to one side. "Where was Brad when it happened?"

"Out on a call," Alton answered. "He found her and took it real bad, had to be sedated. He blamed himself for her killing herself."

"Did he allow Remy to come to her funeral?"

"I don't know if he would have tried to stop him or not. Didn't matter though."

"Why not?"

"Because Remy died the night before Joan was buried," Alton said. "They found him hanging from that tree out back."

They were silent for some time, each lost in his or her thoughts, watching the wind tossing leaves around there at the park.

"Why do you think he killed himself?" she finally asked.

"Well, there's those what say he couldn't live with having his mama die the way she did and was depressed about it," Alton replied. "You know, all alone like that and dead for a time before Joan found her. There were those who thought the war had crippled him in some way, and then there are some who say Joan's death was the last straw, that he just didn't have the heart to go on after that. Me?" He shrugged. "I don't think that boy took his own life." He met her gaze. "I think somebody murdered him and tried to make it look like he committed suicide."

## Chapter Five

After everything she'd heard about Remy's and Joan's deaths, Lannie really didn't want to have supper with Brad but she'd already agreed and backing out seemed ungracious. She'd once done that in high school and the boy – who had been her friend until then – disliked her to this day. But as she dressed for her evening with Brad, the feeling she was somehow cheating on Remy sent her numerous times to the bathroom mirror, but the only image she saw there was her own and that was a letdown she didn't want to contemplate.

*"Tonight I can come to you again."*

"Remy?" she questioned on her last trip to the bathroom, yet there was no sensuous smile forming there in the glass.

Heaving a disappointed sigh, she sat down on the bed, waiting for Brad to arrive at her door. When he knocked, she jumped, her head swinging around. In the periphery of her eye she caught movement in the mirror over the low-slung dresser but when she stood and moved in front of it, there was nothing – and no one – there.

The knock came again and it seemed impatient this time. Frowning sharply, Lannie hurried to the door and opened it, forcing a smile to her lips.

"I thought you might have forgotten about me," Brad said. He was dressed nattily in what she knew had to be a brand-new suit, crisp white shirt and sedate tie, a nice lightweight overcoat in place.

"Is it cold out?" she asked.

"A bit chilly actually," he replied. "You'll want to take a coat."

"Okay," she said, and turned to go back to the open closet to retrieve her beige trench coat. She turned around to find him right behind, hand outstretched for the coat. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," he replied, and his hands seem to linger a bit longer than was necessary after he helped her on with the coat. "Ready?"

"All set," she said, and walked ahead of him, scooping up her shoulder bag on the table by the door.

He was solicitous with a hand to the small of her back as they walked down the corridor to the elevator. Lannie felt keenly uncomfortable with him touching her in that way – however innocuous – but short of shrugging away from his touch, she saw no polite way to end the contact.

Keeping up a pleasant commentary as they made their way out to the car, he opened the passenger door of his pickup for her and told her to buckle up before he

closed the door. Smiling to herself at his lawman's mode, she belted herself in, watching him skirt the front of the vehicle.

"What's the fine for not buckling up?" she asked.

"Sixty-three dollars for the first offense," he replied. "Sorry. Habit."

"Not a problem," she told him.

He pulled out of the parking lot, cast her an inquisitive look. "Are you warm enough?"

"I'm fine," she said.

"So," he said, settling back in the seat as they drove down the road. "You bought the Devereux place, huh?"

She knew he would have found out but it bothered her nevertheless. "Yes," she answered. "I did."

"I imagine the place will need some cleaning up inside, if the outside is any indication," he observed.

Knowing he'd gone by the property further annoyed her but she supposed that was to be expected. He was not only the law, he obviously thought he had a vested interest.

"Can you recommend anyone to help?" she inquired.

Brad laughed. "I doubt you could find anyone who'd be willing to go inside that house, Lannie," he said.

"I can handle the inside," she said, her hands clenched. "I'm talking about the outside."

He picked up on her tone and turned his head toward her. "I can help with both," he said. "I can borrow a heavy-duty weed whacker from my next-door neighbor. It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours to clean up the brush. Since Bon put on new siding, a thorough steam wash should take care of that, though I think there's gonna have to be a bit of touchup painting done on the porch."

"I was thinking about that," Lannie said. "I believe I'll have the porch taken off and PVC flooring, posts and gingerbread put in. That way it won't ever need painting."

"Good idea," he agreed. They had stopped at the Highway 6 stoplight and he turned his left blinker on, waiting behind another car in line to turn. "Could get expensive though."

"Probably, but just thinking about painting woodwork every few years and re-staining and oiling the floor boards doesn't appeal to me," she stated. "The back porch is somewhat protected from the weather by the house itself, but that front porch is open to the elements."

"True," he agreed. "Well, you have your choice of a bunch of home improvement stores all within forty miles of here."

Lannie nodded. She had turned her head to look at the passing scenery that was beginning to seem familiar to her.

"What else have you got planned for the Devereux place?" he inquired.

Thinking her new home would forever be identified as the Devereux place, she sighed. "Well, I will need a garage. I'll have a breezeway built off the kitchen to connect the garage with the house."

"That'll look nice," he said, and began slowing down as they reached the hill on which the Walnut View Acres Golf Course was located. "Two stalls of course."

"Definitely," she replied, and was surprised to see very few cars in the gravel parking lot.

"Jasper County's best kept secret," he told her as he pulled into a parking spot. "Great food and great service, but few people realize it's here."

Secrets, she thought as he turned off the car and got out, coming around to open her door for her. She wondered if he'd tell her about his association with Remy Devereux. She smiled up at him as he opened the door and extended his hand to help her out of the car.

"Your mama taught you manners," she said.

"That's about the only thing she managed to drum into my thick head," he said with a laugh.

Once more he put his hand to the small of her back as they walked, but Lannie accepted the touch as being his way and didn't feel as much irritation as she had at the motel. He opened the restaurant door for her and helped her off with her coat, hanging his and hers in the little vestibule before ushering her up the steps to the second level, calling out a greeting to the hostess who was waiting at the top of the stairs with two menus in hand.

"How's everything, Beth?" he asked.

"Just great, Brad," the woman said, giving Lannie a warm smile. "You must be the writer lady."

Lannie laughed. "That would be me."

"Right this way."

There were only two other people in the restaurant and Brad knew them, speaking to each by name and introducing Lannie as they passed the other diners' table. They were shown to a table that sat beside the sweeping bank of windows overlooking the lighted golf course.

"That is a spectacular view," Lannie said, "but I imagine the course is extremely tough on the legs." She was staring at the rolling hills.

"Most people rent or bring their own carts," Beth said. "I've walked that course and let me tell you, you get plenty of exercise!"

"I bet," Lannie said.

"Your waitress will be right with you," Beth said. "Can I get you something from the bar?"



Brad raised an eyebrow as Lannie ordered a Bloody Maria then explained that was a Bloody Mary with tequila instead of vodka.

"Sounds good," Brad said. "I'll try one too."

"Lots of lime, please," Lannie interjected. She picked up her menu.

"The prime rib is excellent here," Brad told her, obviously already knowing what he wanted.

"Then that's what I'll have," Lannie said. "Medium well."

When the drinks arrived, Brad held his aloft. "To your new place," he said, and when she touched her glass to his, he gave her a gentle smile. "We're glad you decided to stay."

Lannie blushed and took a sip of her drink, closing her eyes to the mellowness and absolutely perfect blending of the ingredients.

"I like this," Brad exclaimed. "Where'd you learn about it?"

"Down in San Antonio," she replied. "At a writer's conference."

The waitress came over to take their order and after ordering for the both of them, Brad leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "So," he said. "When do we start sprucing up your new digs?"

Lannie set her drink down and started to answer him but movement in the window caught her eye and she glanced that way, stunned to see the wavering figure of Remy Devereux staring back at her from the night-dark depths of the glass, the golf course lights behind him giving his ghostly figure a hazy nimbus. He was hovering there almost at Brad's elbow. Had it been possible, the wraithlike reflection could have reached out and touched Wyngate.

"Ah," she said, tearing her gaze from the spectral sight. "Jeannie called this afternoon to tell me the Van Hommes accepted my offer. I called my bank in California and they are cutting a check for the full price. Jeannie should have it by Tuesday at the latest." She glanced at the likeness and away again, her hands in her lap, twisting her napkin.

"They would have been foolish not to," Brad commented.

"We'll close hopefully in two weeks. She said I could come by to get the keys from her so I could measure for blinds, drapes and whatever else I might need."

He nodded. "I can take off and give you a hand," he said.

The shape in the window pulsed brighter and Lannie looked that way—right into the heated eyes of the ghost staring back at her.

"I c-can't ask you to drop what you're doing and..." Lannie said, dragging her attention from the spite she saw on the specter's handsome face.

"I want to," Brad said. "I'm not a bad carpenter either."

"I'm sure you're very good but..."

"I won't take no for an answer," Brad declared. "You're going to need help and I'm just the man to provide it."

One moment his Bloody Maria was sitting beside Brad's water glass and in the next instant it had tipped over, dumping the contents into his lap. He gasped and shot up from his chair, ice tinkling to the floor as he brushed at his pants.

As the waitress came over with an additional napkin and Brad stomped off to the restroom to see to his trousers, Lannie turned her head to look at Remy's wavering image in the glass. He was grinning like a mischievous boy, his lower lip tucked between his teeth as he seemed to be struggling not to laugh.

"You are terrible," she whispered.

*"I know."*

The two words drifted through her mind like a soft wind and she shook her head then felt the softest of touches along her back – as though fingers had trailed across her from shoulder to shoulder.

*"I'll always be here, bien-aimé,"* he said softly. *"Always."*

Why those words should send warmth and comfort through her, Lannie didn't know. By rights, she should be quivering in her shoes, alarmed that she was conversing with a dead man, seeing him, feeling his touch. But she felt none of that. For the first time in a long, long time she felt safe and protected and – dare she think it? – loved.

*"You are loved,"* her ghostly visitor sighed in her ear.

"You don't even know me," she protested to the figure in the glass.

*"I know all I need to know,"* he said.

"I apologize, Lannie," Brad said as he came back to the table with a fresh drink in hand. "I'm usually not that clumsy."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm just sorry it happened."

*"I'm not."*

Lannie ignored the ghostly snicker. "I hope it didn't stain."

"Nah," Brad said. "Just dented my pride. I'll survive."

*"Too bad."*

Lannie cast the specter a warning look and was grateful there were no more asides, though Remy Devereux's flickering reflection remained hovering just over Brad Wyngate's shoulder.

Their food arrived then and the rest of the meal was spent enjoying the excellent fare that had been set before them. The prime rib was tender, juicy, and the vegetables cooked to perfection. Waving away the dessert menu, they sat over a cup of rich coffee, talking about inconsequential things until they were the last ones left in the restaurant.

"I think they'd like us to scram," Brad said at last.

"They probably do," Lannie granted.

Thanking the waitress and hostess for their excellent service, Brad and Lannie left the restaurant, the night air much cooler as they walked to his truck.

"What's on the agenda for you tomorrow?" Brad asked as he opened her door for her.

"Do you know what time Mass is at Saint Mary's?" she asked.

He paused with his hand on the top of her door. "I believe nine and eleven," he replied. "You're Catholic then?"

"Yes," she said, and saw him frown as he shut her door. When he got behind the wheel, she asked where he attended church.

"First Methodist," he answered.

"Was that where you and Joan were married?" she asked.

Brad stilled with his hand on the key in the ignition. He looked over at her. "No," he said. "Joan belonged to Saint Mary's. We were married there." His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Lannie shrugged. "Just curious."

He cranked the truck and put it in reverse, making no comment to her answer. He didn't speak again until they were back on Highway 6 and headed toward Grinnell.

"Who told you about Joan?" he asked, and she could tell from his tone he was miffed.

"Small-town gossip," she answered. "Seems like everybody and their brother knew we were having supper tonight." She saw his jaw clench in the glow of the dashboard lights.

"Alton Spivey needs to keep his big mouth shut," Brad snapped, his hands tensing around the steering wheel. "I guess he spilled his guts to you at the Grill this morning."

Lannie felt the chastisement and bristled at it. "Seems you can't do anything in this town without everyone hearing about it."

They were passing an intersection and Brad surprised her by whipping right onto T-38 South.

"Where are we going?" Lannie asked, spying the road sign for I-80.

"Where we can talk," Brad said.

She said nothing to his statement, wondering where he was taking her. When they pulled onto a country lane and he parked, she felt a little ripple of concern grip her stomach.

"Brad, I..."

He turned off the engine, plunging the car into darkness, but there was enough sky glow coming in through the windshield that she could see him clearly as he twisted around in the seat, releasing his seat belt as he did.

"If you wanted to know about me and Joan, Lannie, all you had to do was ask me," he growled.

Lannie turned so she was facing him. "I wasn't asking Alton about you," she said. "I asked him about what had happened at the Devereux place and he told me. I had no idea your wife was involved in what had occurred."

Brad was silent for a moment then raked a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "The whole thing is a sore point with me."

"I can understand that but I don't want you thinking I was hitting Alton up about information concerning you. I just wanted to know what went down out there and I knew if anyone could tell me, it would be Alton," she said. She folded her arms over her chest in a protective posture. "I wasn't prying into your private life, Brad."

"I see that now," he said, ducking his head. "You just have to realize that what happened to Remy, to Joan, it..." He leaned the back of his head against the driver window. "It has never left me."

They were silent for a moment and then he began to speak as though whatever was on his mind had been a long time in coming.

"I hated Remy Devereux," he confessed. "I had hated him since we were children, and I used to do everything I could to make his life a living hell."

"Why would you do that?" she asked, her forehead crinkled.

"Because I knew Joan loved him," he said. "And I knew he loved her. Not that it mattered. I mean, our parents had planned our wedding and our mothers had that wedding designed down to the last goddamned flower. She and I knew what was expected of us and we had accepted it." He looked out through the windshield. "At least I had. I never wanted anyone but Joan."

"Was she seeing him behind your back?"

"Nah, that wasn't how it was. Joan wouldn't have done that. I just saw the way she looked at him, the way he looked at her, but neither one did anything about it. Remy knew if he tried something, he'd regret it."

"Were you among the boys who put him in the hospital?" she asked quietly.

He flinched. "I'm not proud of it and I regret having been a part of it. Someone had sent Joan a Valentine's card and I thought it had come from him." He shook his head. "Turned out it came from one of my friends who knew I'd blame Remy for it. We went after him that afternoon and beat the hell out of him, broke his nose, his collarbone, fractured some ribs. Remy didn't deserve what we did to him, even if he had sent the damned card. Hell, he didn't deserve any of the shit we did to him."

"He didn't tell on you guys, did he?"

"No," Brad said on a long sigh. "That wasn't Remy's way. He was so used to being treated like a piece of dirt, he just let it slide. I justified what we did to him by convincing myself Devereux was poaching. He got what was coming to him for trying to take my girl away from me."

"Was he doing that?"

"No," Brad said in a low voice.

"Did Joan know what you and your friends had done?"

He nodded. "She knew. She was going to break our engagement because of it but after her father had a long talk with her, she stopped that foolishness."

"Do you think he threatened Remy?"

"I don't know, but if I was a betting man, I'd say he did."

"So after graduation Remy leaves Iowa, unable to stay around while you married the girl he loved," she said. "What about Joan? Did you two have a good marriage?"

He gave her a level look. "What do you think?"

She thought about it for a moment. "I'd say you most likely didn't."

"You'd be right," he told her. "We went through the motions, but we were both unhappy." Once more he stabbed his fingers through his hair. "When she called me that day from Madeleine's house and said she'd found Remy's mother dead, I knew damned well she'd been out there before. After she'd gone home and before the Jasper County guys got there with the meat wagon, I looked around the house, just checking, never expecting to find letters from Remy to Joan—to *my* wife!—sitting on the kitchen table."

"He had been writing her?"

"Ever since he'd left Iowa," Brad said through clenched teeth.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I made Joan tell me!" he shouted then apologized for his outburst. "I went home to find her on the phone with the Army, calling them to have them bring Remy home. I went ballistic and came that close," he held up his thumb and index finger to indicate distance, "that close to hitting her. When she confessed they'd been writing all along, I had to get out of there before I did something I knew I'd regret the rest of my life."

"Then he came home."

"Yeah," Brad hissed. "And she picked the son of a bitch up at the bus station in Newton and took him to Smith Funeral Home. I saw her car and went in to talk to her. That's when I found out she'd met him at the bus. Rather than cause a scene, I just told him I was sorry for his loss and took Joan by the arm to walk her outside." A brittle laugh came from Brad's throat. "He started to protest but I saw her shake her head to warn him not to. When I got her outside, I told her to get her ass to the house, that we were going to settle this once and for all."

"And did you?"

She watched him scrub his hand over his face. As he spoke, his voice broke.

"The only time I ever laid a hand to her was that day," he said, misery rife in his tone. "I told her to stay the hell away from Remy Devereux or he was a dead man. That was when she told me when Remy left Iowa, she was going to go with him." He took a ragged breath. "I lost it then and slapped her, knocked her clean down. I felt like the lowest scum on the bottom of a pond the second I did it. She was lying there on the

kitchen floor—blood trickling from her nose—staring at me like I was the worst kind of bastard.”

Lannie looked away from him for she had seen a glistening tear drifting down his face. She stared out across the dark acreage beyond the car.

“She told me to get out,” he said, sniffing, “and I was so ashamed, I just turned and left. I thought I’d better give her a day or two to get over what I’d done. Madeleine’s funeral was the next morning and I knew Joan would go to it. I stayed away, watching the procession going through town out to Hazelwood. I knew damned well she was sitting in the family limo with him. I *knew* she was. In my mind’s eye, I could see her holding his hand, and I was afraid of what I might do if I saw them together.” He hung his head. “Two days later, Joan was dead.”

“Did you see him at the funeral home?”

“I saw him during visitation and I wanted to jump on him and beat the living hell out of him but I didn’t. I just sat there on the couch and watched him crying at her casket, saw him kiss his fingers and place them on her cheek before he turned to go. He looked right at me, took a few steps toward me but my brother blocked him, ordered him to leave. He stood there looking at me with tears streaming down his face, tears for *my* wife, and I could see the pain eating at him like it was eating at me. But I tell you what, Lannie, if I’d had a gun right then, I’d have blown a hole clean through him. I didn’t want him mourning my goddamned wife!”

She had to ask and turned back to him. “Who killed Remy Devereux, Brad?”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I know it wasn’t you,” she said quietly. She thought of the look in Remy’s ghostly eyes when the drink had spilled in Brad’s lap. There hadn’t been meanness there but boyish mischievousness. If Brad had murdered Remy, there would have been fury in Remy’s golden eyes.

“How do you know it wasn’t me?” he challenged. “Who else had the motive? Who else could have gotten away with it all these years but a lawman?”

“You didn’t do it, but I think you know who did,” she said. “Or at least you suspect who did.”

“I found him,” Brad said. “Hanging from that tree over his mother’s grave, a wooden stool lying on its side beneath him. The coroner said it was suicide but I knew better.”

“Why?”

“Because Remy was a devout Catholic,” Brad said. “He and his mother never missed Mass. Come rain, sleet, snow or tornado they were at Saint Mary’s. Much of the time I heard Remy was one of Father Farrell’s altar boys. A man that religious wouldn’t have risked eternal damnation by killing himself.”

“But someone wanted him dead,” she said. “One of your friends maybe?”

"No, it wasn't one of my friends," he stated. "I'm sure of that. Whoever it was hit Remy over the head and then strung him up from that branch. I know it sure as I'm sitting here. The coroner found a contusion on the back of his head but when I read the report, the coroner explained the wound away by saying he believed the deceased had hit his head on the tree trunk when he jumped from the stool and hung himself."

"You think whoever killed Remy influenced the coroner to write that?"

"I don't know. Doc Miller might have honestly believed that was how it happened. I don't think Remy knew what was happening to him." His voice broke. "At least, I hope he didn't."

*"He did."*

Lannie jumped for the voice had come from right beside her and when she whipped her head around, she could see Remy's face in the passenger window. She watched him shake his head.

*"Don't ask him any more questions, bien-aimé. I'll tell you what you want to know."*

"I dream about him," she heard Brad say, and tore her attention from Remy's sad visage. "I see him hanging there and I know."

"You know what?" she asked.

"I know he died because of Joan."

*"No more. Tell him to take you home,"* the ghostly voice sighed.

Though Lannie suspected Brad was about to tell her who he thought had killed Remy, she reached out to put a hand on his arm. "Let's don't talk about this any more now," she said. "Could we just call it a night?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone into all this."

"It's okay," she said, rubbing his arm. "It's just that I'm tired and I've got a bit of a headache." She felt his shoulder tense then he reached down to turn the engine on.

"I guess I shot myself in the foot with you, huh?" he asked as he put the SUV in gear and backed out on T-38.

"Why would you say that?" she inquired.

"Because you think a hell of a lot less of me than you did before all this," he said bitterly.

*"Tell him you would like to see him again,"* her specter said. *"Tell him nothing's changed."*

Lannie wasn't so sure that was true or that she wanted another date with Brad, but there was something in Remy's words that touched her.

"Didn't I see a movie theater in town?" she asked as they turned onto Highway 6.

"Yeah," Brad said, casting her a quick look.

"Are you busy next Friday night?"

She heard him sigh. "I can make myself un-busy if I am," he replied.

"Then let's have some dinner and take in a flick. I'll need to unwind after the week I know I'm going to be having getting my new house ready for occupancy."

"You've got a date, sweetness," Brad said, and she noticed he was smiling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brad walked her to her door but made no move to kiss her good night. She thanked him for dinner and he just stood there with his hands jammed into the pockets of his trousers. "Can I call you?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "Can you?"

He grinned. "Sorry, teacher. I forget I'm talking to a woman who makes her living with words. *May* I call you?"

"You may," she said. "Good night, Brad."

"Sweet dreams," he said, taking a couple of steps back like a teenage boy.

"You too," she said as she went into her room and closed the door behind her.

She knew he would be waiting in the mirror and when she laid her purse on the dresser, she looked up into the glass to find him hovering there.

"*He is a lonely man,*" Remy said.

"And you feel for him," she said.

"*Much of the time.*"

She thought of their lovemaking the night before and blushed. "Aren't you going to join me?"

