



Steamy Rebellion

Rhiannon Neeley

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Prologue

Where the hell was he?

It was a foggy April evening as Renee cruised the parking lot of the motel, squinting through the windshield, searching for that nasty little red car. She'd hated that car from the day Bruce had bought the little convertible. He had said he'd bought it because it had good gas consumption, which was a plus here in California. Renee knew the real reason. He wanted it to attract women. Young women.

Younger than me, she thought, catching a glimmer of red up the next row of cars. Bruce Crane liked his 'girls' to be barely legal. No older than twenty-two. Well, too bad that Renee had recently turned twenty-six and was one year older than Bruce himself.

Renee Wells-Crane was on a mission. This time, she was going to catch him red-handed. Or red-*whatever*.

She and Bruce had been married for two years and the first few months had been great. Then, when Bruce realized that marriage was 'real', he started going to business meetings at night. But the type of 'meetings' he was going to had nothing to do with business.

Renee had suspected for a long time, but hadn't done anything. She was hoping that it was just Bruce getting used to being married. That she was only being paranoid.

She pulled into an empty parking spot next to the nasty little red car. Throwing the gearshift into park, she seethed. Enough was enough. She was no cowering wife and it was time that Bruce realized it. This...she would not put up with.

Not anymore.

Renee got out of the car, slamming the door.

Narrowing her eyes, she scanned the doors of the motel rooms. Which one?

"There's one way to find out," she said, thinking about the personalized car alarm that Bruce just had to have for his nasty red toy.

Renee strode over to the driver's side of the convertible and grabbed the door handle. With a smirk, she gave it a yank.

The car alarm shrilled, screeching through the air and echoing off the motel.

Renee casually leaned against the front fender of the car, arms crossed. She didn't have to wait long.

Two rooms down on the left, Bruce threw open the door. "Get away from the car!" He rushed out, a faded flowered bedspread wrapped around him.

Renee didn't move. Her heart, which over the past few months had suffered many razor cuts thanks to Bruce's messing around, had finally turned to stone. He couldn't hurt her. In the last few weeks, Renee had grown a very thick skin when it came to her husband. She had a rock hard shell that he could no longer penetrate.

Stumbling toward her in his bare feet, desperately trying not to trip over his ugly bedspread toga, Bruce's face turned white. "Renee?" He stopped, luckily out of arm's reach. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you freaking kidding?" She shoved off the fender, her hands dropping to her sides. She fisted them, her fingernails digging into her palms to keep from rushing up to him and slapping him. "What are you doing here, Bruce?"

"I...uh..." He struggled with his bedspread, bunching it up in his hands.

Renee stepped toward him. "You don't need to tell me. I know what you're doing here. I know what you've been doing all along." She walked past him, making a beeline for the open door of the room he had burst out of.

"Renee, stop. Don't."

But she didn't stop. She could hear his bare feet slapping the sidewalk behind her. She moved faster.

Renee entered the motel room and flicked the light switch just inside the door.

The young woman on the bed cringed away from the light like a vampire. That's what she is, Renee thought. A vampire sucking the life out of my marriage. Then she shook her head. No, that wasn't right. There hadn't been life in her marriage for a long time. It wasn't this woman's fault. It was Bruce's.

With a sigh, Renee turned to leave. "You can have him, honey. I'm finished with him."

One step out the door and Bruce blocked her way. "Move Bruce."

He sidestepped, blocking her when she tried to walk around him. "Where are you going? Renee, let me explain..."

"I don't need an explanation and you don't need to know where I'm going because you know what?" She dodged past him, making it around him this time. "You don't care where I'm going and you never did. All you've ever cared about is yourself."

Renee started to walk away.

"Stop, Renee, please." Bruce's voice sounded like a twelve-year-old, whining.

Renee just shook her head and kept on walking.

"You're going to do something stupid, Renee!" Bruce yelled. "You're just in a state of rebellion. You always have been. You're too headstrong. You're not the woman I thought I married. Someone sweet, that only wanted to please me. That's the whole problem. That's why I'm here."

Renee froze. Anger seethed inside her now. In one quick movement she whirled around to face him. "Don't you ever...EVER...try to blame this on me," she said, her voice booming through the parking lot. Doors were opening, people looking out to see what was going on. Renee didn't care. "You've seen the last of me, Bruce. You can have all of the playmates you want. I'm gone. I'm worth more than this." Then she turned and started walking to her car, a sense of relief beginning to flow over her. It was done. It was over, or would be as soon as she filed for divorce. Then she was really going to be gone. As far away from here as possible.

"You'll regret this, Renee. You will!"

Renee opened her car door and took one last look over her shoulder.

Bruce stood on the sidewalk in front of the room with the open door. The bedspread he was wrapped in drooped around him and his normally perfectly styled white-blond hair stood up in a hundred different directions.

A smile bloomed on Renee's face.

God, she couldn't believe she had settled for him in the first place. She had been blinded by his California good looks. Well, he didn't look so good once his true self was revealed. In fact, those Beach Blond looks were a bit worn at the moment, not so good at all.

Regret leaving that?

Never.

She got in her car and pulled out with a squeal of tires. She was in a hurry. A hurry to get started on a new life. And after she started divorce proceedings, the first thing she was going to do was find a new job to go along with her new life.

And it would be a job as far away from Bruce and this city as she could get.

Chapter One

Renee Wells drummed her manicured nails on the steering wheel. The last thing she needed was to be stuck in traffic on the first day of her new job. The traffic was backed up thanks to some road construction up ahead. Renee clenched the steering wheel, biting back the urge to honk her horn. It wouldn't do her any good. And there was no way she could get far enough ahead that she could turn on the next side street either. She was stuck in the middle of the block and on the other side of the street, where the other lane was open, was only a huge drop off to a river.

"Tough it out, Ren," she mumbled. "Just goes with small towns." She took a few deep breaths and put the car in park. She was going to have to wait it out one way or another.

Renee looked out over the river. It was October, the sky incredibly blue, the trees vibrant. The morning sun glanced over the river, the ripples twinkling like daylight stars. Renee wondered if there was a lot of activity on the water in the summer. It seemed so idyllic. She let the peaceful scene wash over her, calming her nerves. She'd only arrived here in this small town yesterday afternoon and from what little she had seen, she thought she might like it here. At least she hoped so. She had applied for three other jobs as a legal secretary but had chosen this one for two reasons. It was far away from Bruce and she loved the name of the town—Rebellion.

A smile bloomed on her lips. Rebellious. That's what Bruce had called her and that's exactly how she felt.

Bruce and his many girlfriends could all just go to hell.

Pulling her gaze from the slow flowing river, Renee looked out the passenger side window at the stately white stone house that she was parked directly in front of. It was beautiful. The landscaping was kept low except for two conical evergreens that stood sentinel on each side of the front door. The door itself was outstanding. Framed by sidelight, the door held an oval of glass that was spider-webbed with gold inlay.

Renee bit her lip and tried to lean over to see more of the house. The seatbelt held her. With a click of her thumb, she released it and leaned the rest of the way over.

Now she could have a full view of the second story.

Her eyes roamed over the fine angular lines of the stone. "Absolutely wonder..." Her voice caught in her throat.

There. In the far right window of the second story, she saw someone moving inside the house. Renee squinted. The window was long and wide, larger than a standard window, but she couldn't see the person clearly. The window was fogged with steam.

"Someone must like long, hot showers," she said, propping her hand on the passenger seat.

The person moved in front of the window. Only a vague form behind the glass, Renee could tell that they were naked. The form was flesh-toned and from what she could tell—distinctly male.

Renee leaned lower yet, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. Yes, she thought. The glass was starting to clear.

The condensation began to fade at the bottom of the window first.

He stood with his back to the window, arms raised, something white in his hand. A towel, she thought. He's rubbing his hair dry.

But it wasn't the towel Renee was interested in at the moment.

It was the perfectly formed, deftly sculpted, most beautiful ass on a man she'd ever seen.

The window cleared further. Renee sucked at her bottom lip, unmindful of her carefully applied lipstick, as inch by inch the gorgeous hunk of man was revealed. That wonderful ass curved smoothly into a trim waist. Renee took a breath. "Oh my," she sighed. His back was glorious. Muscles shifting with his movements, Renee knew that she had never seen a man's back that belonged on a Greek God more than this one did.

A tingling began between her legs as she watched him drop the towel, then bend to pick it up.

Honk!

"Judas Priest!" Renee snapped up in her seat, her eyes going to her rearview mirror.

A woman in a minivan behind her was waving impatiently.

Renee looked through the windshield. "Good grief," she said, dropping the car into drive. The traffic had cleared and she had been too occupied ogling the man in the window. She cleared her throat and slowly drove past the flagman who looked at her strangely when she passed. With a heavy sigh, Renee admitted the truth to herself.

"Girl, you need some male attention...whether you like it or not."

Too bad she had sworn off men two months ago.

*

With freshly applied lipstick, Renee walked through the front door of Loman and Son, Attorneys at law.

A grandmotherly woman sat at a paper-strewn desk just to the right of the door, in what must be the reception area. "Good morning," the woman said. "What can I do for you today, Miss?"

Renee shifted the shoulder strap of her briefcase and held out her right hand. "I'm Renee Wells."

"Oh!" The woman burst from her chair and instead of shaking Renee's hand, she rounded the desk and grasped her in a hug. "I'm so very glad to see you."

Renee froze for a brief second then gingerly patted the woman's soft back. "Well..." Her voice trailed off, so shocked by the exuberance of the woman that she didn't know what to say.

The woman let her go and stepped back. "I'm sorry," she said, placing a freckled hand on her ample breast. "I'm just so excited I forgot myself. I didn't mean to tackle you like that."

"It's, um, fine." Renee was at a loss. This was a law office? The secretary hugged people?

"I'm Opal Chapman," the woman said, holding out her hand. "I hope I didn't scare you off already." Her blue eyes sparkled, matching the bluish tint of her gray hair.

"No," Renee said, shaking her hand gently. "I'm just not used to such a warm welcome."

"Really?" Opal looked a bit shocked. She withdrew her hand and turned back toward the desk. "You'll get used to it around here. People here are very friendly." She walked

on past the desk and looked over her shoulder. “Come on, now. I’ll show you where you can put your things.”

Renee followed, a bit unsettled but determined to get herself under control. First the male nude, now hug attacks. Renee squared her shoulders. *Deal with it*, she told herself.

Opal was rattling on, her freckled hands waving as they entered a hallway and walked toward the back of the building. “I swear,” Opal said, “my head is in the clouds. I’m finally going to retire and I have more to do now than ever before. And only today and tomorrow to show you around the place. Oh, I just don’t know how I’m going to do it.” She opened a door on the left. “Here. In here, honey.”

Renee followed her into a small room that held shelf after shelf of cardboard file boxes and loose files. “Just put your—,” she hesitated, pointing at Renee’s briefcase, “—purse in here somewhere and we’ll get you started before Rick comes in.”

Renee searched for a place to put her briefcase but there was no unoccupied area on the shelves. They were completely filled. Her heart sinking a little after seeing the mass of files, she opted to shove her case into a corner on the floor.

“Come then,” Opal said, crooking a finger. “Us girls have work to do.”

Renee turned around to find Opal disappearing down the hallway. She hurried to catch up.

“Now I’m going to give you the gist of the filing system this morning and this afternoon, then I’m going to turn you loose on it,” Opal said.

They arrived back at the front desk.

“Are you sure? Don’t you think maybe I should shadow you today and begin the actual hands-on tomorrow?” Renee asked. Panic at the state of the files in the hole in the wall file room she had just seen started to set in. Renee was an experienced secretary. She had worked in one of the most prominent law offices in San Francisco the last two years. She was used to order and process—not ‘throw it in the closet’.

Opal sat down in the desk chair. It creaked as if complaining. “No, I don’t think you should wait.” She looked up at Renee. “I’ve always found that if you want to learn to do something, you just have to jump right in and do it.” Opal cocked her head, narrowing her eyes. “Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young Liz Taylor?”

Renee blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Opal!” A male voice reverberated through the office.

“Oh my goodness, there’s Rick.” Opal popped up out of her chair and almost ran Renee over. “He’s a bear until he’s had his coffee.” She poured a cup from the coffeemaker that sat on a small table beside a large couch in the reception area across from the desk. “You sit there, Renee, and answer the phone if it rings.” Then she disappeared, steaming cup of coffee in hand, though a door on the opposite side of the reception area.

Renee let out a laugh. “What have I gotten myself into?” Her eyes scanned the desktop. Files lay askew, papers hanging out of them. A pile of unopened mail threatened to topple off the edge of the desk. Sticky notes of every color of the rainbow were everywhere—on top of files, under papers, even on the phone. Renee bit her lip. This office was completely out of control.

Tucking a wayward curl behind her ear, Renee sat down at the desk. The chair only creaked a bit. “That’s one thing that will have to be replaced,” she mumbled, reaching for the stack of mail. She required a good ergonomic desk chair. Spending a lot of time

sitting at a desk in a rickety chair was not good for anyone's back, no matter how young you were. She made a mental note to start a list of things that she would need to run the office properly. Once the list was made, she'd present it to Mr. Loman. Not the son, but the elder. Renee assumed since the office went by the name Loman and Son, that there were two attorneys in residence.

Flipping through the mail, Renee quickly found that the mail was not of major importance in the office. Some of the post dates were two weeks old! This would not do. Another thing she had noted was that all of the envelopes were addressed simply—to Rick Loman. Not Loman and Son, Attorneys, nor Richard Loman, Attorney. Just to Rick Loman.

Renee straightened the envelopes into a stack and opened the center drawer of the desk. It looked like a kitchen junk drawer. Renee shook her head and fumbled around for a rubber band.

The mail now in a neat stack, rubber band around it, sat on one corner of the desk. Renee had started on the files, matching names and case numbers to papers that had worked their way out when Opal returned to the waiting room/reception area.

Renee jumped at the sound of Opal, clapping her hands. "I'm sorry. I hope you don't mind but I started collating these files and—."

"Don't you apologize," Opal interrupted. "You need to jump right in. Here, let's work together and while we're working, you'll get to know the system around here."

Renee smiled, relieved that she hadn't overstepped her bounds.

Opal smiled back. "I do swear, you are the spitting image of Elizabeth Taylor."

*

Renee glanced at her watch. A quarter after one. They had been working non-stop for almost four hours and she still hadn't a clue about how Opal found what she needed when she needed it. Another thing that puzzled her was that she had yet to see Richard Loman or the Son who were the attorneys that she would be working for. She opened her mouth to ask Opal if maybe it was time she met her new employers, but Opal spoke first.

