

413 Remembrance Lane

Diary of a House



Jamie Hill
D. Musgrave
Emma Wildes
Michelle Houston
Cheri Valmont
Skylar Grey
Jude Mason

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an anthology of erotic romance by

Skyler Grey
Jamie Hill
Michelle Houston
Jude Mason
D. Musgrave
Cheri Valmont
Emma Wildes

Phaze
6470A Glenway Avenue, #109
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

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Jamie Hill, Michelle Houston, Jude Mason, D. Musgrave, Cheri
Valmont, Emma Wildes

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Table of contents

Prologue	5
Midnight confession	6
AN EXTRAORDINARY REQUEST OF DEATH AND DESIRE	36
The war within	65
Let the sunshine in	92
My vampire, My Love	153
The Life Not Lived	196
About the Authors	221
	240

Prologue

Warning, fair reader, and take heed.

You who decide to make a wish upon this diary must search your heart. If the granting of the wish is worth anything nearest and dearest to your heart, then do as you will. Remember, though, if destined to be, once sacrificed it cannot be retrieved.

That said, if your wish is something you desire with all your heart and soul and worth anything in your possession. Wish away...

Midnight Confession – 1750

Cheri Valmont

chapter one

Catherine Ashbury jumped and shivered when a raspy voice spoke, "I might be able to help ye, laddie. Why ye be looking for that man?"

Nervous and afraid to give away her disguise, Catherine's eyes flared wide as she took in the short, bald man who had sidled up to her and her two companions. She'd noticed him just a moment before, whispering to two other disreputable looking fellows. Tilly McDonald, her Scottish nanny, and Mr. Hillman, who had been Andrew Townsend's manservant from his youth, were in disguise as sailors.

Just as she was.

The alley, with its barely visible visitors milling around, heavy humidity mixed with scarcely a breeze, and flicking torch lights, was eerie and a far cry from the bright ballrooms and cozy parlors that she'd left behind in London. She was shocked at the casual way the pirates and their customers conducted their nefarious business.

Heaven only knew how she had gotten herself into this situation. Nay, her desire to find Drew had brought her halfway across the world to New Orleans and this alley to which their escort had directed them, before hurrying to leave to go about his own pursuits.

She had only herself to blame.

Tilly saved her from answering when she whirled on the little man quick enough to make him start, glaring at him with her dour expression. "And who be ye? A beggar, thief, pirate?" she asked him with a snarl.

Indignant, the man bristled and pulled himself up to his full height of five foot nothing. "I be boatswain to the most famous cap'n to tread these waters." And, as if no longer willing to give Tilly another moment of his time, the man walked next to Mr. Hillman.

Thank goodness the man was English. There were a variety of languages coming from the shadows, the majority being French, of course.

Although some of the French spoken sounded guttural, Catherine knew enough to know she had a right to be frightened. The last man that

Mr. Hillman had attempted to ask about Drew's whereabouts had offered, "The boy, how much?" The baleful stare the man had given her as soon as Mr. Hillman had refused him sent a shiver of unease skating over her body.

"Harrumph." Tilly's voice had no need for disguise. She'd always sounded like a grumpy Scotsman and, with the addition of her male sailor's garb, the illusion was complete. "Verry likely."

Catherine suppressed a giggle at how disgusted Tilly appeared at the little man's affront to her. She really shouldn't find amusement at a time like this, but with Tilly's gray hair stuffed beneath a woolen cap and her thin frame in unkempt sailor's clothes, Catherine couldn't help herself. No caliber of clothing could disguise the annoyed green gaze she threw the boatswain. No matter how grumpy she sounded, Tilly only had her best interest at heart, she knew. Which was how Catherine had convinced Tilly to agree to accompany Mr. Hillman and her on what Catherine's father, Robert Ashbury, would have classed a fool's errand.

Her father. Catherine shivered again when she thought of how furious he would be when he found out from her sister, Diana, where Catherine had gone and why. She'd sent a missive to her sister right before she embarked on this trip, but knew that by the time Diana sent word to their father, Catherine and her companions would be well on their way to the Americas. He might even be halfway to New Orleans himself by now.

She wouldn't think about that now. Her mission to find Drew was her sole priority at the moment.

The man sent a scowl in Tilly's direction, then turned his gaze to Mr. Hillman, who, no matter how rough his clothing looked, could not be mistaken for a simple sailor. "Ye look to be a gentleman who might be interested in wa' I ha' to say. If yer looking for the gent, me cap'n might be able to 'elp ye. But ye ha' to follow me. Directly."

Mr. Hillman looked over the man's head at Tilly and Catherine. Tilly looked toward her, too. After Catherine's brisk signal, Mr. Hillman nodded in agreement. No matter that he appeared the leader of their small but misfit band, William Hillman had been in the employ of the Townsend family since his own youth. Thus, he never stepped beyond his station, which was why he presented something of a problem. The man was tall and distinguished looking, and although his steel gray hair was covered by a hat, there was no hiding his haughty, highbrow servant's expression or the mild disdain in his pale blue gaze.

Diary of a House

Catherine realized he just couldn't help himself, since he'd been an employee of one of the wealthiest non-aristocratic families in England for ages. Besides, with his strong regal features, she was certain he could easily pass for a noble himself. But there was one thing—or better yet, one person—Mr. Hillman cared for more than his station, and that was Drew. He'd doted on the boy like a son, and when Catherine made the decision to find him, Mr. Hillman had been the first person, after Tilly, she considered asking for help.

It had only been since this personal mission that Mr. Hillman had extended himself from the norm in hopes of helping Catherine find Andrew. He had been the male version of Tilly, which was why the two servants seemed to have such a genuine accord between them.

"Canna we retrieve our goods from the ship afore we follow ye? And wa' be yer cap'n's name?" Tilly asked suspiciously, even as she moved to follow behind the retreating little man and Mr. Hillman.

"Cap'n Miles Chadwick. And do not fear about yer things, I'll round up some of me mates to take care o' that for ye. It's important I get ye to the cap'n afore he retires fer the evenin'," he muttered, as all four of them melted into the dark New Orleans night and an uncertain future.

As soon as they left the shadows of the alley's flickering lights, Catherine shrieked, struggling in vain as ruffians set upon them, throwing sacks over their heads.

"By God!" Mr. Hillman roared. He must have lunged sideways toward the men holding Catherine and Tilly captive because, for a moment, she was free.

Catherine heard a loud thump, then no more from Mr. Hillman. Oh, Lord! They hadn't killed the older man, had they?

Before she could move or tear the sack off of her head, she was recaptured and again fighting for her freedom.

She should have never trusted the crusty little beggar.

"Beast!" she screeched through the rough fabric of the sack, ramming her elbow back. Feeling some satisfaction when she heard her captor's grunt of pain, Catherine continued squirming, trying to free herself.

And Tilly! Heaven's above, she'd never heard words of the like from her nanny before. "I'll geld ye, ye wee clottie! Ye'll not draw another breath after I get me hands on ye!"

That only seemed to amuse the cretins, because they chuckled at Tilly's threats before they quickly bound them with ropes.

Their struggles didn't relent until they were shoved into a waiting hack. Once inside, accompanied by an unconscious Mr. Hillman and the instigator of their capture, Catherine was pushed down onto the bench seat. She only just realized they didn't even know the little man's name. He'd at least done them the courtesy of whipping the sacks from her and Tilly's heads. Mr. Hillman he left covered.

"Who are you?" she gasped in indignant fury.

"Mr. Wiley be the name, lad. And this was fer ye own good," Mr. Wiley had the nerve to tell them. "Ye'll see."

Their own good for what? Unless...

Though the man had not admitted to being a pirate, could they have done this so Catherine and her companions would not know how to get to back to their destination, or even how to return to their ship, for that matter?

"Where are ye taking us?" Tilly demanded.

Mr. Wiley looked as unruffled as if he were escorting them to an evening out. "Why, to me cap'n, o'course. Unless ye are no longer interested in finding the gent ye be looking for?"

His words shocked both women silent. If he was taking them to his captain anyway, why had he captured them? They had gone along willingly, hadn't they?

Who was this Captain Chadwick? How, why, had Drew become entangled with the kind of men who would kidnap people?

The enclosed hack seemed to be suffocating her. Catherine's breathing quickened. Moving her hands, she tried in vain to ease the bonds that bit into her small wrists.

She grunted as the enclosed hack hit another pothole in their bumpy ride to their destination. This time a groan came from the senseless Mr. Hillman, as if the last jarring had woken him. Soon after, the swaying conveyance came to grinding halt, and before the occupants could make a move the doors of either side swung open to admit the men who'd captured them. Mr. Hillman's sack was finally pulled off his head, letting him see to walk.

Mr. Wiley seemed to derive much enjoyment from being the one to take Tilly from the inside of the hack. He even smiled as Tilly gave him a killing glare for his assistance.

Catherine was dumbstruck as she looked up the impressive stone steps to the lovely two-story brick home they were being escorted into by way of a set of intricately carved wooden doors. She had no time to

Diary of a House

admire the structure before they were bundled inside. Although she tried to look around, the man holding her pushed her upstairs after getting a nod from Mr. Wiley. The wooden staircase was beautiful, winding upward to the second floor.

Her captor pushed her through a rounded landing. Catherine tripped over the exotic rug that graced the highly polished wooden floor, only slowing the cretin enough for him to grab her arm and continue their journey down the short hallway.

"Oh, but..." Catherine protested, then gasped as the tall, thin man with the scraggly beard and wearing a woolen cap sliced through her bonds with a sharp dagger. It was then she noticed he held her satchel that she'd brought from the ship, *Aphrodite's Dream*, which had brought her halfway across the world. He gave her an amused grin before he tossed her and her satchel into a room, locking the door behind her.

"Beast!" she cried and banged on the door for him to release her.

Where had they taken Tilly and Mr. Hillman? To this Captain Chadwick? Furious when she realized no one was paying her any mind or coming to let her go, Catherine let go with a, "Argh, blasted brigands!" and she turned to grab her satchel.

Was the reason she'd been separated from them because Mr. Wiley thought her only a lad and would have no say in the discussion with his captain? Catherine wasn't too happy about this. She'd waited months, nay years, to find out what had happened to her beloved Drew, and she hated to wait a moment longer.

She had a mind to give the captain a good dressing down for his men's rough treatment of her and her companions.

If he didn't decide to sell her for profit at the alley, that was.

Catherine shivered at the thought.

Chapter TWO

A loud thump sounded from a nearby room. Catherine jumped at the noise, but dropped her satchel to rush to the wall. Raised voices, two she recognized as Tilly and Mr. Hillman. The third voice was lower, and had more of a deep rumble to it.

For some unknown reason a shiver skittered up her spine.

Was this the captain the disreputable Mr. Wiley told them about?

No matter how much she pushed her ear flat against the wallpaper, Catherine could not make out the garbled words. Blast! Her nerves were stretched to the breaking point.

What would happen to them?

Trying to block out the sounds now, Catherine pulled off the woolen cap she and Tilly had used to hide her thick mane of curly blonde hair. The cap had only succeeded in giving her the appearance of a horribly, misshapen headed boy. Returning to her satchel, she bent down to search through the contents for the diary her nanny had given her the night before. She'd taken comfort that the pirates had not stolen it.

They'd left most of their personal items on the ship they'd sailed into the port of New Orleans. Although neither William nor Tilly had trusted the crew of the *Aphrodite's Dream*—except for the captain, John Perry, and his first mate, Conrad Turner—it was better than taking it with them, where they knew they might encounter some cutthroat pirates. Catherine had drawn the line at leaving everything, including the leather bound diary Tilly had told her was special.

Tilly had looked very serious when she'd handed the ledger to Catherine. "Keep it safe, dearie. It will help ye find joy in yer new life."

When Catherine had tried to question her further, Tilly replied, "Ye'll find out soon enough, hinny. Ye might have a long road ahead o' ye. Yon laddie may have changed more than ye might imagine."

Not sure what Tilly's prediction meant, Catherine had transferred the dried rose, the one she'd kept since the night Andrew left Britain's shores, into the diary she planned to keep close to her as Tilly had

Diary of a House

instructed. Her nanny had 'the sight', as some liked to call it. Catherine had no doubt about her future when Tilly had told her, after Catherine's admission to her feelings for Andrew, "Yon laddie be the one fer ye, hinny. Ha' no doubt about it."

And she never had.

Gazing around the luxuriously furnished room, Catherine imagined it belonged to a man of some means. A homey fire crackled in the large brick hearth on the left side of the room, as if awaiting her. Actually, since they were escorted—if that was what it could be called—to the brick home, with its wrought iron railings and storm shutters on the second story, Catherine had to admit the home was deceptive. On the outside, it could have belonged to any merchant and his family. But once inside the spacious yet comfortable place, there was no doubt that all the beautiful contents belonged to either a wealthy merchant or a successful pirate.

And considering their escort, she'd put her coins on the last choice.

How had Drew come to be known by pirates?

She certainly wished she had some of her other belongings if she was meant to meet him soon. Looking down at her lad's togs with uncertainty, Catherine crinkled her pert nose. She was far from the youthful blond debutante she'd been in London in years past. For safety's sake, William and Tilly had insisted she disguise herself and, after her visit to the alley, she understood why.