He shook his head. "*I can't, bien-aimé,*" he said. "*Not until you go to sleep. I can only come to you in your dreams but once you enter our home, I can be with you in the flesh.*"

"Our home," she repeated.

"*It will be ours to share,*" he said, his image wavering.

"If I came there tonight..."

"*We could be together as it was meant for us to be,*" he said, and his reflection faded.

Lannie stood there for a moment. She glanced at the bed and knew it would be cold in the abandoned house. She knew what would happen between her and Remy, it was a foregone conclusion and truth be told, she was looking forward to making love with him again. Her entire body throbbed at the very thought. Chewing on a thumbnail, she finally decided the best thing to do would be to pick up some bedding from the local discount store that was open 24/7.

It took her only a few moments to change into jeans and a sweater, to slip on her tennis shoes and she was out the door, her heart light and her pulse racing.



## Chapter Six

The wind had picked up strongly by the time Lannie pulled up before the property that would soon be hers. She was stunned to see the gate open, allowing her to drive up to the house. Thinking back, she realized the real estate woman hadn't relocked the gate when they left and if memory served, she hadn't replaced the lockbox on the front door. Such carelessness normally would have made Lannie angry but tonight all she did was smile.

No moon shone to light her way. Though there were lights in the house farther west of her, no light found its way to the dark yard of the old Devereux place and she was annoyed with herself that she hadn't thought to bring a flashlight or candles.

*"I have what we need, beloved,"* he whispered to her, and she looked up through the windshield to see faint movement in the dormer window.

Getting out of the car, she opened the door behind her seat and pulled out the bag of blankets, comforter, pillows and sheets. Her arms full, she shut the door with her hip and began picking her way through the weeds, amazed when nothing tripped her or hindered her movement.

The front door opened slowly as she climbed up the steps to the porch. Blackness yawned behind that portal but she felt no alarm, no nervousness. If anything, she felt giddy with excitement and as soon as she entered the house, the door eased shut, she could feel her heart knocking against her ribs with anticipation. She was quivering as she stood there with the bags haphazardly held in her arms.

"Remy?" she asked quietly.

"I am here."

From out of the shadows of the parlor he stepped. In the darkness he was but an outline, a shifting of air, and then candles sprang to life all around them, casting him in a lambent glow from the flickering votives.

Lannie could not move as he came toward her. He was even more handsome than she had remembered him from her dreams. His rich black hair was combed to one side but it fell recklessly over his left eye, giving him a boyish look. He was wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearm, hanging untucked from worn jeans. His feet were bare and she knew that was the way he preferred it to be. There was a gentle smile on his face, dimples in his cheeks, a deep cleft in his chin and his eyes were glowing with a heat that sank into her womb and curled there.

He came to her, took the bags from her arms and laid them aside. When he straightened, his smile widened, white teeth gleaming in the candlelight. "You came

prepared," he said, and she realized that his voice no longer held the ghostly cadence and reverberation she had grown accustomed to hearing.

She put out a hand and touched him, shocked that he felt so substantial, so real.

He laid his hand over hers, against his heart. "Here, I am as I was," he said as though reading her mind. "I am as real as you. There is no need to speak my words in your mind."

There was no heartbeat beneath her palm and when he stepped closer, enclosing her in his arms, she could not feel his breath against her face as he lowered his lips to hers and kissed her so softly, so tenderly, she moaned. She clung to him, needing what his body was offering.

"I have waited so long for you," he said.

Though the heart of the man holding her did not beat, nor his lungs draw breath, his shaft had hardened against her belly and leapt against her, wanting her as much as she wanted it.

Remy released her and stepped back, bending over to retrieve a large bag that held the thick coverlet she had brought. He tore the vinyl covering open and tossed it aside, spread the coverlet on the floor then took her hand.

"There is no need for blankets," he said, dropping to the spread coverlet, tugging her down beside him. "I will keep you warm."

She had questions she wanted to ask, she needed to ask, but he shook his head when she opened her mouth to speak.

"I will tell you everything, but for now let me love you, *bien-aimé*. I need you tonight. I need to be lost within you."

"Will you leave me in the morning light?" she asked, searching his face. The thought made her sad.

He shook his head. "Not here in this place that is ours. I will be with you for eternity."

They were kneeling there on the coverlet and he eased her down with an arm behind her back, laying her beside him, arching one long leg over hers to claim her for his own, and the swell of his erection thrusting against her hip. She looked up into his golden eyes and watched candle flames dancing there. He was so beautiful it made her heart ache to look at him.

"I have waited so long to have you here in this house I want to share with you," he said.

She put a hand to his cheek and he turned his mouth to place a kiss in her palm. "Love me," she said. "Love me in whatever way you want to."

Hunger flashed through his eyes and he lowered his mouth to hers, kissed her with such heat, such pent-up passion, she could feel his need. His tongue slipped around and over hers and he traveled every inch of her mouth. He trailed kisses down her throat, his fingers sliding under her sweater to cup her breast. His fingers molded

around her and he was happy she had forsaken the restriction of a bra to hold her firm flesh.

Lannie luxuriated in the feel of his palm cupping her, his thumb tracing a sweet back-and-forth pattern over her engorged nipple. She arched her chest against his hand, wanting him to do more than just touch her.

Remy smiled and sat back on his heel, put both hands to her sweater and pushed it up above her breasts. He leaned over and took one swollen nipple into his mouth. His tongue lapped at her then swirled around and around the areola until she was squirming beneath him, arching her body for him to give attention to her other breast.

"Greedy little *bébé*," he murmured as he slid his lips to her other breast.

He was cupping her breasts and alternating his hot mouth from one straining peak to the other as he ground his hard erection against her thigh. She could feel the moisture gathering between her legs and lifted her hips toward him, feeling that stony shaft leap in response.

"My *pauvre bien-aimé* wants something more from her man?" he questioned, pausing to look up into her fevered gaze.

"I want you to put your hand..." she got no further for his hand slipped down her pants to cup her between the legs.

"You want my hand here, *bébé*?" He squeezed tightly. "This what you want?"

"Yes," she hissed.

Remy grinned and sat back once again. He reached down to take off her shoes and socks before undoing her jeans and stripping them from her, pulling off her thong with an arch of his eyebrow at her.

"It's comfortable," she said, her face turning red.

"I doubt me that," he said in his Cajun drawl. "Not more than a piece of floss." He tossed the thong aside then held out his hand to help her to sit. When she did, he pulled her sweater over her head and laughed when she shuddered.

"You said you'd keep me warm," she reminded him.

"So I did," he said, his eyes locked on her breasts. Splaying his fingers between her breasts, he pushed her gently down then got lithely to his feet.

Lannie watched him taking off his clothing and felt the blood rushing through her body. As his shirt came off, she marveled at the sheer perfection of his chest and lean abdomen, but when the pants came off, she felt her mouth go dry. He was huge and engorged and standing straight as an arrow pointing toward her. She longed to take that large rod in her hands and trace the heavy veins that ran along its length.

He hunkered down in front of her then laid his body over hers, allowing her the luxury of feeling his manly weight pressing her down. Her arms encircled him and he sighed deeply before laying his head to her breast.

She cupped his head with one hand, her fingers threaded through the dark curls while the other hand smoothed over the sleek muscles of his broad back.

"Am I too heavy for you, *bébé*?" he asked.

"You are just right," she said as she felt him settle between her legs, one knee pushing hers aside so he fit her like a glove. He rubbed against her. "Absolutely perfect."

The candlelight flickered around them to cast the room in varying shades of pale yellow and ebony. A faint scent of gardenia wafted through the air and she inhaled the heady blend of wax and flower.

Remy moved, pushing up on his elbows as he planted light kisses down her chest and around her breasts before putting his mouth to hers and drawing deeply of her sweetness. Their tongues dueled for a long time until the hardness of his erection could no longer be denied by either of them.

He put his hands up and took hers, locking their fingers together as he moved his hip toward her, his erection going unerringly to that moist valley between her legs. She lifted up to accommodate his entry and he settled so perfectly within her heated folds she knew they had been created for one another. His thrust into her was no less sweet than the gentle way he eased out before going in again—deeper this time and holding it longer. Slowly and with expert care, he moved in and out of her until his cock was slick with her warm juices and her body was throbbing for want of his.

With his fingers tensing around hers and hers around his, he began the age-old rocking motion of joining their bodies together. In and out slowly at first and then with a slightly greater speed until she brought her legs up to capture his lean hips and lock them to her. His head went down to her shoulder and her lips to his hair as the rocking became a sliding in and out with heated strokes that brought the breath quicker to her lungs. Her blood sang as she lay there beneath him with his heavy body possessing her, his straining shaft buried deep inside her.

"Remy," she breathed, and his tempo increased until she could hear the light thud of their bodies against one another. He was grunting softly and she knew without seeing that his eyes were closed. He was completely absorbed in taking her and she was reveling in his conquering.

Somewhere outside an owl hooted and the wind skirled around the eaves. A light plink at the window bespoke rain or sleet, perhaps snow. But on the pallet where Remy and his lady lay, it was warm and they were lost in the pleasure each was giving the other.

He felt that first faint tremor deep in her body and stilled with his cock buried to the hilt inside her. Her fingers tightened against his.

"Lie still, *bébé*," he whispered. "Lie very still."

Lannie wanted to squirm. She wanted to writhe beneath him. His cock was so full, so large inside her, she felt impaled by it. She wanted to move against him so the itch that she sensed hovering there could come full-blown.

"Lie still," he ordered again, and when she whimpered, he eased out of her just a little before slowly pressing down even deeper.

"Oh God!" Lannie exclaimed, for the shudders rippled through her vagina with such force she felt it all the way to her teeth. She tensed as the spasms tightened around him, milking him, laving him, and yet he just lay there not moving, his shaft rigid and throbbing.

He shifted inside her and another cycle of convulsions rippled through her sheath—he smiled, still holding himself perfectly still. He eased out just a little and a third set of tremors took her until he could feel her fingernails digging into the back of his hand.

"Remy, please!" she pleaded and ground herself on him, arched her hips up in need.

"All right, *bébé*," he said huskily, and a low growl came from his throat as he unleashed the power of his thrusts until he was slamming into her with such force, he made her grunt with each formidable push.

In and out with a rhythm that to her seemed violent and tender at the same time, he rode her hard. He was claiming her with a possessiveness that could not be denied and she gloried in the taking. His body was hard and his muscles flexed against her, his stomach slamming into hers, his thighs bunching and hardening as he pushed his weight into her.

"Yes!" she cried out, and jerked her hands from his, burying her fingers in his hair and pulling.

Remy shot his hands beneath her and lifted her up for one final deep thrust of penetration, and he felt another orgasm take hold of her. She rippled around him and he pressed as deep as he could go—feeling it all the way to his root—holding it there as he came with such pulses she screamed her release.

The orgasm seemed to go on forever and ever, and Remy became caught up in it like a fish in a net. He squirmed against her, ground into her until he was spent and he buckled like a broken marionette atop her, his body depleted of all energy—supernatural or natural.

"Sleepy," she said, and he slid off her to pull her into his arms and against him, molding her to him as he knew she belonged.

"I am here," he said, and kissed her sweaty brow.

Lannie was asleep in a matter of moments.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lannie lay there in his arms with her hand on his pectoral, the curly chest hairs tickling her palm as the morning sun fell in dirty streaks through the windows. The votive candles in their little blue hobnail glass cups had burned out during the night. He was idly twirling a lock of her short hair around and around his finger as his lips pressed lovingly against her temple now and again. He made what passed as a sighing sound and she looked up at his chiseled face.

"What?" she asked.

"I am happy, Lannie. I have never been so content," he told her.

She echoed the movement of his finger in her hair by swirling a spike of hair beside his nipple. She felt his embrace tighten around her.

"How old were you when you died?" she queried.

"Twenty-three," he replied.

"Yet you look..."

"As old as a man your age?" he challenged. "Would you have felt comfortable with a boy of twenty-three?"

She admitted that she would not have, that making love to a young man that age would feel wrong.

"That is why I look as I do."

"Can you ever leave this place?" she asked.

"Not physically but I can appear in reflective surfaces like windows and mirrors, and I can enter dreams," he told her.

"Like you entered mine," she said.

"Like I entered yours," he agreed.

"Do you enter Brad's dreams too?" she asked.

She felt him stiffen and then he was removing his arm from around her and sitting up, drawing his knees into the perimeter of his arms, his right hand clasping his left wrist.

"I have appeared in his dreams from time to time to keep him honest," he said.

"As a man my age?" she asked.

"As we were when we knew one another."

"Do you hate him, Remy?"

"I never have. Brad's basically a good man but he has to work at it."

Lannie sat up too, her hand on his back. "He wasn't the one who murdered you though, was he?"

"No, it wasn't him," he said, and turned his head so he could look at her. "It was someone else who ended my life."

She had thought as much. "What happened?"

He smiled. "There's a story in it if you want to write it, beloved," he said. "Of course you'd have to change the names to protect the guilty."

"Hard to try a man for a crime when he's dead," she countered.

"Oh he was tried, Lannie," Remy said. "He was tried, sentenced, convicted and executed all within the blink of an eye." He looked down at his bare feet. "His accomplice along with him."

"Did you cause the accident that took their lives?"

He smiled. "Bad driving killed them, *bien-aimé*. All I did was appear to them in the windshield and Chuck Patterson did the rest. A guilty conscience has condemned many a man to his fate."

Justice—though supernatural—had been served and Lannie could not dredge up sympathy for the Pattersons. As long as no one else had been hurt in the process and Remy assured her no one had.

"It was a lonely stretch of I-80 where they met their end and not another car in sight when it happened," he told her.

"She was with you at the funeral and then she drove you home," Lannie said, figuring she knew the way it would have gone.

He shook his head. "I had Mama's car. Joan parked hers at the grocery store and I brought her home with me." A faint smile tugged at his lips. "She stayed the night."

"You made love," she said gently.

"All night," he responded.

"Did Brad find out that had happened?"

"No, he never knew but her parents did. A cousin saw her car and called to tell them." He lifted his head and stared across the room. "They came for her the next morning. Stopped out there on the road and honked the car until she came out. Neither one of them would get out of the car and come up to the house. I tried to get Joan not to leave but she was afraid of her father, afraid of what he might do to me. I told her I could take care of myself but she ran out and got into the car with them before I could stop her. Old man Patterson took off down the road like a bat out of hell." He shuddered. "I never saw her alive again."

"How did you find out she had died?"

He laughed bitterly. "I heard it on the damned radio," he said. "I didn't hear from her the next day and when I tried calling the house, I didn't get an answer. I was all packed, ready to leave, the car gassed up. We had made plans for her to go with me, so when I hadn't heard anything from her, the day after that I decided to drive by her house and get her, in case Brad had tried to stop her. I wasn't going to leave until I knew for sure if she had changed her mind about leaving with me." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Mama always kept the radio in her car on to get all the local news and when I turned it on, the first thing I heard was the funeral announcements. I was about to change the station when the man from the funeral home said Joan Patterson Wyngate's visitation was scheduled for that afternoon."

"What an awful way for you to hear about it," she said, feeling for him.

"Brad was there in the room, sitting on the sofa, but he didn't say a word to me when I came in. I went to her casket and stood there in shock. I couldn't believe she was dead. I expected her to open her eyes and look up at me. No one spoke to me, no one tried to make me leave, but when I turned around, Brad was staring at me like he could have killed me. Everyone was staring at me so I left, went back to the house. I couldn't leave until she was buried." He ground his teeth. "I wouldn't leave."

"Patterson and his wife came out to see you."

"Came right up to the front door and asked if they could have a few words with me," he said. "At that point, I didn't give a damn about anything or anyone so I let them in."

"You didn't suspect they were there to harm you."

"No, and if I had, it wouldn't have mattered. I was dead inside already, a walking corpse. The woman I loved was dead, my mother was dead, the town—hell, the entire county—hated the sight of me. What did I have to live for? I believe if I'd made it back to Iraq, I'd have found a way to get myself killed."

Lannie thought so too. "Brad said he didn't believe it was a suicide. He said he thought someone hit you."

"Someone did," he said.

"What happened?"

"I wasn't feeling particularly hospitable and it was hot in the house. There wasn't any air conditioning so I took the Pattersons out to the back porch. They took the two rockers and I sat on the swing. I just stared at them, figuring they were going to lash into me any second, warn me to leave or whatever."

"Did they?"

"Mrs. Patterson told me Joan had come to tell her that she was going to run away with me and that no matter what she'd said, Joan wouldn't listen. She said Jo had gone home to pack. Her mother told me she called Jo's father but he couldn't leave whatever it was he was doing so he sent Brad's father over there to talk sense into her." His jaw was clenched, a muscle working. "Just like Chuck Patterson, Wyngate's way of talking to his womenfolk was to knock them around, and the more Mrs. Patterson spoke, the madder I got. I hadn't seen any bruises on Joan's face and arms when I'd gone to the funeral home but those two bastards always hit their women where it wouldn't show. If Winnie had hit Joan, the bruises would have been under her clothes."

"What did her father say to you that day?"

"He said Wyngate told her that if she went with me, they'd hunt us down and make her watch while they cut my throat. He looked me in the eye and said they would have done it, and I believed him. It was then Mrs. Patterson told me that Joan had been carrying Brad's child and she had told her mother she had come out to see my mother that day to get rid of it. She said Joan had planned to leave Brad afterward and wait for me in Des Moines." His lips trembled. "Patterson spoke up and said he was glad my mother had died before Joan could commit such a terrible sin."

"Oh Remy!" Lannie said, tears forming in her eyes. "What did you do?"

"I told them to get the hell out of my house. I got up from the swing and went past them, intending to throw them out if they didn't move fast enough. The oak rail pole that had come loose on Mama was propped up against the wall beside the kitchen door. I hadn't had the heart to replace it."



"He hit you with the pole."

"No, Joan's mother did," Remy said. "For a little woman, she packed one hell of a wallop. I went down, out cold, and the next thing I knew I'm hearing her voice from far off telling him to pull on the rope, to pull it hard. I felt the hemp cutting into my neck, choking me, and tried to reach up to take it off but her arms were wrapped around mine, and she was swinging her entire weight on me, her legs wrapped around mine, pulling me down as Patterson pulled me up with the rope. I was strangling, unable to break loose of her grip. In the kitchen window, I could see myself hanging there, dying, with that bitch clinging to me like a damned vine."

"And because you saw yourself at the moment of death, legend would have it that your spirit got trapped in the reflection of the glass," she said.

"I suppose so. I remember watching them arranging the scene from behind the kitchen window where I seemed to be floating so I guess that's what happened. I don't know where the rope they used to hang me came from. I suppose they brought it along with them. Then I saw Winnie Wyngate coming up the driveway. He looked up at my body swaying there and laughed then he reached into his pocket and pulled out my Saint George's medal and hung it on the tree branch. I had given it to Joan the night we'd made love and I knew then that Joan's death hadn't been an accident. I knew in my heart Winnie had killed Joan just as the Pattersons had killed me."

"You caused Brad's father's accident too, didn't you?"

"His last words to me when he hung that medallion on the tree were, 'See what comes of losing your head over somebody else's woman? That'll teach you, boy.'" Remy shrugged. "Wyngate lost his head in that accident. I'd say it was *lex talionis*."

"The law of equal and direct retribution, an eye for an eye," she translated his thought.

"That was exactly what it was."

"*Lex talionis* is also called mirror punishment," she said.

"Now that is fitting," he quipped. "The three of them had rather seen Joan and me dead than together and they got their wish. She was lost to me forever because I sinned by causing their deaths."

"But I'm with you," she said.

He smiled tenderly at her. "Yes, *bien-aimé*, you are."

She gathered him into her arms. "How did you know I'd come?" she asked.

"I didn't," he answered. "I just knew the moment you stopped out on the road and looked up at the house that it called out to you and you were willing to listen. As I watched you looking at my and my mother's grave, I knew you were sensitive to the vibrations that cling to this place and in my heart I hoped you would accept me for what I am, for who I am, not be frightened of me and make my loneliness go away."

"I will, darling," she said. "I promise you I will."

He turned so he pressed against her, his lips on hers for a brief moment. The sound of a car door slamming startled him and he jerked away from her, twisting his head around to stare at the locked door.

"Brad's out there," he said.

Lannie knew he was right, even though there was no way he could see whoever it was that was picking their way through the brambles. She got up and threw on her clothes as quickly as she could, looking at the rumbled coverlet, her face red.

"I'll see to it," Remy told her. "Meet him on the porch."

Lannie ran a quick hand through her hair then opened the front door, going out onto the porch just as Brad put a booted foot on the first step. He was wearing his uniform—complete with hat—and grinned up at her.

"You're an early riser," he told her, and backed up as she came down the steps.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I wanted to come out and take some measurements of the windows and stuff." She forced a smile to her lips. "What are you doing out here so early?"

Brad turned to survey the yard. "I wanted to find out what all I'd need to get started on sprucing up this yard." He tipped his hat back, put one foot on the first step again and then leaned his right forearm on it, perfectly at ease in her presence. "My brother and nephews are going to help and I also checked with David Schmitz. He's a good friend of mine and a jack of all trades. He has a business called One Man and a Hammer and he says he'll do the front porch for you."

"You didn't have to do that," she said, feeling Remy's eyes on her from the house.

"They owe me some favors and are willing to work for a case of beer."

"Oh Brad, no!" she protested. "I'll pay..."

He held up a hand. "Nope, won't hear of it. It's the least I can do for ruining our supper last night."

"You didn't ruin anything," she said.

"Well, I certainly didn't want our first date to be all about what happened here," he said, looking at the house. "Talking about death isn't conducive to courting a girl."

Lannie blinked. "Courting?" she echoed.

"*He's lonely too, bien-aimé,*" Remy whispered in her ear.

"Well, you know," Brad said, throwing out a dismissive hand at what he'd confessed to. "Bad choice of words, I guess, but it's not every day I get to meet a woman like you."

Uncomfortable with the way he was looking at her, Lannie glanced down at her watch. "Oh man, I need to get going if I'm going to make it to Mass by nine o'clock," she said.

"What have you got planned for the rest of the day?" he asked, and she could see the hope in his dark blue eyes.