"Well," Opal said, brushing her hand together as if they were dirty, "I think we need our lunch break. Let's take an hour and then after we've fortified ourselves, I'll introduce you to Rick."

"That sounds...perfect but, only Rick? I thought this was a father and son establishment," Renee said.

"Oh no, there's just Rick now," Opal said, sadness in her voice. "The elder Mr. Loman has passed on."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. Things like that happen."

Renee tugged on her sweater, smoothing the hem. She wished she hadn't asked the question about the father of Rick Loman. She hoped she hadn't put Opal off. At least she had found out before meeting the Mr. Loman she would be working for. Her stomach growled, reminding her about lunch. It's better to meet the new boss after you've freshened up anyway, she thought to herself. "Opal, could you suggest someplace nearby to pick up a light lunch?"

"Oh, sure." Opal started toward the hall that led to the file room. Renee followed her yet again.

“You just go down Main Street here, out in front of the office, to the second stop light.” They entered the room and Opal dug through a shelf, retrieving her purse. “Then at the light, take a left. It’s on the next corner. Be on your left side, across from the courthouse.”

Renee reached for her briefcase. Opal was already out the door and heading back down the hall. Renee raced after her. “Opal?”

“Yes?”

“What is the name? Of the restaurant?”

Opal flapped a hand at her, laughing. “See, I need to retire, don’t I? I’m so forgetful of things these days. The restaurant is called Bud’s. Good food there.” She wiggled her fingers in the air. “See you in a bit.”

*

Renee found the restaurant easily enough. She entered and sat down at the counter that ran almost the whole length of the inside of the building.

A waitress approached, took one look at her, and without asking turned and poured a cup of black coffee and place it in front of her.

Renee raised an eyebrow. “How did you know I was in desperate need of caffeine?”

The waitress smiled. “You look like you need it.”

Renee laughed. “That I do. It’s my drug of choice.” She took a sip. The rich flavor washed over her tongue, hot and wonderful. “This is heaven.”

“Thanks. Now, what else can I get you?”

Renee let out her breath, easing herself into a comfortable frame of mind. She had an hour just to chill. “I’d love a salad. Ranch dressing on the side.”

The waitress frowned at her. “Wouldn’t you like something with a little more substance to it? You surely don’t need to be on a diet. Just look at you.” She waved her pencil at her.

Renee gave her a smile. “Thank you, um...”

“Kate.” She tapped her nametag.

“Kate. Thanks, but I really do like salads.” She leaned forward. “But at night, I’m a chocoholic,” she said in a dramatic whisper.

Kate laughed and pointed her pencil at Renee. “That’s *my* drug of choice.” She wrote down an order on her pad. “A salad it is.”

“Dressing on the side,” Renee reminded her.

“Gotcha.”

Kate moved on and Renee reached down into her briefcase that sat at her feet. She’d picked up a local newspaper at the motel desk on her way out this morning and now was as good a time as any to start looking at the ‘for rent’ ads. She wanted to find an apartment as soon as she could. Renee had recently acquired a certain dislike of motels since finding Bruce in one of them with one of his little playthings. Besides, if she was going to try to make a home here, she needed a place of her own to do it in.

Opening her newspaper to the classifieds, Renee sipped her coffee and scanned the ads.

The outdoorsy scent of the woods wafted over to her from her right. Without looking, Renee drew it in with a deep breath. The word that came immediately to mind was ‘Male’. Slowly, she raised her coffee cup to her lips, taking a sip. The warmth that pooled low in her belly wasn’t from the coffee. She felt like closing her eyes and just

breathing. The cologne of whoever had just sat down beside her not only incited visions of muscular lumberjack types to her mind but also made her panties dampen with a need that had crossed her mind for the first time in months just this morning. *Don't*, she told herself. Don't you even think about it. He smells great and even if you turned to look at him and found a Greek God sitting next to you, he'd still be a man.

Renee turned to look anyway.

And—suppressed a groan.

The man sitting next to her smiled, the dimples in his tanned cheeks matching the cleft in his chin. “Good afternoon,” he said.

Renee came close to melting into a puddle of goo in the floor. “Hello.” She turned her attention back to the classified, afraid that if she looked at him one second longer, she'd just have to run her fingers through that thick, wavy mass of chestnut hued hair of his. She had her finger through the handle of her coffee cup but was afraid to lift it to her mouth. Her hand would shake, but not because she was nervous. It would be because her whole body was vibrating with sexual awareness. He was magnificent! Pure animal attraction flowed in waves from him. Already his face was burned into her psyche. The strong jaw that had the angular lines of someone who seemed positively ‘solid’, but the cleft in his chin gave his character, adding to the mix. Lips that were full, firm and absolutely perfect for nibbling. A fine straight nose. And his eyes—oh, his eyes—they were a hazel tone but with sharp flecks of copper and brown, framed with the thickest lashes she had ever seen on a man. His voice was pure sex, deep and mellow. Even though he'd only said two words, those words had vibrated all the way to her toes. Combine all of that with a killer smiled set off by a tan that didn't come from a tanning salon and she was almost lost.

Get a grip, Renee, she scolded herself. You've only gone without sex for a little over two months. She didn't count her ‘stress relief sessions’ that she performed herself as actual sex. It was just to release pent up frustration. Flipping the page of the newspaper, she mentally patted herself on the back for remembering to pack her favorite vibrator in her suitcase. After sitting so close to a ‘wet-dream-man’, she'd need it.

Renee glanced up as Kate passed in front of her carrying a cup of coffee.

“You're salad will be ready in just a minute, Miss,” Kate said, placing the coffee in front of Mr. Delicious.

“Thank you, Kate,” he said.

Renee drew in a breath. Mmm, that voice. Talk some more and I'll have to change my panties, she thought.

As if reading her mind, he leaned closer. “If you're not reading the front section, mind if I?”

Renee swallowed at the touch of his warm breath brushing her neck. Goosebumps raced up her skin.

“Uh, no. I don't mind at all.” At least my voice works, she thought, turning to hand him the section.

Their eyes locked and held.

He tilted his head slightly. “You look very familiar but I don't believe I've seen you around here before.” He slid the paper from her hand but didn't break eye contact.

"I'm new here, just arrived yesterday. I started my new position—job—just this morning and I swear, if you tell me I look like Elizabeth Taylor, I'm going to scream." Renee blinked. Good Lord where had that come from?

He laughed, loud and hearty. "That's it. That's why you look familiar." He pointed at her. "You do look like Elizabeth Taylor...what was that movie?" He put his left hand to his chin, stroking it.

Renee managed to notice that he wore no band of gold on his ring finger.

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," Kate said, placing Renee's salad in front of her.

He snapped his fingers. "Exactly!"

Renee shook her head. "I just don't see it."

He leaned his elbow on the counter, propping his head in his hand. "I certainly do. You are lovely. Classic."

Renee felt her face grow hot. She picked up her fork and began to move her salad around. "Thank you. You flatter me."

"No. I don't flatter people. I just believe in telling it like I see it."

"You want a sandwich or something?" Kate asked him.

"Oh, sorry." He patted his hand on the counter. "How about a ham and cheese? Wrap it up so I can take it back to the office, would you?"

"Sure." Kate scribbled on her pad and moved down the counter.

"You must be planning on staying in Rebellion," he said.

Renee turned and looked at him. He wore a white shirt, the neck open. No tie, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Dark slacks. He said he was taking his sandwich back to the office. He sure didn't look like he belonged in one. "How did you know I was planning on staying?" she asked, giving him her full attention. She decided she might as well soak him up while she could. Just for 'fantasy reference' later.

He nodded toward the newspaper she had been reading. "You're looking in the classifieds. For an apartment, I'm assuming."

She smiled and nodded. "You're very observant."

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "I am when I'm interested in something. Or *someone*."

Renee felt heat blossom anew, low in her belly. Just like this morning, watching the hunk in the steamed up window.

"Will you be coming here for lunch tomorrow?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Possibly."

"Say...one o'clock?"

"That would be about right."

Kate appeared as if out of nowhere. "Here's your sandwich. That'll be three-fifty." She placed a brown paper bag down on the counter in front of him.

He stood, pulling a five out of his wallet and laying it on the counter. He picked up the brown bag. "See you tomorrow? I'll buy," he said, ignoring Kate.

Renee laughed at his audacity. "All right."

He winked, sending a shock through her then turned and pushed through the front door.

"Well," Kate said, "you sure made an impression on him...I'm sorry, I didn't get your name?"

"Renee." She watched him disappear as he passed the front window.

“Renee. Suits you.” Kate picked up his abandoned coffee cup. “That’s the first time I’ve heard him laugh like that in years.”

“Really?” Renee turned back to her salad. “I wasn’t trying to make an impression. I’m sorry if I stepped into your territory.” Renee cringed inside, wondering if Kate had a thing for the guy.

Kate looked at her strangely for a moment. “Territory?” Then a grin spread over her face. “Okay. I gotcha. Honey, he’s my older *brother*.”

Renee smiled. “Whew. Thought maybe I was butting in on something.”

Kate shook her head. “Nope. And yes...” she leaned forward, “—he’s single and available.”

Renee waved her fork in the air. “Nuh-uh, I’m not looking for ‘available’. I just cut loose one of the finest of the male species, thanks to his adoration of the female of the species. I’ve sworn off men for the time being.”

Kate shrugged and gave her a wide-eyes look. “Coulda fooled me. Looked to me like you were about to break your vow there.”

Renee swallowed a bite of lettuce. “I only agreed to lunch. That’s not getting engaged. He seems like a nice guy and I don’t know anyone here.”

“Well, now you know me and you’re going to get to know my brother. Very well, from the way he was looking at you.”

Renee snorted a laugh. Talking to Kate was like talking to a sister that she never had. She didn’t know why but she felt completely at ease with her. “We’ll see,” she said.

“Yeah. Uh-huh. I hear you.” Kate smirked at her.

“By the way, what is his name? He didn’t introduce himself.” She took a sip of coffee.

“That’s just like him. Been here all his life and thinks everyone should know who he is.”

“All his life, huh? How old is he?”

“Just turned forty. Getting up there for a single guy.”

“You still haven’t told me his name.” Renee drank the last of her coffee, holding the rich flavor on her tongue for a moment.

“His name is Rick. Rick Loman. He’s a lawyer.”

Renee swallowed hard, then started coughing.

“Oh my goodness,” Kate said. “Are you okay?”

Renee struggled to catch her breath.

‘Oh my goodness’ was an understatement.

Chapter Two

Rick began the three-block walk back to the office feeling a new lust for life. Well, not for life, maybe, he thought.

He waved at Ron Higbert as he walked in front of the window of Ron's corner barbershop. Sitting in the barber chair, Ron waved him inside.

Rick glanced at his watch. He had a boatload of work waiting back at the office, but what the heck. He could spare a few minutes. Opal and her trainee wouldn't be back for a little while yet. Rick cut sideways and entered the barbershop.

"How you doing, Ron? How's business?"

"Slow today but tomorrow's Friday. Be busy then." Ron folded the newspaper he had been reading and laid it in his lap. "Hear Opal is finally going to retire."

Rick nodded, plopping down in one of the waiting chairs that line the wall. "I'll miss her but it's time she enjoyed life. She's put in her time working for me and my dad and I know I'm not that easy to get on with."

Ron flapped a hand at him. "Aw, you're all right. Everybody says so. Besides, Opal could probably still take you over her knee like she used to do when you were a kid."

"She only did that once," Rick said, crossing one leg over the other. "Dad took me to the office and I got bored so I went down to throw rocks in the river. Opal caught me and wailed on my butt. I never did it again."

"She ever tell your Dad about that?"

Rick shook his head. "Nope. She told me if I never did it again, she wouldn't tell. To be honest, I was more afraid of Opal than I was of Dad."

"Your Dad was a good man. Sorry that he passed on. What was it—two years ago?"

Rick felt a pang of pain in his heart. "Two and a half. Sure do miss him. And I've been swamped with work ever since. If it wasn't for Opal, I wouldn't get anything done."

"What're you going to do when she leaves? Tomorrow's her last day, I hear." Ron crossed his thin arms over his chest.

Rick couldn't help but think that Ron should be retiring too. Ron Higbert had been around for as long as Rick could remember. He'd given him his first haircut, so the story went, and every one since. Ron had gone to school with Rick's Dad. Strange how it seemed people got old all of a sudden, instead of slowly aging as they should. "I guess I'll have to rely on Opal's judgment," he said. "I let her pick her replacement. According to Opal, this new girl knows her way around a law office." At least Rick hoped so. It remained to be seen, since he had yet to meet her. Opal had told him that though the new girl was only twenty-six and had recently divorced, she must be efficient because she had worked the past two years for one of the most prominent firms in San Francisco. Rick had decided to withhold judgment and see how the girl did. He didn't want to question Opal's choice. It might upset her.

"Well, maybe you'll get on just fine with her." Ron reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew his pipe. He lit it, the aroma of black cherry tobacco wafting over to Rick. That was his strongest memory of this place. The pungent scent of pipe tobacco and the talcum powder Ron would dust the back of his neck with after he had a haircut. Ron

puffed the pipe, sending up blue plumes of smoke. The smoking ban hadn't hit the town of Rebellion just yet but Rick figured it wouldn't be long.

"Yep," Ron said, gazing out the front window of the shop, "Maybe a pretty young secretary, like that one," he pointed toward the window, "will shake that sullen mood right off your bones."

Rick glanced toward the window. The lovely young woman who he'd just met at Bud's lunch counter was walking past. She glanced in. Rick smiled. She nodded gracefully and kept walking. Rick watched her until she disappeared. He turned back to Ron. "I'm not *sullen*. I'm just overworked." Had he been sullen?

Ron pointed the stem of his pipe at him. "You have been of a sour disposition. You hide it pretty much 'round people but I can see it. Why, today is the first day I've seen a spark in your eye in a year."

Rick rose from the chair, his lunch bag in his hand, reminding him that he needed to get back. "I've gotta go, Ron. I've got a pile of files on my desk that are calling my name."

"You go ahead and run away from the truth." He narrowed his eyes, the pipe clenched tightly between his teeth. "Something happened to you since I saw you last Friday. Something good, from the looks of it."

Rick moved toward the door. "I'll see you tomorrow for a trim, Ron." He pushed the door open.

"If you'd let me cut that hair of yours shorter like it should be, you may just be able to snare a wife, Rick. That's what you need—a good woman at home to keep your nose out of that office."

Rick stopped, holding the door open. "I do get out of the office. I go fishing every Sunday when the weather's good."

Ron shook his head. "I swear, didn't your Dad explain anything to you?" He leaned forward in the barber chair, hands on his knees as if he were leaning down to talk to a small child. "Fishing is good for a man but those fish are cold-blooded. You need a good woman to keep the home fires burning. Spend your life in the office and out on the river, time'll pass you by. Then one day, you'll be old like me, staring out your office window and wondering where your life went."