Moving over to the ornate writing desk, Catherine lit the beeswax candle so she might make her first entry into her new diary. She had to do something to keep herself from going insane with worry about what was happening in the other room.

The desk was fully equipped with everything she might need to write a letter. Dipping her pen into the ink well, Catherine began writing.

Going back to the last night she saw Drew, Catherine let the sweet memories engulf her.

"Will you wait for me, Cat?"

Even tonight, all these years later, a shiver of yearning suffused her body.

* * * *

She'd only been fourteen to Drew's impressive eighteen, but she'd loved him as long as she could remember. It had taken her years to finally convince him that what she felt was not just a young girl's fancy, but true love and deep devotion. Any time she had been close to Drew's

golden gaze, sun kissed hair, and well turned figure, Catherine could very easily have swooned, had she been prone to such an insipid activity, which she wasn't. Although she was still in the schoolroom, since she and Drew were so close her father had made the exception to let her join the party that once.

Smiling, she remembered how they'd escaped the crush inside the Townsend family home. Drew cornered her next to the French windows, grabbing her by the hand as they slipped out of the ballroom unnoticed. The celebration was to mark Drew's embarking on what everyone thought was his Grand Tour of the continent. He'd told only Catherine his true mission.

Well, she'd thought he'd told only her.

While they sat on a bench in the fragrant garden, with torches throwing soft shadows of light across the two of them, Drew lay on his back, his head on her lap, as he gazed up at the stars. Catherine had indulged her desire to touch him, cupping his sun burnished cheek in the palm of her hand, before running her fingers through the golden silk of his hair.

"I shall wait for you forever, Drew," Catherine told him in return, watching his lips tilt into a loving smile.

He pulled his gaze away from the brightly shining stars and those remarkable golden eyes locked with hers. Drew reached up to push his fingers through her previously impeccable coiffure and brought her down for a chaste kiss, to which she willingly gave herself over.

When he let her go, he captured one hand and brought her palm to his mouth for a kiss, after which he held it to his heart. "I must make my own fortune, sweet. Since I am the second son, I have nothing for me here. But I plan to make my fortune in trading."

Catherine's heart sank when she realized what that meant. He would be going far away. Leaving her behind with her family until he felt he had made the fortune to let him afford a wife and children. She wanted to protest him going, but in her heart she knew he would never be truly happy until he had proved to himself he could make it on his own.

As if from nowhere, Drew pulled a pure red rose from inside its hiding place within his coat. "This is for you, my love. To remember me, until I can come for you. Will you pledge yourself to me, Cat? I've already spoken to your father and he has given his blessing, as long as I wait until I've made my fortune and you are of age. So, sweet? Can you accept a second son for your prospective bridegroom?"

Diary of a House

"Oh, yes, yes!" Catherine had been unable to hide her joy. Her dream to be Drew's wife was only a few years and his fortune away. She reached down and slid her arms around his neck, giving herself over to a kiss she would remember for the rest of her life. For the first time since they'd revealed their feelings to each other, they kissed and caressed each other as if there was no separation hanging above their heads. Until finally, when it looked like they might get carried away, Drew pulled away, staring up with unhidden longing into her blue eyes.

"We must stop, my pet. You are too young yet. But I promise you, when we marry, I shall give you a wedding night you shall not soon forget."

Chapter Three

That had been six years and a broken heart ago.

Catherine had been steadfast in her love for Drew and determined that he would return to her, rebuffing any young buck who sought to take his place in her heart. Several years ago, she thought her father meant to break his word and insist she marry a respectable Naval captain. She'd furiously refused the man's suit, making her father realize that no matter how much time went by, Catherine was still very much in love with Drew Townsend.

But the final blow had come months past, when a missive had arrived to her father from Drew, releasing Catherine from the bonds she pledged to him. Her father had not given many details. He'd simply stated he planned to give her over to Captain George Durmont, who'd asked for her hand.

Determined never to give up on Drew, no matter that he thought he had some misguided reason to release her, Catherine doggedly set about convincing Tilly and Mr. Hillman to accompany her on her mission. She'd sold some of her valued possessions for the coin necessary for the voyage. It was not like she could go to her father to ask for money to sail halfway around the world.

Catherine held the dried flower to her nose and sniffed, as if its fragrance was just as potent as it was the evening Drew had bestowed it upon her.

What could have happened, after all these years, to make Drew free her?

Had he found someone else?

Whatever the reason, she would have him say it to her face. If he could keep his resolve after looking in the face of her love, there was nothing else she could do. But, if he even hesitated, she would do her best to convince him they were meant to be together.

Looking down at the coarse clothing she wore, Catherine couldn't help but wish Mr. Wiley and his men would bring her own clothes before

Diary of a House

she had to retire for the night—if they brought them at all. If she couldn't get her own shift, she'd have to sleep with nothing at all.

Hearing a key turn, Catherine's gaze swung to the door. After a short knock, Tilly hurried through the oak door, partially closing it behind her. As if satisfied that Catherine had not disrobed, Tilly reopened the door and ordered the men standing behind her with pails of water and a bathing tub. She had a platter of fragrant morsels, which she set down on a small table next to a tufted cream-colored chaise. With the efficiency of a sea captain, Tilly barked orders, and although the rough looking men appeared disgruntled to be following said orders, they kept quiet and did her bidding. With relief, Catherine realized that they had her belongings from *Aphrodite's Dream* with them also.

Mr. Wiley was the only one who grumbled, "Not right, I say. Havin' to follow orders from a dried up old shrew—" He obviously knew Tilly was female now, her hair having been released from her woolen cap.

"Wha' was that, Mr. Wiley?" Tilly whirled around to confront him.

Mr. Wiley grimaced and put down the pails of water he carried. "Nuthin'...eh...Miss Tilly."

Tilly clicked her tongue with disgust, but didn't say anything else until the men had completed their task and left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind their retreating figures, Tilly announced, "Come now, hinny. Eat something afore ye take off those bloody clothes for a nice bath. Things are direr than I ken."

"What do you mean, Tilly?" Catherine asked, but moved to do as her nanny bid her. Popping a bite of cheese into her mouth, she blissfully chewed as if it was a king's feast. They'd not had anything since they'd broken their fast on the ship that morn.

She watched as Tilly pulled a clean shift from her valise.

Perhaps quicker than she should have, Catherine finished the contents of the silver tray and patted her belly contentedly. "Mm, lovely, Tilly. Our host cannot be so base as to not know how to see to a lady's needs, I see."

Tilly gave her usual harrumph and encouraged Catherine to stand. Within moments, the two women made quick work of divesting her of her lad's togs, along with her corset, which they'd rigged to hide Catherine's female attributes. Catherine sucked in a deep breath. She felt practically lightheaded with relief.

Tilly tested Catherine's bath water. "It'll do," Tilly pronounced, and went to stoke the fire in the hearth to a roaring blaze.

Something in Tilly's manner made a shiver of foreboding skitter along her spine. Obviously she had found out something she was loath to blurt out to Catherine. Had something terrible happened to Drew? Was the reason this pirate captain knew something about Drew, because he'd captured or killed him?

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, she demanded, "Where is Drew, Tilly? Does this captain know where he is?"

Seeming reluctant to turn from her crouched position in front of the bricked hearth, Tilly poked the embers with an iron rod. "Aye, he knows. He'll be in to talk to ye later, he said. But do not expect any happy news, dearie." Tilly turned her head to look at Catherine, her green eyes glowing with what looked like sympathy. "I might ha' been hasty in givin' ye the diary."

"What!" Catherine stood naked and shivering, even with the blast of heat from the hearth warming the chilliness from the chamber.

Tilly clicked her tongue and rushed over to push Catherine toward the warm bath. "Mayha' I shouldna ha' told ye that. Have ye written anything in the diary yet, hinny?"

"Aye, I did," Catherine told her.

When Catherine thought Tilly meant to help her bathe, she was surprised when the old woman walked to the diary and picked it up, slowly reading the entry Catherine had written. It was not as if it wasn't anything she hadn't heard Catherine wish for before, a thousand times. Drew. Her Drew and her together forever.

Tilly nodded her head, a frown marring her face. "I should ha' warned ye afore ye wrote in the diary."

"Warned me about what?" Catherine sat forward in the tub; somehow the warming water was not doing much to warm the chill that suddenly struck her heart.

"I hoped ta gi' ye a way to get ye fondest wish. But ye might realize very soon tha' wha' ye thought ye wanted be not wha' ye want now. This diary," Tilly held it up, "be very special. And now, by yer own hand, ye've tied it to this house."

Catherine couldn't understand what the old woman was trying to tell her. "What do you mean?"

Tilly put down the diary and came to kneel next to the tub. Dunking the soap into the water and lathering up the cloth she held, she pushed Catherine forward so she could scrub her back. "By writing about the

Diary of a House

house with your desires concerning yon Drew, ye've pulled it into the spell."

"What spell? What have you done, Tilly?"

Tilly shrugged her thin shoulders before rinsing out the soapy bathing cloth. "I wanted ye to ha' yer dreams come true, hinny. So I gave ye a magical book. If you put your fondest desires into the book, it will come true, but for some it will be at dear price. Fer ye, it will mean givin' up the second thin' ye hold most dear."

The second thing she held most dear? No! Ah, dear Lord, it couldn't be that. The only thing almost as precious to her as her love for Drew, was...No! Her family. Her father. Her sister and her husband, and their children. "Tilly! How could you do that without telling me!"

"I dinna think ye would write in the diary so soon, dearie. I thought I would ha' time to explain it to ye. I just meant fer ye to keep it safe, until we made it here. But even whe' we walked in 'ere I knew this house would be special also." Tilly looked around the room and then at Catherine. "It may be owned by a pirate now, but it wa' built by love."

"Built by love?" Catherine turned and tried to decipher Tilly's expression.

But Tilly was standing, holding a pail of water above Catherine's head. Realizing what she meant to do, Catherine put her head back so Tilly could wet her hair in the stream from the bucket. After she put down the pail of warm water, she knelt next to the tub again so she could lather Catherine's waist length, curly blonde hair.

Catherine forgot about the question she'd asked. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed Tilly massaging her scalp and hair. It had been a sennight since she'd been able to wash it. Sailors were not of a mind to give up their water for the delicacy of a female's sensibilities or her nose; the only reason she'd got to do so then was because they knew they would soon be coming into port.

When her bath was complete and she sat beside the hearth, drying her recently brushed hair, Catherine remembered that Tilly had not answered her question.

"You said this house was built by love. What did you mean?"

Tilly shook her head. "Ye'll find oout soon enough. Now if I be ye, I'd get a wee rest."

Catherine gazed up at her nanny. Tilly's mouth was set in that stubborn line that let Catherine know there would be no more

information forthcoming. She could beg, plead, and cry, but it would do no good.

Deciding to wait for a more opportune time, Catherine stood. It was wonderful to feel her fine linen shift against her body again. She'd used drab, serviceable gowns for the voyage, not wanting to bring undue attention to herself or her companions. Since she and Tilly had been the sole females on the ship, however, it was hard to ignore the grumbles of the sailors at having the unlucky females aboard.

It was only when Catherine made it to the bed did she question her, "I thought Captain Chadwick was coming to speak to me?"

Tilly silently encouraged her to get into the bed. "I ha' a feelin' yon cap'n might be workin' his courage up."

"What?" Why was the old woman making no sense? Why would a pirate captain need to work up his courage to speak to her?

Weren't they fearless? Cutthroat? Ruthless?

"Don't question me, dearie. Just let yerself dream," she encouraged Catherine as she tucked the counterpane around her as she'd done since she was a babe, "mayha' yon Drew will come to ye." Then she gave Catherine as tender a smile as her withered old face could muster, before bending to kiss her cheek. "Night, hinny."

Chapter Four

Catherine opened her eyes again, gazing at the dying embers of the hearth. She'd been surprised Tilly had not dampened the blaze when she left the room. Perhaps it was because she expected the captain to wake her before long.

That seemed like hours ago.

For some reason, an uneasy feeling crept through her. She gasped when she saw a figure rise from the chaise.

Shooting up in her bed, holding her bed linens protectively to her chest, Catherine demanded, "Who are you!"

After a moment the visage moved toward her in the darkness. "It does no good for you to upset yourself, Miss Ashbury. I be Captain Chadwick. Your host."

Catherine pushed herself back against the headboard of the spacious four-poster bed. The blood-red velvet drapes open on all sides, so she could easily see the darkened shadow of her visitor. Wanting to see him in the light, she moved to light a nearby candle so she could see to whom she spoke.

"No!" he barked out the order, as she struck the flint.

Surprised, she jerked away from the bedside table. "What's wrong? Why won't you let me see your face?"

Now she was suspicious.

What possible reason could the man have for not wanting her to see his face?

"I might be too hideous for a young female's sensibilities, Miss Ashbury. A pirate captain who has seen many a battle on the high seas might not live up to the romantic tales some people like to tell about us. We need no light to have our discussion." Although the man had come close to her bed, Catherine could still only make out his shadow. She saw he was fully dressed, with dark form-fitting trousers and boots.

He might consider himself hideous, but his form seemed anything but. Even in the darkness, his body emanated strength and power, as

nothing she had ever encountered before. He held himself poised, as if ready to defend himself from a blow or sudden attack. Why would he feel that way with her? Did the man possibly think she had the strength to physically fight someone of his stature and build?

Unless it wasn't a physical blow he was preparing himself for.