"Have lunch with him," Remy told her.

"No," she stated then blushed for Brad's expression turned sad. "I mean nothing."

"Then how about having lunch with me?" he asked. "I can come by and pick you up at the motel. You like Chinese food?" Before she could answer, he told her there was a great place in Newton that served a terrific buffet. "Or we could eat in Grinnell."

She looked at his uniform. "Aren't you working?"

"I can take off for an hour or so," he said with a grin. "Helps to be chief, you know."

"I was going to go over to Des Moines to look for curtains," she said, not wanting to encourage him.

"That's okay," he said. "I'll take off the rest of the day and drive. We can have lunch over there."

Feeling trapped, hearing Remy insisting she take pity on her lover's nemesis, she finally gave in. "All right."

"I'll come by around eleven then," he said. "How's that?"

"That's fine," she said then turned to go back inside to fetch her purse. "I'll see you then."

Brad's smile was so filled with happiness, she dug her fingernails into her palms as he started back to his car and she opened the door, going inside.

Remy was holding out a piece of paper and her purse.

"What's this?" she asked as she took the paper without looking down at it.

"Measurements for every window in the house," he said. "Can't buy curtains without measurements."

She shook her head. "I hate lying and I don't want to encourage him, Remy. He..."

"He hasn't been out with a woman since Joan died. That's been nearly fifteen years ago," he interrupted her. "Take pity on him, *bien-aimé*. You don't have to sleep with him and I'll be damned if I'll let you marry him, but what will it hurt to brighten his life just a little? Make it a bit more bearable?"

She looked up into his golden eyes and realized this man was unique among all those she had met in her lifetime. Though Brad Wyngate had made Remy's life miserable when they were growing up, had taken the girl he loved away from him, Remy was generous enough to want to make Brad's life a little happier. Such selflessness was hard for her to understand and yet she knew that had to have been the way Madeleine Devereux had raised her son.

"Don't you think it will hurt him when I don't fall madly in love with him?" she countered. "He is talking about courting me, Remy, and..."

"You need someone who can take you out to eat every now and then," Remy said. "Someone to take you to the movies or out dancing, to Lenten fish fries at the KC hall, or to the malls and other places I can't ever go. I'll not have you sit here with me day

after day, night after night, hour after hour, and sigh because you'd like to be out doing things you like to do. I want you to go out with him and do those things because I can't do them with you."

"But..."

"You're going to be late for Mass," he cut in, and took her by the shoulders to turn her around and push her gently toward the door. "Take your purse and go, woman!"

The door opened of its own accord and he nudged her through it. She turned to chastise him but the portal closed firmly and she heard him laughing.

"We'll talk about this later!" she called out to him.

"Say a prayer for me," she heard him say.

All the way into town and as she walked from the Religious Education building parking lot and into Saint Mary's church for the first time, Lannie thought about Remy. He was truly a remarkable man. The greeters were friendly and she liked the looks of the church, scanning the pale blue walls and the fabulous pendant chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceiling. It was an old-fashioned church so it had an ambience that was soothing though the choir left a bit to be desired as they began singing, a few voices rather discordant in the blend. At least the organist played with enthusiasm and the parishioners—like most Catholic churchgoers—joined in. When the service was over, Lannie shook hands with the priest and deacons, declining an invitation to have coffee and rolls in the basement. She wasn't quite up to meeting a lot of people that day.

"Come by the parish office and register," the priest told her. "And be sure to fill out a time and talent survey."

Lannie assured him she would and then walked quickly to her car, trying to ignore the pointed looks she was receiving. She doubted many of the church members didn't know she would soon be the new owner of the old Devereux place.

\* \* \* \* \*

The drive over to Des Moines with Brad was pleasant. They had discussed everything from the weather to the new television season, and though the air was chilly, it was bright and sunny. As her companion was pointing out the amusement park in Altoona, Lannie gasped.

"What's wrong?" Brad asked, looking over at her.

"I told my cousin to go over to Aunt Bethel's house and I'd call her after church today!" She started fumbling through her purse. "I had forgotten all about it and she'll be waiting." She thumbed in the Georgia number, chewing on her lower lip as she waited for the call to go through.

"Hello?"

"Aunt Bethel?" Lannie said. "It's me, Lannie."

"Oh hello, dear. Mary Nell's here. Just a minute."

Lannie heard her elderly aunt yell for her daughter and winced. Bethel was hard of hearing and hated talking on the phone.

"I was beginning to wonder about you," Mary Nell said, and Lannie could hear the irritation in her cousin's voice.

"Is he still down there?"

"Hovering like a mosquito hawk over a stagnant pond," Mary Nell replied with disgust. "I heard he went to the moving company and tried to get them to tell him where they were going to deliver your furniture."

"Damn it!" Lannie said. "How the heck am I going to have the furniture brought out here without him knowing where, Mary Nell?"

Brad put a hand on her arm. "I'll take care of it," he stated firmly. "Don't worry about it."

"Who's that who was speaking?" Mary Nell asked, undoubtedly hearing the masculine voice on the other end. "You met someone already?"

"Yes and no," Lannie replied.

"Cute?" Mary Nell asked, giggling.

"There wasn't any trouble with Trey before the police got to your house, was there?"

"None that we couldn't handle. I told you before, that man is crazy as a loon, Lanelle. He's got it in his mind you'll come back to him if he could just sit down and talk to you."

"Won't happen," Lannie stated firmly.

"Who's the man with you?" Mary Nell asked again.

"Chief of Police Brad Wyngate," Brad said loudly, and Lannie realized he could hear every word Mary Nell spoke.

"Chief of police?" Mary Nell repeated, emphasizing the first symbol of police. "What have you gone and done, Lanelle Durant?"

"Stolen my heart," Brad stated.

"Will you stop?" Lannie said, giving him a comical look. She couldn't keep from laughing.

"Well now, that was fast," Mary Nell said, and Lannie heard her telling whoever else was in the room that Lannie had found herself a beau. "A chief of police no less."

"He'll know what to do about Trey," Mary Nell's husband called out.

"Knock it off," Lannie said with exasperation. "Listen, I bought a house out here and..."

"What?" Mary Nell exclaimed. "You mean you aren't coming home?"

"Remember Granny Jane's house down in Quincy?" Lannie asked.

"Yeah..." Mary Nell answered, drawing the word out. "Do you mean to tell me you found a house like that?"

"Very similar and it's out in the country with plenty of privacy. Mary Nell, it is absolutely perfect."

There was a long, heartfelt sigh. "If that's what you want," she said, "but I'm not happy you aren't coming home. What about your furniture?"

"I'll call the movers tomorrow and tell them what's going on. I won't need my stuff sent out here until..."

"Where is here exactly?" Mary Nell cut in.

Lannie glanced at Brad.

"Tell her Grinnell," he told her.

"Ah, Grinnell, Iowa, Mary Nell. I'll get a post office box in town first thing tomorrow so you can send any mail I've gotten," Lannie said.

"I thought you were in Oklahoma," Mary Nell said.

"That was for Trey's benefit. Just don't tell him anything, Mary Nell. I've a feeling he'll find out somehow sooner or later anyway, but the longer I can keep from having to confront him, the better."

"You still got that court order against him, don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"We'll get you one here," Brad said, and Lannie saw the gleam in his blue eyes turn hard.

"I'll get another one for out here," Lannie said, thankful for Brad's assistance.

"All right but that man is loony tunes, Lanelle. I don't trust him any farther than I can see him. You be careful."

Lannie assured her cousin she would, talked for a few moments longer then hung up, depressed as she stuffed the cell phone back into her purse.

"I can promise you he won't cause you any trouble, Lannie," Brad stated. "If he comes out here, I'll send him packing. Believe me."

"I appreciate that, Brad," she said. "I don't want anything more to do with Trey Durant."

\* \* \* \* \*

At that moment, Lannie's ex-husband was sitting on the balcony of his motel room in Albany, Georgia, guzzling down the third beer of the day. His narrow-eyed stare was locked on an ant crawling across the railing. Dark thoughts roiled through his mind to turn his handsome face into a belligerent, angry mask that created deep grooves to either side of his mouth.

"Fucking faithless bitch," he commented as he lifted the longneck bottle and took a deep sip of the brew. He belched loudly then set the frosty bottle down on his thigh. "I'm going to find you if it's the last thing I do, Lannie, and when I do..." A merciless smile spread over his face. "I'm going to make you sorry you ever left me."

## Chapter Seven

Three weeks later with the yard cleaned up, the flagstone walkway pruned, the vinyl siding steam-cleaned, a new porch almost finished and a two-stall garage attached to the house by a screened-in breezeway under construction, Lannie stood in the side yard as she spoke to the company that would be putting in the gravel driveway up to the garage. She was pointing to a section that she wanted as a turnaround to be added as well when she looked up at the dormer window to see Remy standing there with his hands pressed to the glass like a little boy. She smiled, wondering if the man from the paving company had seen her specter. She glanced at Brad where he and his brother were washing the outside window panes but they were arguing football and too engaged in that activity to notice much of anything else.

"If the weather holds, we can bring your gravel out next week," the man told her.

"I may decide to put in blacktop in the spring," she told him. "I just haven't decided yet."

"Well, you just let us know. We'll do her up right," the man said, tipping his baseball cap before heading back to his truck.

"Brad?" Lannie called out. "Do you and Al and David want some coffee?"

"You bet," David Schmitz told her. He was putting the final touches on the porch.

"Maybe later," Brad said, and went back to discussing the football team.

Going into the house via the back porch, Lannie was thrilled with the way the house was shaping up. The inside was spotless with paint that had been touched up, a thorough cleaning and new carpet in a few of the rooms. Vertical blinds were pulled to the side behind crisp white ruffled curtains, the window treatments in keeping with the Victorian look of the farmhouse.

"Blacktop?" Remy asked. He was leaning with his hip against the kitchen counter, arms folded. He shook his head. "I don't know, *bien-aimé*."

"I don't either," she said as she poured David a cup of black coffee. "I like the functionality of it, but maybe the gravel will be okay."

"Functionality?" he repeated.

"You know, weeds growing up through the gravel," she answered.

"I defy the first weed to grow in your yard," he said, eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, sure," she said, and laughed, heading through the dining room into the parlor.

"I mean it," he said as he followed her, and somehow she was pretty sure not one wild plant would dare pop up through the gravel.

David took the coffee from Lannie and gave her a few ideas for the back deck she had asked him to build off the screened porch.

"You want it where you can go into the hot tub gazebo directly off the porch," the handy man wanted clarified.

"Uh-huh," Lannie said.

"Okay. I'll start on it Monday if we don't get a freeze. The ground is getting a bit hard for digging footings."

"Is Al going to be able to help you with that?" she asked, knowing it would take two men to use the power auger.

"Yeah, he said he would."

Lannie told him if he needed more coffee to just yell. The wind was a bit too brisk and she wanted to go in and sit by the fire, hopefully within the comfort of Remy's arms. She'd had a headache since getting up that morning and feared she was about to come down with one of her biannual migraines.

Going into the second parlor she had set aside as a den, she wasn't surprised to see Remy already seated on the blue and white gingham loveseat. She kicked off her shoes and joined him, leaning into him as he slung his arm around her.

"I really like this room," she said, looking around at the two overstuffed leather chairs sitting to either side of the fieldstone hearth, the sofa facing the crackling fire. Everything in the room was brand new, from the paintings on the wall to the entertainment center on another to the plasma TV over the mantle. The loveseat was actually dual recliners where she and Remy could lie back and enjoy the DVDs he devoured with relish—catching up on sixteen years of movies he'd missed while she munched popcorn or chowed down on salsa and tortilla chips with her ever-present cherry-flavored soda pop.

"It's almost as cozy as our bedroom," he agreed.

Everything in that beautiful room was new as well, the two of them having picked out every stick of furniture, every knickknack, every piece of bedding from catalogues over which they'd pored while waiting for the house to close.

"Did I tell you the movers are coming today?" she asked as she snuggled against him.

"Yeah, you told me," he said. "I'm curious to rummage through all your stuff."

She laughed but then she felt his body go rigid.

"Brad is coming," he told her, and in the blink of an eye he was gone.

Brad came to stand with his hands on either side of the pocket doors. "Can you come out and settle an argument between me and my brother before I stomp him into the ground?" he asked.

Lannie felt rather than heard Remy's guffaw as she got up from the loveseat and went over to slip her feet into her loafers. "I don't know the first thing about football," she warned him.



He just stood there with his head cocked to one side, a slight smile on his face. "Have I told you how lovely you look today with that smudge of dirt on your chin?" he asked, and before she could step back, he reached out to rub his thumb across the blotch.

"Well, you should have seen me yesterday then, when I had soot all over me from head to toe," she snorted, moving away from his touch.

Brad's smile slipped away and he snaked out his arm, sliding it behind her back, pulling her to him, his mouth slanting over hers with such an intense kiss she completely froze. When the tip of his tongue touched her lips, she pulled away, her eyes wide. She put a shaky hand to her mouth.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Even though they'd been out quite a few times and he'd kissed her good night each time, he'd never taken it into his head to kiss her that fiercely. A gentle touch, a respectful pressing of his mouth to hers had been the only intimate contact they'd had, but now he'd upped the ante and she didn't like it.

"Lannie, you have to know how I feel about you," he said.

"I'm not ready for something like that," she said.

Brad sighed heavily. "When will you be ready, Lannie?" he asked. His face showed his hurt as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his torn jeans.

"I don't know," she said. "I've been divorced seven months now, Brad, and I'm just not ready to get serious about anyone."

"Anyone," he echoed. "I didn't realize I was just anyone." He turned and started down the hallway.

"Brad, wait!" she said, knowing she'd not only hurt him, she'd insulted him as well. She started after him but Remy took her arm.

"Leave him be," her ghostly lover said. "He'll cool down and be back in to apologize."

"See, Remy? This is exactly what I didn't want to happen!" she said, tears gathering in her eyes.

"I know," he said, enfolding her in his strong arms. He rested his chin atop her head. "He'll be okay."

"I didn't want to lead him into thinking anything could ever happen between us," she said. "It can't, Remy. I don't want him to think it ever will."

The sound of a truck engine broke into Lannie's misery and she realized it must be the movers. She groaned, not wanting to deal with that now.

"Go see to your furniture, *bien-aimé*," he said softly. "Everything will be all right. I promise."

Remy watched the woman he had come to love more than he had ever loved Joan walk away with her shoulders bowed beneath the weight of her guilt. Seeing her so distressed put a pain deep in what little soul he had left. He knew he had to make

things right for her and the only way he could do that was to pay a visit to Brad—in Wyngate's dreams that night.

As she made her way out the front door and across the PVC plank flooring of her new porch, Lannie was in time to see Brad backing out of the drive, spraying gravel as he took off going north on Jewel Street. She gave his brother an apologetic look.

Al Wyngate shrugged, apparently embarrassed, and continued on with what he was doing. David Schmitz only smiled, screwing into place one of the corbels along the front of the porch. The driver of the semi that was parked on the road was walking toward her, clipboard in hand. Hammering echoed to her from the garage being installed. Depressed, she sat down on her new front steps and bowed her head.

Night had fallen and with it sleet was hitting against the tin roof, pinging against the windowpanes as Lannie lay in Remy's arms. Fresh from her bath, enveloped in her favorite flannel gown, she had her head on his shoulder, his arms tight around her.

"The office is going to be nice, don't you think?" she asked.

Remy smiled. The attic room with its dormers had been his bedroom when he was a boy. It had been there where he had dreamed of faraway places, of being someone other than who he was, of having a happy life with a large family surrounding him, encouraging him, of a time when his father acknowledged him as his son and took an interest in his life. It had been in that room where he had envisioned life so vastly different than what it actually was. Now the woman he loved would use that room to write her novels, tell her tales and create her characters. Once more the room would be used for dreaming.

"You may need another bookcase," he said as he ran his hand up and down her arm, glorying in the feel of her satiny skin beneath his palm. "You sure you don't want a phone line up there?"

"Absolutely not," she said. "I don't want anyone calling me while I'm writing. They can email me if they need me."

He thought of the satellite system that had been installed two days earlier and the wonder of the Internet she had spent hours showing him how to use, opening doors for him that had both elated and saddened him. The world was so much larger than he could ever have imagined when with the click of a few keys a person could speak to dozens of people in as many lands all at the same time. Not everything he saw on the Internet was good. Much of it was sordid and depressing, and some of it downright sinful and immoral.

"Remy?" she asked.

"What, my love?"

"Take me out of my thoughts," she said. "Make me forget today."

He kissed her on the forehead and slid his arm from beneath her shoulder, moving over her to press his body to hers. "How do you want me to take you, *bébé*?" he asked.

"Hard," she said.

He knew her well by now and the mood into which she had fallen was eating her alive. She was miserable worrying about Brad and believing she had hurt the man badly.

His hands were rough on her as he rent the neckline of her gown, exposing her quivering breasts to his view. He covered those sweet mounds and squeezed firmly, ducking his head to flick his tongue quickly across first one nipple then the other before drawing one deep into his mouth, releasing it with a loud popping sound. She fought his possession of her but it was all part of what she needed at that moment and he understood that. He jerked her up to him and slanted his mouth brutally across hers, forcing his tongue past her lips. She clung to him—digging her fingernails into his arms—and he wedged her legs apart with his knee, pushing her thighs wider as he dragged his lower body across the juncture of her sex.

"Is this what you want?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"Yes," she hissed, and writhed beneath him.

He ground his swollen shaft against her then pulled her body up until she was riding his thigh, the two of them kneeling on the bed they now shared.

Lannie squeezed her thighs on his, reveling in the heat of him at her very core. Her bare breasts were pressed into the coils of the hair on his broad chest and his strong arms were holding her captive, so tight to him she could barely draw breath.

"You belong to me," he told her as he cupped her rear and slid her back and forth on his hard flesh, pushing her body down on his thigh, dragging her sex over the wiry hairs there.

"I belong to you," she agreed, panting with the heat flooding her lower body. She clung to him, writhing her hips.

"Only me," he stressed, and pushed her down flat on the bed to cover her with his body. "Do you hear me, Lannie? Only me!"

"Only you."

He pushed the torn gown up until she was bare to his probing shaft. She could feel it sliding wetly against her thigh, stabbing at her center, seeking entry. "Only me!" he said again.

She felt him take hold of his cock and guide it to her, thrusting into her with one hard, upward motion that made her grunt with the force of it. His thrusting became deeper, harder, filling her. All thought evaporated. Only sensation remained.

"Yes, Remy," she breathed, and snaked her legs around him, holding him to her as he pummeled her with his rock-hard erection.

"Mine," he said, and dug his fingers into the soft flesh of her ass to jerk her up even higher for a deeper penetration.

His cock was hard, and it slid in and out of her with deep penetrations that made the bed beneath them rock. The smell of their sex permeated the air and clung to them

as sweat slicked her skin where their bodies slapped against one another. Coils of tension built within her lower belly until it was one long, aching, itching, heated dam ready to burst, and when it did, she dug her nails into his back and arched up to meet his forceful rams. Their climaxes came at the same fevered moment.

Spasms of pure pleasure undulated through Lannie as she wrapped herself around him like a vine, refusing to allow him to escape her. He was as much her prisoner as she was his, and as he met her thrust for thrust, grunt for grunt, pulse for pulse, she screamed his name, forgetting everything but the brilliant lover whose body filled and fulfilled hers.

Spent, drained, unable to do anything but lie in Remy's arms and wait until her heart ceased its erratic, frenzied beat, Lannie vowed nothing between heaven and hell would ever take this happiness away from her.

Nothing and no one.

## Chapter Eight

Trey Durant had paid a lot of money to find out where his ex-wife's furniture was being delivered by bribing a secretary at the moving company with twenties and his own body. Though she'd been ugly as homemade sin and smelled of licorice cough drops, the woman had given him everything he'd asked for including what was arguably the best blowjob he'd ever received.

Once back at the motel, he'd sat down at his laptop and gone on the Internet to find exact directions on how to reach the address the secretary had provided. He then placed a call to directory assistance for that city to get Lannie's new phone number only to find there was no listing for either a Lanelle Durant or Lanelle Blake, which was her maiden name. Neither was there a listing for L. Durant or L. Blake, or any other combinations of the names he thought she might use.

Infuriated, he'd thrown his cell phone across the room and brooded. It was just as well, he told himself, that he hadn't found her number for he knew he'd be tempted to call her. Calling her, letting her know he knew where she was hiding from him, would put her on guard and that was the last thing he wanted. She needed to be blissfully unaware that he was coming for her. That way, he'd be more likely to catch her with her pants down.

That thought made his vision blur with a wavering red haze.

"Yeah and who's pulling those pants down for you, bitch?" Trey snarled. His hands were doubled into fists, his jaw working as he ground his teeth.

He'd already made plans to leave Albany the next morning and head for Iowa. The more he thought about Lannie and who might be fucking her at the moment, the madder he became. He knew himself well enough to know he wouldn't be able to sleep considering the mood he was in so he jumped up and began throwing his clothes into his suitcase, cursing beneath his breath as he went. In less than ten minutes he was out of the hotel and speeding along Oglethorpe Boulevard, heading east toward Valdosta and I-75 that would take him north out of Georgia.

"You just wait, Lanelle," he said as he sat hunched over the steering wheel. "You're going to be sorry you ever fucked with Trey Durant!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Brad had deliberately avoided Lannie the rest of the day but it was close to midnight now and he was sitting in his den at Walnut View Acres and staring moodily into the fire. His anger was as red-hot as the logs glowing in the firebox and just as smoldering. The anger wasn't directed at Lannie but at himself for going too far earlier

that day. She'd never given him any indication she was interested in taking their relationship beyond a comfortable friendship and now he might well have wrecked his chances of it ever doing so.

"Goddamned fool," he called himself, and took another sip of the whiskey he'd been drinking since coming home. The fifth was almost empty and the chief of police was unpleasantly buzzed.

With his bare feet crossed at the ankle and his flannel pajama bottoms heated nicely from the warmth of the fire, his chest was nevertheless covered in goose bumps, bare to the chill draft that swirled around him. Not that he cared or noticed. The liquor had numbed him to the point that nothing except his anger at himself was registering.