Rick took a good look at Ron. There was a certain sadness in the elder man's eyes, one Rick hadn't noticed before. "Are you okay, Ron?"

Ron sat back in his chair and crossed his arms again. "I'm fine as peach fuzz. You go on," he said, waving Rick off. "You got business to attend to. Don't need to waste your time getting a lecture on life from the likes of me."

Still, Rick hesitated.

"Go *on*." Ron gave him a stern look.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Rick said.

"I'll be here."

Rick stepped out onto the sidewalk, a tiny seed of worry in the back of his mind. Ron had never talked to him that way before. Oh sure, he had given Rick grief for not getting married and settling down many times but he had never sounded as serious as he had just now. Rick made a mental note to ask Opal if she had heard anything about Ron. Maybe the man's health was failing.

Or maybe he's just right, a little voice in his head said as he entered the front door of his office. His mind on Ron, he had walked all the way across the reception area and to the door that led to his private office before he realized that someone was sitting at Opal's desk. And it wasn't Opal.

He froze, hand on the doorknob to his office.

Whom had he just seen?

Whirling around, he was stunned.

There she sat, her dark blue eyes wide, her wavy raven black hair shining in the sun that glinted through the front windows.

The woman from Bud's lunch counter.

She nodded at him, just the barest inclination of her head. "Mr. Loman."

Rick opened his mouth. Shut it. Raked his fingers through his hair. Stop acting stupid, he told himself. "I...ah...I'm sorry but my secretary hasn't returned from lunch—why are you sitting at my secretary's desk?"

She gave him a small smile and rose gracefully from the chair. As she came around the desk, Rick felt sparks snapping in his body. She moved with an ease he'd rarely seen. Her pale blue sweater hugged her like a lover and her tan slacks were fitted to her shapely legs so perfectly that it almost seemed that she wasn't wearing them at all. He felt a twitch in the front of his own slacks. By instinct, he moved the brown bag that held his sandwich in front of his zipper. His eyes never left the gently swaying way she walked until she was less than a foot away.

Rick sighed, pleasure filling him, as he lifted his gaze to her eyes.

The look on her face was questioning, one fine eyebrow lifted, her dark blue eyes intense.

Crap, she was talking. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?" He clutched the brown bag with both hands, holding it just a little below his belt buckle.

"I said, Mr. Loman, I'm your new assistant." She offered her hand. "Renee Wells."

Rick felt the pull of a smile on his lips as he took her hand. "Nice to meet you, Renee." Her hand was small in his own, birdlike and dainty and warm.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Loman." She withdrew her hand. "Opal was going to introduce us after lunch. It appears that I arrived back at the office first, so I thought I would take care of any calls that came in." She turned and walked back to the desk, stopping in front of it.

Rick almost groaned, having to bite the inside of his cheek to hold it back, when she bent over to reach for a piece of paper on the far corner of the desk. She turned quickly and started back to him, his eyes thankfully on the paper in her hand while he regained his composure after being treated to the seductive roundness of her behind.

"A Mr. Wales phoned asking if he could see you this afternoon," she handed the note to him. "It was something to do with his son and a drunken driving offense. I told him that your schedule was rather tight today but that I would speak to you and let you know that he called. I set him up with an appointment..." she crossed back to the desk and leaned over again to check the appointment book, "—tomorrow morning at ten-fifteen." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Is that all right?"

The appointment was fine. What wasn't fine was the fact that if she kept leaning over like that, she was going to cause him to pop a vein from the rise in his blood pressure—among other things. Rick crumpled the note up in his hand and nodded.

“That’s fine Renee. His son’s first name is Kyle. You’ll need to pull his file and have it to me before I leave today so that I can look it over.”

Renee reached for a pencil and pad of paper, then leaned her perfect behind against the front of the desk. She spoke as she took a note. “I take it this isn’t his first offense. I’ll have the file for you.” She looked up. “What time will you be leaving the office today?”

“Five o’clock.”

She nodded and made a note.

Rick turned and started for his office. He needed to get his mind back on the case he was working on and off of the fact that his new secretary affected him so strongly that it cut to the bone. “When Opal gets back, tell her I’d like to see her in my office, would you please?” he asked without turning around.

“I’ll be sure and do that.”

Rick stepped inside his office and closed the door. He tossed the bag on his desk and stuck his hand deep in his pants pocket to reposition the out of control hard-on that had a mind of its own.

He shook his head. “Maybe you have been spending too much time in the office,” he grumbled to himself, walking to his desk and dropping down into the chair.

He closed his eyes for a moment, clearing his thoughts. He wasn’t used to having a goddess sitting in the next room at his beck and call. “Stop it,” he ordered, chastising himself. The case was too important to get sidetracked and be using the wrong head.

Rick opened his eyes and stretched his arms above his head. “Okay. All right. Eat your sandwich. Read the statements.” He snatched the brown paper bag and took out his sandwich, munching as he read the first officer on the scene’s report.

Rick already had felt a bit swamped when the court had appointed him to this case, but he couldn’t turn it down. Sherri Binger had gone to school with Kate—had been her best friend—for thirty years. Now Sherri was up for a murder charge. Rick couldn’t say no, he wouldn’t represent her. But he was having one heck of a time with this case. What made it sticky was the fact that not only was the ‘victim’ Sherri’s husband, Carl—he was also a cop.

There had been headlines out the wazoo.

Rick bit into his ham and cheese and rubbed his eyes while he chewed. Sherrie had admitted that she had shot Carl at their first client/lawyer meeting. She had tearfully revealed the fact that they had been playing a sex game—a role-playing game—and the gun had accidentally gone off. She hadn’t known it was loaded.

Rick became increasingly embarrassed for her as he questioned her about the game and why they were into things like that. Had they ever done it before? Were there other scenarios to their role-playing or was it only police officer and prisoner? It hurt him in his gut to dig so deep into the private life of someone he considered almost a little sister, but it had to be done. He needed to show that kinky sex did go on in the small town of Rebellion, no matter how calm and serene people thought it was here. The big question of course was exactly how Sherri had managed to shoot Carl in the head. No one, even playing with a gun they thought was empty, would put the barrel of a gun to their loved one’s head. Not a responsible adult, anyway. It was the ‘make or break’ issue of the case. Plus whether or not Sherri knew the gun was loaded.

Rick wished he could discuss it with someone. Bounce his ideas off another set of eyes and ears, add another mind to help piece the puzzle together, but if he did he would

be violating the client/lawyer privilege. If he discussed the case with anyone, it would have to be someone here, in his office. Due to the nature of the case, Rick just didn't feel right discussing it with Opal.

Rick shoved the last bite of his sandwich in his mouth and glanced at the clock on the wall. Where the heck is Opal?

The door opened without someone knocking. "Renee said you wanted to see me as soon as I got back," Opal gushed, rushing in.

"I was beginning to wonder if you started your retirement early," he said, sifting through the papers on his desk.

"I'm sorry but Sarah Roads called while I was home for lunch and I couldn't get her to stop talking. On and on about my retirement." Opal sat in the chair in front of his desk. "She's going to throw me a party. Next weekend. You'll have to come."

Rick smiled. The flush in Opal's cheeks made her look twenty years younger. "I wouldn't miss it. And I'm sorry for snapping at you."

"Never you mind. Nothing can bother me these days. One more day and then I'm a lady of leisure." She giggled.

"I need you to take care of a couple of things for me before you ride off into the sunset," Rick said, lifting a file. He pulled his coffee cup from under it and peered inside. It didn't look good. He hid it back under the file. "I want you to gather a list together of all the police officers on the City Police force. I want to know how long they've been on the force, if they're married, how long they've been married, etcetera."

Opal was scribbling on her pad as fast as she could. "What in the world do you want this for? You know most everyone as it is." She looked up, cocking her head.

"The Binger case." He tapped the pile of papers on his desk.

Opal shook her head. "I don't understand."

Rick let out a sigh. "Opal—this case has a lot to do with the private things that go on in a marriage. If you don't know, men sometimes..." Geez, he didn't want to talk about this to Opal. It was like talking about the facts of life with your grandmother. "—Sometimes men brag about things that go on in the bedroom and..."

Opal raised her hand. "Stop right there. I don't need to know anymore." She flushed even redder. "There are so many rumors. So much that should be kept behind closed doors."

"Could you get me that list then?" Rick steepled his fingers and rested his chin on them, giving her the innocent little boy look.

"I'll get it for you." She rose from the chair.

Rick smiled. The wide-eyed look still worked even though he'd found his first gray hair this morning. The shock of a gray hair had caused him to drop his towel as he'd been using it to dry his hair. It had been like a slap in the face from reality. His thoughts returned to the conversation he had with Ron earlier.

"Opal, have you heard anything about Ron Higbert?"

"Like what?"

"He's well, isn't he? I mean, he's not ill or something."

Opal let out a little gasp. "You haven't heard then." Her face turned sorrowful. "Ron has cancer. Such a sad thing."

Rick felt a sickening clench in his stomach. "How bad?"

“According to the gossip, he has maybe six months if that, unfortunately. It’s inoperable.”

“Damn.” He should have known something was wrong. Should have seen it long before now.

“Okay,” he said. “Keep me updated.”

Opal walked to the door but stopped with her hand on the knob. “My goodness. I forgot something very important.”

“What’s that?”

“My replacement. You haven’t met her.” She opened the door. “Renee, could you come in please?”

Rick had been slouching over his desk but now he straightened, taking a deep breath. Shit, the desk was an absolute cyclone of papers. Hurriedly, he gathered them together the best that he could, only managing to knock a stack off the front of his desk onto the floor. Rick shot out of his chair and around the desk, scooping them up.

“What in the world?” Opal cried.

Before Rick could rise up, a soft voice spoke in his ear. “Here. I’ll get that.”

He turned to find Renee, kneeling beside him, the hint of a smile on her face.

“I’m a bit clumsy today,” he said, drawn by the sparkle in her eyes. They were a mere two inches apart. Rick fought the urge to capture her lips with his own and sample what a vision tasted like.

“You’re more than clumsy,” Opal said. “You’re a big oaf.”

Rick’s eyes snapped to Opal. He bit his tongue. What the heck was wrong with him? First he’s frustrated by the case he’s working on, then saddened by the news of Ron having cancer, and he had to keep holding his tongue to keep from sniping at Opal. All through it all, he felt an extreme desire for this beautiful woman who had just waltzed into his life out of the blue. Was this what they called a mid-life crisis? Was he that darn old?

“He’s not usually like this, Renee,” Opal said.

“No,” he said, rising up with his hands full of papers. “He’s usually neat, clean and on time.” He dropped the papers onto his desk, giving up any hope of order.

“You don’t need to be so touchy,” Opal said. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

“Sorry.” He glanced at her quickly, feeling like he was ten years old.

Renee rose from her crouch, the papers in her hands neatly aligned. She looked for a place to put them on the desk. After a moment, she handed them to Rick.

He sighed, taking them. “Thank you.”

“Rick, this is Renee Wells. She is my replacement. And I must say, she is already digging in and putting this office in order.”

“I like to know where things are. It makes for better efficiency,” Renee said, her eyes drifting back to the disaster on his desk. “If you like, Mr. Loman, I can straighten this out for you.” She waved a finger over his desk.

He felt heat creep into his face. Cripes, was he blushing? “Yes, well, that would be nice since I’d like to take this case home with me tonight.”

Renee nodded and smiled.

“Have you found Kyle’s file yet, Renee?” Rick asked, trying like hell to dig himself out of this embarrassing situation.

Renee raised a finger. "I've almost got it tracked down. The filing system, well, needs a bit of improvement."

Opal laughed. "Doesn't it though? Amazing how things can accumulate over the years."

Rick looked at her. "Opal. Could you get that list for me?" He nodded at the notepad she had clutched to her ample breast.

Opal nodded, her face flashing to a business-like demeanor. "On my way." She turned and left Rick's office like a woman on a mission.

Rick shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants. "The office is in need of an updated filing system. I hope the chaos doesn't scare you off."

Renee chuckled. "I like a challenge. Give me a week and we'll be running smoothly." She turned to leave. "I'll just get that file you need and then straighten up your desk."

"Renee?" Rick swallowed and jerked his eyes from her hips when she turned to face him.

"Was there something else?"

"Have you ever..." His voice trailed off. Rick raised a hand and raked it through his hair, unsure how to approach her on this. He cleared his throat.

She raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"Have you ever," he began again, "worked closely on a case with someone?"

She tilted her head, her eyes slightly narrowed. "That depends on what you mean by 'worked closely'."

Uh-oh. Clarify yourself, boy, his inner voice warned.

Rick waved his hand over his desk. "What I mean is that I could use some help on this case. Someone to bounce ideas off of. I've got to come up with a greater angle for a defense."

She frowned. "Is it a new case? Have you spoken to Opal about it?"

"It's fairly new." He shook his head. "There are certain circumstances involved with the case that I don't feel comfortable talking to Opal about."

"Really?" That tilt of the head again. The narrowing of the eyes. "I'm sure Opal has run into about every situation there could be when it comes to a suit."

"No. Not this." Geez. Best to just blurt it out and gauge her reaction. "It's a murder case. Wife accused of shooting husband."

"Hmm. And that, I'm sure, has happened many times. What's so special about this one that you think Opal couldn't handle?"

The words came out in a rush. "The alleged murder occurred while the couple were role-playing—during sex." He watched her face carefully.

She mulled it over for a moment. Then she nodded. "Sounds interesting. You're defending the survivor?"

"The wife." He nodded.

"On the basis of..."

"Accidental shooting."

She pursed her lips, nodding. Then she looked him directly in the eye. "Sure. I'd love to help. Just let me know what you'd like me to do." She turned again toward the door.

"Now, I'll get that file."

She closed the door behind her.

Rick stood for a moment, staring at the door. “Hunh,” he said. “She didn’t even blush.”

Interesting, indeed.

Chapter Three

Renee stopped the car before she rammed the one in front of her. She was backed up in traffic for the second morning in a row. This time it was intentional. Renee had deliberately taken the route that was under construction just to get another peek at the man in the window of the white stone house. She had left the motel just a few minutes earlier this time, not wanting to be late for work two days in a row. She hoped the earlier time wouldn't affect her plan of window peeking. A bit further back in the lineup of traffic that was waiting to be let through, she didn't have the best view of the steamy window today.

"Come on," she said, inching her car closer to the bumper of the one in front of her. The car moved forward. "Yes!" Renee inched forward some more. She leaned over the passenger seat. "Perfect."