"Do you know the whereabouts of Andrew Townsend?" Catherine noted his body tautened at the sound of her Drew's name.

"Andrew Townsend is dead," the man replied flatly.

Catherine recoiled as if someone had stabbed her in the heart. "No!" she cried, and jumped to her knees, letting her covering fall to the bed unnoticed. "You're lying! Tilly said you knew, you knew!"

"Loose-lipped old crone," Captain Chadwick muttered, then spoke up, "she had no right to tell you anything." He'd kept his distance until that moment, but for some reason her distress seemed to motivate him to move. When he neared her bed, a pale beam of moonlight fell across his face.

"Oh, my!" she cried when she saw the rigid line of a scar marring the right side of a face that had once been perfect. "Drew..."

Realizing what had happened, Drew stepped out of the light. "Cat..."

Catherine wanted to melt at the sound of his pet name for her. "How could you be so cruel as to tell me you were dead?"

"I am dead to you, Cat. I'm no longer the romantic fool who pledged himself to you six years ago." Drew's voice was gruff, harsh, self-deprecating.

Catherine left the safety of her bed to stand before him. When she reached out to touch a hand to his chest, he sucked in his breath as if she'd stabbed him instead.

"Don't," he ordered, moving farther away from her.

But Catherine was nothing if not stubborn and followed him, making out the faint scent of sandalwood, rum, and some other unknown but alluring smell. She wanted him to hold out his arms so she could melt into them. Trying again, she reached out for him.

"Don't touch me," he demanded again and turned away from her.

She'd had enough of games, and she went to strike the flint to light the candle.

"Damn you, I said no light." Drew stalked toward the door.

Catherine stamped her foot. "Don't you dare leave this room, Andrew Townsend!" And to her surprise he stopped, facing the wall, his

Diary of a House

body rigid with anger and something else. Could it be fear? "You owe me an explanation as to why you thought to release me from our betrothal." Catherine's breath came in short pants of air, because for the first time since she lit the candle, she was noticing what a fine figure of a man Drew had become. His sun-kissed hair hung loosely to just below his splendidly broad shoulders, which tapered down from a muscular back to lean, deliciously male hips. And that outfit! A billowy, fine lawn shirt tucked into a snug pair of black trousers, which were in turn tucked into high black boots. Just the type of garb any respectable pirate would wear, if that pirate was her Drew.

His respirations looked to be just as labored as her own. "Fine, Cat, if you insist!" Drew whirled around to face her.

Her gasp was involuntary. Upon hearing it, Drew turned away again.

"No, please! I'm sorry! It was just a shock." Catherine rushed over and met him when he reached her door. Desperation emboldened her and she slid her arms around his trim, muscular waist. He stiffened as she buried her face against his back.

"Cat," he pleaded, sounding strangled, "do not touch..." But his voice trailed away as she flexed her hands into the seemingly rock hard, yet pliable muscles of his taut abdomen.

"Don't leave. Please, talk to me. I've come all this way. Won't you talk to me, Drew?" As if the pleading in her voice was his undoing, Drew turned in her arms, holding her against him. One long, lean hand moved up to caress her curls, while he held her with the other.

"Isn't my face explanation enough? How could you want to be strapped down to a man as hideous as I am now?"

"No, you're not hideous," Catherine insisted, and looked up at him to prove to him she didn't just want a man with physical beauty, but someone she loved and would love her in return. "I love you, Drew. I've always loved you."

He closed his eyes. She wasn't sure why. Did he want to believe her words? No matter that he wasn't the handsome young buck who'd left England, with thoughts of making his fortune and experiencing high adventure.

"Kiss me, Drew," Catherine said when his eyes opened, those same beautiful golden eyes that looked at her with longing all those years ago. As there was longing now, with a hint of desperate hunger about them.

"You have no conception of what has happened to me since we last met. I'm not that man anymore, Cat."

What was he doing? Trying to discourage her?

"Then let me get to know the man you've become. I won't leave until you do."

He flexed his hand into the curls of her hair, gazing down into her face with eyes that burned with...she wasn't sure what with—she'd never seen a look quite like it before. "You might regret that statement. Fine. You want to know the man I've become, I'll show you and tomorrow you'll be on the first ship back to England."

Catherine shivered at the sound of his dark prediction. Before she knew what was happening, Drew reached down and swung her up into his arms, and ignoring the uncertain gaze she threw toward his face, he brought her over to her bed.

Did he mean to ravish her? Was he trying to scare her?

When he laid her on the fluffy mattress, she thought he would follow her down, but he stood over her, gazing down at her as if he meant to devour her. In the candlelight, she got her first good look at the damage that had been done to his beloved face. She yearned to touch the disfiguring scar that marred his right cheek, from the edge of his eye to his jaw, as if it had been deliberately cut to ruin his looks.

With his gaze still on her, Drew pulled his shirttails from his trousers and pulled it up over his head.

Catherine gasped again, but this time it was for a very different reason. Lord above! The lean, graceful youth was gone forever and in his place was a gloriously wild looking creature meant for pure pleasure. Only rigorous physical labor could be responsible for Drew's body.

His eyes darkened at the uncontrolled sound of her reaction. Without a word, he removed his boots, which was quickly followed by the rest of his clothing.

Although she felt heat fill her cheeks, Catherine couldn't help the irresistible draw of her gaze to his manhood. She'd never seen a man naked before, but though she might be a little nervous, something deep inside her yearned to kiss and caress his bare flesh. Even...eh...there.

As if her desire for him was writ plainly on her face, Drew made a strangled noise and reached for her, pulling her until she knelt before him as he stood next to the bed.

Catherine closed her eyes with delight when he caressed her face and hair as he gazed down at her upturned face. "You should fight me,

Diary of a House

Cat," Drew muttered before bending toward her, kissing her lips, as if testing her resistance to him.

Doing as she longed to, Catherine reached up to slide her arms around his powerful neck, bringing his face down to her level. Pulling away slightly, she breathed, "I don't want to fight you, Drew. I've longed for this moment since I fell in love with you."

It seemed her lack of resistance baffled him, because he shook his head, causing his mane of hair to swish against his bare shoulders. "I'm no longer the man you fell in love with. Time and a vindictive British captain have left their mark on me."

Catherine reached out to touch the stark line of the pale scar on his face. Although he stiffened, Drew allowed her to satisfy her curiosity about it. He did close his eyes, though, as if he could not bear to see what her response would be. "Who did this to you?"

Drew opened his eyes again and gazed into her upturned face. She knew he would not see what he thought to see in her eyes. Although she might feel some sympathy for his plight, her love could not be diminished. Silently, he searched her expression. "It matters not now. It is done and I have been branded a pirate, which is why Andrew Townsend no longer exists. I am Captain Miles Chadwick now and forever. I am banned from ever setting foot in England. Do you understand what that means?"

Catherine nodded, but her mind went back to when her father told her Drew had released her from their betrothal. "But didn't you send a missive to my father? He knows you are alive. And were last seen here. I don't understand."

Drew pushed her down into the bed, following her down this time, until she laid tucked flush with his body. The heaviness of his arousal pressed against her belly. Before he answered, he kissed her, until she almost lost the direction of her thoughts. Then he pulled back, gazing down at her, as if even *he* couldn't believe that she was really there with him.

"I had the missive sent, but it was with the news of my death."

"But why did he..." Her voiced trailed off as she thought of what all this meant. "He lied?"

Drew shrugged. "There is no way he would know I'm still alive. No one in England knows, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Durmont, God rot his miserable hide," Drew spat the name. And, as if just the mention of his name ruined the moment, he turned onto his back, moving away from her.

Determined that he would not put any distance between them, Catherine clung to him, rolling with him, ending up on his hard body. Drew emitted something between a snort and a chuckle. "You are insistent, aren't you, Cat?"

Hiding her smile in the crook of his neck, she nodded. "You said something about Durmont? Captain George Durmont?"

Even without looking, she sensed Drew's surprise, as if the very breath was trapped in his chest. "How do you know his full name?" He reached down and raised her face to look at him.

Catherine shivered when she saw the glow of suspicion in his golden eyes. "I...eh...he tried to get father to let him marry me, even though I was betrothed to you." There was no way she could lie to him about George Durmont's vested interest in destroying his reputation, but disfiguring him...? Why would he do something so ruthless? "I'm sorry..."

"The bloody bastard! That's why he was chasing me and my crew with the Devil's own single-mindedness. The coward! If he'd told me the real reason, I could have challenged him outright. Instead he..." Then Drew looked away from her, as if unwilling for his expression to give away what a horrible experience he'd had at the hand of her jilted suitor.

"What did he do?"

Shaking his head, Drew flipped her onto her back, burying his face in her hair, drawing a deep breath. "I never think about it anymore. But had it not been for Mr. Stamford, Mr. Wiley, and the rest of my crew, my bones would be resting in the depths of Davy Jones' locker."

Catherine gasped. "He would have murdered you?"

"Undoubtedly." And he kissed her with all the anguish and torment he'd gone through for the sole crime of loving her.

When he released her, she was panting. His gaze was caught by the rise and fall of her breasts beneath her thin linen shift. He reached to untie it, letting the edges gape open, exposing her trembling flesh to his avid gaze.

"Cat..." he whispered as he bent his head to kiss between her breasts. Grabbing her arms and pushing them over her head, Drew held her captive while he kissed and sucked on her breasts with a desperate

Diary of a House

hunger that sent Catherine soaring to the heights of ecstasy she never knew existed.

Responding to his touch, Catherine shivered and undulated beneath him, rubbing her legs against the feel of his desire trapped between them. Warmth pooled between her thighs. A deep ache of longing filled her. Drew rose above her, his arms bent on either side of her face, kissing her with long buried desire. Then he pressed his hard member between her thighs, which had fallen open instinctively, silently begging him to fill the sudden void there.

"Take me, Drew," she moaned.

"I want to, Cat. More than anything I've ever wanted on this earth," he responded, but made no further move to fulfill her request.

"Please..."

Drew remained silent, but kissed her face, down her cheek to her ear, causing unceasing shivers to rack her body.

"You're killing me, Drew. Please..." she begged him.

Although his breathing was ragged and harsh, Drew stilled; even though the proof of his raging desire demanded entry to her body, he wouldn't give them what they both longed for: completion.

Chapter Five

Drew's body was drenched with sweat from the exertion he used to prevent himself from ravaging Catherine's sweet body. God only knew how much longer he could hold off giving into his craving to possess her.

He was no longer the young romantic swain who'd begged her to wait for him that night so many years ago. Even though, deep down, he wished he could give her what she desired: an undying pledge to love her and ask her for her hand. Drew had left those notions behind when he'd faced the cruel realities of life—when he'd almost lost his own.

Miles Chadwick was a pirate, pure and simple. Never truly happy until he felt the sway of the ocean beneath his ship's hull. But even the name of his ship hinted that perhaps he longed for deliverance from the harshness of his present course in life. *Redemption*. She was his mistress now. What he lived for, banishing the innocent dreams and desires he had of making Catherine his wife, the mother of his children.

There would be no one to leave behind if he was not tied to anyone. But, even as he denied his feelings, Drew's rampant member wanted to press farther and deeper into the slick folds of her sex.

"Argh..." he groaned, pulling his hips back, closing his eyes as he moved away from her.

"What..." Catherine protested his retreat, sitting up to gaze at him with hurt uncertainty glowing in her eyes.

Drew closed his own eyes to block out her obvious pain. Breathing harshly, he strained to get his desire under control. If he did what they both appeared to want so desperately, she would be ruined. There would be no marriage or children in her future.

Although he had done his best to suppress the Andrew Townsend of his personality, there was something about how Catherine affected him that pulled him back from the abyss, allowing him this last gallant effort to spare her a life of scandal and misery. She could never live the life of a pirate's wife. She belonged back in England, going to light hearted

Diary of a House

parties and balls, having children for some faceless man that Drew couldn't even bring himself to think about.

"Drew..." Catherine whispered. Drew's gut clenched when she touched his abdomen, just above the level of his rigid rod.

"Don't, Cat," he insisted and grabbed her hand, in case she thought to touch him more intimately.

Sucking in a deep breath, he finally opened his eyes again. "We can't," he tried to explain in a way that she would accept. "Don't you understand? There is no future for you here. You don't belong here. I have nothing to offer you. No stable life. No marriage. No children. You deserve better."

"No..." she responded and jerked her hand out of his, "I deserve you. The man I love and have loved ever since I can remember. And you say you have no stable life? What about this house?"

Drew shook his head and, against his better judgment, let her move back into his arms, pulling her close to him. "I'm here very rarely. Not long enough to keep a woman satisfied, nor to give her the family she would want."

"Don't talk as if this woman is some nameless, faceless entity. We're talking about me. If *I* was here waiting for you, would you want to stay away?"

Drew slid two fingers under her chin and lifted her face until he could look into those eyes, suddenly shiny with unshed tears. "I can never return to England and nor could you if you chose this course. I couldn't ask you to sacrifice your family and everything you hold dear to be with me."

Catherine hesitated, as if remembering something. With a stubborn set to her slender shoulders and face, she told him, "You are mine, Drew. Nothing or no one will stand in our way. Besides," she smiled with certainty, "we have fate and magic on our side."