Laying his head along the back of the corduroy-covered recliner, he closed his eyes and pictured Lannie as he'd seen her as she'd come out on the porch after him. He had almost stopped and gone back to apologize to her but his pride had goaded him into a grandstand show that he supposed had been meant to punish her and impress Al and David. What it had done was make him look like a fool, and David had said as much when he'd dropped by after finishing Lannie's porch.

"Man, why don't you just tell her how you feel?" David had asked.

"What's gonna happen if I do?" Brad had demanded.

"What's gonna happen if you don't?" David had countered.

David had never been married and though he'd spent his informative years in the same house with three women—his mother and two sisters—what he didn't know about the female sex spoke volumes for why he was still unattached in his late forties.

"You don't let someone like Lannie get away, Wyngate. She's a keeper," had been David's last words to him that afternoon.

Lifting the last of the whiskey to his lips, Brad downed the potent brew then set the glass on the end table beside his chair. He drew in a long breath then exhaled, opening his eyes to stare unseeingly at the ceiling.

"Lannie," he whispered, wishful thoughts of her eating at a hole in his heart.

What had Al said about her when he'd called to find out how Brad was doing?

*"I read somewhere that she'd had a really miserable marriage with that TV weatherman who thought he was God's gift to women. It was a messy divorce and things got way out of hand. He was stalking her, beat up a friend she'd gone to lunch with, stole her mail and did some other really nasty shit, bro. You got to give her some space. You come on too heavy and I'm telling you, her instinct will tell her to pull away. Go slow, Bradford. Go real slow with this one."*

Was that what it was? he wondered. Had he moved too quick? Had he gone a bit overboard with that kiss in the den?

Thinking back at how he'd snatched her to him, Brad groaned and ran his hand over his whiskered face. Grabbing at her like that had to have not only surprised her, it more than likely scared her as well.

"Idiot!" he spat, pounding the chair arm with his chest. "What a stupid, fucking idiot!"

A very cold swirl of air eddied around him to make Brad open his eyes. He looked at the windows, half expecting to see the drapes billowing out into the room. But the window was closed, the blinds shut and the door to the den was closed as well. Making a mental note to check for drafts the next morning, he wearily got up from the recliner. For just a second he thought he saw something reflected in the television screen and looked that way, but the set was off, the gray expanse of its thirty-inch glass surface showing him standing there looking at it. Blowing out a hard breath, he lay down on the sofa, flinging an arm over his eyes, though the lights were off in the room and the only light came from the leaping flames in the fireplace. Crooking one knee, he leaned it against the sofa's back, too tired to even pull the crocheted afghan down to cover his naked chest. He sighed again, letting his body drift into the darkness reaching up to claim him, bringing the dream that always made Brad Wyngate whimper.

*"Not you again," Brad said, looking up at the ghost who had fallen into step beside him.*

*"Can't get rid of me, Wyngate," Remy Devereux said as they walked down the hallway toward study hall. "I'll always be here."*

*They were young again – teenage boys in blue jeans and polo shirts, Brad's of better quality and less wear than Remy's. Brad's sneakers were new, Remy's had seen better days. Brad's hair was short, cut so for football. Remy's was longer and ruffled, in need of a trim.*

*"Go away. Leave me alone," Brad ordered. He shifted his books under his arms.*

*"She doesn't want a lover right now," the specter informed him. "She has me for that."*

*"Yeah, right," Brad scoffed. "Like a woman would have you, dead man."*

*"Joan did."*

*It was a direct hit and Brad felt it all the way down to the pit of his belly. It burned. It churned. It hurt like hell.*

*"Low blow, dude," Brad said from between clenched teeth.*

*"Yeah, but true," Remy reminded him. "And the truth hurts, doesn't it, Wyngate?"*

*As it always did, the dream shifted and Brad was standing beneath the spreading oak in Remy's backyard.*

*"What's it like being dead?" Brad asked, looking up at Remy.*

*Remy was swinging back and forth from the rope that circled his throat. "It's not so bad really. What's it like knowing you caused my death?"*

*Brad sat down on Remy's gravestone and buried his face in his hands. "I didn't mean to, Devereux. Honest to God, I didn't." He looked up at Remy with tears in his eyes. "If I could take it back, don't you think I would?"*

*"You want to make it right, Brad?" Remy asked, and the rope slipped from his neck. "I know a way you can."*

*"That's what you always say and it never gets any better, Remy. Not really!" Brad sobbed. "I still feel guilty. Nothing I do can atone for my part in your death."*

*"This time it will," Remy said, sitting down beside Brad.*

*"How?" There was anguish in Brad's voice.*

*"Be Lannie's friend. Take her out, show her a good time and don't expect her to love you as anything but a friend. She never will. Don't make her choose between you and me, like you made Joan do. You see how that turned out."*

*Once more the dream changed and Brad was staring down into Remy's casket, the only mourner at the young man's funeral. Lying there in a suit Brad had bought for him – the only suit Remy Devereux had ever worn – Remy was staring up at his rival.*

*"You kept Joan from me, Brad. You owe me," Remy said. "Don't make Lannie choose."*

*"But I love her!" Brad protested.*

*"I loved Joan but that didn't matter to you," Remy said. "I love Lannie. This time, I'll be the one to get the girl."*

*"I hate you!"*

*"I know but you'll do the proper thing. This time, you'll do what you know is right. Won't you, Brad?"*

Brad jerked awake, sitting up as though someone had pulled him. He could feel his heart racing, hear the blood pounding in his ears and his upper body was covered in a fine mist of sweat. He felt as though he'd been running, had been being chased through his dreams and though he could not remember what had upset him in his nightly wanderings, he knew something had.

Remy Devereux's image shot across his mind and Brad cursed, flinging himself from the sofa to stand in front of the fire, breathing heavily. In the flames, he envisioned he saw Remy grinning at him, mocking him.

"Leave me alone, Remy," Brad said. "Go back to hell where you belong and stay there!"

Over the years, he had encountered Remy many times in his dreams and he thought perhaps he had again tonight. It was sleeting outside and the tick of the ice against the windows made him shiver along with a suspicion that the phantom had paid him still another visit.

"Why won't you leave me the hell alone?" he asked.

Stabbing a hand through his hair, he tugged at the strands until he winced, wishing he could pull all thoughts, all memories, of Remy Devereux from his mind. If only it were that easy.

Opening the den door, he climbed wearily up the backstairs to his bedroom and threw himself across the bed. The room was too hot—the electric baseboard heaters chugging and ticking away—but he didn't have the energy to get up and turn the



thermostat down. He simply curled into a fetal position and lay there wishing with all his heart that Remy would stay dead and stop paying him visits.

As the wind increased in strength and the sleet turned to silent snow, Brad Wyngate lay there staring across the dark room, making up his mind to let Lannie dictate the terms of their relationship and if in doing that, it was only friendship she had to offer, to accept what she was willing to give and suffer his love for her in silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remy pulled his astral body back from the reflective surface of the television in Brad's den and settled down beside Lannie once more. She did not awaken as he put his arms around her and drew her to him once more, settling her against him.

He was always saddened by his nocturnal visits to Brad. Despite the fact the lawmen had made his boyhood sheer torture and his teenage years as unhappy as any ostracized and ignored young male who had ever garnered the enmity of the school jocks could have, Remy had liked Brad Wyngate. A day hadn't passed that he'd prayed to God to let Brad really see him for who he was and extend the hand of friendship toward him. He had longed to have just one friend to ease his loneliness, his solitude.

That had never happened.

All because of Joan.

No other boys in school would defy Brad and his friends to offer friendship to Remy because Wyngate and his crowd had made it clear Devereux was off limits. None of them would dare risk bringing the wrath of the jocks down on their heads to even venture a friendly word Remy's way. So Remy had endured a wretched, lonely childhood and a miserable teenage existence. Like a hungry child looking through the windows at diners enjoying their meals, he had hovered outside the fringes of happiness and gazed longingly at what others took for granted. He would have given anything to be asked to join the other boys in shooting hoops after school or to have a girl accept his invitation to the movies.

Only Joan had smiled at him when she thought no one was looking. Only Joan had dared to speak to him when they passed in the halls, but then only when no one would hear. Only Joan.

As Lannie shifted against him and her arm slid across his chest to hold him to her, Remy thought of the vicious beating he had taken at the hands of Brad Wyngate and his friends their junior year. That beating had put him in the hospital. His nose broken, two black eyes, a broken collarbone—compliments of Sammy Dexter's boot—broken ribs, bruised kidneys and a concussion brought on by a two-by-four wielded by Nick Faison, he had lain there striving not to cry as his mother had stared down at him with horror.

*"Mon pauvre bébé! Je ferai à ceux les garçons détestables rue le jour où ils ont jamais étendu une main à mon Remy!"*

He could hear his mother's words even now. She had always conversed with him in French—though not the Cajun patois she used when she spoke to her only living relative in Louisiana while the old man was still alive. He remembered how she had threatened to retaliate against the boys who had hurt him.

*"Non, Maman. Laissez lui soyez. Si nous nous abaissons à leur niveau, nous ne sommes pas meilleurs qu'ils sont."*

When he had asked her not to interfere, telling her if vengeance was done, they'd be no better than the ones who had beaten him, his mother had broken down and cried.

*"Je l'aurais rendu meilleur pour vous, mon enfant. Je n'ai jamais voulu que vous sussiez la haine que j'ai supportée."*

"I would have made it better for you, my child. I never wanted you to know the hatred I endured," Remy translated her words, whispering them.

Long after his mother had left him, when the hospital's visiting hours were almost over, he had heard a sound at the door and turned to find Joan Patterson standing there. Stunned, he had tried to push himself up in the bed—groaning as the pain lanced through his battered body—and she had shocked him by rushing forward, her hand out.

"No, Remy, lie still! You'll hurt yourself!"

He had lain there gazing up at her beautiful face, at the quivering smile on her pretty lips, at the tears glistening in her gray eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Remy," she said, and a single crystal tear eased down her smooth cheek.

Though his jaw ached from the punches that had slammed into it and his speech sounded funny to him with the packing stuffed up his nose, he told her it wasn't her fault.

"But it is!" she'd cried, and the tears had started in earnest. "It is!"

As he lay there gazing at her with such hungry eyes, with such hopeless love, she had told him of an argument she had had with Brad earlier that day Remy had been beaten.

"I love you, Remy," she admitted, scrubbing a hand over her trembling mouth. "I love you with all my heart."

Nothing Joan could have ever said to him could have astounded Remy any more than that confession. He had struggled to lift his hand to cup her cheek and had been doubly amazed to have her clasp his hand and turn it so she could kiss his palm. Tremendous heat flowed down his arm and his fingers shook as he cupped her face.

"I do, Remy. I have always loved you and now Brad realizes it."

He could well imagine the anger Wyngate had expressed. Not used to having anything denied him, the Grinnell Tiger football player's first thought would have been to smash the opposition. That he had brought along four of his buddies to help didn't

say much for Brad's bravery but then again it had said legions for just how infuriated the boy had been.

"I'll kill you if you even look at her again!" Brad had shouted as he'd planted a vicious kick in Remy's belly.

Before he could tell Joan he loved her too, a noise in the hall had frightened her and she had jerked her hand from his, fleeing to the door. But she had stopped and looked around at him.

"You can't tell anyone I was here, Remy," she said. "My father would beat me if you do."

"Joan..."

"I belong to Brad, Remy," she said, her lips quivering. "I have to marry him."

She had fled, closing the door behind her, plunging his room into darkness.

For the next few days he had been confined to the bed and when he'd finally been able to get up, to walk with the IV pole clutched in his hands, he had vowed to go after Brad and take Joan away from him.

He had replayed his mother's words to him over and over again. He had told her what he intended to do once he was out of the hospital and well enough to take Brad on one-to-one. He had not expected his mother's vehement words that had come—not in her beloved French—but in harsh, strident English, made harsher still by her wide eyes and clenched teeth.

"Joan's father came to see me, Remy. He said if you tried to cause trouble for Brad and Joan, he would burn down our house. He would, Remy. I know he would, and no one would lift a hand to make him pay for his crime. I can't lose my papa's house, Remy. It is all I have besides you. Leave it be, my son. Leave it be!"

While Lannie slept so soundly beside him, Remy heard those words again in his mind. They had not only angered him, they had caused him to do something he should never have done—he had gone to see the man he had been told was his father.

Raegin Bartlett had been out walking his bean field when Remy had appeared. He had stared at the boy who was a mirror image of himself at that age and said nothing.

"Charles Patterson threatened my mother," Remy had told the man he had never once spoken to before that day.

Hawking a wad of phlegm, Raegin had spat it at Remy's foot. "What's it to me?" he'd growled.

Since he'd been old enough to know about the man who made regular late night visits to his mother—and he suspected daytime visits as well while Remy was at school—Remy had disliked the man who used his mother for his sexual pleasures yet refused to acknowledge the child he had made with her. The entire town knew Madeleine was Raegin Bartlett's whore.

That day in the field, standing up to the man who had fathered him, Remy had squared his shoulders. "My mistake, Mr. Bartlett," he'd said. "I thought you were man enough to protect what you consider yours but I guess I was wrong."

Turning away, Remy had felt a hard calloused hand on his shoulder gripping savagely and he was spun around to face an angry red face that was glaring at him with hatred.

"Who the hell do you think you are to talk to me like that, you fucking little bastard?" Bartlett had snarled, his other arm drawn back with a closed fist preparing to smash into Remy's already broken nose.

Remy had found the courage to smile in the face of such overwhelming loathing. "Your fucking little bastard, Mr. Bartlett," he had said. "That's who you made me."

Raegin Bartlett had snatched his hand back as though it had been seared by fire.

Remy had walked away, feeling the merciless eyes of his father crawling all over him. He had no intention of telling his mother what he'd done and he doubted Bartlett would have the nerve to.

"You better stay away from Joan Patterson if you know what's good for you, Remy!" he heard Bartlett shout.

A week later Remy found himself back in the hospital. Another brutal beating had almost killed him this time, but that beating had not come from Brad and his friends. Winnie Wyngate and Chuck Patterson had gone after Remy. While Wyngate held him, Patterson had repeatedly slammed his fist into Remy's stomach.

"You go anywhere near Joan and I promise you I'll kill you, Devereux, but before I do, me and Win will pay a long, intense visit to your mama. When we're finished with her, she won't be able to walk right for a month! She'll be bleeding out of every hole she's got and then some! Do you understand me, boy?" Patterson had growled.

Pissing blood for weeks, barely able to stand, hurting so badly he had trouble eating and couldn't hold down what he could eat, Remy had told no one except his priest about what had happened to him, about the threats to himself and his mother, and the priest had counseled him to leave well enough alone.

"Turn the other cheek, Remy," the father had cautioned. "That was the Lord's way and you know it is the right way."

Someone though had gotten back at Patterson and Wyngate while Remy was recuperating. Patterson's prized bull that sired champions at the state fair for years had simply vanished in the dead of night without a trace. Wyngate's vintage '56 that he had so lovingly restored, a car he cherished more than any other possession, had been lost to a mysterious fire. No one knew what had happened in either incident but Remy had always suspected Raegin Bartlett had taken matters into his own hands.

Not because Bartlett's illegitimate son had been hurt or was in danger, but because Madeleine Devereux's wellbeing was at stake.

Two days before graduation, Brad had caught Remy alone in the boy's restroom at school and had pushed his rival up against the wall.

"Joan and I are going to be married. If you so much as look her way after that, I'll pound you into the ground. She belongs to me!"

Now, Remy thought as he lay beside Lannie—not needing sleep but weary just the same—he knew history was repeating itself. Once more he and Brad were at odds over a woman, yet Brad did not consciously know he had a rival for the attentions of Lannie Durant.

This time he would prevail. Death could not, would not, separate him from the woman in his arms. When it came time for her life on earth to end, he would carry her with him through the mirror and into the Shadowlands where he dwelt—never would they be apart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Barreling up I-75 through the cold October night, Trey Durant flipped on the radio to stay awake and the song that came blaring out of the speakers of his year-old sports car was a country tune that set his teeth on edge, the words slithering straight into his fevered mind to churn there like a nest of vipers.

Listening to the bluegrass cheating song with its twanging mandolin and skirling fiddle, Trey's murderous rage grew like a poisonous mushroom in his mind. He became absorbed in the tale of a cuckolded husband who had gone after his cheating wife and her lover, murdering them in cold blood then hiding their bodies in the swamp.

"Now the gators have got you and I am free. That's what you get for a'cheatin' on me!" the singer crooned

"Damned straight," Trey said, nodding. He cranked up the volume on the final chorus, singing along with the nasal baritone of Cyrus Brent.

Lannie's face drifted across Trey's mind and he turned the radio off. It had been months since he'd last seen her—sitting across the table from him at the divorce hearing. He'd listened to her telling her lies to the mediator, trying to make people believe he'd been an abusive husband. She'd made him so mad, he'd lost it and lunged across the table at her, his hands outstretched to wring her lying, deceiving neck. He would have done just that had his lawyer not pulled him off her.

"Where's the prick who's been servicing you, bitch?" Trey had yelled at her.

"There is no other man, Trey," she'd lied.

"Who is he?" Trey had demanded. "What's the bastard's name who took you away from me?"

"Trey, please," Lannie had whispered, crying her crocodile tears, her pretty lips trembling. "It's all in your mind."

"Well, I'm of a mind to slit your lying, cheating throat!" he'd shouted, trying to get to her again, and it had been those ill-thought words that had sealed his fate. The divorce had been granted, the restraining order put into place.

And it had been those poorly considered words that had lost him his job with the television station and gotten him blackballed from ever working in that medium again.

"Goddamned whore," Trey seethed. He pressed his foot harder on the accelerator. The faster he got to Iowa, the sooner his troubles would be over.

Over and buried as deep as a shovel could dig.

\* \* \* \* \*

Raegin Bartlett couldn't sleep so he got up as quietly as he could from the bed he'd shared with his wife Loretta for the last thirty years, and eased their bedroom door shut. He walked slowly down the stairs, time and experience teaching him which treads to avoid so as not to make a sound. He went into the kitchen and flipped on the light, blinking against the brightness, and set about making a pot of coffee.

As the coffee machine began gurgling, the dark liquid streaming into the glass pot, Raegin went over to the bay window that overlooked the back part of his property. The security light on the pole out by the barn cast its light in a wide swath across the yard and Rae wasn't surprised to see the snow cascading down in thick sheets. His head was aching unmercifully and that usually signaled a migraine coming on, the high atmospheric pressure he knew was the cause of the pain.

The cotton pajamas he wore were the exact same blue-and-white-stripe pattern as the curtains 'Retta had used for the breakfast nook. Always a frugal woman, she had killed two birds with one stone when she'd wanted new curtains, and he'd needed a new pair of PJs.

Thoughts of his wife's habit of stretching a dollar made Raegin frown. It wasn't like they didn't have all the money they could ever need. The farm was one of a few in Jasper County that was highly successful and—better yet—completely free of debt. Prying the wooden button from the newel post on the stairs and pouring the ashes of the burned bank note into the hollow, capping it with an ivory mortgage button had been one of the proudest days of Rae's life. It signified he had done what his grandfather and father before him had failed to do—secure the Bartlett lands and free them of mortgage. Yet 'Retta insisted on scrimping pennies as if they were deep in debt. It bothered Rae even more than her bringing up his affair with Madeleine Devereux every time they had an argument and throwing it in his face.

Five miscarriages had ruined any chances that 'Retta would give him a child of their own. Her hatred for Madeleine was exceeded only by her almost manic loathing of Madeleine's son.

Pouring his coffee, Rae sat down at the table with the pristine white crocheted placemats 'Retta had made, pushing his aside to keep from getting stains on it. With his

hands cupped around the mug, he stared out into the cold night, thinking of the snow globes 'Retta's sister Marla collected.

He took a sip of the hot brew and not for the first time wished he'd married Marla instead of her twin. Marla had a generous nature and sweet disposition. Loretta had inherited the stinginess and spleen from her paternal grandmother Eunice.

*"Vous avez fait votre lit, Raegin. Maintenant vous devez vous étendre dans lui,"* Madeleine had once told him.

"Maddy..." he'd growled in warning. Four years of high school French made it possible for him to understand she had told him he'd made his bed and now had to lie in it.

"You could have had me," Maddy had told him. "You could have been a father to our Remy and yet you have never claimed him as yours."

"I couldn't, Maddy. You know that!" he'd reminded her. "If I had, all hell would have broken loose! My father would have disinherited me."

Raegin lowered his head. The farm, his father's good opinion of him, his mother's strict, unyielding Baptist upbringing having declared the Devereux family as idol worshippers had kept Raegin from ever declaring the love he held for Madeleine and from admitting to the world that he had fathered the woman's child.

But none of that had ever kept him from Maddy's bed and the arms she held out to him no matter what. She had been his anchor in the storms of his life. When she had died, he had been heartsick, taking to his bed with the curtains drawn, the room dark and the migraine from hell eating away at what little rational thought he had left during that sorrowful time. After refusing to eat, refusing to speak, spending hours silently sobbing into his pillow, Raegin emerged from his room on the day his son—the only son he would ever have—arrived home to bury his mother.

"If you go to that whore's funeral, you are finished in this town!" Spence Tolliver, the mayor of Grinnell, had warned. "People will shun you like the plague. Loretta Ellis comes from one of the founding families in these parts. Don't throw your illicit affair in her face by attending that woman's funeral!"

So Raegin had stayed at home that day, though every instinct within him cried out to be there, to send Madeleine home to her Maker as was befitting the woman who had borne Rae's child. When he learned Maddy was to be buried—not in the cemetery right beside her home but in unhallowed ground at the back of her property—he had been devastated, once more taking to his bed to grieve for the only woman he would ever love.

And he had been cloistered in his dark room when his only son had been murdered. That it was a suicide never crossed Rae's mind. Someone—and he figured it was most likely a friend of Brad's—had taken Remy's life. Not that it concerned Rae all that much. He'd never known the boy, had spoken to him only once in the twenty-three years Remy was alive—and then in anger. At the time he thought it was just as well the

boy had died. A lot had been settled when Remy Bartlett Devereux had been laid to rest in unhallowed ground beside his mother.

Or so Raegin thought.

"Remy Bartlett Devereux," Rae said aloud. The middle name Maddy had given the boy had angered Rae to the point he had hit her but there had been no making her change it.