The view of the steamy window was in her line of sight. Renee put her car in park and waited. The window only had a fine mist of steam today. She settled in, hoping the construction crew was not fully awake and moving slow. She had to get a glimpse of that awesome body again.

Yesterday, her new boss, Rick Loman, had a meeting with his client Sherri Binger late in the afternoon. He had rushed out, leaving the file spread out on his desk. While he was gone, Renee had straightened his desk, gathering all of the papers into the file marked 'State of Ohio vs. Binger'. While she did, she scanned the file. It more than sparked her interest, her mind kicking into high gear. Renee loved a case full of intrigue and innuendo. She was pleased that Rick—Mr. Loman—had asked for her help.

Renee had left the file on his desk and left the office at five o'clock. He hadn't returned from his meeting with the Binger woman and, with it being her first day, Renee didn't want to seem too eager. Besides, she needed to dampen the attraction she felt toward Rick. When he was near, it completely unnerved her. She hoped that it didn't show too much.

Renee had driven around town after leaving the office, getting a feel for the area.

Over the weekend she was going to set up appointments to view apartments. Around seven, Renee picked up a pizza and returned to the motel—alone.

She fell asleep quickly but her dreams haunted her. Renee dreamed of the mysterious man behind the steamy window. He was enigmatic, calling to her most basic instincts. In the dream, she entered the house and wove her way up the stairs into the room he beckoned from. She walked into a hot, moist cloud...searching.

When she came upon him, he was as she had seen him; back turned to her, his nakedness dewed with the moist steam that permeated the air. When he turned to face her, she gasped.

It was Rick Loman.

The rest of the dream had been pure sensation as they came together in heated passion.

Renee had awakened before the alarm went off to find herself drenched in sweat and aching for the touch of a man. Problem was the man she craved was her new boss—Rick.

That's why she had chosen to come this way to work again. The dream had been so intense that she couldn't help herself. She had instantly become addicted to the mystery of the man in the window.

Biting her lip, she wondered where he could be. She didn't see him moving behind the glass.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Turning, she realized what it was. "Dang it." Traffic was moving.

Renee shoved the gearshift down into drive, feeling cheated. Driving the rest of the way to the office, all she could think about was missing her chance to get her fix of the gorgeous, naked man.

Walking from her car to the office, she thought of Bruce. She didn't miss *him*, she missed sex. At least he had been willing in that department, even if he was too quick about it. She couldn't miss someone that had no feeling, no emotions. Renee wondered if there was a man alive that had a heart. Renee shook her head as she walked through the front door of the office. Thinking of Bruce, the man in the window who in her dreams wore Rick's face—my goodness, she thought, have I become sex-crazed?

"You have the strangest look on your face," a deep melodic voice said, breaking into her thoughts.

Renee's head snapped up. She sucked in her breath, heat washing over her. Rick. Looking so good, his hair slightly damp as if he hadn't taken the time to dry it after a shower. "It's nothing," she said, shifting her eyes away. "I just didn't sleep well last night." She moved to Opal's desk, taking a deep breath as she passed him. His cologne filled her senses. She felt heat coil low inside her, the dream returning to her mind full-force. Renee dropped her briefcase on top of the desk. "Just give me a few minutes and I'll get with it."

Rick sipped from his cup of coffee, watching her.

Renee hesitated. "Is there something wrong?" She touched her face, then looked down at herself. "My blouse isn't on backward, is it?"

Rick laughed. It was a smooth, rich laugh. "I don't think you're the sort that would be capable of a mistake like that."

Renee raised an eyebrow.

He smiled, his dimples tweaking his cheeks. "You seem much too efficient to make such a mistake."

Great, she thought. Efficient. What a description. But of course that's how she wanted him to see her, wasn't it?

Rick raised his coffee cup in a salute. "Opal will be late, so you are in charge. I've got some notes to go over so," he turned and began to walk toward his office, "when Kyle gets here, just bring him on in."

"Kyle?"

Rick stopped. "The kid with the DUI. From yesterday. You took the call."

"Yes. Okay. I'll do that then."

Rick eyed her for another second, then entered his office.

After he closed the door behind him, Renee let out the breath she'd been holding. "Get a grip."

Renee's morning was busy. She quickly dismissed her sexual frustration and traded it for aggravation with Opal's so-called filing system. Opal herself hadn't been much

help, too busy enjoying her last day of work. Renee wasn't about to burst the elder woman's bubble either. Someday, she would be in Opal's shoes.

Later in the day, she was in the small file room, trying to pull out a file that was wedged tightly on a shelf. She didn't want to tug too hard for fear the whole thing would come crashing down on top of her.

"You stood me up," a voice behind her said.

Renee yelped. Her hand jerked, pulling the file out. Half the shelf came with it. Before she could react, an arm encircled her waist and she was pulled out of the way just before the whole mess landed on her.

Renee gulped for breath. The arm, a very strong one, was holding her tightly around the waist, her backside firmly against a very solid form. She could feel the heat of him all along the back of her body. "You can let me go now," Renee said, wishing he wouldn't.

His hand slid across her tummy as he withdrew his arm, leaving a trail of fire where he touched. Renee closed her eyes at the sensation, for a brief second allowing herself to feel the sizzle his touch created in her blood. Then she turned around.

"For one thing, Mr. Loman, I didn't stand you up. It's not even lunchtime yet and for another thing," She put her hands on her hips and tried not to notice the way his dimples were starting to show as he fought back a smile, "I won't be able to go to lunch, thanks to this mess you caused me to create." Renee held her breath. Now that she'd snapped at her new boss, she wondered if she had just talked herself right out of a job. She was always doing that. Letting her mouth spew her feelings before her mind could filter them.

Silence. He stared her right in the eye for the span of what seemed an eternity then, all of a sudden, it was as if the sun came out from behind the clouds and a smile broke on his face. He burst out laughing.

Anger flared in Renee. "Just what is so funny?"

"You are really cute when you're angry," he said, trying to control his chuckle and not doing a very good job at it.

"I'm not *cute*." She almost stomped her foot but stopped herself before she did it. "Stop laughing at me."

"All right. Okay." He held up a brown paper sack. "Since you missed lunch, I thought I'd bring you a sandwich. Tuna okay?"

"I didn't miss...what time is it?" Now he had her wondering.

He checked his watch. "Almost three."

Renee touched her forehead. "I'm really...I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize," he said, offering the paper sack again.

Renee took it, more embarrassed than she'd ever been in her life. "I'll just clean this up first," she said.

"If you like." He turned to go, but hesitated at the door. "Are you free this evening?"

Renee swallowed. "That depends." Thoughts swarmed her mind like angry bees. *Yes, go out with him. No, don't start anything. He's your boss. What's a harmless date going to hurt? Stop it—you've sworn off men...* On and on it went.

"The case I'm working on..."

"The Binger case, yes." Renee narrowed her eyes, focusing on business. Trying to, anyway.

He laid a finger to his chin. "If you're not busy this evening, would you mind coming over to my house? Helping me with a little experiment?"

“Experiment?” What was this?

“I just can’t figure out the positioning of the victim during the crime.” His face was intense, clearly thinking about the case. “I’d really like your view on it.”

Renee felt a pang of pride. He valued her judgment. Something Bruce had never done. “Sure,” she said. “I can do that.”

Rick grinned. “I’ll buy dinner. We’ll eat at my place. Chicken, okay?”

Renee nodded. “Sounds good. Just give me a time and an address.”

“Why don’t you just follow me from here? I’ll leave a few minutes early and pick up the chicken. Unless you’d be willing to just ride with me?”

Renee shrugged. What could it hurt? He didn’t seem like he would attack her or anything. “You’ll bring me back to pick up my car after?”

“Of course.”

“Fine, then.”

“We’ll lock up at five.” He turned and disappeared down the hallway.

Renee heaved a sigh. So what if Rick Loman was a boss that could make her drool. She was fully capable of keeping it on a business level. It didn’t matter that she found herself attracted to his down-home ways—so different from Bruce. No, she was a professional. She could keep it that way.

“Get this mess cleaned up,” she said, scolding herself to get back to the business at hand. She knelt down, placing the sandwich bag to her side, and began gathering up the files. She didn’t bother to put them in any order. Maybe Rick would allow her to take care of it over the weekend. It wasn’t as if she had anything better to do.

A thought struck her, freezing her in motion. If she didn’t come to work tomorrow morning, due to it being Saturday, she wouldn’t get to see the man in the window.

Renee blew out an exasperated breath. Good grief, her infatuation with the mystery man had just reached a new level. Shaking her head, she attacked the files, using every ounce of her pent up sexual fantasy frustration.

Two hours later, Opal had gleefully left for the rest of her life and Renee was busy shutting down the office equipment. No matter what she did, the man behind the steamy window kept invading her thoughts...except he had Rick Loman’s face. By the time Rick entered the reception area, jingling his keys in his hand, Renee’s body was literally vibrating with an animalistic urge.

“Are you ready?” Rick asked, leaning against the doorframe of his office door.

Control yourself, she thought. It was awfully hard to do when she kept picturing Rick’s face on that drop-dead body behind the steamy glass. She reached for her briefcase and smiled. “Definitely.”

On the way to his house, they made a quick run through *Kentucky Fried Chicken’s* drive-thru window then were on their way. Renee could smell the aroma of fried chicken coming from the back seat of his car. “I hope you’re hungry,” he said. “I know you didn’t have much for lunch.”

Renee laughed, feeling at ease with him even though the sexual tension she felt was thrumming through her like a live wire. “I didn’t mean to stand you up this afternoon. Time just got away from me.”

“At least it was work that had your attention and not something else.”

Renee looked at him. What was he trying to convey with that remark? The car came to a stop. Renee looked up to find the construction crew that had held her up the past two mornings in front of them. Her body went on alert. They would pass *the house*.

Traffic started moving again.

"I hope you don't mind giving up your Friday night to work with me," Rick said.

Renee turned to him. "Well, I am new here, so I don't have a social calendar to compete with work. Besides, I find you enjoyable." She noted that his hair looked freshly trimmed, but still, the wavy mass defied staying in place.

Rick laughed loudly. "Enjoyable. Well, I guess you could have used a less flattering word."

Renee blanched. "I haven't offended you, haven I?"

The car stopped again. This time he put it in park. He turned toward her in the seat. "No. I'm not offended." A smile played on his lips. "We're home."

Renee looked through the windshield.

Her heart skipped a beat.

It was the white stone house.

The house.

She looked at him as he got out of the car.

Rick Loman, her boss, was her fantasy lover from the dream.

He was the man behind the steamy window.

*

Rick hadn't felt so comfortable or as *uncomfortable* with a woman as he did with Renee Wells.

He rounded the car and opened the door for her, offering his hand.

She took it. The instant their fingers touched, an electric shock pulsed through him. Exactly like when he had caught her this afternoon to keep her from falling in the file room. Instant raw heat. Rick caught her gaze as she rose gracefully from the car. He knew she felt it too. Her electric blue eyes grew dark as she stood.

It was all he could do to keep from capturing her perfect mouth with his own.

"I'll, um, get the chicken," he managed to say, releasing her delicate hand.

Moments later, Rick led her into the house, trying not to touch her again. Just the memory of her firm body against his earlier this afternoon had already begun to make his hard. Not a good thing to impress a new assistant with.

Making small talk as he led her into the kitchen, he tried his best to get his mind on something else.

Renee sat down at the kitchen table while he scurried around gathering a place setting for each of them.

Dinnerware finally on the table, Rick pulled two wine glasses from the cabinet. "How about a glass of chardonnay with our takeout?"

"I would love some," she said, smiling softly.

Wine poured, Rick sat down across from her. Lifting his glass, he said, "To a wonderful relationship."

"Business," she said, clicking her glass against his.

"And personal. I hope we can also be friends as well as business associates." He sipped his wine, watching her face.

She lifted the glass to her lips, slowly, sensuously. "Friends," she said. Then she took a sip.

If he didn't know better, he'd swear that the look in her eyes was one of seduction.

Renee blinked. The look disappeared. "I hope you don't mind if I just dig in," she said, stabbing a chicken leg out of the bucket in the center of the table and placing it on her plate. "I am hungry."

"Go right ahead."

While they ate, Rick talked about the Binger case. Renee listened. He told her about his misgivings concerning Sherri Binger's innocence. He just couldn't picture how the accident occurred. "I have to admit," he said, a sadness settling in the pit of his stomach, "I think she shot him on purpose."

Renee's brows drew together. She licked her fingers. "Why do you think that? You must have a solid reason."

The sight of her licking her fingers, her tongue trailing over her skin, almost threw him completely off track. He felt a tightening in his groin, picturing her mouth...that tongue...doing wonderful things to certain parts of his anatomy. Clearing his throat, he filed away that fantasy in the back of his mind. "Because," he said, "I see no way from what Sherri tells me, and from what the first officer on the scene stated about the position of the body, that the gun could have went off by accident and the bullet hit him square between the eyes."

Renee listened, her gaze intelligent and intense. "They were playing a game."

Rick nodded.

Renee pursed her lips. She twirled her wine glass in her fingers for a moment. "She told you that she thought the gun wasn't loaded. If she believed that, no matter what they were doing, it would still be an accident."

Rick shook his head. "I don't buy it. I think she knew it was loaded."

"The reason being?" She took a sip of her wine.

Rick rose from the table and gathered their dishes. "Reason being; she was the one who removed it from his holster."

"Maybe he unloaded it when he came home from work."

Putting the dishes into the sink, Rick shook his head. "It wasn't his way." He wiped his hands on a towel. "I spoke to some of the other officers today. They all said that Carl kept it in the holster, hanging on the bedpost by his head, just in case."

"In case of what?" Renee got up and walked to the sink. She turned on the water.

Rick took her wrist. "You don't have to do that."

Renee turned, her eyes drawing him in. "I don't mind," she said, "There's just he two of us. Not so many dishes that it will ruin my hands."

God, he wanted to kiss her. He stroked the inside of her delicate wrist with his thumb. She tilted her chin up slightly, as if she knew what he was thinking. Her eyes grew dreamy. Her lips parted.

Rick wanted to groan.

Tamping down his urge to ravish her right here in the kitchen, he released her wrist. "All right then...you wash and I'll dry."

He was surprised to see a blush bloom in her cheeks, just before she turned back to the sink. "Sounds like a plan," she said, reaching for the dish detergent that sat near the faucet.

They began doing the dishes. Their hands touched, hers warm and soapy, as she handed him a dish to rinse. Rick was reminded of the conversation that he'd had with Ron at the barbershop yesterday and again today while he was getting his hair trimmed. The conversation about how Rick needed a good woman to settle down with. Doing dishes with Renee was so much like a 'married' thing that it stung his heart.

"You never told me the 'why' of the 'just in case'," Renee said.