Magic? What the bloody hell was she talking about? Was this some girlish fantasy she was talking about? Then he recalled a vague memory from long ago. When they were youngsters Catherine informed him that her nanny, Tilly, had special powers. Was she involved in this somehow?

"What are you talking about?"

Pulling away, Catherine scrambled off the bed and over to the desk in the corner. When she returned, she had a leather bound book clutched protectively to her chest. "This. It's magical. Tilly told me, if I wrote my

deepest desires in this book, it would come true." She handed it to him, and crawled back into bed with him.

By the light of the candle, Drew opened her book and read the entry. God in Heaven! The girl did still love him!

Looking at her with new eyes, Drew asked, "It doesn't matter to you that I've changed and am no longer..."

"Shush," she whispered and pressed two fingers to stop his words. Her eyes glowed with the depths of her feelings. "You are the most loving, desirable man I've ever seen or will see for the rest of my days. You're my Drew. I don't care that you have a new name. No matter what has happened to your body or mind. No matter."

That was enough for him. Drew moved over her, pushing her diary aside. It said it all, all her hopes and dreams for them both. Even this house. Their home. A new start on a new life.

Catherine moaned as his weight pushed her into the soft mattress, and gave herself over to him and his love.

There was no denying it anymore. It was the reason he'd had to drink to prepare himself for this meeting. Her love had always been like a comfortable, sweet home he longed to lose himself in. It had taken all of his youthful honor not to give into his desire for her, all those years ago. He'd wanted her then, but not as desperately as he wanted her now. As if her love was the lifeline sent from heaven above to save him from a life devoid of any sweetness, humor, happiness and love.

His love.

"I love you, Cat," he admitted and leaned down to kiss her. In minutes, he had her squirming and moaning, his kisses deep, delving, plunging.

"Oh, Drew..." she whispered, and gave herself up to his ministrations. Finally, he would have her.

Drew had barely allowed himself to really feel her, look at her, but now he knew she was to be his in truth, he could look his fill. Pulling away, despite her protest, Drew knelt between her legs.

"What—" she began, but when he grabbed her hands to pull her into an upright position, her words cut off.

He lifted her, and instinctively she pulled her legs up so she knelt facing him. She looked like an angel. Her curly blonde hair lay about her bare shoulders. Now that her shift had fallen unnoticed to her waist, it bared the pale globes of her breasts for his visual delectation. Her expression was soft and loving as she gazed up at him.

Diary of a House

"You're beautiful, love." To his own ears the words sounded strange, like they were coming from someone else, someone used to complimenting a woman he cared about—loved.

"Mm, Drew..." she responded, rising to press herself against him.

Sliding his arms around her, Drew leaned down to kiss her. Caressing her back, he pushed her shift down until it pooled around her knees. His body responded instinctively to her nakedness, desire thrumming through his veins, his heart pounding with anticipation. Now he could touch and look to his heart's content. Feeling every fluttering caress her hands gave to his body in return, and if her own frantic caresses were anything to go by, she felt the same.

"Oh, mm...yes, oh, Drew," she moaned as Drew caressed the peaks of her breasts, kneading and fondling her pliant flesh until she was pressing herself harder into his hands.

"Ah, yes!" she cried as he pinched her turgid nipple between his thumb and forefinger, twirling it with relish, while her own caresses to his body grew more frantic.

"Argh..." Drew groaned as Catherine grabbed his throbbing member and squeezed him. Being an innocent, her movements were uncoordinated and jerky, but Drew would gladly teach her the intricacies of sexual intimacy. It would be his ultimate pleasure to do so.

Giving her some direction, to bring them both more pleasure, he wrapped his hand around hers, guiding her in the up and down motions that would increase his arousal. Not that his desire needed any assistance. He would only allow her a little time, because he would soon explode. And the first time he wanted to be within her sweet body before he allowed his climax to consume him.

"It's so...so..."

"Hard?" He decided to save her virginal embarrassment.

"Mmm Hmm," she agreed, as she seemed to enjoy the feel of his hardness beneath her touch.

But Drew was afraid he could not withstand much more.

"Lay down, Cat," Drew commanded. He wanted to kiss her body, preparing her for the erotic invasion yet to come.

With immense gratification, he watched her hurry to comply. Divesting herself of her shift, she did not move to lay in virginal submission before him, but positioned herself with her legs straddling his own. He could easily bury his member into her welcoming sheath.

Drew wanted to hear her scream her ecstasy to the world before he gave into his desire to penetrate her. He wanted her to have no earthly doubt that he was the man for her, meant to love her, pleasure her, bring her joy of the kind she never felt before.

Carefully watching as she eagerly gazed at his body, Drew moved down until his body rubbed against her soft, pliant one. He let himself enjoy the sound of her gasp as he let her slick warmth cradle his rod. Instinctively, her hips undulated beneath him, searching for the thickness of his member to fill the void that must be as agonizing as his own desire to fill it for her.

"Mm, oh...what's...eh...happening...?" she said with an enraptured moan. "Oh, Drew..."

"Patience, my love," Drew cringed at the harsh sound of his voice. His desperation to fill her pounded through his veins. "I'll take care of you. I promise, but first..."

Drew kissed her roughly, slanting over her full lips again and again, until she seemed lost once more in the pleasure his body stirred within in her. Her cries and moans soon turned into demands for him to do something.

Delighted with her unbidden responses, he slid down so he might savor her succulent breasts. Responding with gut clenching desire, he relished the feel of her hands pulling at his hair, yet pushing his face ever closer to her body, silently demanding he devour her. Stabbing her nipple with his tongue, he drew her farther upward, her body bowed beneath him like a finely tuned instrument. The feel of her heated flesh, her soft skin, and her turgid nipples in his mouth was the essence of his deepest fantasies. Her crying out, her body thrashing unbidden beneath him, drove him ever closer to his climax.

He'd wanted to savor her, but he knew his time was near. With a muttered warning, "It may hurt, love," Drew surged forward, using one hand to guide himself into her sheath. Pushing downward until her back rested against his other arm, Drew let himself enjoy the feel of her wet, warm core expanding to accommodate him. Catherine panted, grasping him to her, frantically searching for his mouth for a kiss, which he obliged. As he reached her maidenhead, Drew knew there was no help for it; he would have to push through the thin shield of her virginity. Ravishing her with an open mouthed kiss, Drew surged through the final barrier.

Diary of a House

Swallowing her gasp of surprise, he continued to kiss her until the tenseness melted from her body. He held himself still, letting her body accustom itself to his sensual invasion. Then he let his body's drive take over, but not so much that he would hurt her unduly. Slowly, with consummate care, he filled her before pulling out again. Soon Catherine whimpered, undulating beneath him, matching him thrust for thrust before finally jerking away from his kiss to cry out in ecstasy as her climax took her.

"Oh, Drew, love...ah...ah...yes!" And Drew let his own climax explode, joining her in her joyful completion, pounding his hips against her again and again.

Until she cried out a second time, this time joined by his own groan, "Argh...sweet...yes!"

* * * *

When their ragged breathing returned to normal, Catherine held Drew to her. Sweet Lord in Heaven! She'd never expected such a tumultuous storm of emotions to flood her. She'd expected their union to be special, but it had been more than even she could have imagined.

Without much effort Drew flipped over until she lay on him, his partially hard member still snugly buried within her body. As if loath to let her go, he began fondling her breasts again.

While playing with her nipples, he kissed her again until she squirmed. Pulling his lips from hers, he chuckled, and murmured, "Shall you marry me then, Cat?"

She gave a happy laugh of her own. "Aye, that I shall, Captain Chadwick."

And Catherine knew she'd finally found home. Though she knew she could never return to England, she had her heart's desire. Drew. And then, she gave herself over to his lovemaking once more.

* * * *

Many years later, after the dawn of the young America's bid for independence, Catherine sat in the library of their home at 413 Remembrance Lane. This was the room they'd claimed for their own when time alone had been scarce. She waited for her husband, who'd whispered in her ear earlier, "I have a surprise for you, my love, but you must meet me in our special place," as they had sat down to supper, with their eldest son and his family.

Having retired long ago from pirating, Drew had transformed his life. Not just for her, but for the sake of their growing brood, of which

their son, Robert Townsend—a new Lieutenant in America's bid for freedom—was the first of four.

They'd come a long way from the day her father finally caught up to them.

He had been as furious as she'd predicted. But when he found her happily married and expecting his grandchild, he'd relented. Leaving her in the capable hands of Drew, Tilly, and Mr. Hillman, who had also elected to stay, Robert Ashbury returned to England to the family home that she'd never see again.

Of Captain George Durmont, she'd never heard either.

Sitting up expectantly when she heard the library door open, Catherine's eyes flared wide when she saw the long box her husband carried with him.

Drew set the box down on the low table before the settee. It was a wooden box.

Drew turned as he sat next to her. Smiling in the face of her impatience to see the contents of the box, he pulled her into his arms.

"But Drew..." she protested, looking at the box with longing.

Drew laughed and kissed her lips. "Now, now, my dear, you must let me do this in my own time. You'll spoil the surprise."

Catherine pouted, but after seeing the teasing twinkle in his eyes, gave herself over to his embrace. When she lay spent after a delicious bout of kissing and caressing, Drew's fingertips brushed her hair from her heated face. He looked into her eyes and said, "I know you've been worrying about us leaving New Orleans." They were to accompany Robert's family for a time to help them settle into their new home. "And having to leave a certain very special book behind, as old Tilly said you would have to one day, so..." Drew released her and leaned forward, opening the wooden box.

How she missed her old nanny, who had become nanny to her own children after their birth. It seemed like yesterday that Tilly, Mr. Hillman, and she had braved the mysterious and treacherous ocean to find Drew. "What—" She stopped short when Drew opened the box. Atop two beautifully crafted cutlasses sat her diary, but not as it had looked. "Oh, Drew..." she whispered, and reached for the lovely refinished book.

Drew smiled when he noted her pleasure. "I wanted to put your mind at ease. I had the lock put so that although someone might find it, they cannot open it unless they find the key."

Diary of a House

"What a wonderful idea, darling! But what are..." Wordlessly she looked down at the cutlasses.

Standing and picking up one of the well-crafted weapons, Drew presented it to her hilt first, moving it just so the light could fall upon a tiny engraving of a key. Catherine placed the diary on the table and reached for the cutlass, which Drew relinquished to her. As she admired the workmanship, Drew retrieved the diary, which had been recovered with embossed leather and closed with a lock. After holding his hand out for her to place the cutlass, he then handed her the diary again.

"It's beautiful, Drew."

"Turn it over," Drew instructed her, while he placed the cutlass back into the box. Then he returned to sit beside her.

"Oh, my! It's a cutlass!" Catherine let her fingers play over the small, upraised cutlass located in the bottom right hand corner of the diary.

"Indeed. It's that cutlass." And Drew pointed to the cutlass he'd just replaced in the box.

"It's a..."

Drew nodded when her words trailed off. "Aye, it's a clue. I asked Tilly about the diary once. About its power. She did assure me that although it's destined to stay with this house, only those meant to find the diary would. But for your own heart to be at ease, I made it a little harder to open. Now, hopefully, only those meant to find the diary shall."

"Thank you, Drew, I do feel better about it now."

After receiving her grateful kiss, Drew stood, picking up the cutlasses and went to the hearth. Only then did Catherine notice, the space above the hearth, empty except for the mounts, on which Drew placed the cutlasses, so they sat with blades crossing.

When he looked back at her, he smiled, moving to join her again. "Now, my dear, one last thing. I suggest you give a warning to those who open your special diary and think to write something of their own within its pages. Just in case they are unwilling to give up something they might hold too dear to part with."

"How clever you are, my love," Catherine told him. And that was what she planned to do, after she showed her clever husband her heartfelt appreciation, of course.

413 Remembrance Lane

AN EXTRAORDINARY REQUEST – 1815

Emma Wildes

Diary of a House

ALSO BY Emma Wildes

Servicing Lady Tremayne

Ritual Passion

The Arrangement

chapter one

Cheek pressed against the smooth glass, Serena Duclos gazed out over the settling darkness. The Live Oaks, strewn with Spanish moss, stood quietly in the encroaching dusk, the shapes both eerie and beautiful as the light faded from the sky.

A slight noise shook her from her reverie and she whirled around.

Nothing.

The room was empty, except for the usual furnishings: a bed hung with silk curtains, the rich rug under her feet, and the ordinary shapes of armoire and silk-covered chairs.

Once again, she started at shadows. How Henri would mock and tease her if he had seen her reaction to what was probably nothing more than the summer breeze sighing beneath the eaves.

Still, there was something about this house.

The knock on the door was soft, discreet. Without waiting for an answer, her husband opened the door. "You are expected downstairs. Our guest has arrived, *cherie*, and I'm anxious for you to meet him." His gaze traveled over her. The indigo watered silk gown was cut low at the bodice, the square-cut *tatez-y* vogue of decades past giving way to a modern style, but the invitation was the same. *Touch here*. The entire upper swells of her breasts were revealed.

"I like it," Henri murmured, "but then again, I knew I would. Your glorious body would make a bolt of coarse cloth look like the latest in high fashion. I predict he will be enchanted."

Serena stared into his face, not certain exactly what to say. "You will not change your mind about this?" she finally asked, uncertain if the twist deep in her stomach was tension or treacherous excitement.