"He is as much a part of you as he is of me," she'd told him in her sweet French voice. "I am not ashamed of him and neither should you."

But Rae *had* been ashamed of the boy. Back then he had hated Maddy's brat—as he always thought of Remy. His parents had not spoken to him for days after learning he had fathered the child. It had been an embarrassment to his father and shameful to his mother who had spent hours on her knees praying for the redemption of his immortal soul.

"Repent of your foul deed, Raegin Eugene Bartlett," his mother had demanded. "Ask the Lord to forgive you for your sins or you will roast in hell beside that whore of Babylon!"

Sitting there in the kitchen 'Retta kept as immaculate as any operating room, looking out a window whose panes shone with a daily washing, watching the snow slanting down in the glow of the security light, Raegin Bartlett felt moisture forming in his eyes. At fifty-two years of age he had buried his parents, two brothers to a boating accident and another to a heart attack, watched one sister waste away from ovarian cancer and learned another had perished in the tragedy on 9/11, attended the funeral of his best friend from his school days and lost the woman he loved. There was no going back for Rae, and even if his future looked bright and promising as he ambled into his senior years, there was no one left to inherit the farm he had worked so hard to protect and keep. Loretta's folks were gone—as was her twin sister. No cousins stood in line to queue up to take the reins of the Lazy B. Like Madeleine's property, it would be sold to the highest bidder unless he left it to someone.

"I'd have left it to you, Remy," Rae said, his mouth quivering. "I would have, if you'd lived, boy."

Guilt and remorse—bitter tastes in an aging man's mouth—washed over Raegin Bartlett and his shoulders heaved as he sobbed, the snow ticking lightly at the window.



## Chapter Nine

Lannie dusted her hands after dumping wood in the log holder beside the den fireplace. Though the house was equipped with electric baseboard heating, she loved that each parlor had its own fireplace as did the breakfast nook and the master bedroom. She was seriously considering having one put in her attic office as well.

"What did you do for heat up there?" she'd asked Remy, who shrugged.

"I had quilts and blankets and I could dress very quickly in the winter," he replied with a smirk. He was leaning against the door as she hunkered down to throw a log onto the fire.

"Thank goodness for the baseboard heat," she said, shivering.

"When we get an ice storm and the electricity goes out, you'll be glad I insisted you had the gas generator put in," he told her.

"I hate gas," she said, not knowing if she'd have the courage to start the generator outside. She was terrified of gas. Even though the Van Hommes had put in a new large propane tank for cooking and heating, they'd also had the electric baseboard heaters added when they were desperate to sell the place. "Not everyone feels comfortable around propane."

"You're such a baby," he teased. "Nothing is going to happen to you in this house. Not with me here."

"What if I'm outside?" she said, grinning. "What if a bee stings me or..."

"A bee wouldn't dare sting you, *bien-aimé*," he said, eyebrow quirked.

One of the perks of having a live-in ghost for a roommate was the absence of bugs of any sort. Spiders, mosquitoes, ants, moths, wireworms, box elder bugs, rodents and especially snakes kept out of the Devereux place.

"Snakes?" Lannie had asked, eyes wide when Remy had brought up the subject.

"Mama once found one in her bedroom," he said.

"Remy!" she'd gasped.

"In these old farmhouses they can come up through the plumbing into the toilet," he said. "Or through the cellar. It happens, Lannie."

"Remy!" She had turned pale.

"It won't happen with me here," he assured her. "I swear it won't."

She'd been somewhat relieved but she knew she'd never again sit down on her toilet in the dead of night without expecting something to slither across her bottom.

"I'm going to paint that propane tank hot pink and make it look like a giant pig," she told Remy as she plopped down on the love seat.

"A giant, elongated hot-pink pig with a hump on its back. Delightful," he said with a sigh, and came to sit on the other end of the loveseat, reaching down to drag her legs into his lap. He began massaging her feet through the thick wool socks she was sporting.

"With a huge corkscrew tail and ears," she said with a nod. She had turned so she was facing him, her back against the loveseat's arm. She loved having him rub her feet and he was an expert at it.

"Did you decide what bushes you were going to plant out front?" he asked, working each of her toes in turn.

"Lilacs for sure," she said, closing her eyes and sighing. "Forsythia and spirea for that pretty draping effect in the spring. Barberry, lilacs and peonies too. I want to fill the yard with old-fashioned plants that will make it shine."

"Mama never liked gardening and that's why there aren't many bushes out there," he said. "I hated to mow the darn yard because I was always running across..." He stopped, and when she opened her eyes, he shrugged. "Things."

"Snakes," she said, eyes narrowed. "You were going to say snakes."

Remy sighed. "*Bébé*, there won't be any snakes for you to confront in the yard. I promise."

"Humpf," she commented, and closed her eyes again. "Well, I hate mowing too, but Brad said either he or one of his nephews will take care of that for me."

"Good man," Remy agreed.

They were silent for a moment then Lannie opened her eyes and gave him a quizzical look. "What about raccoons and possums? Foxes and deer?"

"What about them?"

"Can we have them come traipsing through the yard from time to time?"

Remy frowned. "You want the deer to eat your plants and the coons turn over your garbage cans?"

"Will they?"

"In a heartbeat," he answered.

"Can you ask them not to?"

The smile he bestowed upon her made her heart ache for it was the precious face of a little boy grinning back at her.

"I'll insist they behave while they're visiting. How's that?"

"Idjut," she labeled him. Then her eyes widened. "What about owls and hawks and eagles and Canada geese and..."

He held up a hand. "Whatever you want gallivanting or flying or perching or waddling through your yard, I'll ask to come visit."

"I want a cat," she said. "A big, fat lazy Maine coon cat to curl up on the foot of the bed at night."

"Whatever your heart desires," he said with a grunt.

"Will a cat be afraid of you?"

"Nope."

"How 'bout a dog?"

"Uh-uh," he answered in the negative.

"Ferret?"

"Absolutely not! Ferrets would be terrified of me," he growled. "No ferrets. Hell, woman, those things stink, they steal stuff and are first cousins to pole cats, and I *know* you don't want them ambling through the yard!"

"No," she agreed. "No pole cats." She thought about it for a moment. "Maybe a dog and a cat, or two cats so they'll have someone to play with when I'm not here."

"What am I, chopped liver?" he asked, offended. "I can play with them. I love cats and I'm fond enough of dogs."

"How are you with horny writers?" she asked, one eyebrow elevated.

"Oh..." he said, turning the word into a long groan. "I eat them right up!"

"Is that so?"

He eased his hands up her shin, over her knee and along the inside of her thighs. His fingers grazed the juncture of her legs and she squirmed. He slid his hand up to the flare of her hips then pulled her toward him so he could unbutton the waistband of her jeans.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He undid the button at her waist and slid the zipper down. "Just cruising," he answered. As he held her gaze with his, he began to tug the jeans from her hips.

Lannie was lying flat on the cushion of the loveseat, her arms above her head, her knees bent as he worked the jeans from her legs. She watched her lover ease off the loveseat and go to his knees on the floor. He tugged off her socks.

"You are an insatiable man, aren't you?" she queried as he removed her panties.

"I'm a hungry man," he replied, and took her left ankle in his hand and swung her body around, pulled her to the edge of the cushion and then draped her legs over his shoulders, sliding her toward him to bury his face against her and take her into his mouth.

His lips were so soft upon her flesh and his tongue swept delicious heat coursing through her to pool into honeyed moisture within her sheath. As his teeth moved over the swell of her clit, she threaded her fingers through his hair to hold his head to her. She closed her eyes to his tender mercies and like a lazy kitten basking in a sunbeam, soaked up the exquisite pleasure he was giving her.

Remy was lost in the scent of her body in his nostrils, the taste of her upon his tongue. His body ached for her but he denied them both as he flicked his tongue over her and down the soft folds, pierced gently into the wet channel that beckoned. He used

his fingers to spread her wider so he could lick at the sensitive pathway along her upper thighs where her leg curved into her mons. He heard her draw in a breath and looked up past her quivering belly to watch her. With infinite care, he eased a finger into her, enjoying the light shudder that raced through her at his invasion.

"I need you," he heard her whisper.

He took his lips from her clit. "Soon," he told her.

Pulling back, he used his fingers to stroke deep within her, to lave her honeyed recess. The heat and the juice of her flowed over his flesh, coating him, and he withdrew his fingers to put them in his mouth, to lick away that slightly salty essence.

"You have no idea what that does to me," she told him, and he looked up to see her staring intently at him.

"I think I do," he replied, and returned his fingers to her hot sheath, pressing deeply, twisting them ever so slightly until he heard her breath rate increase, felt her body beginning to respond to the passion he was slowly building within her.

Lannie drew her legs up so she could put her feet on his shoulders, allowing her legs to splay far apart, giving him total access to her most private parts. She watched as his gaze lowered to the folds of her sex. She saw heat searing in his gaze when he glanced up at her.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked in a husky tone.

"Yes," she answered on a breath of sound.

He took her left leg and pulled it over his head then scooped his arms beneath her knees and behind her back to lift her from the loveseat. He stood in one lithe movement that no human man could have executed without effort. As he turned with her toward the stairs, she looped her arms around his neck.

"I love you," she said.

He stopped with one foot on the first riser of the staircase and locked his attention on her. "I love you in return."

She laid her head on his shoulder and he continued up the stairs, carrying her into the room they shared and laying her down upon the comforter. He leaned over her to unbutton her flannel shirt and smiled knowingly when he found no bra to remove.

"That's just the way I like you," he said, and ran his palm over her right breast, easing his fingertips over her nipple before straightening to shrug off his own clothes.

Though Lannie knew he could wish away the garments he wore, she knew he had discovered she preferred to see him strip for her. Her eyes always blazed with passion and she would run the tip of her tongue over her upper lip, setting his blood afire with lust.

With him naked before her, he put one knee to the mattress then climbed atop her, sliding his body down hers until the heavy weight of his erection pressed hard against her thigh. He put a hand to that swollen shaft and guided it into her moistness, settling himself deep within her waiting folds.

There was no haste in his lovemaking. The rhythm that moved in and out of her was slow but strong. She could feel the beat of her blood, the heat of her juices, the buildup of desire beginning deep with her. His body was hard and muscular and had just the right amount of weight to press her down into the mattress to make her passion flare. His scent filled her senses and she felt the first faint ripple of release as it began to stir.

Remy slipped his hand beneath her firm derriere and lifted her higher for a deeper penetration. He braced his feet on the bed and pushed into her with long, decidedly slow strokes that brought her love juices flowing down his hard shaft. He had the smell of her in his nostrils and it was driving him wild. It was all he could do not to take her with heated thrusts. He wanted this to be slow and deep, allowing the passion to come leisurely. Her muscles gripped him tightly for a moment and all his good intentions vanished with the constriction.

Lannie moaned as his penetrations came at a faster pace and went so deep within her she thought he might well be touching her very womb. She was hot for him—wet and creaming—as he slid in and out with such fierceness she had to dig her hands into his arms to hold on. The slap of their bodies coming together was an aphrodisiac of its own and only added to the lust that was fast galloping toward its conclusion.

He was straining as he pumped into her body. His eyes were closed and he was using every ounce of his concentration to put as much pleasure into the act for her as he knew how. Every heated dream he'd ever had when he'd been alive, every wandering fancy he had ever conceived, was being met in the sweet heat of Lannie's body and he poured himself into her with abandon.

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around him, arched up into the force of his thrusts. She was grunting just as he was and with every deep push into her welcoming body, she felt the release coming closer until it shot over her with such intensity, such absolute force, she screamed his name and dug her fingernails into his flesh, scoring him, branding him as hers.

Remy climaxed just behind her and knew a moment of pure enjoyment he had never experienced before. He threw his head back and cried out his release.

Panting along with her lover, Lannie gathered him to her, enfolding him into her arms as he collapsed upon her. She was sated to the point of unconsciousness and closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to lie there with him and drift into sleep, his body cradled against hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

The snow that had started the night before continued to fall throughout the morning until it was a blowing sheet accompanying the howl of the wind. Drifts piled up to block Lannie's driveway and her car was nothing more than a mound of the fluffy white stuff. Alton Spivey had called to ask her if she needed his help in plowing out once the snow stopped and she was grateful the elderly man had offered.

"I gotta blade on my truck," he said.

"How much are you gonna charge me?" she asked.

"A good home-cooked meal and some serious conversation," Alton replied.

"About what?"

"About you and the chief of police," Alton said, stressing the first syllable on the word police. "I'll be out whenever the county gets to your roads."

"I'll see you then," she agreed.

"I think Alton's sweet on you," Remy said.

"Alton just loves to gossip," she countered.

"Did he tell you about his daughter Ruthie?" he asked as he watched her peeling potatoes for salad.

"I didn't know he had a daughter."

"Had," Remy stressed. "She got killed when her boyfriend slammed his car into the bridge abutment at Sugar Creek. She was killed instantly, his only child."

"Oh Remy, that's awful," she said, looking about at him.

"Alton took to drinking, his wife left him, he lost his business," he continued. "Became the town drunk. He's something of a local character around Poweshiek and Jasper Counties but I always liked him. He was one of the few people who would actually speak to Mama and me."

"He told me you were a good boy," she said as she began chopping sweet pickles for the salad.

"I was a good boy," he said.

"And modest too," she said with a giggle.

He came up behind her and enfolded her in his arms, laying his chin on her shoulder as she began cutting up onions. He sighed deeply. "I wish I needed to eat. That smells so good."

"The onion?"

"I loved onions," he said, pronouncing it the Cajun way as un-yawns.

He was pressed tightly against her, nuzzling her neck, sliding his lips against her flesh as his arms were crossed over her waist. "I can taste, you know." His hips rocked against her rump. "I can taste you when we make love and you taste like heaven, did you know that?"

"Please," she groaned. "If anything I probably taste like potatoes."

He felt warm and the natural scent that was Remy Devereux was heady, making her body yearn for him. "Nope. Like honey. Velvety honey." His hands moved up to her breasts to cover them.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Having fun," he replied in a sing-song voice.

"Well, knock it off. You're distracting me," she complained.

"I can't help it. I was deprived."

"Deprived of what?" she countered.

"My mama weaned me too soon from my num-nums," he said, groping her gently, tweaking her nipples.

"Oh that's just sick!" Lannie complained, and when he giggled like the mischievous little boy he could be, she laughed along with him, leaning back against his hard body.

But at the moment he moved back from her, she knew he was frowning, could feel the immediate tension in his body.

"What's the matter?" she asked, craning her head to look around at him.

"That man is going to be a nuisance," he said with a growl.

"Who?"

"Your overly friendly, anal retentive, repentant gendarme here to apologize and beg your forbearance for his assholeness," Remy mumbled as he released her, digging his hands into his pockets.

"Assholeness?" she repeated. She laid her knife down and picked up a towel to dry her hands. "Is that even a word?"

"It is if I make it one," he said with a twitch of his lips.

"Spoiled brat," she called him just as the loud knock came at the front door.

"Go let him in before he beats the damned door down," Remy snarled.

Lannie hurried through the front parlor and opened the door, amused to see Brad standing there with his nose as red as the fabled reindeer and a sheepish look on his face.

"I came to make sure you survived your first blizzard," he said.

"Is this a blizzard?" she asked.

"Well, no, but it might have turned into one," he replied.

She stepped back. "Want a cup of coffee?"

Brad nodded. He removed his boots before stepping across the threshold and onto her new carpet.

"Put them over by the fireplace," she told him, pointing to a plastic tray she had just for that purpose. "You don't need frozen footsies."

After taking his shoes to the hearth, Brad followed her into the kitchen, unzipping his jacket as he walked. "Man," he said. "Something smells wonderful. Whatcha cooking?"

"I'm making potato salad right now," she said, "but I've got pepper steak in the oven and I'm going to make rice and tomatoes to go along with it." She gave him a quick look. "Want to stay for lunch?"

"I'd love to but I'm down two deputies with the flu and with the weather like it is, there's no telling what might happen," he said, taking a seat at her table unaware the ghost of Remy Devereux was only a foot or so away. "There was a bad accident at the Walnut View Acres exit on the interstate."

"I hope no one was killed," she said, pouring him a cup of coffee.

"Two semis collided," he said. He took his jacket off and hung it over the back of the chair. "One of the drivers died on impact. The other was airlifted to Des Moines by life flight. Hopefully he'll survive."

"My father was a trucker," Lannie said as she sat opposite him. "I have a lot of respect for the knights of the road."

"So do I," he said, and took a long sip of his coffee as she told him Alton was coming out later to clear her driveway.

"Al's a good man," Brad said. "When he's not drinking. Drunk, he can be meaner than a junkyard dog." He looked down into his cup. "About the way I acted..."

"Brad..." she began, but he held up a hand.

"I did a lot of thinking and I realized I was jumping the gun and was way the hell out of line, Lannie," he said. He shrugged. "The only explanation—and it ain't really even a good one—is that I've been lonely since Joan's death and maybe more than a little desperate. I was reading something into this that just isn't there to be read." He looked up at her. "And might never be. I just want you to know that however this goes, I'll mind my Ps and Qs from now on and try not to act like an asshole the next time you box my ears."

She reached out to lay her hand over his on the table. "It's all right," she said. "I'm probably more sensitive to stuff right now than a normal woman would be. What with everything that went down with my ex and the move and..."

"I understand," he cut her off. "I do. Really."

Lannie gave him a sad smile. "I'm not looking for anything right now," she said, knowing in her heart she'd already found what she'd been searching all her life to find. "I just need a few really good friends."

"And you've got one," Brad said.

She slid her hand back. "Thank you for understanding."

He nodded and lifted his cup for another sip of his coffee. When he put the cup down, he pushed his chair back. "I'd better not stay away from the radio too long. Is there anything you need in town?" he asked.

"Nothing I can think of," she said.

He stood then swept his jacket from the chair, thrusting his long arms into the sleeves then zipping it. "Well if you do, just give me a jingle or let Alton know. We'll be happy to pick it up for you." He glanced around the kitchen. "You got plenty of bread and the like?"



"I believe so. I'm going to make some cornbread to go with my supper tonight," she said, and got up too. She walked him to the front parlor.

Brad retrieved his boots and stopped at the door to give her a long, penetrating look. "I just want you to know that I'm here if you need me, Lannie."

She smiled. "I appreciate that, Brad."

As he drove away in his cruiser, Lannie stood at the closed door and watched a man walking along the road, his ski-masked face turned toward her house. He was bundled in a thick coat and when he started up her driveway, she felt a niggle of alarm settle in her belly.

"Remy?" she called out, and instantly felt his hands on her shoulders.

"It's Raegin Bartlett," he told her in a soft voice.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Your father?"

He sighed heavily. "Probably coming to check on the city girl," he said. "Most likely Brad didn't see him or the good chief of police would have eased the old man's mind."

The man in question was coming up the driveway.

"This should be interesting," he said, and then faded away as the first heavy footstep echoed on the porch.

Lannie took a deep breath and opened the door. A middle-aged man was pulling off a plaid wool hat with ear flaps and a snow-caked ski mask to reveal a pair of bright green eyes crinkled at the corner and a smile so like Remy's it made her heart ache.

"Howdy," Rae said. "I'm your neighbor up the road."

"Mr. Bartlett, isn't it?" she asked, sticking out her hand. She could tell she'd shocked him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, fumbling to remove his right glove. He chuckled as he shook hands with her. "Ain't no secrets to be kept in Jasper County, is there?"

"If there are, I haven't found one. Won't you come in?" she invited.

"No, ma'am," he said, shaking his head. "Don't want to be no bother. Just came to make sure you was all right. I saw Wyngate leaving but just wanted to intro myself and let you know if you need anythin', my wife and I are the first house east of you." He reached into the pocket of his coat, pulled out a slip of paper and handed it to her. "That there's my home phone and my cell number in case you ever need it."

"Thank you," she said. "I really wish you'd come in at least to warm up."

Rae hesitated. "I don't want to be no bother," he said again.

"It's no bother and you look like you could use a cup of coffee," she said, feeling like a pusher and wondering if she had enough left in the pot for him.

"That I could," he said. He glanced around then seemed to make his mind up. "Maybe for a little while then." He removed his other glove and stuffed both into the pocket of his nylon sky pants.

Like Brad, he took his boots off but insisted on leaving them on the porch. "Got manure on 'em," he explained. "Don't worry. I won't get it on your newfangled porch floor."

He was bundled up for the trek from his house to hers and at her urging laid his coat and heavy muffler by the fireplace. When he walked, the nylon ski pants made funny little squishing sounds.

"Ain't been in this house in a long time," he said as he followed her into the kitchen. "Looks a lot different than the last time I was here." He nodded. "Looks real good."

*"Like you would have noticed anything save my mother's bed,"* Remy muttered. His ghostly image was hovering at the back door with a scowl firmly in place on his handsome face.

Lannie cast her lover a chastising look before asking Rae how he liked his coffee.

"Like my women," Rae answered. "Bold and sassy."

Remy rolled his eyes. *"I may hurt him before he leaves,"* he grumbled.

"Want a shot of Irish whiskey in it then?" Lannie asked.

Rae grinned. "Well now, that I would, ma'am. That I would!"

There was enough for one cup left in the pot and Lannie poured it for her visitor, deciding to pour herself some orange juice before she joined him at the table. After adding the shot of liquor, she took her seat and smiled warmly at him.

They talked about the weather, about the renovations to the house, about Lannie's trip from California and the people she had met since coming to the Midwest. They spoke of her southern background and his farming.

"I don't know what you've got in that stove, but it sure does whet the appetite," Rae told her as she got up to stir the pepper steak.

"Just two big skirt steaks simmering in my special tomato sauce with green peppers, onions, loads of garlic and celery," she told him. "I like to cook it slow on a low temperature for a couple of hours. It makes the steak very tender."

"Gotta tell that to the missus. Sounds like something I could sink my choppers into," Rae said.

They discussed the differences in southern and Midwestern cooking, and when she put her potato salad together, she dished them both up a small plate.

"I like it while it's still hot," she said.

"We call this German potato salad out here," he said, nodding his approval. "This is real good stuff."

"Thank you," she said, and poured him a glass of sweetened tea since all the coffee was gone.