Rick dried the plate, trying not to let her see the slight tremor in his hands. "According to the other officers, Carl had arrested a few undesirables and put a halt to their drug trade. He was paranoid about them sending someone after him."

"Drug trade? Here?" She looked at him, eyebrows raised. "I wouldn't think this size of a town would have a very large drug trade."

"You'd be surprised at the things that go on here, behind closed doors. Sometimes they get pretty steamy."

"Really." She turned and started washing dishes again, but not before Rick caught a flash in those deep blue eyes of hers. "Where I come from," she continued, "just about anything can be found if you want it. Right out in the open."

"You make it sound like it was a bad place that you were in. Was that why you left?" He'd caught a hint of disdain in her voice.

She shook her head and handed him another plate. "It wasn't the 'place' it was the 'people'. Well, really just one in particular."

"Bad relationship, then." Rick had experience with one bad relationship and that had been enough for him. But what he felt toward Renee was beginning to make him reconsider his state of bachelorhood. She was beautiful, smart, and feisty. Renee was the first woman in the last ten years who was able to gain his full attention for more than a few hours. Now that he thought about it, she'd had his full attention since the moment he'd met her at Bud's lunch counter. That was probably the reason he was struggling with this case. He had a thing for her—bad.

Renee let the water out of the sink. "My relationship with Bruce had one major problem," she said, taking the towel from him. She began drying her hands, leaning one hip against the counter. "I wasn't his *only* relationship."

Now he got it. She'd been cheated on. "Whoever he was—Bruce—was a fool."

She tilted her head and smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment." She offered him the towel.

"Please do, because it was."

"You brought the Binger files with you. Can I have a better look at them?"

Rick nodded. "I left them in the living room on the couch."

"I'll just get them." She started to walk through the door to the living room. "May I have another glass of wine?" she asked, "If you don't mind?"

"I'll pour."

Renee disappeared into the living room.

Rick folded the hand towel and laid it on the counter.

"You, Renee, can have anything you want," he said softly.

Chapter Four

Renee entered the living room and took a deep breath.

Her oath of swearing off men was not going to work. Not since she'd met Rick Loman. It had completely dissolved into nothing from the heat of her attraction to him. There was something about him that tugged at her heart and heated her insides to the boiling point.

So far, Renee had learned a few things about Rick. He seemed confident and comfortable with who he was. He didn't put on airs just because he was an attorney and he was the best-looking man she had seen in a long time. He paid attention when she spoke to him, obviously giving her words weight. He was intelligent and friendly. She'd seen him in the barbershop yesterday talking to the old barber and from the look that had been on his face Rick was enjoying the conversation. Viewing him in that light gave her a homey feeling, something that she had never felt before.

There was the fact of their age difference though. Rick was forty but then—what did age really matter anymore? Since she had found out that he was the mystery man in the steamy window, just that glimpse of his body had told her that he definitely wore his age well, clothed or *unclothed*. And his smile, ah...his smile could warm frozen toes.

Renee bit her lip. The only thing that was holding her back from making her attraction to him known was the fact that he was her boss.

Frustrated, she bent to pick up the file from the couch when a little voice in her head spoke up.

Why is the fact that he's your boss stopping you? You had other offers. You can always find another job if you feel like it. Don't you see, he's everything that Bruce wasn't? Has Bruce cowed you into not letting you give in to what you really feel about this man?

Renee hugged the file to her breast. It was true. She could always find another job if it came to that. And—Rick was the exact opposite of Bruce. Realization struck her, digging in deep all the way to the bone. She had let her awful experience with Bruce cow her into denying herself. The fact of the matter was—Rick Loman was everything she wanted in a man.

And very possibly exactly what she needed.

Taking the file, Renee returned to the kitchen, her mind made up. She'd cancel her oath to swear off men and see just how this played out.

Rick was sitting at the table. When she entered, a smile lit up his face.

There was that warmth, that homey feeling again, in her stomach but also another sort of heat, lower and begging for attention.

Renee sat down, to his side this time, and laid the file on the table.

"Here you go," Rick said, handing her the freshened glass of wine.

"Okay." She took a sip of wine. "Tell me—if the Binger woman *did* shoot her husband on purpose, what was her motive?"

Rick rubbed a hand over his chin, his expression troubled. "I think it may have been some form of revenge."

“Revenge? For what?” Renee studied the firm lines of his face. She noticed there were the beginnings of crinkle lines at the corners of his eyes and thought they added to the character of his face.

Rick leaned forward in his chair, pinning her with a look. “You have no problem with discussing sexual situations with me, do you?”

Renee bit back a laugh. Was he kidding? Right now, she was picturing him just stepping out of a hot shower, droplets of water clinging to his skin. “No, I don’t have a problem with it. I’m not a prude.”

He laced his fingers together. “One of the other officers told me something that makes me think that Sherri shot Carl as a payback. He told me that Carl confessed to him that he liked to pretend Sherri was his prisoner.”

“That’s a common fantasy.” Renee sipped her wine, listening.

“Yes. It is. When both parties are willing.”

Now there was something. “He forced her?”

“Sounds like it.”

“What does she say?”

Rick leaned back in his chair and sighed. “She says Carl never forced her. Says they played at cop and prisoner often.”

Renee’s mind whirled. “Then there’s no chance of a battered wife defense.”

“Nope.”

Renee tapped her fingernail against the glass. “Was she *always* the prisoner?”

“There’s the rub.” He crossed his arms. “The other officer, the one with the inside information, said that Carl would never allow Sherri to be the master. She was always the submissive.”

Renee shook her head. “I don’t understand. When he was shot, wasn’t he the one handcuffed to the bed?”

“Exactly!” Rick snapped his fingers. “Who do we believe? Sherri or the officer Carl told his sexual escapades to?”

“Carl could have been lying, you know. It wouldn’t be the first time some guy bragged about sex he didn’t have.”

Rick blinked a couple of times. “You’re right. Maybe he was just bragging.” He grinned at her. “I’m glad you agreed to mull this over with me. I think we’re going to make a great team.”

Renee was glowing inside. His words were a balm over the wounds that Bruce had left on her psyche. She reached for the file and opened it. Quickly leafing through the paper, she extracted one. “Since we work together so well, why don’t we try an experiment?”

“What do you have in mind?”

Renee scooted the paper over to him.

He looked at it then back at her. “The diagram of the bedroom where it happened. What are you thinking?”

“A re-enactment.”

“Of the incident?”

She nodded. “You have the description of how the body was found and you have her statement...” She fished in the file for Sherri Binger’s statement. “...right here, explaining what each of them did before the gun went off. Let’s try it, go through the

moves, and see if there is something that could have caused that gun to go off accidentally.”

Rick stood. “That is why I asked you here. Remember, I said something about an experiment? I like how our minds work together. Now, what to use for the gun.” He snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it.” He went to a drawer on the other side of the sink and opened it.

As he rummaged through it, Renee could tell that it was a junk drawer. He wasn’t taking care with the contents as he shoved it around. Renee thought about his comment on how their minds worked alike. So that was what he had been talking about at the office...an experimental re-enactment. The more time she spent with Rick, the more in tune with him she felt.

Suddenly, Rick whirled around. “Found our gun.” He held up an object.

Renee laughed. “Perfect.”

In his hand was a neon green squirt gun.

“Why may I ask do you have a squirt gun?” Renee rose from her chair.

“One of my sister’s kids left it here. I just tossed it in a drawer.”

Renee smiled widely, wondering if he liked kids. She gathered up the file and turned to him. “Where’s the bedroom?”

*

As soon as she entered the master suite, all Renee could think about was Rick and a steamy shower. She swallowed, trying to quell the urge to take a look in his bathroom. “This is...I’m speechless,” she said, moving to the king-sized bed. She laid the file down on the coverlet. “I’ve never seen a master suite so large. This must take up the whole second floor.”

“Half of it. There are two smaller bedrooms in case I need them in the future.”

Renee caught his gaze. Was he inferring that someday he’d have children?

His eyes were sparkling. “Want a tour of the suite?”

Renee nodded.

He swept his arms wide. “This, of course, is where I sleep.” He moved to an archway on the left. “Come on.”

Renee followed.

“This is my dressing area.”

Renee was impressed. The dressing area wasn’t as wide as the bedroom due to closets that ran the full length of it on either side. There were two chairs, one positioned on each side along the closets. The room basically formed a wide hallway. “Very nice,” she said. “But I wouldn’t have thought a single man would have enough clothes to fill all of this closet space.”

“Good observation. You should have been an attorney yourself. And no—I don’t have that many clothes.” He cleared his throat. “On to my pride and joy.” He started for the next archway.

Renee followed, her stomach quivering. *The bath. The shower.*

The steam.

Heat began to pool in her lower regions. Her heartbeat quickened.

She entered the bathroom and literally had to put her hand to her mouth so he wouldn’t hear her gasp.

“This is my way of indulging myself,” he said.

“It’s—wonderful,” Renee said when she finally found her voice.

This was no bathroom...it was a spa.

In one corner was a large triangle shaped whirlpool tub. It fit perfectly in the corner and Renee could swear that four people could fit in it comfortably. In the center of the room was a freestanding vanity with two sinks. Above it, a mirror hung suspended from the ceiling on wires, making it seem like the mirror was floating in the air. The lighting in the room was completely recessed into the ceiling itself, except for two bright fixtures that hung down on either side of the mirror. There was a door in the left side of the room, that portion of the wall coming into the room in an L-shape. Renee guessed that behind the door was the commode.

“This is my favorite feature,” Rick said, standing beside the largest shower she’d ever seen in her life. “Come. You’ve got to take a look.” He opened the wide-etched glass door.

Renee stepped forward to stand beside him.

The shower was huge, to say the least. Lined in cocoa brown marble, gold fixtures gleamed on two sides. A shower for two, she thought. She wondered whom the other person was that he liked to shower with. Maybe he did have someone. Maybe Kate had been wrong about him being single and available. Renee’s eyes traveled over the expansive shower. The two main showerheads were of the waterfall type. Wide and slender, the water would pour over you just as if you were standing beneath a waterfall. Then she noticed the additional showerheads. Six on each side, below the waterfall ones, they lined up in two sets of three. Using them, your body would be blasted with water in six jets of spray. “This is amazing,” Renee said.

“I thought so.” Rick turned to her. “Nothing better after a long day at the office than coming home and letting the water wash away my troubles.” He cocked his head. “Have you ever taken a Swedish shower before?”

Renee shook her head. Was he leading up to an invitation?

“You should try it. I know, it sounds weird for a man, but it eases my muscles. Especially after I workout.” Rick closed the shower door. “You’re welcome to take the plunge, any time. The whirlpool is great, too. If you’re so inclined.”

Kind of odd, the invitation coming from her boss’ mouth. ‘Come take a shower or bath at my place.’ No matter how odd it was, it made the heat inside her kick up a notch. Now she knew why his windows were steamy in the mornings.

“I may just take you up on that sometime. I know I won’t find an apartment with such a lavish bathroom,” she said, walking toward the archway that led back into the dressing area. “This isn’t really a bathroom. It’s more like a spa. You could sell memberships.”

Rick laughed behind her. “There’s a thought. If I ever decide to retire, I’ll have an income.”

Renee entered the main bedroom and went directly to the bed. She sat on the edge and reached for the file. “Tell me,” she said, keeping her eyes on the file. “Do you usually invite women that you just met to bathe in your home?”

Silence.

She looked up.

Rick was standing in front of the window, facing her. There was an odd look on his face.

She tilted her head. "Something wrong?"

Rick blinked, then shook his head. "No. Not a thing." He walked to the bed. "And no, I don't invite women I've just met to bathe in my home."

"You invited me."

His eyes met hers and she could immediately feel the heat in them. "Yes," he said, "I did."

Renee swallowed. Damn, she wanted him. She cleared her throat and withdrew the diagram of the crime scene. "Maybe we should get started."

"Yes. Probably should."

Renee stood and took the file from the bed, then laid it on a low dresser. "Okay," she walked around the bed, surveying it as she talked, "The victim was handcuffed to the bed. Hands to the bedposts of the headboard."

"Right." Rick shoved his hands in his pockets.

Renee looked up, frowning. "Where his feet cuffed or secured in some way?"

"No. They weren't."

"Strange. Seems like he could have fought back if his legs weren't secured." She looked around the room. "What can we use for handcuffs?" She looked at him. "I don't suppose that you have any?"

Rick shook his head. "Wouldn't have a use for them." He moved to the dressing room and disappeared through the archway. "I've got an idea though," he said.

Renee waited. The whole room was infused with the scent of his cologne. She breathed deep, drawing it in. Feeling as if she was drawing him into herself at the same time.

Rick returned, a long velvet like rope strung between his hands. "What about this?"

"What is that?"

"The belt to my robe." He crossed over and handed it to her. "Think you can tie me up with that?"

Renee ran the belt through her fingers. The velvet felt warm and sensuously soft. "I think I can do something with it, though whatever I do, I think you'll be able to get out of it."

"I'll pretend I can't move."

Renee nodded. "Okay. On the bed."

He grinned. "I love it when you order me around."

Renee let loose a laugh. This was almost like playing a game. A really fun game. She felt a thrill chase through her at the thought of Rick, tied to the bed, at her mercy.

Rick began to undo his belt.

"What are you doing?" she asked, stunned by his action.

He looked at her wide-eyed. "Listen, if I'm going to be tied to the bed, I'm going to be comfortable. You don't mind do you? I mean, I won't be able to attack you or anything...since you'll have me tied up." He winked.

"Okay. I see what you mean." She watched as he slid the belt from his pants then pulled his shirttail out of them. He unbuttoned the first three buttons of the shirt, then toed his shoes off. He climbed onto the bed and flipped onto his back, arms spread wide. "Tie me up."

Renee ran the velvet belt through her hands again. She clenched her hands into fists.

"Now I get to ask...something wrong?" Rick asked.

Renee sucked in a breath. “No. I, um...”

“Just climb on. Climb on the bed.”

Renee sighed. There was no other way. She picked up the squirt gun that Rick had laid on the bedside table and laid it beside him on the bed. Then she climbed on the bed, thankful that she had worn slacks today. On her knees beside him, she wrapped the velvet belt around one of his wrists and threaded it through the wooden spindles of his headboard. She bit her lip. “I have to...” She didn’t say anymore. Before she chickened out, Renee swung her leg over Rick’s waist and straddled him. Leaning over, she drew the velvet rope through the spindles and quickly secured his other hand.

She looked down at him.

His eyes blazed.

“I’m not too heavy?” she asked.

He shook his head slowly. “Go ahead. Sit on me. Put yourself in the position as if we were...having sex. That’s how they were, according to Sherri.”