"No." Her husband looked steadily back. He was tall, and still well-built and lean in his mid-thirties, with classic, clean aristocratic features bestowed upon him by his French ancestors. His dark eyes were unfathomable under the downy ebony arch of his brows. As always, he

Diary of a House

was dressed with precise elegance in tailored evening clothes. He said very quietly, "I will not change my mind."

"We could wait."

"We have waited a year already."

"But—"

"Serena, my love, shall we go?" Very formally, he offered his arm.

She went, of course. Woodenly, she walked across the soft rug and laid her hand on his sleeve. Under her fingers and the cloth of his coat, the muscles were rock hard, and she knew he was not nearly as relaxed as he pretended.

They descended the stairs in silence. The big house sat quietly also, as if listening, waiting for the next act of the play to be performed.

For surely, this was not real.

The formal parlor had brick walls and a lovely fireplace, dead at this warm time of year. The furnishings were mostly French antiques, many brought from the court at Versailles, where Henri's grandfather had spent most of his life. The Comte de Pradel had enormous wealth at one time, but unfortunately the revolution had come and gone, and the family fortunes had only barely survived. Emigrating to New France had been a better option than losing his head to the guillotine. That he had managed to bring anything at all was near a miracle, and the beautiful chairs and antique clock, ticking loudly in the corner, were reminders that reversal of fortune was possible; no matter how invulnerable you might feel yourself to be.

It had certainly happened to them. When she had met Henri, it had been like a fairy tale until fate had decided to maliciously toy with their happiness.

A man rose hastily at their entrance, his bow both courtly and cultured. He was well-built and strikingly good-looking. His glossy dark hair gathered at his nape in a queue, and his eyes were a vivid blue, rather like the material of her gown.

He bent over her hand at once, murmuring, "Madame Duclos, it is a pleasure."

"My dear, may I present Lord Arthur Roland? As you well know, he is a good friend of mine. We met at Cambridge, when my father insisted I get an education abroad." Henri spoke in his usual calm, modulated tones, as if this particular introduction were simply a guest meeting his hostess.

Instead of something much, much more.

Serena managed a small smile. "It is wonderful to have you visit us, Lord Arthur. Tell me, how do you like Louisiana?"

"I've only just arrived." Their guest smiled back, a curve of his well-shaped lips. "It isn't at all like Berkshire, I must say. I have visited the colonies before and am always amazed at the diversity of the wildlife and insects."

She did her best not to flinch.

"Yes, indeed, the mosquitoes alone will pick you up and carry you off over the bayou," Henri said dryly, looking bland. "Can I get you a glass of wine, Arthur?"

"Absolutely." Arthur Roland agreed. "I am thirsty after my journey."

"Serena?"

"Please," she murmured, since she had the feeling she would need the soothing effect of an intoxicating beverage to get through dinner, and, of course, what was to come after.

When had their lives descended into such...madness?

* * * *

The food was marvelous; foreign, yes, a spicy combination of seafood, vegetables, and rice that made him reach for his glass of wine more than once, but he enjoyed it. Arthur Roland also found the house charming, with its wide porches and brick walls, the surrounding land a mixture of trim grass, cultivated bushes, and huge sweeping trees with their burdens of grayish moss. The air smelled different even, fecund, rich, and exotic.

However, for the life of him, he wasn't sure exactly why his hostess was so nervous, and Henri—normally urbane, polished, and affable—so tense. There were small lines incised around the sides of his old friend's mouth, and though he looked as fit and healthy as ever, he was thinner most certainly than when Arthur had last seen him.

The atmosphere didn't exactly set him at ease.

When dinner was over and the dishes cleared, Serena Duclos almost immediately excused herself. It was impossible to not watch her exit the room, but he did his best to keep his expression neutral. In his travels, he had met many beautiful women, but she might qualify as the most exquisite yet. To say he thought Henri fortunate was an understatement. With her lustrous, dark gold hair, voluptuous body, and exquisitely feminine features, she was not a woman any man would forget easily. There was something about her also, that—although she was ladylike in

Diary of a House

every way—hinted at a sensuality she could not quite conceal. Perhaps it was the almost languid grace of her movements, or the way she held her undeniably lush body.

When she was gone, in a whisper of silk and a trace of lingering sweet perfume, he grinned at his old friend. "You are, as always, extraordinarily lucky, Duclos."

To his surprise, Henri didn't smile back, but instead said somberly, "In some ways, yes. I agree, Serena is without equal. Winning her was the best thing that has ever happened in my life."

"I can only imagine. I haven't found that special one yet, but I am content enough to continue to sample the possibilities."

"Your reputation as a rake stands firm then, I take it?" Henri lifted a brow with a small hollow laugh.

Again, Arthur caught it, a slightly speculative glint in his friend's eye. "I suppose it does," he agreed slowly.

"Good. Let's us retire to the veranda with our brandy and tobacco. A fair breeze blows tonight and it should be comfortable. There is a story I wish to tell you."

Still mystified, Arthur inclined his head, following his host out of the formal dining room to where several sets of French-style doors opened to the wide porch. Henri was correct, it was cooler with the light breeze that brought the foreign scent of blooming flowers Arthur couldn't identify, and the sound of insects in the trees. There was a half-moon hung high in the night sky, and the studding of millions of stars.

"It is a beautiful night," Arthur remarked as they each chose a chair from a small grouping set around a table made of iron and inlaid stones, and sat down. He accepted a glass of brandy and added, "It is odd, for those surely are the very same stars I see from my estate in Berkshire, but they look entirely different here."

"It *is* different here," Henri said in a moody, contemplative tone. "For all that Louisiana has been settled for over a century, and was officially made a state three years ago, it is a wild place."

"But beautiful in a primitive way that reminds me of the tropical islands."

"Yes, indeed, I agree. However, beauty such as this comes frequently with a price. That is part of the story I wish to relate to you. It is not," his friend added briefly, "an easy one to tell, nor does anyone know it except myself and my wife."

"You do seem not quite yourself," Arthur agreed cautiously.

Henri's laugh was completely without mirth. "That is a quintessential understatement, Arthur." He stared over the trim lawn, his usual charming smile in abeyance.

"We have been friends for over fifteen years and despite the ocean that usually is between us, I value your regard almost more than anyone I know. When you wrote me and said you'd married, I was delighted for you. I will admit, however, you do not seem as...contented as I would have expected. Please, tell me what is wrong. As always, I am at your service if I can help." Having grown more curious with each passing second, Arthur sipped his brandy and waited in obvious expectation.

Henri gave him an unreadable glance. He cleared his throat and, after a moment, said in a cool, unemotional tone, "Last summer I was in the city on business. I am required to go there frequently, to visit my banker and secure different contracts for my shipping company. I was, in fact, in one of the offices on the docks, checking on a shipment, when I felt a sharp burning pain on my right thigh. Alarmed and in sudden agony, I looked down to realize that I had been bitten by a very large spider, right through the cloth of my breeches. It was bigger than any eight-legged creature I had ever seen, close to the size of my fist, and black as midnight except for some red markings I found underneath when I killed it. I still do not know if the thing was indigenous to Louisiana, or if it had come in on one of the many ships that use the harbor of New Orleans. At any rate, the bite hurt, but I tried to dismiss it. However, on the ride back here to the house, I began to feel quite ill, and my leg hurt abominably. By the time I reached home, I was shaking and faint. Serena was horrified and insisted we call the doctor, but by the time he arrived, I was only half-conscious. I am glad enough of that, by the way."

Arthur murmured, "How extraordinary."

"The bite itself had spread by this time to a huge round welt, and the flesh in the middle had turned black and septic. I was in for a fight for my life, though that seems impossible from one small, albeit vicious, creature. For over a week I breathed only erratically and the wound worsened. Then, by some miracle—and the fact, no doubt, that Serena did not leave my side and cared for me—the tide turned and I started to improve. It was nearly a month before I could walk without limping and I still have a very noticeable scar."

Diary of a House

Thoughtfully, Arthur said, "I have heard of some deadly species of arachnids, especially in parts of Australia and the Indonesian islands. I'd say you are a very lucky man to have survived."

Henri drained his glass and reached for the brandy decanter to refill it. "I did not escape entirely unscathed, unfortunately."

A night bird called mournfully from somewhere in the lush vegetation surrounding the grounds, an unfamiliar and melancholy sound. It wasn't hard to discern this was the part of the story that was difficult to tell. Neutrally, Arthur asked, "How so?"

"I am impotent."

There was a moment of silence in which Arthur could not think of a single thing to say. Henri, with his persuasive way with women, had been before his marriage every bit as much of a rake as he was himself. His stark good looks and charm had seduced many, and certainly that must have been how he won a woman as lovely as Serena.

"You are speechless." The observation was made evenly, but there was a hint of pain underneath. "Let me contribute to it by adding that if you meant what you said about being able to help, during your time here, I'd like you to sleep with my wife."

Not certain he'd heard correctly, Arthur froze, his brandy arrested a fraction from his mouth. "What?" he asked incredulously.

The thin moonlight sent slanting shadows over the other man's features, giving hollows to his cheekbones. "Please understand, I don't ask this lightly, but I have been thinking about it ever since I got your letter stating you were coming for a visit."

"Henri, you cannot be serious."

"Serena and I want children. We agreed when we married that we would have a large family, and now that is impossible, I'm afraid. But there is a chance, if you are willing to help us, that during your stay here, you might impregnate her. It is not a perfect solution to our dilemma, but is the closest thing I can think of to one. I would not ask anyone in the world but you to do this, and suddenly, I learned you will be with us for a month. *Voila!* It seems like fate is being kind for a change. Think about it, we even have the same coloring, you and I. We've been mistaken for brothers before."

Arthur tugged at his cravat, loosening it, even the cool breeze doing nothing to soothe the sudden warmth on his skin. "The moral implications of what you ask are fairly staggering, Henri. I cannot bed

your wife, you are like my brother. Not to mention siring a child and walking away."

"As for the child, you know we would love and care for it." Duclos' mouth curved in a faintly ironic smile. "You enjoy women. Does the idea not intrigue you even a little?"

It did, to the extent that Serena Duclos was exceptionally beautiful, but this was hardly about seduction and sexual satisfaction.

"I see it does," Henri observed quietly, "and I do not blame you, of course. She's lovely in every way a woman can be, and, I tell you also, very passionate in bed. Our situation is unfair to her and, though it wasn't intentional, my fault. Suddenly she is doomed to be without a lover and left childless, locked in a marriage with a man who cannot even provide the most basic of human joys. A child would be solace for us both and give us something to share again."

No wonder the woman had been so on edge at dinner, Arthur realized. Henri would never ask this of him if his wife wasn't willing and their mutual desperation was a little overwhelming.

Good God, he really did not see how he could agree, but he also had no idea how he could refuse.

Chapter TWO

The ripple of air moved again, making her shiver. Serena ran her brush through her long hair, trying to ignore the urge to turn around and look. If the old diary she found was accurate, this house had seen both joy and tragedy between its venerable brick walls.

What would her story be, she wondered. So far, since they had bought it and moved in, she had lost her lover and the future she had once pictured to a bizarre incident no one could imagine would ever happen. Now, her husband wanted her to give her body to a perfect stranger in hopes they might breed a child.

Poor Henri. She was still desperately in love with him in every way, but she certainly did miss being held tenderly in his arms, as well as the feel of him hot and hard inside her. Once he realized he couldn't get an erection, he'd stopped touching her entirely. How to cope with his inner devastation was difficult for her to understand, because she could only imagine his flayed male pride. For her part, she still craved the things he *could* give her. A kiss, a touch, the strength of his arms around her in the night. However, any overtures on her part were rebuffed with cool detached efficiency and she had stopped trying after a few frustrating months. If he couldn't have her physically, it seemed, he didn't want to have emotional intimacy, either. Or perhaps he didn't separate the two, but she certainly could. She loved him unconditionally, whether or not he could make love to her.

Damn prideful fool.

If what he wanted was for her to spread her legs for Lord Arthur Roland, then she would do it, if only perhaps to break through his brittle shell and have him feel *something* again.

I hope he's jealous as hell, Serena thought savagely, staring in the mirror. Her blonde hair tumbled around her shoulders and down her back, and her negligee, on the chance that Henri actually convinced their guest to participate in this ridiculous scheme, was sheer lace, designed to

display her body, not cover it. She looked slightly flushed, and her eyes darker than normal, the blue color reflecting her stormy mood.

The creak of someone on the stairs made her stiffen before she forced herself to relax by taking a deep breath. A few moments later, the footsteps paused at her door.

The long hesitation told her that somehow Henri had persuaded his old friend to go along with his outrageous request.

The light rap sent a small coil of nervousness through her stomach. She didn't even *know* this man. "Yes?" Her voice sounded hoarse.

"Madame Duclos?"

Oh God. His voice was deep, with that proper English accent, and held an undeniable questioning note.

Getting up, she crossed the room and opened the door.

Lord Arthur stood outside, his tall form still entirely dressed in his evening clothes, right down to his snowy cravat. He had a fine tan from his recent travels in South America, but underneath his skin held a faint dusky flush. His eyes, an unusual cobalt blue and framed by long dark lashes, gazed at her with a clear uncertainty mixed with something unidentifiable. His gaze briefly left her face to skim the lace of her inadequate gown, and his breath went in audibly. "I take it I am welcome?"