He cleaned up his dish of salad and politely refused more. "'Retta would have my hide if I didn't save room for the sauerkraut and brats she's planning for dinner."

They were silent for a bit then Rae asked her what she'd heard about him.

"That you were Remy Devereux's father," she said, looking him in the eye.

Rae's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You're a writer, ain't you?" he countered.

"I am."

"You gonna write about what happened here?" he challenged.

"No," she said. "Although it would make a good story, it would hurt too many people if the truth got out."

The man across from her settled back in his chair and folded his arms. "And what exactly is the truth, little lady?"

"That Winnie Wyngate murdered his daughter-in-law and Chuck Patterson and his wife murdered your son," she replied.

All color blanched from Raegin Bartlett's swarthy face and his green eyes widened. "Where the hell did you hear that?" he demanded.

Lannie cocked her head to one side. "Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Bartlett?" she asked.

Rae shot up from the table so quickly his chair overturned with a loud crash. He stood there glaring down at her, his huge hands opening and closing at his side. "I don't take to people making fun of me, woman!" he growled. "Just 'cause there have been fools who swear they have seen that boy..."

"That boy," Lannie said calmly, "was your son." Without warning, memories flashed through her mind and she knew she was seeing what Remy had seen long ago. She gave his father a slight smile. "How many people did you tell that Remy came out to your field that day to tell you Wyngate and Patterson had threatened him and his mama?"

The middle-aged man stumbled back, his lower lips trembling. "W-what?" he whispered, his face as pale as parchment.

"He came out to ask your help because he didn't know where else to turn," she continued. "That was the only time you ever spoke to him, wasn't it?"

"Nobody knows about that," Rae stated, and she watched his eyes searching the room. "I didn't tell anybody about that."

"I believe you gave him the help he needed when you set fire to a certain vintage car," she said. "And tell me, what happened to the prized bull, Mr. Bartlett?"

"You're a witchy woman, like Maddy was!" Rae accused and rushed from the kitchen as though the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

"He's still here, Mr. Bartlett," Lannie told him as the older man snatched up his coat. "Just once, won't you admit who he really is to you?"

Rae was trembling violently as he shrugged into his coat. He had spent the night passed in fretful regret but with the cold light of day, reason had returned. It had been a mistake to come to this house.

"He forgives you, Mr. Bartlett," Lannie said as Rae snatched open the door.

Standing there staring at the diminishing snow, Rae could feel the coldness within him outweighing the coldness outside. He slowly turned his head and in that brief moment could have sworn he saw a figure hovering at the corner of his vision.

"He forgives you," Lannie repeated. "All he ever wanted was for you to claim him."

Tears gathered in Raegin Bartlett's eyes. "I couldn't," he said, his lip trembling. "I didn't dare."

"He understood. Maybe you couldn't tell him back then but what about now?" Lannie probed. "Why not tell him now, when there's no one but the three of us who will ever hear."

"Three?" Rae echoed, his eyes wide. "What do you mean three?"

"He's listening," she said gently, and stepped up to him, put a hand to his broad back and rubbed gently. She lowered her voice to a soft caress. "Just say it, Mr. Bartlett. Just this once. He'll hear you."

Rae swept the room behind him and would have pledged on a stack of bibles there was a shadow there between the parlor and the dining room. He stared at that misty outline for a long moment then shook his head. "I can't. I'm sorry. I just can't," he said, and stumbled out on the porch and down the steps, practically running down the driveway and away from the place where he and Maddy Devereux had conceived their only child.

"He'll be back," Remy told her as he joined her at the door.

"I know," Lannie said. She eased the door shut and slipped into the arms of her lover.

## Chapter Ten

Trey was furious. It had been raining for a good part of the trip and now it was snowing lightly, but west of him the sky was ominously dark. Though he had been only a television weatherman, he'd taken enough courses in meteorology and studied enough books to know what that color sky meant. Snow would slow him down again – might even strand him – and that thought enraged him.

He had grown tired as he got halfway up the state of Illinois and had to pull into a rest stop to get a few hours of sleep. His vision had been blurring and when he caught himself nodding off, allowing his vehicle to wander over into the other lane, he decided a rest was needed, though he hated to waste a minute in getting to Lannie.

"This time, you will pay for cuckolding me, Lanelle," he vowed. "You're probably fucking some hotshot attorney or the like." His hands tightened around the steering wheel. "Well, enjoy it, baby, because when I'm through with you this time, there won't be a man alive who'll give you a second look except to pity you!"

Thoughts of smashing his ex-wife's face into pulp with his fists made Trey grin like a maniac. In his mind he could hear the meaty smacks, hear her screaming for pity, the fragile bones in her lovely face breaking.

"You'll be sorry you ever cheated on me," he growled, and pressed his foot harder on the accelerator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alton parked his truck out on the street after he'd bladed Lannie's drive then trudged slowly toward the house.

"He's getting old," Remy said with regret.

"We all get old, sweetie," Lannie reminded him then glanced at him. "Well, most of us anyway."

Remy smiled. "Yeah. Most of us." He turned away from the window as Alton came up on the porch, stomping snow off his boots on the top step.

Lannie opened the door before Alton could knock. "Get your butt in here, mister," she said. "I've got lunch all ready for us."

"Nag, nag, nag," Alton said, taking off his boots.

"Bring those in and put them by the fireplace," Lannie ordered.

"Nag, nag, nag," Alton repeated, but his aged eyes were sparkling.

"You want coffee with your meal or will you trust me to give you something reserved only for hardy southern men?" she asked.

Alton had padded over to the fireplace in his thick gray wool socks—the toes of which were a dingy orange color—and was straightening up from aligning his boots on the hearth. “Don’t want to booze, young lady.” He took off his wool watch cap, coat and wool vest, hanging them on the ladder-back chair beside the fireplace.

“No booze,” she said, “but honest-to-goodness sweet iced tea.” She winked playfully. “Nectar of the gods.”

“Heard of it and always wanted to taste it,” Alton said, falling into step behind her. He was glancing around the room, his shoulders drawn up as though expecting a blow at any moment.

“He’s here,” Lannie said.

“I can feel him,” Alton said. “Hey, Remy.”

“Hey yourself, Alton,” Lannie heard Remy say.

Lannie pointed to the table. “Take a seat and I’ll dish up our food.”

“Getting along okay with him, huh?” the old man asked. He took the paper napkin at his plate, opened it and stuffed it into the collar of his plaid shirt.

Lannie knew he meant Remy. She nodded as she brought their plates to the table. “No complaints.” She walked over to the fridge to retrieve the pitcher of sweetened tea.

“Good,” Alton said. “But it ain’t wise to speak of the dead. Let’s speak of the living.”

“Okay,” she said, pouring their tea. She took her seat then held out her hand. “Will you join me in saying Grace?”

Alton bobbed his head and settled his rough, calloused hand in hers. He closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“Bless us, o Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thou bounty. Through Christ, our Lord, amen,” Lannie said.

“Amen,” Alton echoed, and surprised Lannie by making the Sign of the Cross.

“I didn’t know you were Catholic,” she said as she followed suit.

“Ain’t,” he said. “But at my age, I’m just hedging my bets.”

“Dig in then,” she said with a laugh.

Alton lifted his glass of tea and took a healthy sip. When he lowered the glass, he looked like a man who had discovered the Promised Land. “Yeah,” he said, nodding. “Now I know what makes you southern girls so sweet.” He smacked his lips. “I can drink that instead of coffee any old day.”

“I’ll give you the recipe,” she said.

The old man blinked. “There’s a recipe for tea?” he asked.

“There’s a recipe for everything a southern woman does, Alton,” she teased him.

“I heard that,” Alton agreed, and picked up his fork to ladle a big spoon of pepper steak into his mouth. His eyes rolled, he groaned and then he held up a thumb in compliment but said nothing as he shoveled more food in.

They ate in silence for a while then Alton reached for his cornbread. His first taste of the buttery treat made him groan again. He looked over at Lannie. "If this potato salad is as good as the rest of what you've cooked, girl, I may just marry you!"

Lannie grinned. "Worth plowing out the drive?" she asked.

"Hell's bells, woman! It's worth a whole season of plowing!" he responded.

*"Like I said, Alton is sweet on you,"* Remy whispered in her ear.

Scooping up a big forkful of potato salad, Alton stuck it in his mouth, chewed for a moment then sat back in his seat. "You'd best pick yourself out a wedding garment, girl, 'cause I done lost my heart to you."

"I made an egg custard pie," she told him. "You haven't tasted heaven until you've tasted that."

*"I have,"* Remy growled.

Lannie's face flamed and she pursed her lips to keep from chastising her lover.

"I can't hardly wait," the old man said. He shifted his gaze to the pie on the counter.

"You gotta clean your plate first," she said.

"Now that might be a real chore since it's so bad and all," he said with a wicked glint in his rheumy eyes.

They took a few more bites then Alton asked if she'd met any of her neighbors yet.

"Rae Bartlett stopped by to introduce himself," she said.

"Figured he would," Alton said, "if for no other reason than to see what you'd done to his love nest."

"He seems like a nice man."

Alton grunted. "Can be, but he can be a real bastard too."

*"I heard that,"* Remy said with a sigh.

"I suspect the chief of police came by too, didn't he?" Alton asked.

"He did," she admitted.

"He's getting attached to you," the old man stated. "Looking for wife number two, he is."

*"He can keep right on looking,"* Remy said with a growl.

"I'm not looking for a husband though," Lannie said.

Alton scraped the last of his potato salad up on to his fork with a meaty thumb. "Why the hell not, girl? He's a good man and you could do a lot worse."

"I have no intention of ever marrying again, Alton," she said. "I like Brad but I like my freedom too, and after the marriage I had, I want to enjoy that freedom."

"Don't go judging other men by one bad apple," Alton said. "Brad ain't like that. He'd treat you right."

"I'm sure he would but I won't ever marry again," she told him.

Alton sighed, smushing up the last of the cornbread crumbs with his fork and then licking the tines clean. He shook his head to an offer of seconds but did pick up his nearly empty glass and ask for more tea. "Well, such news will sure break the chief of police's heart."

"I'm sorry," she said, pouring him more tea, "but he'll just have to live with it."

"Cold-hearted woman," Alton pronounced then smiled to let her know he was teasing. He turned his attention to the pie. "We ready for that now?"

Lannie laughed. "I think so." She got up to fetch the pie and clean salad plates. Bringing the egg custard over to the table, she took up a pie cutter and sliced Alton a large wedge and a small one for herself. "This is made with an entire carton of eggs so if you're watching your cholesterol, you'd better not eat that."

"Ain't watching nothing," Alton said and took his pie, jabbing his fork through the fluffy meringue and into the pale yellow custard below. One bite of the pastry and he closed his eyes, groaning.

"This is what you call comfort food in the South," she told him.

Alton chewed slowly as though savoring every nuance of flavors in the pie. When he swallowed, he sighed so deeply it sounded like he was about to have a bout of asthma.

"Now that is just plain heavenly like you said, Lannie," he agreed. "Just plain heavenly."

After a second piece of pie and being told he could take the rest of it home with him in thanks for plowing the drive, Alton helped her clean the dishes away and even offered to wash them for her.

"I'll just stick them in the dishwasher," she said. "You go on into the living room and I'll pour us another glass of tea."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Alton said, and ambled away.

"He's lost his heart and soul to you," Remy told her, appearing beside the dishwasher as she stacked the dirty plates inside.

"He's lonely," she said.

"And wouldn't be in the least opposed to you sending him home a plate of lunch for his supper," Remy said. "It will save him eating a can of dog food tonight."

Lannie straightened up, her eyes wide. "Are you kidding?"

Remy shook his head. "No."

Tears formed in Lannie's eyes and she had to bite her lip to keep from bawling. She glanced down the hallway toward the living room. "Is he that bad off?"

"He's a proud man so be careful how you approach him, *bébé*," he cautioned.

She nodded and shut the dishwasher door, poured two more glasses of tea, dried her hands on a towel and headed for the living room.



Alton was standing in front of the fireplace, his hands held out to the flames. He grinned at her. "All's I want right now is to crawl up and go to sleep." He rubbed his belly. "I'm fuller than a tick on a coon dog." He took the glass of tea.

She took a sip of her tea. "I was hoping you'd take a plate of food home with you along with the pie," she said, sitting down on the sofa and curling her legs up under her. "I'll never eat all that and it seems a waste to throw it out."

"Lord, don't you dare throw nothing out!" he said, eyebrows lifting into his sparse hair. "You got leftovers you don't want, you just let me know! I'll take 'em off your hands."

"That would be great," she said.

Alton settled down in the overstuffed chair beside the fireplace and they talked for thirty minutes or so. He tried once more to convince her that she needed a husband but once he saw she was adamant in her refusal to marry again, he sighed and gave up.

"I should be getting on home though. I got a couple of driveways to do this afternoon."

"Let me go fix you a plate to take with you then," she said.

He followed her out to the kitchen and when she insisted on giving him what was left of the cornbread, he was grinning like a child in a candy shop. "I'll have that for my breakfast in the morning," he told her.

"My grandfather used to mix his cornbread with grits and patty sausage," she told him. "Do you like grits?"

The old man shook his head. "Don't like sand neither," he informed her.

"What about collard greens, black-eyed peas and okra?"

"Don't like 'em mixed together, but separate they're all right," he replied.

"Then I'll have to fix us some baked ham with black-eyed peas and a pot of greens. That would go good with the potato salad."

"Reckon it would at that," Alton agreed. He took the plate she'd fixed for him, adding the pie atop it, and thanked her. "I'll be eating good tonight."

She walked with him to the front door and held the food for him as he dressed in his vest, coat and watch cap. She stood in the doorway as he tugged on his boots.

"I really enjoyed myself, Lannie," he told, taking back the food. "Thank you."

"Thank you for plowing my drive," she said, knowing he would be insulted if she offered to pay him too.

The old man shrugged. "My pleasure. You stay warm now, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," she said saluting him, and waited at the door until he was down the drive and into the cab of his truck before she shut the storm door. As soon as she did, she felt strong arms circling her.

"You're a good woman, Lannie Durant," Remy told her.

"I'm a horny woman," she said, wriggling her rump against his crotch.

"Well, let's see what we can do about that," he said, turning her around to face him.

He slid one arm around her back, bringing her tightly to him, and put a hand to her breast to knead the tender flesh. His lips slanted over hers and he kissed her deeply, his tongue sweeping over hers.

Lannie could feel the hardness of his growing erection pushed against her and her womb clenched in anticipation. She ached for this man. She longed for the weight of him pressing down upon her, the fullness of his cock deep within her body. She knew in her heart of hearts that she would never tire of his touch, of the way he made her feel, and that he would be the one constant in her life for as long as she lived and possibly beyond.

"I will be with you for eternities to come," he whispered against her lips, hearing her unspoken thoughts. "We will never be parted."

He lowered his hand to the swell of her sex and caressed her through the fabric of her jeans. When he heard her moan, he swept her up in his arms and carried her to the rug in front of the fireplace, laying her there then putting his fingers to the buttons of her shirt, working them slowly open.

"You will never be alone, my *bien-aimé*," he told her as the shirt came undone and he unhooked the brass tab at the waistband of her jeans. "Never."

She felt languorous and protected as she lay there, his strong hands tugging her jeans from her legs, removing her panties and socks, helping her sit up so he could slip the shirt from her shoulders and unhook her bra. What she did not feel was self-conscious or embarrassed when he swept his fevered gaze over her and heat burned in his amber eyes.

"You will always be beautiful to me," he said, and slowly began to unbutton his own shirt.

Watching him undress was one of the most lustful things she'd ever experienced. He made it so sensuous, so licentious, that she could feel the juices gathering between her legs. The sight of him stripping the shirt from his body, peeling it away from his broad chest, made her tremble with expectation. He knelt there on his knees as he removed that garment then stood to remove his jeans. Since he tended to go barefoot much of the time, as soon as he slid the jeans down his long legs, there was nothing else for him to remove and the jut of his shaft made her mouth water with desire.

"Your body is beautiful to me," she told him.

He smiled slowly. "I am glad you like my body."

She held her arms up to him. "I especially like the way your body feels on mine."

Sinking to his knees, he stretched out atop her, his flesh sliding along hers as he took her mouth with his. Her arms were around his shoulders, his arms going under her, his hands to her rump to hold her to him. The weight and stab of his cock along her thigh was delicious. Unerringly it slid into her and she brought her legs up to capture his hips, her ankles crossed as he began the slow rocking, thrusting rhythm that began to soothe the need growing within them both.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brad nodded to Alton as the older man pulled up beside him at the Casey's gas island. Filling his cruiser, Brad had locked the pump handle in place and retreated to the warmth inside the car as the gas flowed into the tank. When Alton climbed out of his truck and came over to the pump, Brad opened his door and got out. "Did you get Lannie all squared away?" he asked.

"Yep," Alton said. "Me and her are gonna be setting a wedding date real soon, I'm thinkin'."

The chief of police chuckled. "Was her food that good?"

"In the way young folks talk today, it was to die for," Alton replied as he punched the button to pay inside the convenience store then began pumping his gas. "You gotta try her egg pie."

"Good, huh?"

"Good don't even start to describe it, son," Alton told him. He gave Brad a steady look. "I hate to tell you, but the girl ain't lookin' to get hitched."

Brad looked across Highway 6 and let out a long breath. "Yeah, I know."

"Not ever, Brad," Alton stressed.

"Yeah, I got that, Alton," Brad said.

"If you do, then you won't go pushing her then, will ya?"

Returning his attention to the old man, Brad hooked a finger down his cold nose and met Alton's eyes. "No, I won't. I'll just be happy to take whatever she's willing to give."

Alton bobbed his head in agreement to that. "That man she was married to must have really worked a number on her, you know?"

"I did some checking and he was a classless prick," Brad declared. "She's well rid of him."

The old man was finished pumping his little bit of gas and flicked up the lever, returning the nozzle to the machine. He hitched up his pants then screwed the gas cap back on his truck. "Seems to me any man what hurt a sweet girl like our Lannie ought to be tarred and feathered."

"What goes around, comes around," Brad prophesied. "He'll get his one day."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting hunched over the steering wheel as his wipers worked frantically to push aside the accumulating snow, Trey Durant was getting one hell of a headache centered right between his narrowed eyes. He was grinding teeth tightly together in an effort to keep the car on the road and his temper from getting any worse. He'd almost punched out a sassy female back at the Iowa 80 truck stop for daring to get smart with him when

he'd asked how far it was to Kellogg. It had taken every ounce of restraint he had not to jump her and pound her into the concrete floor.

"Goddamn uppity bitch," he labeled her.

It was bad enough the snow had started falling while he was using the restroom in what the sign said was the world's largest truck stop and he'd skidded coming back onto the interstate from exit 284 at Walcott. Now he was being forced to creep along the super slab behind drivers he considered just one notch up from the moronic truckers who flew past with no regard to the safety or conditions of the road.

"One hundred and ten miles," he said to himself. "Should take about two hours." He snorted. "In this shit, it'll take me the rest of the goddamned day to get there!" He glanced at his watch and was enraged to see it was well past four in the afternoon. The sun would be setting soon, making driving that much more hazardous, not to mention aggravating his headache.

Barely going thirty miles per hour, the slow speed was annoying Trey, and the constant swipe of the blades across the windshield was adding to the intensity of his headache. He didn't dare pull off on the shoulder to fish in the glove compartment for aspirin. He was getting close to Iowa City and if the snow was no better when he got there, he planned on stopping despite his eagerness to reach Lannie. He wasn't going to kill himself by driving into the back of some idiot's SUV.

## Chapter Eleven

Rae Bartlett was uneasy. He'd been uneasy all day and he knew it had as much to do with his visit to Maddy's old house as it was to the new girl's insistence that Remy was hanging around the place.

"Haunted," Rae mumbled as he sat in his chair and stared into the leaping flames in his fireplace.

"What, dear?" Loretta, his wife, asked as she looked up from the afghan she was crocheting.

"Nothing," Rae said. "Just talking to myself."

"That's a sign of that old-timer's disease creeping up on you," Loretta teased, and returned her attention to the chevron pattern in her lap.

"Now don't you start," Rae warned her in a good-natured tone before getting up to add another log to the fire.

Sitting back down, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped. The niggling feeling that was constantly making the hair rise up on the back of his weathered neck was getting to him. It almost felt as though something—or someone—were running their fingernails down his bare spine. He shifted his shoulders in an attempt to ward off the sensation.

"Why are you so restless tonight?" Loretta inquired.

"Cabin fever I guess," he replied.

"Then why don't you go check on the animals," she suggested. "That'll give you something to do."

Rae shrugged listlessly. "Don't know that I want to get out in that cold," he told her.

Loretta said nothing, her fingers flying through the crochet stitches. It was the second afghan she'd done that week, this one for a friend's new grandbaby. Glancing over at her husband, she continued to work, humming an old hymn. When Rae let out a long, harsh breath, she smiled to herself, knowing full well he would soon be putting on his coat and going out to work off his nervous energy.

"Did I tell you I went down to introduce myself to the new girl?" he asked.

"Um-hum," his wife answered.

"Seems real nice," he said.

"When the weather is better, I'll take her over one of my rhubarb pies," Loretta said.

"She's made that place a real showcase," he observed.

"I imagine the Van Hommes did a lot of it," Loretta reminded him.

"Yeah, but she added that detached garage and breezeway, and the new front porch is jim-dandy. Did I tell you it was made from PVC?" At her silent nod, he thought about that for a moment. "Wouldn't mind putting one like that on our place now that I see how it looks."

"Wouldn't have to keep painting it every few years," she commented.

"Now that would be a godsend," he said, getting up. He put his hands to his back and stretched. The sound of his bones popping was loud in the still room that was silent save for the gentle ticking of the grandfather's clock. "I think I will get a breath of fresh air."

"Bundle up," she advised.

The sun was setting as Rae pushed open the screen door and ventured out into his backyard. He stood there on the top step for a moment—the uneasy feeling seeming to grow. He turned his head toward the lights coming from the old Devereux place down the road—he'd never be able to think of it any other way—and that unsettled sensation seemed to intensify.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alton finished the last of the pepper steak and potato salad on the plate Lannie had made for him and took it to the sink. Running hot water into the little plastic basin he used to wash dishes, he stared out the dark window. He'd been nervous all afternoon as he'd plowed the Wilders' and the Shutts' driveways but hadn't known why. Something had been nagging at him but he just couldn't put a finger to it. As he washed Lannie's plate, the feeling seemed to grow and he stopped with his hands wet from the soapy sink water and went over to the phone, picked it up and called her.