Heat coiled inside her as she lowered herself onto him. Sliding back just a bit, Renee positioned her hot center over him. The urge to rock herself against him was powerful, something that she almost couldn’t control. She grit her teeth and leaned over him to retrieve the squirt gun.

“Renee,” he said, his voice a low growl.

She met his eyes. “Yes?”

“I think you should know that...I’m very attracted to you.”

Renee shuddered. God, this could really lead to something here. She braced one hand beside his head just above his shoulder. “I am very attracted to you, too,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Rick’s eyes darkened. “If we act upon our attraction, will it create a problem with us working together?”

Renee gripped the squirt gun tightly in her palm, which was now dewed with sweat. “I don’t know.”

“I—I want you, Renee. I know that I may be crossing a line of some sort here, but I have to tell you that. I want you.”

Renee couldn’t fight the urge any longer. She released the squirt gun and stroked his face. The light stubble of his beard tickled her palm.

“Renee...”

Renee leaned down and brushed a kiss across his lips. Electricity shot through her, sparking in her nipples and on down to her toes.

Rick groaned and parted his lips, inviting her in.

Renee didn’t hesitate. She gave into her most basic instincts. This was the man...the one she’d been dreaming about, thinking about for days. She deepened the kiss, probing inside his mouth, tasting the wine on his tongue.

Renee moaned, her pussy clenching at the thought of him, deep inside her. The heat that they generated dewed her skin. His lips were firm, yet pliant under her assault. She ran her fingers into the thick mass of his hair, shifting her body on him. She felt his hardness, just beneath her damp core, separated only by thin layers of cloth.

Renee rose up, catching her breath. Her heart pounded, her breath coming in short gasps. “We...we shouldn’t be doing this,” she breathed.

“No, we shouldn’t.” With one sudden movement, he jerked his arms free of the loose bindings. He reached up and grasped the sides of her head, drawing her back down until her face was within a hair’s breadth of his nose. “But we’re going to, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

They came together like a raging fire. Rick drew her down, then rolled, putting her on the bottom. Their mouths devoured each other, their bodies molding together.

“We need to...” her voice trailed off as she struggled with the buttons on his shirt.

He didn’t hesitate. Rearing up, he ripped his shirt off, buttons flying.

Renee wouldn’t be outdone. She wriggled from beneath him and without leaving the bed, stripped naked within seconds. Rick matched her every move until they both were bare.

Renee breathed heavy, perched on her knees facing him. He mirrored her position, his member standing straight and hard between them. The feverish heat between them seared them both.

Rick took her by the waist and brought her close.

Renee stared into his eyes, feeling wanton and sensuous. His cock burned at her core, seeking the heat.

Rick fell onto the bed, taking her with him. She landed on top of him and their lips met again.

His hands roamed her back, sending smoky trails down her spine.

Renee began to move, her hips rocking up and down as his cock, nestled between her sweet folds, stroked her into a frenzy. With a whine, she lifted higher and with his hands guiding her, impaled herself on his shaft.

A shudder passed through her as his thick member stretched her pussy deliciously, doing deep into her core.

Rick gasped beneath her lips.

Renee lifted herself. She wanted to see his face, wanted to be able to move freely. Wanted to ride him. Hard.

“Damn, Renee you are b-beautiful,” he ground out. His hands came up and cupped her breasts.

Renee braced her hands on his shoulders and arched into him as she drew her knees forward and began to move, stroking his cock with her wetness.

He tweaked her nipples. She let out a little mewl.

He smiled and rolled them between his fingers, his face one of pure lust.

Renee threw her head back and relinquished all control to the animal inside her. She rolled her hips in a circle, moving up and down the length of him. A tightening centered itself low inside her, hint of the orgasm that was within just a few breaths.

“Yes, Renee, move honey,” Rick said. He matched her movements, thrusting up and into her.

“Ahhh,” she sighed, thrashing her head, letting the sensual flame take over.

Her fingers clenched on his shoulders and she heard him hiss. She didn’t stop. Faster. Harder. The scent of them wafting around them, his cologne mixed with her perfume and the aroma of sex.

She felt him throbbing inside her, his cock vibrating with tension. She let it incite her to move faster.

Their skin slapped together, both of them moaning, sighing.

“Oh my God!” Renee screamed as the orgasm hit her, her back stiffening, as her cream flowed freely. He groaned loudly one second later, his hot seed filling her as he gripped her hips and brought her down hard.

Renee shook with the force of it, no thought, just feeling.

Slowly, she came down from the sexual high, breathing hard, wondering if her heart would hold out. It seemed as if it was beating at a hummingbird pace. She collapsed on top of Rick. He was hot beneath her, his body drenched in sweat as was hers.

He wrapped his arms around her and cradled her on his chest. “Jesus,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“Yes.” She said, closing her eyes. Her muscles twitched from the release of adrenaline. The orgasm Renee had just had was the most explosive experience she had ever had with a man. It had completely overpowered every ounce of reserve she had. She lay limp, trying to slow her breathing.

“This is nice,” Rick said, his voice rumbling up through his chest. “Really nice.”

Renee smiled. “Nice? I wouldn’t call what we just did ‘nice’.”

His arms tightened around her. “What would you call it then?”

She sighed happily. “Naughty. Very, very naughty.”

He laughed, then still holding her, rolled them to the side. She opened her eyes and looked up into his copper-flecked eyes. “You find that funny.”

“Oh no, not funny at all. I find it extremely pleasant though.” He reached up and stroked her hair.

Renee touched a fingertip to the cleft in his chin. This man was awesome. There was no other word for it. How she had ever found him, she didn’t know, but she was so glad she had come to Rebellion. So glad she had taken the job working for him.

Suddenly she froze.

‘Working for him’. The words struck her like a hammer.

Her eyes snapped to his.

The man lying naked beside her, his eyes sultry and satisfied, was her employer. All they were supposed to be doing was re-enacting a crime that his client allegedly committing. And what had she done? She’d attacked him. Seduced him. Had her way with him like some loose sex-starved woman.

Oh my God, she thought, what have I done?

Chapter Five

Rick saw the change in her eyes. The sparkle had faded and in its place was what looked like fear.

He frowned. "What is it?"

She swallowed. "I shouldn't have—I didn't mean to..."

"What?" Rick's heart stuttered for a moment. Something was wrong here but he didn't know what. Renee had been cuddling with him after the most outrageous sex he'd ever had and everything had been cozy and warm but now, from the look on her face, something had suddenly gone sour.

Renee placed her palm on his chest and pushed away.

He released her, not knowing what else to do.

She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her back to him. He saw her shudder, then her arms went around herself. "I'm really sorry," she said, her voice shaking.

Rick rose up on one elbow. "Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"For *attacking* you."

Rick reached out and lightly touched her shoulder. She quivered beneath his touch. "You didn't attack me. What are you talking about?"

She got up from the bed and bent to the floor. When she came back up, she had her blouse in her hand. With her back still to him, she drew it over her head and turned, tugging at the hem. "We were supposed to be working on the Binger case." Her hand came up and fluttered back down as if useless. "I jumped on you. You must think I'm some sort of sex-hungry bimbo."

Rick saw the glimmer of tears sparkling in her eyes.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and captured her hands, drawing her closer. "No. Not at all. Renee, please don't cry."

Her lower lips quivered. She blinked back tears and sucked in a breath. "I'm supposed to be a professional."

"You are, hon. You are a wonderful legal assistant. You've already helped me more in one day than Opal has in years. I could never talk about the cases with her." He ran his hands up her arms, soothing her. "What happened between us was just as much me, as it was you. I can't help that I'm attracted to you. You're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

She shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Rick, I'm your employee. I'm supposed to keep it on a business level. How in the world are you ever going to take me seriously when all I want to do is kiss you?"

He smiled. "Is that really how you feel? Like kissing me?"

She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "Yes."

"That's not a bad thing, you know."

A corner of her mouth curled up and she almost smiled.

"In fact," he said, pulling her in between his knees and locking his arms around her waist, "I think it's a very good thing."

She rested her hands on his shoulders. "You don't understand. There's something else."

"There is? Well then," he patted the bed beside him, "sit down here and tell me."

Renee sat beside him and primly folded her hands in her lap. Rick didn't tell her just how delectable she looked, sitting there with nothing more than her blouse on, her hands so properly folded in her lap like a very proper lady.

She took a deep breath and stared straight ahead at the bedroom wall. "I had a bad time with Bruce."

"Your ex-husband."

"Yes." She nodded. "He made me want to swear off men...completely. He was such a cheater. He had no feelings—no emotions—at all. It was all about him. About his pleasure."

"Well, I like my pleasure, too," she said, looking at him. "I like sex. The encounter we just had is like nothing I've ever experienced before but it wasn't the 'sex' that made me give up my oath not to see any men again. It was *you*."

"Go on." Rick wasn't sure where she was going with this but he could tell from her posture and the look on her face, that it wasn't easy for her to say what she was saying.

"Bruce hurt me. Badly. Made me feel like I wasn't enough. For anyone," she continued, her eyes traveling down to her lap. "But you, you seem so comfortable with your life. You aren't 'reaching' for more. Bruce always was. Nothing was ever good enough." She took a shaky breath. "Enough about that." She looked at him again. "My attraction to you is twofold. On the one hand, I like the fact that you seem to be so *real*. On the other...I've been watching you."

That was weird. "Watching me? How?"

Her face began to flush and she looked away again. "Well, I didn't know you lived here. In this house."

"What's my house got to do with anything?" He wasn't sure he understood this at all. What the heck was she trying to say?

"I drive past here on my way to work," she said. "With the construction, I get stopped right in front of this house and have to wait until traffic moves." She raised a hand and raked it through her hair. "That first morning, I was looking at your house and I noticed you...through the window."

"Huh?"

She pointed toward the bathroom. "Your bathroom window. It faces out to the street." She met his eyes. "I window peeked at you. The window was steamed up but I could see you behind the glass. Naked. Just out of your shower."

Rick blinked. Could someone see him from the street? Now that was news. "So, you saw me. I didn't know that anyone could. If I did, I would have put up some blinds or something." He chuckled. "Good Lord, I must be giving people nightmares."

Renee shook her head fiercely. "Not nightmares. Wet dreams."

Rick felt a swelling in his chest. He'd given her wet dreams? "What a compliment. Is that your confession? That you were watching me?"

"Yes. But I didn't know it was you at the time." She got up from the bed and started to pace. "When you brought me here and I realized that you were the man from my dreams, it was too much. Not only was I already attracted to you, the fact that you were my mystery man just pushed me over the edge. I had to have you."

“Like I said,” he said levelly, “it’s not a bad thing. I’m really flattered.”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t think less of me? I mean, the first time we’re alone together I jump your bones.”

Rick stood. “No. I don’t think less of you. So we have a thing for each other. That doesn’t mean we can’t work together. Renee, please don’t pull away from me. I think that we could be really good together—personally and professionally.”

She crossed her arms and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. After a moment, she spoke. “You make a good argument, counselor.”

He smiled, the tension he hadn’t realized was building easing a little. “That’s what I’m good at...winning arguments.”

She tilted her head and gave him a sassy look out of the corner of her eye. “I know another thing you’re good at.”

“Really now.” He crossed to her and plucked the hem of her blouse. “You haven’t experienced the whole deal yet. How can you make that assumption?”

“Well, maybe you should show me some more of your moves when it comes to a sexual nature. Then I’ll be able to make a more informed decision.”

Rick took the hem of her blouse and pulled it up. “Don’t you feel the need for a shower, dear assistant? You did work awfully hard today.”

“Maybe I do.” With that, she shed her blouse again.

Rick felt himself hardening again at the sight of her gorgeous, curvy body naked in front of him. She had a spark in her eyes again, a small smile gracing her lips. Without hesitation, Rick scooped her up into his arms and carried her, laughing, into the bathroom.

Placing her on her feet, he opened the shower and turned on both waterfall showerheads, adjusting the temperature to medium. He wasn’t sure just how hot she liked her shower and he didn’t want to burn her, so he settled for warm. Rick was sure that after they entered the shower, things would heat up pretty fast anyway.

“Hang on here while I get some towels,” he said, moving to the vanity in the center of the room. He kept a stack of white, fluffy towels beneath it. Bringing them back to the shower, he laid two towels on the small stand just next to the shower door. “Ready to wash your troubles away?”

Without answering, Renee entered the shower and ducked under one of the waterfalls.

Rick grinned, following her in and closed the door.

Immediately, her arms went around his neck and pulled him under the water.

Rick captured her mouth, probing inside the warm wetness with his tongue. He ran his hands down her slippery back and cupped the round cheeks of her ass. She moaned into his mouth, pressing herself against him. The water sluiced over them, slickening their skins, warming them.

“Oh God, this is wonderful,” she said, leaning back from his kiss.

Her fingers curled in his hair, massaging his scalp.

Rick backed up a bit and hit the button that changed the spray from the waterfalls to the Swedish nozzles. Water blasted them from all sides.

Renee let out a little yelp, then laughed. Her laugh sounded like bells, echoing off the marble walls.

Rick wanted to taste more of her. "Come," he said, taking her by her shoulders and positioning her against the shower wall in the center. The water splashed against them, not so strong, feeling more like rain on their naked bodies.

He pressed her back against the marble. She jerked. "That's cold," she said, trying to step away.

"It'll warm up. Humor me."

She tilted her head coyly and leaned back again. "What do you have in mind here, boss?"

"You'll see," he said with a grin. Then he cupped her breasts and dipped his head.

He ran his tongue over one peaked nipple, flicking it while brushing his thumb over the other, not wanting to neglect either. Rick felt a shudder run through her. Her hands went to his hair, pulling him to her. With a chuckle, Rick closed his mouth over her nipple and suckled, the water from the shower adding to the slickness of her skin.

She arched against him. "Oh, yes," she said.

He sucked harder, pinching the other nipple between his fingers. But it wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted to make her squirm.

Releasing her nipple, he drew his tongue down between her breasts and on to her bellybutton. He dipped inside the tiny depression. She sucked in her breath, tightening her stomach muscles.

Rick continued on, going to his knees in front of her. The marble floor of the shower was hard, but at least it had been warmed from the water. In any event, he didn't care. He had other things on his mind.

The dark curls that covered her core beckoned him. Sliding his hands down her shapely hips, he ran his fingers through her curls. She gasped at his touch. Rick looked up to find her watching him, her gaze heated, lips slightly parted.

Using his hands, he urged her to part her thighs. Her knees bent and she widened her stance, now leaning back fully against the shower wall.

Rick felt electricity running through him as he parted the petals of her sex, exposing the pink folds of her womanhood.

He had to taste.