Serena stepped back, not answering, but the silent invitation unmistakable. She closed the door behind him, her heart beating faster and her mouth suddenly dry. Clearing her throat, she said in what she hoped was a composed voice, "I see Henri approached you with our...situation."

"He did." The Englishman looked slightly disconcerted when he saw the turned down sheets of the bed, though she guessed that was probably unusual. He had such smooth, polished manners and an undeniable air of self-confidence. With his chiseled features and lean, athletic body, he reminded her, in fact, of Henri in many ways.

Lowering her lashes a fraction, she watched him. "Since you are here, you must have agreed."

Though he did his best, she saw his gaze once more stray to where her breasts were visible in provocative display through the sheer cloth of her gown. "I agreed," he conceded, "but only if you are entirely willing. I have never bedded a woman who didn't wish it, and I am not going to start now, even if Henri is a friend. Please tell me if you want me to leave right now, and I will."

Diary of a House

Her eyes suddenly stung with tears of both anger and despair. Serena choked out, "I love him, but he is so...infernally stubborn. I'm willing, if only to prove to him that he is a fool. He is determined this is the solution to our problems, and so I will go along because I don't believe for a moment he will move forward if not absolutely shaken from his current state of apathy."

Lord Arthur looked slightly taken aback, his handsome features tightening. Long fingers raked restlessly through his dark hair, loosening the ribbon that held it in place at his nape so it spilled free over his collar and pristine white cravat. "I am not sure that is the answer I wanted."

Looking at her husband's friend with straightforward directness, Serena said deliberately, "I will be blunt then, my lord. Yes, I want you to...to *fuck* me. I want you to enjoy it, so tell me what pleases you. For that matter, I am determined to enjoy it. Let us give Henri exactly what it is he thinks he wants."

The crude unladylike word had a visible effect. His eyes narrowed. "I see."

Shaking back her hair, Serena asked softly, "Do you?"

"I think so. You want to show him the exact cost of such a sacrifice, for he thinks only by making it, can he keep you."

He did seem to understand; which was encouraging. "Something very close to that. The trouble is, he was never in danger of losing me in the first place. That danger only exists in his mind, yet here he is, pushing me into another man's arms. This is some sort of absurd test, and I refuse to live the rest of my life with his recrimination, to have it flung into my face that if I had only agreed and conceived a child with you, our lives would be entirely different." She lifted her chin. "So I agree. While you are here, at any time, if you feel the desire to take me to bed, I am yours, my lord."

For a second, he didn't speak, but stood there, his expression shuttered. "You believe this is the only way?"

"I don't believe he gave us a choice, did he?"

Lord Arthur shook his head. "Not much of one, I admit. I'm of the same mind, I suppose. I refused at first, for bedding the wife of a friend is not an honorable act, but he was very persuasive. I value our friendship highly, but this seems a bizarre way of proving it."

Serena laughed, but it was without mirth. "Yes, indeed. I always wanted to meet you because Henri speaks so well of you. I hardly thought our first acquaintance would be of an intimate nature."

"Needless to say, neither did I." He took a step toward her so he stood close, staring down at her flushed face. "However, since it is the case and we are agreed, may I?"

Serena didn't move as he tugged the ribbon at her bodice free, though her cheeks heated when her gown opened and bared her breasts. Arthur pushed it from her shoulders, the material a whisper on her skin as it slid down her arms and over her hips. Resisting the urge to shyly look away, she was gratified at least to see the heated flare in his azure eyes. "You are so very beautiful," he murmured, staring at her nakedness.

Now that this was really going to happen, she fought a small surge of panic. Luckily, she most certainly was a woman in every sense with real needs, and the panic was mixed with anticipation. It had been a long time since she had seen that level of salacious appreciation in a man's eyes. "Thank you."

"Here." He lifted her easily in his arms and took her to the bed, gently depositing her on the sheets. While he undressed, he looked at her as she lay in quiet acquiescence. When his attention focused on the apex of her thighs, a small throb began there, in tune with the beat of her heart.

As he discarded his shirt, Serena saw Arthur Roland was well-muscled, with smooth skin darkened to gold by the sun. He sat down to tug off his boots, and barefoot and bare-chested, stood to unfasten his breeches.

He was already becoming aroused, she saw as he pushed off his trousers and stepped free, but that probably wasn't surprising since she was in bed, naked and waiting. His erection swelled visibly, and as he eased onto the bed next to her, the hard length of it pressed against her hip. Arthur looked into her eyes and said softly, "Tell me what you want me to do. I am out of my depth here, my lady, for as you can tell, I do want you, but neither am I entirely comfortable with our circumstances."

She wasn't, either, but they had both been coerced. "Kiss me," she told him in a low whisper, "and hold me as if you love me."

"I am not an expert on love, but I vow I will do my best," he murmured, lowering his head, though there was a flash of something hard to read in his blue eyes.

His mouth was warm, heady, and Serena parted her lips, her lashes drifting low. His hand very gently cupped her cheek and he pressed closer, his tongue sliding inside to touch and toy with hers.

It felt marvelous. When the idea was first presented to her by Henri, she had been at first stunned, then outraged, and when she realized just

Diary of a House

how determined her husband was to go through with his mad scheme, she had in resignation told herself she would simply lie there and let her body be used.

Considering her partner, the man kissing her so carefully and tenderly, was just as used as she was, she found she couldn't do anything but respond to his gentle persuasion..

She raised her arms, placing them around his neck, and tugged him closer until her breasts were against the strong plane of his chest, the taut nipples tightening further at the erotic pressure. A sob locked in her throat as his arms came around her in turn and their bodies pressed together. The embrace grew from tentative to passionate and between her legs grew a slow molten need.

Arthur finally released her mouth, his lips trailing along her jaw, his breathing quick in her ear as he kissed the hollow beneath. "By the gods, I may be able to forget my honor after all. You feel wonderful in my arms, Serena."

Her abdomen contracted at those whispered words and the way he said her given name, a flutter of excitement spiking deep in her stomach. She felt both needy and vulnerable, and his superior size and weight should have made her at least a little afraid, but as his hand slid to cup her breast, she sighed in pleasure.

It had been so very long...

His thumb slid over her nipple, circling until it hardened. His mouth followed, tasting the swell of flesh, licking gently until he found one straining crest and suckled.

Serena gasped, a low sound that escaped involuntarily. Her hands slid into his hair, the warm silk of it flowing over her fingers. He stroked the other breast as he licked and tasted, taking the weight of it in his palm, gently squeezing and massaging.

Passion had been dormant inside her for so long she closed her eyes and absorbed every sensation. His lips were hot against her flesh as he transferred to the opposite breast, also ministering to it until it was tight and straining, her nipple a hard peak.

"You taste so sweet," he murmured against her skin, licking the valley between the flesh cupped in both hands. His mouth slid lower, and it wasn't until she felt light kisses across her stomach and the pressure of his knees separating her legs that she registered his intention.

Surely she should protest. Children were not conceived from a man putting his mouth between a woman's legs.

But the pleasure...

She arched with the first touch of his mouth on her sex, and the sight of his dark head between the pale skin of her inner thighs was indescribably erotic. When he pressed closer, the gentle abrasion of his tongue on her clitoris made her moan in sheer, open enjoyment. Knees bent, she opened wider, shameless and wanton, her starved body quivering with each gentle, tantalizing stroke.

He brought her to climax effortlessly, in just moments, the tremors beginning in her womb. Rapture held her captive as she trembled and cried out, and he knew exactly how to keep her there, on that blissful peak, until finally she went lax and weak, her pulse pounding in her wrist and throat.

Her lashes lifted when she realized he had moved, adjusting his position so that he eased between her open legs. Arthur smiled at her with dark masculine promise, his dark hair brushing his shoulders. He leaned down to kiss her, whispering against her mouth, "You said you wanted to enjoy it."

* * * *

What price he would pay when the day of reckoning came, Arthur didn't know, but by damn, it might be worth it.

His best friend's wife lay beneath him, his cock positioned between her slim thighs, the engorged tip just nudging her vaginal opening. She had beautiful breasts, opulent and firm, a contrast to the natural slenderness of her graceful body. The curtain of her hair tumbled in a dark gold mass over the bed linens and framed her face and ivory shoulders.

There was no question he shouldn't, but he desired her.

And, at this moment, he was going to have her.

His entry was measured, and her body accepted him slowly. Wet, satin walls gave to the pressure of his shaft, the tightness making him grit his teeth in self-restraint. During his recent trip to Mexico and the Isthmus of Panama, he had been entirely celibate. There had been beautiful women, dark-skinned native girls who were more than willing, but no one had particularly caught his eye, and despite his reputation for seduction, he never had sex just for the sake of having it. The problem was, considering his recent abstinence, he might not have his usual stamina.

Serena moaned, sending a ripple of sensation down his body to pool in his testicles, which were full and aching. Not only had he not had

Diary of a House

sexual intercourse with anyone in months, but she was one of the most alluring women he'd ever seen, and her body...well, if he'd asked for a woman's body to be fashioned to his exact taste, hers would be perfect. Jesus, he wasn't likely to last long.

It was arousing, also, for the first time in his life to not worry about conception. He was a careful man, not interested in siring a string of bastards, and usually his bed partners were experienced women just as disinterested in an unwanted pregnancy. Unfortunately, sometimes those precautions detracted from the experience.

Through half-closed eyes, he watched her face as he sheathed himself fully inside her luscious body. Her skin was still pink in the flush of post-orgasmic release, and her soft mouth parted as she accepted his entire length. Dark lashes fanned her cheeks, her eyes closing, and he wondered briefly if she were imagining it was her husband with his cock deep inside her.

"Arthur," she breathed, her hands sliding down his back.

Maybe not. Ridiculously, he was glad she was well-aware who was making love to her.

Sliding backward, he thrust forward, a gentle sweat breaking out over his skin. "God," he whispered hoarsely.

Her hips lifted at just the right angle to take every bit of his hard shaft and the small, sexy sound she made in the back of her throat was like a flame singed his nerve-endings. He began to move, the urgency increasing with each thrust, fighting his need for completion. Serena moved with him, finding his rhythm with ease, adjusting as he became more urgent. The frantic pressure of her hands at the small of his back spoke volumes about her level of rising sexual tension, and he wasn't surprised when he felt the first contractions as she climaxed again.

It was all he needed. Arthur moved in a forceful stroke, his muscles shaking as he ejaculated deep inside her, against her womb, a groan erupting from his chest. The pleasure was exquisite and white-hot, searing his senses. Her scream of release rang in his ears like an echo.

It was so good, he thought incoherently.

No, better than good. Incredible was a better word.

Something tickled his nose, and as he drifted back into the real world he realized his face was buried in the fragrant mass of her disheveled hair. He shifted his weight, making sure he wasn't sprawled directly on top of her damp, enticing body, and lifted his head.

Her eyes were open, her gaze direct. A small, almost tentative smile curved her lips. She said quietly, "Thank you."

Being thanked after sex wasn't quite what he expected, but then again their circumstances weren't exactly normal. Almost gruffly, he said, "As I'm sure you could tell, the pleasure was all mine."

"Not exclusively, as I'm sure *you* could tell."

"I'm glad." He was sincere, looking at her with a sort of wonder.

Her smile widened, but her eyes still held that haunted, wistful look. "Before you arrived, I was terribly nervous over all of this. It is all well and good that Henri thinks you are a wonderful man, but the idea of what he wanted me to do with a perfect stranger..." She shook her head.

"We aren't exactly strangers now." He lifted a hand and gently brushed a curling tendril of hair from her cheek. "This should be an interesting visit, to say the least, Madame Duclos."

"Yes." Her voice was hushed.

He was still inside her, softening, but nonetheless in the paradise of her body. Arthur asked neutrally, "Do you want me to stay, or go to my room?" He didn't want to leave, he knew that.

Her smooth brow furrowed. "I ... don't know."

"If conception is our goal, I could stay."

Her eyes widened just slightly at his implication and persuasive tone.

Arthur lifted his brows. "I might need a few minutes, but I would guess that if we are going to do this, we should try to make sure we are successful."

A small blush touched her already pink cheeks. "I wasn't sure...I mean, Henri was sometimes importunate and it was more than once, but..."

Arthur kissed her, long and slow. When their lips parted, he said, "It will definitely be more than once."

* * * *

His fists clenched, Henri Duclos stood on the balcony outside his wife's bedroom. A slow bead of sweat edged along his jaw.

What the devil had he done?

First he had pandered his wife, offering her body to his friend, a man who would never dream of doing more than admire her exquisite beauty. Then, he had compounded his crime by lurking at the window like some sort of midnight thief, vicariously living the act that should be his alone by listening to every sigh, every whisper.

Diary of a House

And, God help him, *watching*.

The window was ajar to the night. From his angled position, he could see the bed. He stood there, masked in shadows, and observed every look, caress, and even the act itself.

If he could possibly be dispassionate about it, he could tell himself that he was glad they seemed to have so quickly found a physical connection. Actually, he hadn't doubted they would, which had been part of his plan. Serena was a very sensual woman, though she didn't really realize it. Innocent and virginal when they married, she had known only him as a lover before this night, and had no idea that her unabashed enjoyment of sexual intercourse—even on their wedding night, when there had been some pain—was unusual. That Arthur would enjoy her was not in question, he was by all accounts an exceptional lover and women seemed to simply fall at his feet.