"Hello?"

"You all right out there?" Alton asked, running an arthritic finger under his nose.

"Snug as a bug in the rug," Lannie assured him. "Why?"

"Just checking," Alton said. "Got your doors locked and all?"

"Yes, daddy," she replied with a giggle.

"Don't be smart-mouthing me, little girl," Alton said with a snort. "You got my number in case you need me."

"Yes, I do," she said.

"Well, I'll let you go then. Just wanted to tell you I finished up that pepper steak and it was as good this time round as it was to lunch. Gonna eat my pie now."

"Enjoy. Good night, Alton," she said.

"G'night," he said and hung up, his disquiet just as strong as it had been before he'd called her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remy stood with his arms folded as his lady finished cleaning up the kitchen. He watched her glance out the window. It was almost eight o'clock and already it was dark as midnight beyond the panes. She went over to the trash can and slipped off the top, took the white plastic garbage bag from inside and tied the self-tie strips together. She headed for the new door that connected the kitchen to the breezeway.

"If I could leave the house, I'd do that for you," he said.

"I know you would," she told him.

"Hated to take out the garbage when I was alive," he said. "Now I'd give anything to be able to do it."

"It's not a big deal," she said. She opened the door and went through the breezeway. She opened the door into the garage and reached along the wall to turn on the light. After putting the garbage in the big rolling can she would have to drag to the curb every Monday night for early Tuesday morning pick up, she pulled the garage door shut and hurried back through the breezeway.

"Cold out there?" he asked as she came in rubbing her arms.

"Than a witch's teat," she remarked.

"Come here," he ordered, and she went to him to have him wrap her in his arms. She laid her head on his chest and felt his lips grazing her hair as his hands moved up and down her back, his warm body pressed to hers.

There was a low thud on the north side of the house and they both looked toward the breezeway. When it came again, she slipped out of his arms and went to the door to listen.

"Must be a coon," he said.

"In the garage?" she asked.

"They like garbage, *bébé*," he answered.

"Shoot," she grumbled. "Will it attack me if I go shoo it out?"

"No," he said. "I'd never allow that."

She looked around at him and grinned. "Okay, so what do I need to do?"

"It most likely got in when you went out to get wood before supper. They are sneaky little bandits. Just hit the garage door opener and chances are it will run out."

Once more a thud came from the garage.

"He's probably already turned the can over," she said, opening the breezeway door.

She was just reaching for the knob to the garage door when Remy felt the vibration ripple through him like an earthquake measuring ten on the Richter scale. It staggered him and slammed him back against the wall with enough force to dent the drywall, a shudder of clinging, slimy cold dread flowing down him in a single piercing wave.

"*Lannie, no!*" he bellowed, his eyes wide.

He saw her look back at him down the length of the twelve-feet-long breezeway. His shout startled her and she stilled with the garage door open just a sliver, the darkness beyond it showing clearly in the gap. She was taking her hand off the knob, starting back toward him when the door was jerked open.

Lannie turned and her eyes went wide as she saw Trey standing there, his face a truly horrible mask of fury. She stumbled back, tried to run, but he reached out and grabbed her by the hair, yanking her back, dragging her into the dark garage.

*"Lannie!"*

Remy could do nothing as he stood just inside the kitchen doorway. He could not venture past the threshold, could not go to his lady's aid for his material body was trapped within the confines of the house. He watched in horror as a man who had to be Lannie's ex-husband shoved her against her car and then backhanded her, knocking her to the floor.

*"No!"* Remy howled, and his entire body quivered so violently the house shook on its foundation. His form was shimmering like sunlight on undulating water and was giving off a humming sound that made the windowpanes throughout the house crack into spider web fractures.

Lannie felt her lip tear with the brutal hit Trey sent her way and she slid down the side of the car, catching her ribs on the fender as she crashed to the floor. Her scalp was on fire where he had savagely pulled her hair.

*"Whore!"* Trey shouted, and brought his foot back to plant it into her unprotected belly.

Shrieking from the pain, Lannie tried to scramble up and away from him but his next kick caught her on the thigh, making her leg go numb.

*"Filthy slut!"*

Another vicious kick landed on her tailbone as she twisted to avoid an additional hit to her belly. She felt something give inside her.

*"Lannie! Lannie!"* Remy was frantically calling her name over and over again, and the lights in the house were flickering on and off. The sound of breaking glass was loud.

Trey curled his fingers into claws and slapped them down on Lannie's shoulders to drag her up, her back to him, one of his arms snaking around her to drag her into the breezeway.

She fought him, struggling to break free although her right leg felt broken, paralyzed from his kick. She tried to rake her fingernails down the back of his hand, scoring his flesh, but all that got her was a hand groping for her breast, squeezing so cruelly she almost lost consciousness.

*"I'll teach you to cuckold me!"* she heard Trey hiss in her ear a moment before he bit her earlobe so hard she screamed.

*"Make him bring you into the house!"* Remy yelled at her. *"I can get him in here!"*



Her leg gave out beneath her and she went down, pulling Trey off balance with her. She dug her fingernails into the sisal runner on the breezeway floor in an effort to drag him with her toward the kitchen, a distant part of her hearing Remy's frenzied words though her body was unable to obey.

"You bitch!" Trey yelped, as he went down hard on one knee beside her.

Remy bellowed with rage when he saw the man ripping at Lannie's clothes. He was shuddering so violently, the foundation of the house was shuddering with him. Cracks spread out across the drywall. Floor tiles buckled with the upheaval of the beams beneath the under-flooring. Light bulbs burst. The entire structure groaned.

Trey snatched at the shirt covering Lannie's breasts and ripped it from her. Though she tried to bat his hands away, he slapped her hard several times in succession until she was dazed from the blows. Blood was running from her nose, the corner of her mouth. Her right eye was swollen shut.

"Goddamn tramp," Trey spat as he tore at her jeans, yanking them down. "Whore!"

Lannie looked up at her ex-husband's face and knew he would kill her before this was over and done. She turned her head away—striving with her one good eye to see Remy—as Trey plopped down atop her, snatching open his pants to free himself and then rammed into her with such force her tender flesh tore.

"Lannie!" Remy's cry as he dropped to his knees on the floor was heart-rending. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he held one hand out to her, begging forgiveness for not being able to help her.

"I'll make you sorry you ever cheated on me!" Trey said, and shoved his cock into her as hard as he could.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rae could not sit down. He could not lie down. He could not stay still. His wife had gone up to take her bath and he was pacing the den, the feeling that had plagued him all day now at such an intensity he could barely think straight. He had checked on the cattle twice and had even gone out to look after the chickens and the pigs. Nothing was out of the ordinary, yet the jumpiness persisted and his nerves were being abraded raw by whatever was unsettling him.

He kept going to the window and looking westward to the Devereux place where he would stare at the lights shining in the windows. Why his anxiety kept turning his eyes that way he didn't know, but the fretfulness had reached a point that he could no longer ignore it.

Putting on his heavy clothes, carrying the loaded shotgun in the crook of his arm, he left his house at fifteen minutes past eight that evening and began walking resolutely toward his new neighbor's house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just east of the Bartlett spread, Alton Spivey was driving his rusted-out truck as fast as he could down North 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue East. The dilapidated vehicle bounced over the snow-packed gravel, sweeping the cockeyed aligned headlights all around the thick woods beside the road.

The disquiet that had settled on the old man had turned his stomach sour and he kept belching and farting as the truck rattled along. He cursed when his head hit the torn canvas of the truck's headliner but he never let up on the gas. Why he felt it so imperative to go check on Lannie and not to call first, he had no idea, but in all his years of living, he had never known such unbridled jitteriness and it was making his heart race.

"I'm coming, darlin'," he said, teeth gritting. "Just hold on. Alton is coming!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Brad fixed himself a sandwich then stood there at the kitchen counter and just stared at it. He wasn't any more hungry now that he'd slapped ham and cheese together between two slices of quickly going stale bread than he had been before he decided to make the damned thing. He glared at the concoction as though it had mortally offended him then turned around, leaving it on the counter and strode out of the kitchen.

For the last half hour he'd been on edge but he didn't know why. The storm had abated and the night was almost crystal clear, the stars twinkling down from the heavens like diamonds. The wind had laid and there hadn't been a single call on his police band since around four o'clock. Things were quiet outside but inside, Brad was a bundle of nerves.

He tried watching television but the insipid reality shows and the ridiculous sitcoms were no better than the omnipresent coroner dramas that didn't show him much. They all seemed to run together until he found himself watching the shopping channel for lack of anything else to do. When he'd had his fill, he snapped off the set and just sat there staring at the dark screen.

How he wished he were sitting beside Lannie right now, he thought, and laid his head back against the chair. They could be watching some classic horror movie and chowing down on buttered popcorn.

"I put one stick of oleo in the popcorn popper, shake in exactly twelve shakes of salt, add a cup of white popcorn and let her rip," she had told him. "Makes the absolute best popcorn this side of a movie theater!"

And it had been because he'd tried it. The girl knew her stuff.

Thoughts of Lannie only added to the apprehension he'd been feeling and he frowned, reaching up to rub at the ache that had settled in his forehead. He drew in a deep, long breath then let it out, wishing he knew what was causing his anxiousness.

Unable to keep sitting there, he got up and went over to the CD player, rummaged through the stacks of country music, folk music, Celtic music and Jim Brickman music, but had no real desire to play any of the CDs he picked up. After a few minutes, he discarded that idea and strolled back into the kitchen to stare once more at the ham and cheese sandwich.

"Do you really want that, Wyngate?" he asked himself, and decided he didn't. He cursed, flipped off the kitchen light and went back into the den, chewing on a loose cuticle. As he passed the phone, he stopped and after a moment's hesitation picked up the receiver, dialing Lannie.

As the phone he held continued to ring, the expression on Brad Wyngate's face went from mild concern to overwhelming fear and he dropped the receiver and tore out of the house, ripping his coat and gun belt from the coat rack as he ran out the front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although the house in which Remy was held captive was straining to remain intact, the walls contracting and expanding as though breathing and alive, the breezeway and garage were as still as the rest of the house was shuddering. As Trey Durant brutally and viciously raped his ex-wife on the floor of the breezeway and Remy Devereaux watched helplessly, unable to come to her aid, Trey was unaware of anything except doing as much damage to Lannie as he could. He raked at her bare breasts—drawing welts and scratches over the soft flesh. He ground his body cruelly into hers, pummeling her with his flesh. He bit her neck, her shoulder, sinking his teeth into her, breaking skin and making blood bubble from the bites. All the while he cursed her for the unfaithful slut he thought her to be.

*"Lannie, make him come into the house!"* Remy shouted.

Through the bright wash of pain flooding her body, Lannie could hear Remy's frantic voice but she couldn't push Trey off her. He was pounding into her body, straining over her so that drops of his salty sweat fell into her eyes to sting her. He was grunting like a rabid animal, swiveling his hips against her as though he could not reach the orgasm he was striving to have.

*"Bitch!"* Trey spat at her. *"Goddamned filthy, cheating bitch!"*

*"Lannie, please!"* she heard Remy pleading. *"Get him in the house!"*

Using the very last ounce of energy she had, Lannie bucked beneath her attacker, bringing her hands up to claw at his eyes instead of his shoulders. She felt his skin give way on his cheeks, heard him yelp, and in that split second he was distracted, managed to throw him off her. He pulled free of her and she flipped over, scrambling on all fours to crawl as fast as she could down the breezeway, ignoring Trey's violent burst of foul language and hisses. She had almost reached the doorway, was lifting her hand up to Remy who was there to take it, when Trey's brutal fingers dug into her ankle to pull her back.

"No!" Remy screamed. His hand was just inside the house, his fingers even with the strip of metal that ran across the threshold. Lannie's fingertips had brushed his for a moment before her vile ex-husband snatched her back out of Remy's reach.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alton had to veer sharply as he rounded the curve just past Rae Bartlett's place, for as soon as he'd made the turn, his wobbling headlights picked up a man walking down the middle of the road. He almost lost control of the old truck but managed to keep it from slamming into the stand of black walnuts at the edge of the road. In the wash of the headlights, he recognized Rae but more importantly he saw the shotgun cradled in the younger man's arm.

Rae had jumped to the opposite side of the gravel road the moment the truck came barreling around the curve. He didn't know who was driving, didn't care, but instinct told him the noise of the approaching truck would not be good. He loped over to the cab.

Alton cranked his window down. "Bartlett? What the Sam hell are you doing in the middle of the..."

"She's in trouble," Rae said, "but we don't need you advertising that we're coming."

Alton didn't argue. He eased the truck as close to the edge of the road as he could get it, turned off the engine, killed the lights and got out, stopping just long enough to grab a tire iron from behind the seat. "You feel it too?" he asked as he shut the door with as little noise as possible.

"Something ain't right," Rae said.

The two men looked grim as they started walking toward the Devereux house that was less than sixty yards away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brad's truck skidded as he took the sharp turn off Highway 6 onto North 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue East just before Sugar Creek. Fishtailing as his heavy-duty tires gripped the gravel, he fought the wheel to keep the truck from sliding off the road. He accelerated and shot over the concrete bridge—his rear tires spinning on the ice before the front ones dug into the gravel beyond the concrete to give the truck traction. He was glad for the sandbags in the bed of the truck for he was facing a steep incline, praying the truck could scoot up.

Though he was cold, hadn't turned on the heater so he would stay alert, he was sweating beneath the bulk of his heavy corduroy coat. He armed the sweat off his brow and almost lost control of the truck again as it labored to get up the incline. His heart was hammering in his chest, his blood pounding in his ears, and for just a split second, he thought he saw something hovering at the corner of his eye. When he snapped his

head to the dark window on the passenger side, he could have sworn he saw a young Remy Devereux there, his face stamped with fear.

"I know, Remy," he said, grinding his teeth. "I'm going to her, man. I'm going!"

Brad Wyngate didn't question his sanity at that moment. There would be plenty of time later for such introspection. His nerves were strung so raw that he could barely draw breath into his constricted lungs. With the truck straining up the incline, he stomped down on the accelerator, felt the tires spin for a moment before it shot up the rest of the way and he fought to keep it from skidding as he neared another sharp curve in the road.

On his hip was his service revolver. He could feel it, and for the first time in his life, he knew he wouldn't hesitate to draw it and kill whoever was threatening Lannie Durant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alton and Rae came simultaneously to a dead standstill when they got close enough to the old Devereux place to hear the groaning of the timbers, the rattle of the building, in the still night air. They exchanged a brief glance.

"That house is alive," Alton whispered.

Rae swung his shotgun barrel up and grasped it with his left hand. "Let's go!"

Digging their booted feet into the bank of snow leading up from the road to Lannie's backyard, the two men could see the lights on in the breezeway but the rest of the house was dark as it rattled and shook. As their gaze fell at the same time to the two bodies lying on the floor of the breezeway, they increased their speed, Rae's shotgun pointing straight forward now.

Brad almost ran right into the back of Alton Spivey's old pickup as the chief of police came barreling around the corner. He had to practically stand on the brake to keep his own vehicle from slamming into Alton's. He cursed a blue streak as his truck skidded sideways then traveled backward a good ten feet beyond Alton's truck before stalling.

Something pushed hard against Brad's mind and he didn't even bother turning off his headlights before he was out of the truck and sprinting as fast as he could move toward the Devereux place, his hand shoving aside his coat to settle his palm on the grip of his 9 mm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trey had managed to flip Lannie back over as he crawled up her body, intent on pushing himself back inside her. He didn't notice she was scooting backward on the floor, straining to get over the threshold, one hand thrust out above her head. He slapped her, felt her blood splatter his face and snarled like an enraged tiger. He was

fumbling with his cock, trying to get it between her legs, but she was writhing beneath him, her feet pushing against the floor in her effort to move backward.

*"Just a bit more!"* Lannie heard Remy encouraging. *"Just a bit more!"*

The moment she felt the electric surge of energy as her fingertips touched Remy's, Lannie doubled her effort to get as much of her hand inside the house as she could. She had no doubt that if Remy could grasp her wrist, he could pull her over the threshold and into the realm where he was trapped.

"Oh no, you don't!" Trey hissed at her as though he knew her intent. His body pressed down hard on hers and for just a moment, the tip of his shaft touched her, but at that instant, she also felt Remy's hand close around her wrist.

Despite his advancing years, Alton was the first one to reach the back door of Lannie's house, Rae only a few steps behind. The old man took the steps up to the porch two at a time and yanked on the door only to find it locked. Slamming his palm as hard as he could against the frame, he was barely aware of Rae moving past him until he heard the blast of the shotgun and the shattering of the storm windows in the breezeway.

At the moment the gun discharged, Trey's head popped up like that of a meerkat from a burrow. His face swiveled toward the destroyed windows at the exact moment Lannie's body slid away from him. Since he was gripping her shoulder with one hand as the other had been trying to impale her with his cock, he slid with her, the unreality of the moment not even registering until he was inside the house and looking up in the face of something not of Trey Durant's world.

Alton heard the unearthly scream as he slammed his hand against the doorframe again, hearing the rattle of the lock as it came undone. He snatched open the porch door and hurried in. From the periphery of his vision he saw Rae Bartlett using the stock of his shotgun to break out the rest of a window before swinging a leg over the shattered remnants of wallboard and frame to climb inside the breezeway. He barely felt the hand that closed over his shoulder to push him aside.

"Move, Spivey!" Brad yelled.

Alton didn't question how the chief of police came to be there or why the younger man simply pointed his gun at the doorknob and shot it off instead of trying to see if the door was locked. He just stood to one side as Brad yanked open the back door and entered the house.

Rae was breathing hard and his chest felt as though someone were pressing on it with a bony knee. The noise coming from inside the house as he hurried toward Lannie was enough to make the hair stand up at the nape of his neck. With his shotgun level at the side of his face, he barely glanced at Lannie before moving past her into the dark kitchen. "You all right?" he asked the woman.

"Let him handle it," Lannie managed to say. She was trying to sit up, the cacophony of the shrieks and screams coming from farther inside her house like fingernails down a chalkboard.

"Let who handle it?" Rae asked as he swung the barrel from side to side.

Brad had nearly lost his life as he came stumbling into the kitchen, Alton close behind him. He saw Rae Bartlett outlined from the light of the breezeway and held a hand up to keep the older man from blasting him. His attention went to Lannie and he froze.

"Help her," Rae ordered, and moved from the kitchen toward the hallway, his shotgun ready, his finger on the trigger.

Alton stripped off his coat and stumbled over to where Lannie sat, swinging the heavy garment around her as she sat there shuddering violently. He put a scrawny arm around her as he knelt beside her. "How bad you hurt, darlin'?" he asked.

"I'm okay," she said. "Alton, don't let Rae interfere. Let Remy take care of it."

Brad blinked several times at her words, trying to understand the strange noises coming out of the living area of the house. In the darkness of the kitchen he did not see Lannie's battered face but instinct told him she wasn't critical. All he wanted to do was get to the bastard who had dared attack her. With his gun gripped tightly in his hand, he followed Rae into the dark interior.

All around them the house was still straining from rafter to floor joists. The hideous screams coming from deep within it was unnerving. Total darkness surrounded them, and when Rae stopped in the doorway between the dining room and the parlor, Brad bumped into him. The demonic sounds were coming from just beyond them and neither man really wanted to see what was causing the hideous slurping, crunching noises that accompanied the screams.

"It's him," Rae said quietly, barely heard above the shrieks.

"The ex-husband?" Brad questioned, swallowing, feeling a minute trickle of urine wet his underwear.

"Remy," Rae said, and lowered the shotgun slowly inch by inch as the gruesome sounds became a long, drawn-out gurgle then stopped altogether.

The house stilled and the air became as frigid as the farthest reaches of the Arctic.

Brad felt a shiver go down his back and he lowered his own gun, holstered it. Whatever had been causing the screams had stopped. The threat was over.

"Every window in this room is shattered," Rae said, nudging his head toward the bay windows there in the dining room.

Through the glow from the lights in the breezeway, Brad could see the webbed cracks in the panes.

Hesitantly, their hearts racing, the two men moved on through the dining room and into the parlor. The smell of death was heavy in the air. It was a coppery odor that made the mouth water and the bowels feel loose. It made the hair stand up on their arms. They had barely entered the parlor before there was a strange tinkling sound and the lights came on in the lamps scattered about the room.

"Sweet Jesus," Rae whispered, and when Brad turned his head to see what the older man was looking at it, the chief of police felt another trickle of urine seep from his cock.

Lying on his back in the middle of the parlor floor was a man whose pallid face was contorted in a hideous rictus of pure terror. Livid red slashes from Lannie's fingernails were grooved down his bloodless face. Eyes bulging, mouth gaping in a cavernous scream, the corpse's arms were up as though to ward off his attacker, fingers curled into rigid claws. His hair was snow white and frizzed as though he'd been electrocuted. His legs were bent at the knee with his feet planted firmly to the floor. Not a drop of blood showed anywhere on his person. No wounds were evident.

"It's Trey Durant," Brad said, wincing at the sound of his own voice. He recognized Lannie's ex from the mug shot that had been telexed to him from California.

"What the hell happened to him?" Rae questioned. The shotgun was hanging loosely at his side but for the first time since he was a boy, he did not feel protected by the weapon.

"Hell happened to him," Alton said from behind them. The old man shivered. "And I imagine that's where he is at this very moment."

Brad tore his attention from the corpse. "Lannie?" he queried.

"She'll be okay but he raped her," Alton said. "I think we ought to take her to the hospital. I got her sitting at the kitchen table."

Another strange tinkling sound began and as the men stood there in silent suspense, the cracks in the windowpanes began to disappear, to close, reversing the splitting in the glass until the panes were once more intact. Likewise the cracks in the drywall, the ceiling and the buckling of the floorboards began to reverse. The cold air became warm, carrying on it the light scent of gardenia. The house shuddered one last time then healed itself completely, as though nothing had ever transpired out of the ordinary.

"Holy Mother of God," Alton said, and crossed himself.