Leaning forward, Rick ran his tongue over the velvet folds, tasting her sweetness and her heat. She was wet, creamy and not from the shower. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

She smelled like heaven, her scent heady and spicy. Grasping her firm thighs, Rick lapped at her essence, rolling his tongue over the hard bud in the center of her womanly flower.

Renee groaned and thrust her hips forward, offering him more.

Rick caught her clit between his lips and pressed them together. She shuddered. He pressed his mouth against her and drew her hardened bud into his mouth and sucked, drinking her in.

Renee jerked. "Ah!" she gasped, bucking against his mouth.

Rick continued on, sucking at her. The velvet silk feel of her most private area felt wonderful against his lips. Her perfume hypnotized him. He couldn't get enough. He inserted one finger into her tight sheath and tickled her with his fingertip, pressing up against her g-spot. She jerked again, and began to squirm against him.

Rick added another finger and began to stroke in and out while he undulated his tongue over her clit.

Within seconds, she stiffened, thrusting against him. She called out his name. "Oh God, Rick!" Her cream filled his mouth and he lapped it up, hungry for more. Her body quaked and threatened to collapse. Rick moved his hands to her bottom, holding her up until he licked her clean.

He stood, his thighs complaining at being in a crouch for so long. But the look on her face...it was worth it.

Renee's eyes were heavy-lidded, sultry. Her face was relaxed into an expression of pure satisfaction.

Rick smiled and snatched the bar of soap from its niche in the shower wall and began running it over her skin. Soaping her breasts slowly, he kissed her softly. "You are something else," he breathed. He moved the bar of soap over her stomach, feeling the quiver of her muscles beneath his fingertips.

"No, my dear boss, you are something," she said, taking the soap from his hand. "My turn."

Rick relinquished the soap and stood in the center of the shower as she began to work on him.

Renee ran the bar of soap over his chest, flicking his nipples with her fingernail as she moved over them. It sent a shock through him. His groin tightened. As she lathered him, moving down his stomach, Rick grit his teeth. Her touch was firm and not a bit tentative.

When her hand closed over his cock, he fisted his hands. Looking up at him through lowered lashes, she ran the bar of soap over the tight skin of his member while holding it in the other hand. "Feel good?" she asked.

"You have no idea," he ground out.

"I think I do." She dropped the soap on the floor and placed a hand on his chest. "Against the wall," she ordered.

Rick obeyed her command without protest.

He watched as she stepped away for a moment, out of the spray of water, letting it rinse the soap from him.

She raised her arms above her head, stretching. Her breasts, nipples tight, jutted out for his appraisal. God, she was wanton. Her hair, jet-black, was plastered to her head, her curls gracing her flushed cheeks. Her body, perfect in its form, was flushed and wet, water running in rivulets. Dropping her arms, she smiled at him. "Are you ready?"

"Are you kidding?"

She approached him, her eyes burning into his. She gently placed her hands on his shoulders then brushed his lips with a kiss before moving down and flicking her tongue over his nipples again, then continuing down his stomach. Rick clenched his teeth, straining for control. Her tongue, hotter than the water that rained down on them, drew a path of fire down his center.

Then she was on her knees.

Jesus. She was something to behold, kneeling in front of him, her eyes bright, one hand tickling over his rock hard cock.

She ran her tongue over her lips and without looking away from his eyes, opened her mouth and drew him in.

Oh sweet Jesus. Rick couldn't help himself. He laid one hand gently on top of her head and closed his eyes.

The hot wet cavern of her mouth engulfed him. Rick's toes curled as she drew his cock deeper into the steamy depths of her hungry mouth until the head of him bumped the back of her throat.

She began to love him with her mouth, running her tongue along the underside of his dick, one hand holding him at the root, the other sliding beneath and cupping his balls.

His fingers tangled in her hair, his muscles straining as she took him deeper still. Rick leaned his head back against the marble sidewall, thrusting his hips forward, letting her take all of him that she wanted.

She moaned in her throat, sending the vibration all the way up his shaft into his balls.

Rick felt the swelling pulse of his seed, ready to burst forth.

Then...she took him all the way.

Rick let out an 'argh' as his cock pressed past the back of her throat into the searing tightness.

She pulled back and immediately took him to the bottom again, rolling his balls in her palm.

Tingling raced through him and he couldn't hold back any longer. With a yell, he burst into her mouth, the feeling of draining coming all the way from his toes.

She didn't let up. She sucked at him, pulling back just a bit, as his seed spilled from him.

A wash of shimmering shocks filtered through him, making him weak, as she laved his cock clean of his seed. He couldn't take anymore. He'd collapse for sure.

Straightening, he put his hands on her shoulders and moved her back. "Stop. Renee. Stop."

She looked up at him and pouted her lower lip out. "I wasn't finished."

"You have to be," he breathed, his heart pounding so hard he feared a heart attack. "I'm finished."

She unfolded her lithe body from the shower floor. Snaking her arms around his neck, she kissed him softly.

Rick wrapped her in his arms and drew her into him. As they stood, melded together in the warm spray of the shower, Rick knew that he'd never get enough of this woman. Never.

After a few moments, Renee lifted her head and smiled at him. "I had better get out and dry off before all of my skin wrinkles and I look eighty years old."

Rick chuckled. "Okay. But if you don't mind, I want to crank up the heat a bit. Stand under the hot spray for a few minutes."

She pulled away from him and reached for the shower door. "You go ahead. I know you like steamy showers."

"That's right. You admitted you were window peeking."

She grinned and stepped out.

When she closed the door, Rick cranked the hot water up, letting the spray pelt him as he shrugged, working his muscles.

God, what a woman. How had he ever lucked out to get her for an assistant? Grabbing the soap, he ran it roughly over his skin as his thoughts meandered over the evening.

Renee was smart and capable. Her mind worked like his, always questioning. And the fireworks that they had together...wow was the only word that came to mind. Sex with Renee was nothing less than earth shattering. He smiled to himself. Wonder if she can cook too. That would just about seal the deal.

He ducked into the spray and let the water rinse the soap from him, hoping that Renee was satisfied with his performance as well. She sure had acted like it.

He turned off the water and stood letting it run from him for a moment before opening the shower door.

A faint ring filtered to him.

Rick frowned. Who would be calling this late on a Saturday night? He opened the shower door and grabbed his towel.

The phone in the bedroom rang again.

"Renee? Could you get that?" he called out.

"Okay!"

As he dried off, he heard Renee talking softly. Just as he tossed the towel back on the stand, Renee entered the bathroom, the large white towel wrapped around her. She was carrying the phone handset.

She thrust it toward him. "I think you'd better take this." Then she strode back out the door.

Rick frowned again. Something was wrong. He didn't like the look on her face or how she had thrust the phone at him. Putting the phone to his ear, he started for the dressing area to get his robe. "Hello?"

"Rick, oh God, I need you," a woman's strained voice said on the other end of the line.

He grabbed his robe off the chair beside the closet and shrugged it on. "Who is this?"

"It's Rose White." A snuffle, then she began to cry in earnest. "Dad passed away."

Rick froze. Rose White. He hadn't recognized her voice because she'd been crying. Oh Lord, Rose. Rose was Ron Higbert's daughter. He dropped down into the chair, his heart sinking. "Rose, calm down. Ron passed away?"

"Y-yes. Can you come? I don't know how to deal with these arrangements." Another snuffle. "You were close to Dad too. Can you please come?"

Rick leaned forward and braced an elbow on his knee, his head drooping. "Where are you?"

"I...I'm at the hospital. I don't know what to do." Her voice rose in a whine.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes, okay? Just...wait for me."

"Thank you, Rick," Rose gushed. Then she hung up.

Rick blew out a breath. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Ron was dead. It felt like losing his father all over again.

He straightened, tightening his jaw. Rose needed help. He'd be there for her. She had been there for him when his father died. He and Rose had grown up together. Had been friends for a long time.

He rose from the chair, his heart steeled against the pain that he knew he'd have to deal with sooner or later. Right now, it had to be later.

He walked into the bedroom. "Renee, I'm sorry but I'm going to have to..."

She wasn't there.

Rick surveyed the room. "Renee?" No answer.

He looked on the floor. Her clothes were gone.

Rick raked a hand through his hair.

He walked downstairs, searching the house. She was nowhere. Where had she gone?
And why?

Frustration filled him. She had left without saying a word. She had no car. She must be walking. What the heck had happened?

He looked at the phone in his hand. *Rose*. He had to get to the hospital and get preparations started for Ron's funeral.

"Damn it." Heading for his bedroom, he took the stairs two at a time.

Chapter Six

Renee trudged along the sidewalk, glad that the construction was along the riverside of the street. It was only six blocks from Rick's house to the office. She could walk it easily. She only wished she had thought to bring a jacket.

Hugging herself, her damp hair chilling the nape of her neck, Renee fought back tears.

She and Rick had been getting along so perfectly. They seemed to 'fit' one another. Their minds thought alike, their bodies... worshipped each other. But all of it had been ripped to shreds by that phone call.

A tear trickled down her cheek. She brushed at it angrily, swiping it away. The woman on the other end of the phone had begun crying as soon as she heard Renee's voice. She had said her name was Rose and she insisted that she needed to talk to Rick. Now.

Renee immediately flashed back to Bruce, and his many girlfriends. After giving the phone to Rick, who looked so darn good just fresh from the shower, Renee had cut and run.

She shook her head and hugged herself tighter. She hadn't guarded her heart well enough. After only two days, she had allowed herself to become attached to Rick Loman.

"Damn it, Renee. You're so gullible. What made you think that he didn't have anyone?" She grumbled as she walked; head down, angrier with herself than she'd been in a long time.

A car horn honked, startling her out of her dark thoughts. She looked up to find a car, pacing her along the street.

Renee straightened and dropped her arms, walking with purpose. Just great, she thought. Someone was going to offer her a ride.

The driver beeped again.

Renee refused to look toward the car.

Three steps later, she heard him call her name.

"Renee! Renee, stop."

Rick. He had followed her. She quickened her pace.

The car sped past her, then pulled in along the curb.

Renee slowed, looking for an easy escape. She didn't want to talk to him. Not now. Not when she felt this raw. But there was nowhere to go unless she walked up to somebody's door and asked to be let in.

She saw him get out and slam the car door shut.

Renee stopped, sighing. There was no way out of it. She'd have to talk to him. She raised her chin and waited.

She didn't have to wait long.

Rick strode toward her, his footfalls sounding much too loud on the cement sidewalk. "Why did you leave? I would have taken you back to your car." He stopped directly in front of her. "What happened?"

Renee bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying.

He reached for her.

Renee stepped back. "Don't."

Rick held his hand out, palm up. "What's wrong?"

Renee heard a slice of pain in his voice. Her heart cringed. She sucked in a breath. "Nothing. Nothing is wrong. Don't you think you should go meet the lady who called? She sounded pretty upset that I answered the phone."

Rick shook his head. In the light cast from the streetlamp, Renee could see the frown creasing his forehead. "She had every right to be upset, but that's got nothing to do with you."

Renee let out a laugh. "Oh really. Sounded a bit different to me."

His face darkened. "You don't know..."

"No. I don't know," she interrupted. "I didn't know that you had another 'lady friend'. I'm sorry if I've stepped into something I shouldn't have." She moved to walk past him, to end this conversation before she lost her composure. Before I start crying, she thought.

As she past him, Rick grabbed her arm. "Don't go storming off. We're not finished here."

Renee felt a shaft of anger spear her. She jerked her arm free of his grasp. "I think we are."

"No. We're not." He took her arm again. "Come with me. Let me prove to you how wrong you are."

"I don't think I'm wrong. I think that you and I just got...carried away with the moment. I think that maybe you weren't thinking and you let yourself go."

Rick laughed, but it was a cynical laugh. "What happened to your analytical mind? Are you assuming before you have all of the facts? You know that's not the right thing to do."

Renee pressed her lips together. She hated it when someone questioned the way she thought. That's what Bruce had always done. Well, not this time. "All right, Mr. Loman, I'll go with you. But it's your funeral."

Rick looked as if she'd struck him. He let go of her arm. "Strange choice of words." He looked away for a moment, then back at her. "Let's go. I'm kind of in a hurry."

"Well, I don't want to hold you up." Renee strode to the car and got in without his help.

She buckled her seatbelt as Rick slid in the driver's seat.

Neither of them spoke as they traveled through the dark streets. Renee had no idea where they were going. She didn't know Rebellion all that well. When Rick pulled into the hospital, she chanced a glance at him.

His jaw was firmly set, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. Renee started to feel a slight bit chastised.

A hospital. Something must be really wrong. Maybe she had jumped to conclusions. Maybe she had been wrong. A sickening feeling began in her stomach as Rick parked the car.

He turned in the seat toward her. "I'm going to ask you to please be gracious."

Renee opened her mouth to speak but Rick raised a hand, signaling he wasn't finished. She closed her mouth.

"The situation that we are going to walk into is going to be touchy. I just want to warn you." He sighed. "The woman who called is an old friend of mine. She just lost her

father. Her father was also a good friend of mine. She called me to come to the hospital to help her make funeral arrangements.”

Renee’s hand flew to her mouth. Tears stung her eyes. “Oh God, Rick. I’m such a heel. I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “Come with me. I need to go inside.”

Inside the hospital, Renee kept silent as she watched the scene unfold between Rick and the upset woman named Rose. When they entered the hospital, Rose, looking very much like she had not slept in days, ran up to Rick and threw her arms around his neck. Rick folded her into his arms and hugged her as if she was his long-lost sister. Rose cried on his shoulder, her whole body shaking.

Renee had to look away. Her heart was breaking. Not only for the woman who had just lost her father, but also for the damage she may have done to a relationship that had shown so much promise.

God, she hated Bruce. Hated him for making her so suspicious of men. Hated him for ‘damaging’ her.

It took nearly an hour for Rick to calm Rose down and make the arrangements for the funeral home to pick up the body. Renee tried to help by bringing coffee and staying mostly in the background, letting Rick handle the grief that flowed so freely from Rose.

Rose’s husband arrived, finally back from what Renee learned was a business trip and he took over for Rick. After things were settled and Rose’s husband talked her into going home, Rick turned to Renee with tired eyes. “Are you ready to call it a night?” he asked.

Renee nodded demurely.

They walked to Rick’s car without speaking.

Renee felt so low for suspecting him. What right did she have in the first place? She didn’t own him. They had made no commitment. She had been assuming when there was nothing to assume other than the fact that they enjoyed each other.

They got in the car.

Renee snapped her seatbelt and looked up.

Rick sat in the driver’s seat, staring through the windshield. Unmoving.

“Rick? Are you all right?” She touched his shoulder.

That’s when she realized he was crying.