Serena... Henri loved her so much it hurt. But, perhaps, he wondered in despair at this moment, maybe he loved his pride more. His current handicap ate and gnawed at him deeply, ruining every living moment of his day. If she could conceive and grow swollen with a child, no one would know he was no longer a man.

Except Arthur Roland, of course. The man he trusted enough to stand outside the window and do nothing as he watched him fuck his wife.

The low lamp sent shadows over the forms of the two people on the bed. Hungrily, Henri studied his wife's lissome body; those lush breasts, so smooth and resilient, her flawless skin, the dainty triangle of hair between her long slim legs. Memory of how she tasted, female and delicately earthy in arousal, flooded back and he briefly closed his eyes. Arthur had known unerringly what to do, for she loved to be orally gratified and, after almost a year of being deprived of sexual stimulation, had climaxed quickly.

When Roland had mounted her, Henri had almost turned and returned to his room, but some perverse need to be part of their mating had kept him there, for every excruciating moment. The sight of him moving so hard and insistently between her legs as she arched and moaned was almost too much.

Almost. Trapped in his hellish need to know, Henri stayed where he was.

At this moment, they were talking, too softly for him to hear the words. Arthur was propped on his elbow, nude and muscular, his dark

brows drawn together. Serena, next to him, said something and shook her head, the expression on her lovely face poignantly touched with sadness.

They were probably discussing him, Henri decided with savage resignation. He resented the hell out of their pity, even though he loved them both in different ways.

The night breeze whispered back and he felt the ghostly echo in his brain of that ethereal sound. He might be a ghost, weightless, formless, his soul bereft and full of bitterness.

As he watched, Arthur leaned forward and kissed his wife, his mouth lingering, his hands again roaming over her body. There was little doubt of his returning erection, his penis high and dark, jutting out from the black nest of curls between his hard thighs. Long fingers slid between Serena's legs and she parted them, accepting the caress. Soft blond curls gleamed wet as his hand moved in gentle strokes.

Transfixed, Henri stood and endured as they began to make love again.

After all, they were doing just what he wanted.

Chapter Three

The small structure was little more than a shack and smelled like the remnants of a thousand meals cooked and eaten over the past decades. The odor of rancid boiled pork seemed to be a part of the wooden walls and as Serena took a seat, she wrinkled her nose.

"What do you seek?" The woman, so black her skin shone, looked at her without emotion. Cyrene, she had no last name that Serena was aware of, was actually very beautiful, with high cheekbones and huge dark eyes. Her hair, a cloudy mass of twisted curls, framed that delicate face, and her gaze was sharp and keen. A loose cotton dress draped her body in a shapeless fall of fabric. She had an ageless quality that was a little disturbing.

"I want to know about this." From her bag Serena produced the diary, setting it on the rickety table. "They tell me you can help me."

With a slow movement, the woman across from her traced a thin finger over the embossed surface, following the outline of the cutlass. "Ah, yes."

What did that mean? Serena watched as the tip of the woman's fingers went over and over the engraving.

"Give me your hand, pretty one."

The command was said with enough authority Serena hesitated only a moment before lifting her arm and extending it. The priestess had a surprisingly firm grip for one so thin, and she turned Serena's hand over, palm upward. "You seek happiness."

"Doesn't everyone?" Serena asked, unimpressed. "I assume most people who come to you want something and happiness is a fairly logical choice."

The other woman smiled in a flash of white teeth. "Yes, pretty one, but what is this I see? There are two of them...two men...one is dark, one is light. They form shadows here," the pad of one finger traced her palm, "and there." The finger lifted to point at her face. Cyrene said softly, "I see them in your eyes."

Two of them. One dark—that would be Henri, more brooding and detached than ever—and light, that would be Arthur, giving pleasure and tenderness, all three of them living in a small polite hell of pretense and illicit passion. It had been two weeks now since Lord Roland's arrival and the atmosphere in the house was...explosive.

Damn Henri and his useless stubborn pride. It was obvious that even though he had insisted on this untenable arrangement, he was suffering horribly. Both she and Arthur had tried to talk to him, but he was adamant that they continue to spend each night together. She was desperate enough to try the diary, though inwardly she scoffed at the notion.

Serena shook her head and tried to withdraw her hand. "I want to know about the diary."

"The dark one." Cyrene frowned, ignoring the request and staring downward at her hand. "He needs you. The light one, he wants you, but that is different. His soul isn't chained to yours."

"That sounds charming," Serena retorted tartly because she was a little alarmed at the insightfulness of the observation, "two souls chained together."

The priestess looked up. "You do not believe it is so?"

Did she? Would she be sleeping with another man if she wasn't chained to Henri, body *and* soul? Yes, she enjoyed the sex. Yes, Arthur was a considerate, tender lover who pleased her body. Maybe even now she carried his child.

But she didn't love him.

She loved Henri.

"I believe," she admitted, her throat thickening. "Very much so. What else do you see?"

"Pain...but also salvation."

"A child?"

The woman looked at her, her dark eyes inscrutable. "Children."

Surprised, Serena leaned back. "More than one?"

"Oh, yes."

"That isn't possible." Once Arthur sailed for England, her chances for conception were gone and he would only be there another few weeks. It was just as well, for Serena did not think Henri could survive much more than that, no matter what he said.

Cyrene smiled, her teeth slightly crooked. "Why not, pretty one?"

Diary of a House

She couldn't elaborate, so she just shook her head. "Tell me about the book."

"The magic...it is powerful. But, you must remember, *petite*, there is always a cost."

As if she wasn't paying, heart and soul, already.

"It's true?" She stared at the book, not certain if she should feel foolish for considering making an entry. "It has power?"

Cyrene said solemnly, "There is only one way to find out."

* * * *

Reining in his horse, Arthur slid from the saddle and led the animal back toward the stables. Once he'd unsaddled and put it into the stall, he turned and walked toward the house. In the thickening dusk, it sat in serene beauty, the brick walls glowing in the slanting blood red rays of the setting sun.

It was a lovely place, but he certainly had mixed feelings about his visit so far.

Henri tried, but he was a somber host at best, their old camaraderie waning, if not completely lost. Serena was warm and willing in his arms each night, but during the day she treated him almost too formally, as if trying to emphasize to her husband that whatever happened between them was just meaningless coupling.

In short, he was uncomfortable as hell with the whole situation.

Slowly he went up the steps and let himself in the front door. Henri was at the harbor, busy with his financial concerns. Serena, he'd seen, had left the house earlier, so he had decided to go for a long ride to give himself time to think and try to decide what to do. Cutting his visit short would probably insult them both, but he wasn't sure how long he could stand the tension.

To his surprise, Serena was in the front hall, hovering there as if waiting for his return. Spectacular as always in rose-colored gown that gathered softly below her perfect breasts, her hair loosely caught up with a cascade of golden curls over one shapely shoulder, she ceased pacing at his entrance and turned. "Arthur, I am so glad you are here!"

"Why, what is it?" Stepping forward he caught her hands, staring down into her face. Her eyes were dilated, and her porcelain cheeks flushed. "Nothing is wrong, I hope?"

"I have done something, and I hopefully it isn't supremely foolish."

"What?" He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

Too easily, he knew, he could fall in love with this woman. So far, he'd kept all such thoughts at bay, but it was true. That was part of the reason he was considering leaving.

"Come look," she said in a hushed voice.

He followed, because if she had asked him to lie down before a herd of charging African buffalo, he would probably have done so at the touch of her hand. To his surprise she led him into the small morning room she used to answer correspondence. On her dainty carved desk sat an open book, the pages slightly yellowed.

Serena said simply, "Read it."

There was a passage in fresh ink on the open page. Curious, he complied.

Dear Diary,

Since moving to this house our lives have been stricken with sorrow and tragedy, our once bright future now in ashes. I wish fervently that my dear husband, Henri, can recover from his affliction so we can become lovers again.

Serena Duclos, August 11, the year of our Lord, 1815

Glancing up, Arthur said quietly, "I wish this for you both as well, you know that. However, I confess I am mystified as to why you would do this. Writing it down could be foolish, other than I doubt Henri would appreciate it. His desire to keep anyone from knowing his secret is driving him—and me, quite frankly—mad. I do not know if I can continue to stay here, Serena."

Her lashes lowered and she looked away, out the window where she would see Henri approach as he returned, and then her gaze slid back to the book. "We have asked too much of you, I thought so all along, but as you know it was not my idea. In turn, you have been more than...cooperative."

He laughed at her choice of words, a small mirthless sound that echoed in the small room. "It has hardly been selfless on my part. I get to make love to a beautiful, responsive woman each night, and were the circumstances different, I wouldn't dream of giving that up, believe me. You are extraordinary, Serena, and I have known more than a few women in my day."

Diary of a House

Color rose into her pale cheeks at his words and she swallowed, a visible ripple of the muscles in her slender throat. "I have enjoyed you as well. You honored my request, Arthur, and I have never felt like you were simply using my body for your pleasure."

He stared down at her. "That is part of the problem, I'm afraid. Touching you as if I love you is becoming easier and easier."

The revelation startled her, he could see it reflected in the lovely blue of her eyes and the way her soft mouth parted. Serena took a small shuddering breath. "Well, perhaps this will be resolved soon anyway. You see, the book is magical."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It is enchanted, cursed, or whatever you'd like to call it, but if you request something by making an entry, the legend has it that the wish will be granted."

Arthur hardly wanted to show his disbelief, for she looked almost desperately sincere. "I see."

"You think it is a ridiculous notion."

"I think it is impractical to place any hope on such a thing, but—" He hesitated, not certain how to continue.

"Here he comes." Serena pointed at the window and quickly swept up the book in question, closing it and going to place it on a shelf of books near the small ornate fireplace. Nestled there it looked quite ordinary and hardly the stuff of legends and magic. "Please do not mention I wrote in it," she asked with a slight breathless tone to her voice.

"If that is your wish, of course not."

"The docks are filthy and he always goes upstairs to wash and change when he returns. I'm going to go up and wait for him. Tell him you don't know where I am, please."

Arthur merely lifted a brow for she hurried off toward the stairs before he could respond. He glanced at the book again and shook his head. Women were such impractical, romantic creatures, it was no wonder men were ever mystified at trying to understand them. Did she honestly believe that by jotting a few words in an old book she could cure her husband's handicap?

That wistful look on her lovely face told him she did believe it.

He would tell his old friend he was leaving tonight at dinner, Arthur resolved and turned to leave the room.

* * * *

It had been miserably hot in the city and particularly so at the harbor. He had already removed his jacket and neckcloth before the ride home, and his white lawn shirt was damp with sweat and clung to his body uncomfortably. At least here, on the outskirts, under the spread of the oaks, it was much cooler and Henri gave a sigh of relief at being home. Inside, the house felt deserted, and he was more than a little grateful for that. The servants went home in the late afternoon, the cook and the housekeeper both living nearby, and he was glad enough to not see Serena or Arthur.

Maybe, even now, they were together, naked and entwined.

Climbing the stairs, he tried to deny that sickening stab of jealousy, the coil tightening his stomach cruelly. Nonetheless, once he was in the hallway upstairs, he stopped by her bedroom door and stood, listening for the telltale sounds of the mattress creaking or the low whispers of the words they exchanged when they made love.

Silence. Tentatively, he opened the door to find the room quiet and deserted. A faint whiff of his wife's perfume drifted in the air and he inhaled deeply, trying to ignore the small sudden sting behind his eyelids.

God, how he missed her.

Closing the door abruptly, he went to his own room, noticing the door was ajar. Pushing it open, he stepped inside, only to halt abruptly in surprise. Serena sat on the side of his bed, her hands folded in her lap. It was obvious she waited for him, and he was at a loss, so he merely said, "Hello, my love."

"Am I your love?"

That delicately phrased question was not quite what he expected. Henri answered abruptly, "You know that you are, Serena. I do not mean to be impolite, but I'm hot and tired and simply wish to wash and change. A cool glass of wine downstairs sounds lovely. Why don't I join you on the veranda in a few moments?"

"Why don't I help you wash?" Sliding to her feet, she walked over to the basin and picked up the cloth neatly folded beside it, dipping it in the water and wringing it out. She turned and lifted her brows. "Take off your shirt and breeches, Henri."

"I am perfectly capable of washing myself."

"But I wish to do it." There was a certain stubborn set to her lovely mouth. "Take off your clothes, darling. In fact, I might also wash, as I took a long walk today and it was terribly warm." She unfastened the

Diary of a House

bodice of her dress quickly and let it slide from her shoulders. Underneath she wore only a fine chemise trimmed with lace, and the full curves of her breasts were visible through the thin cloth.

Through gritted teeth, he asked, "Are you trying to torture me?"

"No." For a moment, her eyes shimmered as they filled with tears, but she blinked several times and shook her head. "We share no intimacies and I am not asking much. Can you not do this for me?"

It was pointless and fruitless in his opinion, but her tears unmanned him always, and after a moment, he silently began to undress, stripping out of his shirt, then removing his dusty boots and breeches. The scar on his leg was still vivid even a year later, but it had faded from utterly gruesome to simply a red shiny patch of healed flesh. Reluctantly, he walked over to stand by the basin, the breeze coming in the open window brushing his damp skin. The first touch of the cloth was like heaven, he had to admit it, and Serena's soft scent as she stood next to him and slid the cloth over his bare chest was enticing.