Rae trembled then made a low, keening sound deep in his throat. He plopped down in the chair beside him, staring intently at the deformed corpse.

Brad took a step back, something moving in the mirror over the sideboard catching his attention, but when he looked that way, he caught only a shadow passing over the reflective glass. He shuddered hard and reached up to run a shaky hand over his sweaty face. "I'd best call this in to Jasper County," he heard himself say, and his voice sounded hollow.

"And say what?" Alton asked.

"That he attacked Lannie and..." Brad began, but Rae's voice cut him off.

"How you going to explain how he died, Wyngate?" Rae asked. "What will they say caused the bastard's death?"



"I don't know," Brad said, "but we can't just dig a hole and drop him in it as much as I'd like to do that."

"Why not?" Alton challenged.

"Let the law handle it, Alton," Lannie said from the doorway, and when the men turned to look at her, each of them flinched at her appearance.

The right side of Lannie's face was livid with purple bruises. Her lip was torn, her eye swollen shut. She had scratch marks on the backs of her hands as she clutched Alton's coat to her. There were scratches on her neck and along one cheek.

"When the autopsy is performed, they will find he died of a heart attack," Lannie stated.

"You don't know that," Alton said.

"Yes, I do," she said softly.

"And how are you going to explain that look on his face?" Rae asked.

"What look?" Lannie inquired.

The three men swiveled their heads toward the man lying on the floor and a collective gasp went through them.

Trey Durant was lying with his eyes and mouth closed, his legs flat on the floor and slightly parted, his arms at his side. There wasn't a scratch on his face, not a bruise to be seen anywhere, no evidence at all that he had struggled with Lannie. Had the men not seen him earlier, they could well imagine he was only sleeping.

"Holy shit," Alton whispered. "Will you look at him?"

"Call who you have to, Brad," Lannie said, moving past them.

"Where are you going?" Brad asked, reaching out to take her arm.

She shrugged away from him. "To take a shower and wash his smell off me."

"But we need to take you to..."

Lannie lifted her chin. "You will find he forced the side door of the garage open. His car is somewhere nearby and I'm sure his tracks are in the snow. His fingerprints will be on the door. You can take pictures of my bruises where he and I struggled."

"Lannie..." Brad began.

"He forced his way in, slapped me around and while he was in the process, had a massive coronary and dropped dead at my feet in the living room," she stated. "No one needs to know what else that sick bastard did to me." She locked gazes with Brad. "I don't want anyone to know he did anything else to me. Do you understand?"

"That would be best," Rae agreed. He plowed a thick hand through his hair. "No need for there to be any more gossip than there will be as it is."

Though it went against his grain as a lawman, Brad could see the wisdom in playing down Durant's death. If Lannie's assessment of how the man had died held up—and his gut told him it would—talk of it would die down quickly, though it would be one more legend to be told about the Devereux place.

"There is no way for the damage done to the breezeway to be fixed," she told them. "So what you did will need to be explained, Rae."

Rae looked up at her. "What do we...?"

"You and Alton were out hunting on the property behind mine," she told him. "You heard me screaming and came running to help. You saw me struggling with Trey as I tried to get into the house away from him and you fired a shot to scare him off. Your aim was off and it hit the breezeway windows. With the window blown out, you and Alton were able to climb through and come to help me."

"I've never hunted with Spivey in my life," Rae said. "People might question that."

"And I blew the doorknob off your porch," Brad said. "How will you explain that?"

"You'll find it has been fixed, Brad," she said with a faint smile. "That is part of the original house so it is part of Remy's domain over which he has absolute control."

Brad shuddered at that statement, glancing at the windowpanes that no longer had cracks veined through them.

"As for why you were out here, Brad," she said, "Alton called you."

"I'd best go move my truck," Alton said. "Before someone comes by and sees it."

"Mine too," Brad said.

"Pull it up the drive and come up on the porch," Lannie said. "Rae will let you in."

Rae nodded, his clasped hands dangling between his spread knees.

She moved past the men and started up the staircase, confident they would do exactly as she said. She moved slowly, her battered body protesting every step, but her head was not down, her eyes were not lowered.

"This has been one helluva night," Alton said, as he started back through the parlor.

"I hate leaving her for even a moment," Brad said.

"She's not alone," Rae said.

"Yeah, but when we leave..."

"We know what we saw here, Chief," Rae said softly. "We all know Remy is here and he took care of Durant. No one else needs to know that."

"I didn't see nothing," Alton said, shaking his head as he departed.

Brad watched Lannie until she was out of sight up the stairs. He felt chilled to the bone though warm air was flowing gently around him from the baseboard heater by which he stood.

"Make your call, Chief," Rae said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lannie laid Alton's musty old coat on the chair beside her bed and took off her torn shirt, kicked off her shoes, tugged off her socks then slipped off the jeans that had the smell of Trey Durant all over them. She wadded the clothes into a bundle and carried

them over to the fireplace, and dropped them into the flames. She stood there until the material was nothing more than embers before heading into the bathroom, closing the door behind her and locking it.

He was there waiting for her by the shower with his arms open, his handsome face grave. She walked into his embrace and laid her cheek against his chest. He held her to him, one hand smoothing over the bare expanse of her back.

"I am sorry, *bébé*," he whispered to her. "If I could have come into the breezeway..."

"I know," she said.

"It will be all right," he said. "I will make it all right."

"I know you will."

With one arm around her, he opened the glass shower door and leaned in to turn the water on, adjusting it to the degree he knew she liked. She was shivering and he knew she needed to get Durant's scent off her. With a single thought, his clothes dissolved from his body and he eased her with him under the pounding water of the pulsing water. As she stood there with her arms at her sides, her lower lip trembling, he unhooked her net scrubbie from the shower caddy and picked up the bottle of mango body wash to squeeze a liberal amount of the golden liquid onto the scrubbie. Returning the body wash to the caddy, he began easing the scrubbie over her, gently washing her shoulders and neck then her arms before smoothing the net over her breasts and stomach, being very careful of the deep scratches and bruises covering her tender flesh. Squatting down before her, he tenderly bathed her hips and legs, lifted one foot after the other to wash it, careful not to touch her in the bruised juncture that bore Durant's vile odor.

"Wash it off," she said, her body shivering violently. "Get all that smell off me, Remy."

"I will, *bébé*," he promised, and with exquisite care ran the scrubbie between her legs and up the separation of her rump, cleansing her completely and ridding her of the offensive odor of her attacker. When he was sure no lingering scent clung to her, he stood and hung the scrubbie back on the caddy. Using the facial soap, he rolled it between his hands until he had a sufficient lather then gently smoothed it over her cheeks, nose and forehead. Though she flinched as he grazed her swollen eye, she stood as still as her shivering would allow her to do, and when he pushed her back beneath the spray so he could wet her hair and shampoo it, she closed her good eye to keep the suds out.

Lannie reveled in his gentle touch. His hands were so sure and strong on her, yet he handled her as though she were an infant. He ran his fingers through her hair and massaged her scalp then rinsed away the lather. When she was as clean as he could make her, he stood beneath the water with her — his arms tightly folded around her.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, *bien-aimé*," he responded.

"Make love to me, Remy," she asked.

Remy acknowledged her request but said nothing. He knew now was not the time for such things. He simply reached behind her and turned off the shower. Opening the door, he took the thick bath sheet hanging on the rack and wrapped it around her, using a small towel to dry her hair. When he was satisfied she was as dry as she was going to get, he hooked his arms under her legs and back and carried her into the bedroom. As he laid her on the bed, a light knock came at the door.

"I don't want to talk to anyone," she said, curling up into a ball. "I just want you, Remy."

He nodded and straightened. Turning his head toward the door, he knew who was on the other side. He closed his eyes.

*"Go away, Brad. I am handling it."*

Brad Wyngate jumped back from the door, his hand up to knock again. The words that had driven through his mind made his heart pound and his breath leave his lungs in a rush. He stood there staring at the closed portal, unable to move.

*"I am with her. Leave her be."*

The chief of police knew those words had not been spoken aloud. No one would have heard them because they had been directed at him. He took another step away from the door. "Is she all right?" he asked.

*"She will be fine. Go away."*

Brad stood there for a moment longer then turned and hurried down the stairs as though the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. His booted foot skidded off the bottom step and he had to struggle to grab the handrail to keep from falling flat on his ass in front of Rae and Alton.

"He's up there, ain't he?" Alton asked. "He's with her?"

His hand shaking so badly he could barely plow it through his hair, Brad didn't answer. He could see himself in the mirror on the wall beside him and he was as white as a ghost, had seen one—or at least heard it speaking to him.

Rae was standing before the fireplace in the parlor, his hands to the fire, his face turned toward Brad. He slowly lowered his hands and dug them into the pockets of his denims.

"I...I..." Brad shook his head as though to clear it of whatever had frightened him so badly, he had to sink down to the step and sit.

"He's up there," Alton said with a nod. "I know he is."

The strobing lights of the cruisers Brad had called lit up the outside of the house. He had requested no sirens but had failed to deny them the use of the revolving lights. He cursed, getting to his feet with a grunt as he strode heavily to the front door. He shook his head at the pile of vehicles coming to a stop in front of the house. There was the city police officer from Kellogg, the nearest Jasper County town, two deputy cars from Newton, the county seat of Jasper County, an ambulance from the volunteer fire

department in Kellogg, along with several pickup trucks with lights flashing from their dashboards. In all, nine men were rushing up the driveway toward the house. In the distance, he heard the faint warble of another ambulance and figured it was coming from Grinnell.

"Ain't this gonna be a cluster fuck," Alton said as he came to stand beside Brad.

Rae came to the stairs and stood there looking up. His shoulders were hunched and he appeared to be a man whose world had come crashing down upon him, whose sense of what was right had been shattered.

As deputies, paramedics and other volunteers came trooping into Lannie's house, Alton stood to one side and watched the proceedings with interest as Rae continued staring up the stairs and Brad took the men through the events of the evening.

"Best call Smith Funeral Home," one of the deputies said. He was staring down at Trey's body with interest. "Coroner and his deputy are on the way. Didn't nobody touch nothing, did they?"

Brad shook his head. "Nothing's been touched, Joe."

He went to stand beside Alton.

"Why all the mouth-breathers, Chief?" the old man asked, nodding toward the men milling around.

"With me involved, they'll want to make sure every T is crossed, and every I is dotted," Brad answered. "It's policy."

Alton nodded. "'Cause you and Lannie are an item, huh?"

"Something like that," Brad mumbled.

"Did anyone other than the woman see what happened?" the deputy from Newton inquired.

"I saw him grab his chest and go down like a rock," Alton spoke up, and all the men in the room turned to look at him. "Betcha you'll find it was a heart attack what done him in."

"They'll handle it, Alton," Brad cautioned, giving the old man a sharp look.

"Just telling it like I think it is," Alton said with a careless shrug.

"Where is the lady who lives here?" one of the deputies asked as two paramedics entered the living room.

"Upstairs in bed," Brad said. "She was pretty shook up."

"The perp knocked her around," Alton said, hitching up his belt. At Brad's hiss, the old man held up his hand. "Okay, I'll shut up."

"We'll go check on her," the paramedics from Grinnell said after a quick glance at the body and a consultation with the deputy and ambulance driver from Kellogg who had been the first on the scene.

Rae moved aside for the two men with their medical bags to go up the stairs. He glanced at Alton.

"Best go up with 'em, Rae," Alton advised.

Rae's face paled but he nodded and followed in the wake of the paramedics.

"She had a restraining order out on him in California for beating her," Brad was telling the Jasper County law officers. "I don't think she thought he'd come after her here." He was glancing up the stairs nervously.

"You a friend of hers, Chief?" the deputy asked, writing in his notebook.

"We...ah...we're dating," Brad replied.

"So that's why Mr. Spivey called you?"

"Yeah," Brad agreed.

For the next half hour the paramedics treated Lannie's wounds—all superficial though painful—and then came back downstairs. By then the county coroner had arrived as well as the mortician from Grinnell. Trey Durant was placed on a gurney and taken out to the hearse.

"What happens now?" Alton asked.

"He'll be taken to Polk County to the State Medical Examiner's office where they'll perform an autopsy," Brad told him.

"Why are they taking him to Des Moines?" Alton wanted to know. "Why not to Grinnell or Newton?"

"It's policy, Alton," Brad said. "And with me involved its best they investigate thoroughly just to clear things and rule out any foul play."

"Looks like a coronary to me," the coroner said, "but we won't know for sure until they do the autopsy." He turned to the Jasper County deputy. "Doesn't look like foul play to me, Joe. I'd say off the record its pretty cut and dried."

When everyone except Rae, Alton and Brad had left the scene, the three men trooped into Lannie's kitchen and rummaged until they found the bottle of Irish whiskey she kept in a cupboard. Sitting at her table, they poured themselves generous amounts into three of her juice glasses and sat there silently, each lost in his own thoughts.

"I saw cracks all over these walls," Rae said at last, his gaze roaming over the drywall that was as smooth as the day it had been painted and papered. "And the windows were all broken."

"Spooky thing that," Alton put in. "How the house just healed itself."

"It's his house," Brad said.

"It's their house," Rae amended. "His and Lannie's."

"Guess you know why she don't want to get married now, huh, Chief?" Alton inquired.

"You men best be heading home," Brad said. "I'll lock up after you."

Rae would have declined the order but Alton finished his whiskey and stood, telling Bartlett they needed to make tracks.

"Things are being handled here," Alton said. "I'll drop you at your place, Rae."

After a moment's hesitation, Rae got up and followed Alton to the back door. The old man had moved his truck closer to the house before the law had arrived. It was now where it would have been if he and Rae had indeed been night hunting.

"He killed them, you know," Brad said quietly, as the two men started out the back door. He looked up at them from the table. "Joan's parents. I don't know how he did it but he did it."

"That's only fitting since they killed him," Rae said.

"You don't know that," Brad said.

"Yes, I do," Rae said, "and so do you." He looked up at the ceiling for a moment then continued out the door.

Brad took another deep swallow of the burning liquid as Rae and Alton left. He sat there until he'd finished off the bottle, his thoughts dark, unearthly, totally alien to the man he considered himself to be. The strangeness of the evening had seeped into his very bones to chill him to the marrow, and though he was having a hard time accepting what he had seen, what he *knew* had happened, he found he was not as surprised by it all as he should have been. When he had mulled over the goings-on that evening, looked at it from every angle possible, decided it was not to be questioned, he laid his head on his crossed hands and went to sleep, his dreams filled with strange images that made him mumble as he moved through a bizarre, unbelievable world.

As Brad slept restlessly downstairs, Remy finally moved over his lady and with tenderness and sweetness began to make love to her in an effort to wipe out the savage memory of the man who had abused her. She had insisted he make love to her and though he had tried to forestall it, she would not allow him.

"I want his stink off and out of me! I want you, Remy!"

"But he hurt you, *bébé*. You will be tender and..."

"I don't care! I want you, Remy!" she had yelled at him, eyes wild, and to soothe her he had simply nodded.

His hands were gentle as they smoothed over her silken flesh, sure when they stroked and commanding when they massaged. The pads of his thumbs fanned lovingly over swollen nipples and his fingers dipped into slick, wet heat that closed around him like a tight fist.

His mouth coaxed open his lover's lips and he stroked her tongue with his own, taking her in this sweet way as he would moments after take her body—sliding in and out with firmness and surety, claiming her, making her his. He nibbled at her lips and flicked his tongue along the corners of her mouth to make her shiver with anticipation. He trailed kisses to her ear and drew her earlobe between his teeth, whispered soft breaths into the spiral of her flesh and lapped gently at the delicate curves.

Sliding his body down hers, he took one straining peak into his mouth and suckled her as his fingers plucked lightly at the opposite peak. He moved lower to lick at her

bellybutton then lower still to sweep his tongue over her clit before he settled his lower body between her legs, pushing her thighs wide with his knees.

Lannie's arms held her lover, her fingers gliding up into his thick curls. She felt the heat of his hard cock grazing her thigh as he guided himself into her and when he slid into her slick sheath, she drew in a long breath, luxuriating in the feel of his fullness filling her.

Remy moved slowly, undulating his hips against hers, putting his hands under her delectable little ass and lifting her better for a deeper, more fulfilling penetration. He went deep inside her and rocked, giving her all he had to offer.

The rhythm of his thrusts brought Lannie's leg up to crook over his hip as she used her other foot to run a sensuous pattern down his calf. She arched into his push and tightened her vaginal muscles around his shaft—squeezing and rippling over him like a hot honeyed glove.

*"Je vous aimerai quand le temps n'est pas plus et la vie car nous le savons s'est fanée loin,"* he whispered to her then translated to tell her he would love her when time was no more and life as they knew it had faded away.

Lannie sighed deeply. She could ask for nothing more.

As the tremors of release claimed them, they held on tightly to one another and the sweet bliss shot over them until they were spent and sated, until the only sound in the house that belonged to Remy and Lannie was the comfortable squeak of a foundation settling itself in peace.



## Epilogue

The backyard was ablaze with a riot of late spring color. Bright yellow forsythia hung in graceful arches beside white spirea and the brilliant purple of lilac. A bubbling verdigris birdbath drew a thirsty crowd that flitted from copper feeder to copper feeder suspended above the emerald green grass then came back to indulge in a quick bath. Orioles darted in to sip the nectar from the bright orange feeders while hummingbirds zigzagged among the red ones. A black-capped chickadee kept up the constant cry that sounded like a screen door opening and mourning doves waddled under the feeders for the seed scratched down by the wrens and cardinals and juncos. Squirrels ran around and around the trunks of the black walnuts and took time out from their play to sit on the feeder and take a few nibbles from the corncocks. Cottontails played hide and seek with one another beneath the lilac bushes and around the peonies.

"I could sit here all day and just watch them little critters go at it. They look like they're having so much fun," Alton said. He took a sip of the new addiction of his life – sweetened tea – and continued to rock there on Lannie's back porch.

Rae was sitting on the porch steps with a stalk of straw bobbing between his teeth. He was resting up before making the trek back to his place. "You missed a spot, Chief," he called out.

Brad glanced around from the staining he and David Schmitz were finishing up on the latticework of the little shrine to the Virgin Mary that the four of them had spent the weekend constructing for Lannie for the May Day picnic she would be hosting for all her new friends. "Where?"

"Over on the right," Alton answered for Rae. "Right about where the Virgin Mary's left hand will be pointing when you put her statue in."

Stepping back, Brad saw the unstained crosspiece and held up a hand in acknowledgement before dipping his brush in the can of stain.

"I did a damned fine job on that frame, I think," Alton said.

"That you did," Rae agreed.

David asked Alton if he was ready to go.

"What's your hurry?" Alton asked.

"I have things to do up at the church," David replied. "Come on, old man. Time's money!"

"Hold your horses, boy," Alton grumbled. He finished off his tea and stood, hitching up his baggy pants. "You young folks just don't know how to relax."

"You old men know too much about it," David returned with a grin.

"Thank you, guys," Lannie said. She was sitting in the swing, slowly pushing herself with her bare foot. "It really looks great."

"Sure will once we get the statue in," Alton agreed. He stepped around Rae and out into the yard. "Wanna ride to your place, old fella?"

Rae snorted. "I can take myself home, Spivey. Don't you worry about it." He got up and meandered toward the back of Lannie's property. "Call if you need anything, Lannie."

"We'll see you tomorrow, Rae," Lannie called out to him.

"Yep," Rae said, and continued walking.

"*He looks tired,*" Remy said from his place beside her. Since no one but she could see him or hear him, his arm was draped around her and he was massaging her shoulder.

"But it's a good tired," she replied.

Brad glanced around from his stooped position over the lattice. "What?"

"I said it's a good tired," she answered. "Working on something like this. It's a good tired when you're finished."

"How would you know, woman?" Brad countered. "All you've done is to supervise."

"That's work too, Brad," she told him, and when he snorted, she laid her head back on Remy's arm.

"Glad you think so," Brad chuckled.

Straightening up, Brad arched his back to relieve the ache and turned to bring his brush and the can of stain up to the work counter David had put up temporarily for them. It was at that moment as he looked through the screen to the window that flanked the swing that he saw the hazy figure sitting beside Lannie. He stopped in his tracks, his face going pale.

"What's wrong?" Lannie asked, her forehead crinkled.

"*He sees me,*" Remy said softly. "*In the reflective surface, he sees me.*"

Though the figure was insubstantial and wavering, Brad knew precisely what it was he was seeing. Any residual hope he might have had that one day Lannie would accept his suit vanished at that moment. It was the first time he'd seen Remy outside his dreams and it disturbed him more than he wanted to admit.

"What is it?" Lannie repeated.

"Nothing," Brad mumbled, and lowered his head, unwilling to view that ghostly image for long. He went to the work counter and added his brush to David's in the can containing the mineral spirits.

"Brad..." she began, sensing his sudden withdrawal.

"I don't want to talk about it!" he snapped. "I've got to get going."

Before she could say anything else to him, the chief of police had disappeared around the side of her house. When she would have gotten up from the swing to follow him, Remy took her arm.

"Leave him be, *bien-aimé*," he said.

She stared at him. "You let him see you, didn't you?" She searched his face. "Why, Remy? Why did you do that?"

"Now he understands."

"Understands what?" she countered.

"That what is between you and me is forever, that I won't ever let any man take you from me."

Her heart ached for Brad. He was a good man and he had stood by her during the inquest in which it had been stated that Trey Durant had died from a massive coronary that had practically torn his heart apart. He'd been there to protect her outside her home as Remy protected her inside it.

"But, Remy, he..."

"Shush," Remy told her, pulling her back so she would be encased in his strong arms. "Everything you need is right here."

As Brad climbed into the cab of his truck, he looked up at the dormer window where many folks had sworn they'd seen the ghost of Remy Devereaux standing. He didn't know if those people really had seen Remy or had imagined they had, but he knew what he'd seen in that swing.

"I saw him sitting in the swing on the back porch," Bon Van Homme had once sworn to Brad. "I swear to the good Lord I did!"

"We'll never spend a night in that house with him still there," Varnie, Bon's wife, had declared.

Staring up at the dormer, Brad knew Remy would always be there.

And Lannie Durant would be at his side.

## **About the Author**

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 40 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

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In the Wind's Eye

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