She unsnapped her seatbelt and leaned toward him, wrapping her arm around his neck. “I’m so sorry,” she said, her voice cracking. She’d never seen a grown man cry before.

Rick turned to her and laid his head on her shoulder. “He was...he was like my father. I didn’t even know he was sick until yesterday.” His voice was choked with tears, thick and shaky.

Renee felt her own tears trickling down her face. She hugged him as tightly as their position would allow. Rubbing his back, she let him cry, hoping that by holding him, it made his pain slightly easier to bear.

Rick straightened up, moving her arms from around him. “I’m sorry.” He sniffed. “I’ll take you to your car.” He started the engine.

When he pulled out onto the street, Renee touched his arm. “Do you feel the need to be alone tonight?”

Rick glanced at her. “Actually, I’d like some company.”

Renee smiled gently. "Then, do you mind if I...stay with you?"

One nod of his head. "I'd like that."

Renee kept her hand on his arm the rest of the way back to his house.

When they arrived back at the stone house, Renee took control. She settled Rick on the couch in the living room, then went into the kitchen and searched for something a bit stronger than chardonnay. In a cupboard, she found a half bottle of scotch, shoved behind a box of crackers. She took it and two glasses back to the living room.

She handed him a glass with two inches of scotch.

"Thanks," he said. He took a long drink, wincing as he lowered his glass.

"Rick, I..." she twirled the glass in her hands, not sure how to proceed. "I need to apologize."

"There's no need." He leaned his head back on the couch.

"Yes. There is." She turned toward him. "I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have come off on you like that. I...don't have a claim to you. I had no right, even if it was what I thought it was."

He rolled his head toward her without lifting it. "Why are you so quick in your decisions? All you had to do was ask me who was on the phone. I would have told you."

Renee looked down at the amber brown liquid in her glass. "It's just...an old scar." She met his eyes. "I'm really sorry."

Rick reached over and patted her hand. "I guess I should apologize, too. For blubbering on your shoulder." He let out a short laugh. "Not very manly of me, was it?"

No, it wasn't. And that fact, the display of pure emotion, had been what had taken her heart, and made it his. "Sometimes we need to cry. It's not good to hold everything in."

He snorted and downed the rest of his scotch. Sucking in a breath between clenched teeth, he took her hand and squeezed it. "Thanks."

"He meant a lot to you, this Rose's father?"

Rick nodded. "His name was Ron Higbert. He ran the barbershop. Only man who ever put scissors to my hair my whole life."

So...it was the man that she'd seen him with in the barbershop.

"Ron and my dad went to school together," Rick continued. "We all visited each other. Rose and Kate and I played together. After my dad died, Ron listened to me talk for hours on end."

He rubbed his thumb over hers. "I'm going to miss him. It's funny how you think you'll see someone everyday then suddenly, poof, they're gone."

"That's why we love," Renee said. "So we can keep them in our heart. Even after they're gone."

He smiled then, a warm smile. "You're a very intelligent woman, do you know that?"

"Sometimes I wonder," she said, thinking about how she had stormed out of here earlier without even giving him a chance.

Right here, right now...this very moment, Renee felt her heart opening fully for the first time in her life. Looking into his copper-flecked, warm hazel eyes, Renee recognized something that had called to her from the day she'd been born. Rick's heart was one of feeling, one of emotions that ran deeper than she ever imagined. He cared about people, loved them. And Renee found herself beginning to love him.

"It's been quite a day," he said softly. "I could use some sleep."

Renee nodded. "Me, too."

They both rose from the couch and without releasing each other's hands, they walked up the stairs to his bedroom.

*

They lay in bed together, holding each other.

Renee placed her hand on his chest, feeling the strong steady beat of his heart. The sense of being *home* filled her. She was in awe of it. Here was this strong, sensitive man who had been at first a mystery behind a steamed up window and now...now he was like an open book. Rick had shown her more of himself in two days than she had ever learned about Bruce in two years.

Here in the darkness, there was only their hearts beating, their breath mingling on the pillow. Already, it seemed they were one.

Cradled against him, Renee fell into a comforting sleep...feeling that she was right where she belonged.

*

Rick lay awake, listening as Renee's breathing settled into the steady rhythm of sleep.

The moonlight that filtered in through the window cast a silvery tint on Renee's creamy skin, making her look made of fine porcelain. The dark curls of her hair lay in sharp contrast against it, as did her long dark eyelashes.

Even with the pain he felt over the loss of Ron, he couldn't help but feel content with her lying here in his arms.

But even still, there would be no sleep for him tonight. Not while the paradox of Sherri Binger lay in his mind, a puzzle yet unsolved.

He wondered how things had gotten so complicated. Living here in this small town had seemed an easy life until lately. And it was just recently that Rick, himself, realized that life didn't last forever. It was finite. And he had been spending it alone.

Maybe not now, he thought, his eyes roaming over Renee's sleep-relaxed face.

Maybe not now.

An hour later, she stirred.

"Shhh," he soothed, brushing a curl from her forehead.

She opened her eyes, blinking. "Can't you sleep?"

"No. Too many things on my mind."

She shifted on the pillow. "Want to talk about it?"

This is what it should be like, he thought. This, talking softly in the middle of the night with someone you loved.

Loved.

Surprise filled him. He did feel it. Love. So quickly he had fallen.

"Tell me what's bothering you," she said, her voice soft and gentle.

"Apart from the stress at the hospital, I'm still trying to figure out how to defend Sherri," he said, splaying his hand over her trim waist. She felt warm and so...there.

"We didn't finish that re-enactment. Maybe we should do that in the morning."

"How awake are you?" he asked, feeling a whiff of adrenaline. "Are you awake enough to do it now?"

"Now?" She yawned. "It's really bothering you, isn't it?"

“You’re too sleepy.”

She shook her head. “No. Now is okay. Just give me a minute.” She slithered off the bed and padded to the bathroom.

He felt cold with her gone. As if she was taking part of him with her even though she wasn’t going far. Oh boy, you’re in deep, he told himself, tucking his arms behind his head as he rolled onto his back.

When Renee came back into the room, she turned on the lamp on the bedside table. “Where did you put the squirt gun? Oh—here it is.” She bent down and retrieved it from the floor beside the bed where it must have fallen.

Squirt gun in hand, she climbed on the bed. “Ready?”

“Any time you are.” He let his eyes roam over her. She was wearing one of his t-shirts. It looked five sizes too big for her but still, she was sexy as hell with her tousled hair and her smoky eyes. Tame it, he told himself. Now is not the time. He scooted to the middle of the bed and grasped one of the spindles of the headboard in each hand. “Okay, I’m handcuffed.”

Renee swung one leg over him and settled over his hips. She gave him a small grin. “You know what this lead to last time.”

“Oh yeah. I definitely remember but let’s see if we can get through it this time without one of us attacking the other.”

She shook her head and tried to look serious. “I don’t know if I can, but I’ll try.”

“Okay,” he said, all business now. “Sherri said that they were having sex and she was supposed to be playing the cop. Carl was the prisoner. She was on top, holding a gun on him while she...well, you know what she was doing.” For some reason, he felt embarrassed to say that Sherri was riding Carl’s rod.

“Like this?” Renee began to move, going through the motions of making love to him while holding the gun in both hands, pointing at his chest.

“That’s it. Now,” Rick hesitated. The friction she was making wasn’t doing a whole lot to keep his mind on the scenario. “Now,” he repeated, “what would make her point the gun at his head?”

Renee bit her lip, thinking, but continued to rock her pelvis against his groin. “Wait,” she said, “If he was getting into it, wouldn’t he be bucking up under her?”

“Good point. Want me to move?”

“Yeah. Move like we were doing this for real.”

Rick began to move beneath her, jerking up to meet her motions.

“Faster,” she said. “They’re getting really hot now.”

They moved in tandem, quickening their pace.

Rick watched her face. He was growing steadily harder and Renee’s eyes were turned more heated with every false movement they made.

“He’s ready to come now,” Renee said, her voice deeper. “Come into me now. Thrust like you’re coming.”

Rick shoved up, fast and strong.

Renee’s eyes went wide as she lost her balance, hands holding the gun instead of bracing herself. His thrust threw her forward. She put her hands out to try to catch herself.

The barrel of the squirt gun connected squarely on Rick’s forehead, directly between his eyes.

“Ow!” he yelled, jerking his head to the side.

She rolled. “Oh, Rick, I’m sorry, I…”

“That’s it!” Rick shot up in the bed, rubbing harshly at his forehead. “That’s how it happened!” He burst from the bed and ran into the bathroom.

He flicked on the lights and looked in the mirror.

Perfect. The mark on his forehead from the barrel of the gun was in the exact same spot as the gunshot wound on Carl’s forehead.

He raced back into the bedroom and dove for the bed.

Renee screamed, then laughed when he covered her face with kisses. “You did it!” he said between kisses. “This is our defense. He thrust up and she lost her balance.”

Renee caught his face between her hands and focused on his forehead. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. There are a few other things I’ll have to work out—like how he must have just been bragging when he said he never let Sherri be on top—but it’s a good defense. We’ll win. She’s innocent.”

He took her face in his hands and stared into the deep blue depths of her eyes. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Rick spent the next hour showing Renee just how grateful he was, making slow, sensuous love to her until both of them were completely exhausted, falling into a dreamless sleep.

Epilogue

The rising April sun filtering through the gauzy curtains coaxed Renee's eyes open. Ever so slowly, she came awake. The bed was so comfortable and warm that she didn't want to move.

Rick shifted, drawing her closer into his embrace.

Renee smiled, settling against his warmth. Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift over the last few months.

October had been chaotic. Her arrival here, her strong attraction to Rick, the struggle Renee had with herself learning to trust him...everything had rushed in on her so fast and all at once that she had barely had time to think about anything, except the fact that she had fallen madly in love with Rick Loman.

After Ron Higbert's death, Renee had handled everything at the office while Rick dealt with Ron's daughter Rose, the funeral and preparation for the case of the State vs. Binger. The day of Ron's funeral had been heart wrenching. Renee had never been to a funeral where it seemed the whole town had turned out. The office had closed for the day and Rick had asked her to accompany him. She had no reservations about going. She would be there for him. Her heart already belonged to the man by then so it was her place to stand beside him when his heart was sorrowful.

Rick had shown her how deep the river of emotion ran in his heart. Very deep indeed. He was capable of more than love—he was capable of loyalty. And that spoke volumes to Renee.

Renee had moved in with Rick after that, the move just seeming to come naturally, and they had settled into a contented existence. Business during the day, quiet talk in the evening, passion at night. And early in the morning...the steamy mist of the shower.

Renee helped Rick prepare for the Binger case. It had been long and drawn out, tiring both them and Sherri Binger. Both sides argued competently, at times making Renee worry that they would not be the victors in this case, and that Sherri would spend the rest of her life in jail for a crime she hadn't committed. Once Rick got to the core of Sherri's defense...the fact that she had lost her balance and the gun had fired...the tide began to turn. Rick had made a PowerPoint presentation, using models, showing how the position of Carl and Sherri Binger had caused his death. And, the police officer who had at first said that Carl had bragged about never letting Sherri have the upper hand during their sexcapades had admitted that Carl bragged a lot and most of them were outright falsehoods. Sherri had testified that yes, they used Carl's gun often in their sex play and she thought that it was unloaded. Carl usually unloaded it while Sherri went to the bathroom just off the bedroom to get the warming lotion that they liked to use. That night, it had taken her a little bit longer to return to the bedroom because her mother had called and Sherri had a hard time getting off the phone. When she returned to the bedroom, Carl had almost dozed off. And evidently, he had forgotten to unload the gun.

The judge had come to a decision quickly after both sides rested their case. In light of the fact that there had never been any domestic problems between Sherri and Carl Binger, and due to the presentation that Rick had presented on how the incident had happened, the judge declared Sherri innocent, ruling that Carl's death had been an

accident. Though still heartbroken, Sherri had been relieved with the judge's verdict. After a tearful reunion with her family, Sherri had left Rebellion, telling Rick and Renee that there were too many bad memories and embarrassing secrets to be able to stay.

Rick and Renee had wished her well and as time wore on, they heard less and less from Sherri Binger.

As Renee began to feel part of the community of Rebellion, becoming good friends with Kate, visiting with Opal and her many grandchildren, she and Rick grew closer with every passing day. Renee felt as if Rick was the core of her heart. She no longer had that hard shell that she used to hide inside. That protective covering had shielded her from opening her eyes to what normal people were...caring beings. Not like what she had been exposed to by living with Bruce. Thankfully that part of her life was over.

A wonderful part of her life was just beginning.

Stretching, she reached across Rick's chest and tickled his ribs.

He jerked awake. "Hey," he grumbled, rolling onto his side. "What are you doing waking me up like that?"

Renee smiled, ruffling his thick chestnut hair. "It's time to wake up."

"No." He tried to bury his head in the pillow.

Renee laughed and shook him. "Come on...come shower with me. Don't you want a nice, hot shower?"

With a growl, Rick grabbed her by the waist and, taking her with him as he rolled off the bed, carried her into the shower.

Renee giggled, then gasped as her back came in contact with the cold marble of the shower wall.

"You laugh now but you just wait," Rick said, his voice deep and mellow. "I'll have you begging in just a few minutes." He turned on the water and stepped inside.

Renee slid her arms around Rick's neck as he placed a hand on either side of her, trapping her between his muscular arms. "I love you," she said, looking up into his eyes.

"Then marry me."

Renee swallowed. "What?"

"Marry me."

Renee searched his face. Steam began to fill the shower, enveloping them in shifting mist. But she could still see his face clearly. Rick was serious, his eyes clear and vibrant.

Renee's lower lip trembled and she caught it between her teeth. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "I'll marry you."

Rick didn't move for a second. Renee's heart stuttered for a moment. "Rick?"

Then he smiled.

Renee felt her heart lift.

Their lips met tenderly at first but as the steam swirled, clouding the very air they breathed, the heat between them intensified.

This was home. Not this *place*. It was this time, this man, this feeling. Her heart felt open yet completely full. Renee floated in a vaporous dream, the love of her life making love to her.

Rebellion—once no more than a state of not only mind, but heart—was now where Renee called home.

Rebellion...steamy Rebellion.

The End

About the Author:

Rhiannon Neeley has thought about writing all of her life and has now finally made time for it, along with learning to play an Irish jig on her fiddle. Rhiannon is a very busy woman who has her fingers in almost every pie but she does make time to reply to email if you give her a day or two.

You can email her at Rhiannon@rhiannonneeley.com . For those of you with Irish roots, Rhiannon's 'Neeley' line hails from County Tyrone, Ireland. She has done quite a bit of research into her family tree. And of course when it come to romance, Rhiannon likes them hot and steamy and preferably paranormal.

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