Maybe even arousing.

He stared downward, almost unwillingly, watching her. Those glorious breasts...he remembered only too well how they felt in his hands.

"You have such beautiful muscles," his wife murmured, running the wet cloth across his shoulders. "Your whole body is so lean and firm."

Henri barely heard her. His entire attention was riveted on the need pooling in his lower body.

She rinsed the cloth, wrung it out, and moved behind him to wash his back. The sensation of the cool cloth and the skim of her fingers made him catch his breath, and when she ran it over his buttocks, he stifled a low sound of pleasure.

Pleasure. God in heaven, he *was* getting hard. His erection rose to half-mast already, that fast, and when she moved in front of him again and slid the cloth lower, toward his groin, Henri closed his eyes.

Serena cupped his testicles and very lightly brushed the cloth up and down his stiffening cock. He groaned then, his hands going to her shoulders.

"It worked," she whispered in a thickened voice. "Oh, Henri, do you want me?"

What worked? He had no idea what she was talking about, but as to her question, did he want her? More than to take another breath, or see

another sunrise. Desire throbbed through him and he said hoarsely, "Yes, my love, I want you."

"Then take me."

With shaking fingers, he pulled loose the ribbon on her shift and pushed the garment off her shoulders. At once, Serena pressed against him, her breasts warm and soft against his chest as she offered her mouth for a kiss. He complied with the pent-up hunger of the past year, devouring her mouth, his hands roaming over her body.

He might explode just from that kiss, he realized with incredulous joy.

Henri swept his wife into his arms and deposited her on the bed in a tumble of golden hair and long, supple limbs. Serena immediately spread her legs, inviting him to take her, and he didn't have to be asked twice. Positioning himself, he entered her in one smooth thrust, sheathing his hard cock in wet, satin heat.

Clinging to him, she made a small soft sound of acceptance and pleasure as he moved. Though in the past he had always used finesse and tenderness to bring her to climax, his need was simply too great and he thrust in long, hard strokes, the long-absent pleasure of sexual intercourse holding his body prisoner. The woman beneath didn't seem to object to his tempestuous possession, just the opposite. She took every bit of his penetration eagerly, lifting her hips in sync with his almost frantic rhythm, and even as he felt the helpless tide of release rushing in, she climaxed wildly, her nails scoring his back. In turn, he went rigid, the small contractions of her passage milking him as his cock flexed and spilled his seed in a hot, forceful flood.

Trying to quiet his erratic breathing, Henri held her close afterwards. They were no words between them, because no words were adequate to describe his feelings and he sensed Serena felt exactly the same way.

What had just happened was a miracle.

It was nothing short of ...*magical*.

* * * *

Her hand lifted to knock, Serena hesitated a moment before she rapped softly. When the deep voice bid her to enter, she stepped inside the guest room, her gaze going to the trunk sitting on the floor, still open. Clearing her throat, she said quietly, "I see you are almost all packed."

Arthur Roland nodded. He was dressed for travel in impeccable formal tailored clothes and looked both dashing and incredibly

Diary of a House

handsome. A small smile, tinged with regret, hovered on his lips. "Henri did not argue with me at all when I told him I was leaving, and from the looks the two of you exchanged last evening and your lateness for dinner last night, I'm going to guess now all is well between you. I didn't even try to go to your room. I assume if I had, it would have been empty."

"Yes." She had spent the night in her husband's bed, in his arms, and it had been indescribably wonderful. "He didn't tell you he's better?"

"No, but then again he didn't have to, and I'm sure he saw I understood it was just as well if I left." Arthur's azure eyes held a hint of regret.

To be the cause of any bitterness between her husband and his friend made her feel terrible. Serena paced across the room. "He has no right to feel jealous."

"If you believe that, then you do not understand men, Serena."

She turned and looked at the man who had been such a tender and generous lover. "Wishing in the book exacts a price. I hope it doesn't ask the cost of your friendship."

"My dear, I think you both paid dearly before you ever penned your wish." He grinned, lifting his dark brows. "Besides, though your sudden success has shaken my skepticism in old fables and mystical books, I don't think any spell that grants happiness will immediately take it away. Our friendship will be different from now on, maybe that is the price, but it will endure. Henri is too fine a man to not make sure that it does. For my part, all I ask is to be able to come visit any child that might be mine."

It had occurred to her that Arthur might want some rights, if indeed she was already pregnant. "You will always be welcome here," she said simply.

Hours later, when Arthur was long gone, his ship sailing at noon, she sat on the veranda, looking over the late afternoon shadows on the lawn. She sensed rather than heard her husband come up behind her and smiled. "Henri."

His hands touched her shoulders and he bent to brush her neck with a kiss. "Are you sad at his departure?"

"Yes and no," she admitted. "He is a wonderful man, just as you promised. We are lucky to know him."

"Yes." Henri sighed and came to sit in the chair beside hers. His smile was a wry twist of his well-shaped mouth. "I confess, I now wonder if the entire problem of impotency was in my mind, not my

body. Maybe I tried to make love to you too soon, before I was entirely recovered, and subsequently, my horror over my failure to be able to perform like a man made it impossible for me to do so, even once my body was healed. If I had simply waited, maybe I wouldn't have had to make either of you suffer my...extraordinary request."

He was the one who had suffered, and, she knew, suffered terribly.

With a small secret smile, Serena gazed at husband. "That's possible," she admitted in an off-hand voice, "or perhaps we were simply granted a second chance by some mystical power."

"I don't particularly believe in chance," Henri declared with firm practicality. "Or mystical powers, for that matter."

Very softly, Serena said, "I do."

Diary of a House

Of Death and Desire – 1898

Jude Mason

413 Remembrance Lane

Also by Jude Mason

An Acquired Taste

Pink Ribbon

Scorpio Tattoo

Stage Fright

Jesse's Homecoming

Prologue

October 15

Dear Diary,

That's how you're supposed to begin these things, or so I assume. I never thought in a million years I'd write in one, let alone under these circumstances. This was Jonathan's doing. When he asked me to make this entry, it was something I had to do, for him. He's given up so much.

The beginning. Yes, that's where I should begin, and then let his accounting tell the tale.

Jonathan Strand—artist, author, wealthy due to an inheritance from his parents who'd died years ago. My Jonathan—tall, slender, dark-haired, and dark-eyed—has a Mediterranean look about him that drives me wild. Yes, we're lovers, and have been since I turned twenty-four.

Two years older than I, Jonathan was twenty-seven, I, twenty-five, when I became ill. At first we thought it was just a passing ailment that would take its toll and then fade, as so many disorders do. Unfortunately, that's not what happened. Consumption doesn't simply go away. There's little treatment for it, and what there is did little good.

Before I became too ill, we traveled to New Orleans—a final vacation together, arranged by him, of course. Friends, good ones, owned a property there, and offered it to us for as long as we wanted to stay. We jumped at the chance to get away together, and what better place to spend the last days of one's life.

Little did we know what would transpire there. But, that's Jonathan's tale.

chapter one

The train ride from Memphis to New Orleans took more out of Philip than Jonathan liked. His lover's health was deteriorating faster all the time, and even with the tonic and poultice applied every night, the man could scarcely catch his breath. He'd become so thin and frail. He'd always been slender, but now his joints looked like knots of bone holding him together. His sharp-featured, fair-haired Adonis was fading before his eyes, and he, with all of his wealth and position, could do nothing to stop it.

Sitting next to him in the carriage, he ached to wrap an arm around the younger man's shoulders, but even in this city of sin he didn't dare. Dressed for travel in charcoal frockcoats, vests and slacks, both men were stifled. Philip reeked of sweat and his face shone. His high collar was soaked though and he finally took off his hat in hopes of cooling himself.

"We'll be there soon, Philip," he reassured and wished he could do, or say, more.

Philip looked at him, eyes shining with fever, and nodded dismally.

The trip through the city center was horrid. New Orleans had a smell about it that never quite went away. Those who lived in the city became accustomed to the heavy humidity and its stench of decay from the brackish water of the gulf and Mississippi River.

Half an hour later, he helped Philip walk to the steps that led to their vacation retreat's front doorway. It was an impressive building surrounded by ancient oak trees with long, wispy beards of Spanish moss sweeping the well-manicured lawns and walkways. Flower beds of every variety and color imaginable filled the air with an almost cloying sweetness, nearly masking the scent of the delta, but when a breeze swept by it magically disappeared. The two-story house had wrought iron railings on the second story balcony, and shutters bracketed each of the tall windows.

Diary of a House

Cobblestone paths meandered over the lawn and around large bushes, leading to who knew where, but at that moment all he could think of was getting Philip inside and into bed. The man was beyond tired and stumbled ahead only as Jonathan pushed him. The front stairs were mountainous, but finally they crossed the wide porch and reached the door. With his arm around the sagging man, he reached in his jacket pocket for the key his friend Cecil had sent him. He fumbled for a moment with the unfamiliar lock, but soon pushed one of the large, beautifully carved wooden doors open.

A blast of cool air enveloped him. Beside him, Philip shuddered and straightened. Jonathan felt his ribs expand and knew he was taking in a deep breath of that refreshing cool air. It seemed to give him strength for a moment and he shook himself loose of the helpful embrace, walking into the foyer under his own questionable steam.

"It's gorgeous," he murmured in his deep, masculine voice. The voice that Jonathan had fallen in love with, the voice he lusted after when they shared a bed, and loved each other.

A flash of memory stirred his loins as he followed his flaxen haired beauty inside—a blond head, held firmly, while a warm wet mouth devoured his manhood. Breath tickling the hair at the base of his cock sent a shiver of need deep into him.

He shuddered and forced his attention back to the present. Philip, standing in the middle of the lavish sitting room, slowly spun, taking in the luxury the man never seemed to get used to.

"Hey, let's find the bedroom, or *a* bedroom," Jonathan urged and headed for the winding staircase that led up to the second floor. He wondered how long Philip would be able to make the climb unassisted, and hated himself for the thought. Stopping on the third step, he turned and waited for his lover to join him.

"Mid-afternoon and I'm exhausted," Philip sighed. Allowing Jonathan to wrap his arm around his too slim waist, the pair ambled up the stairs. They halted halfway up, the younger man breathing in ragged, wheezing draughts of air.

Jonathan stroked his neck and back, willing his lover's body to allow him to take a deep, cleansing breath without fighting for it. He hated the disease that was slowly eating away at the man's strength. "Not to worry, we'll get you to bed, and after a good rest I'm sure you'll feel much better."

"I know I will." His voice didn't hold any certainty, though. His strength was fading. The trip to New Orleans might not have been the best idea after all.

At the top of the stairs, they found themselves on a large, circular-shaped landing with a grouping of easy chairs around a low, round table. Beyond was a short hallway, two doors off each side and one at the far end.

"Why don't you sit here while I go and investigate?" He pressed Philip into one of the soft, plush easy chairs and went in search of the master bedroom.

He opened each door on his way down the hall, the first was a bedroom done in pale greens and white, the second, across the hall, was its twin but done in flowered prints of gold and orange. The next room was a real surprise—a bathing room, unusual in an older house, but he approved greatly. Across the hall was a small sitting room, with a sewing machine in one corner and a quilting rack in another. Finally, at the end room, he pushed the door open and entered.

"Yes," he hissed in appreciation. Right across from him, a pair of French doors led to a balcony. To his right was a large canopied bed, bracketed by two dark wood side-tables, and to his left was a lovely brick fireplace. The entire room was done in rich tones of dark green, accented with gold. The carpeting was a mixture of the main colors, with additional touches of bronze in a paisley pattern.

He turned back to see that Philip had risen and was walking unsteadily toward him, down the short hallway. The man's face was so pale it was almost translucent. "Hey, I thought I told you to sit and wait for me," Jonathan said, concerned.

"Yes, well, if I did everything I was told, I'd work in a bank, be married to some frigid woman, and have a house full of ungrateful children." His smile was strained, though and Jonathan hurried to him.

"You, with children," he mused aloud, then chuckled. Sliding an arm around him, he took some of the man's weight as he guided him into the room they'd share for the duration of their stay.

Philip was thin, so thin Jonathan felt as if he could count his ribs right through the heavy wool jacket. A floorboard creaked as the two of them crossed the threshold. The carpeting muted the sound of their passing. "You, with children," he repeated, "an intriguing thought, seeing as how you dislike women so much. I'm not sure you could have 'risen' to the occasion."

Diary of a House

He felt the man chuckle, then cough, before he replied, "Dislike, how civilized." Philip shrugged away from him and collapsed onto the chenille covered bed. Lying there, he sighed and added, "If you'd had the experiences I did when you were a child, you'd 'dislike' women as much as I do."

"Probably." Jonathan went about disrobing the exhausted man. Bending, he unfastened his shoes first and pulled them off, then tucked his socks into them. Rising to his feet, he leaned forward and pulled Philip up to a sitting position, and manhandled him out of his jacket and vest. "Your mother and her sisters were deranged, we both know that. Most women would never torment a boy as they did you. Mine never did." He fumbled with the sweat-damp collar, the buttons fighting him. Once unfastened, he tossed the sturdy torture device after the jacket. Shirt unbuttoned, and shrugged off; he sent it sailing through the air to land on the floor mid-room.

Naked from the waist up, his sunken chest seemed much too white and frail. Jonathan fought back the desire to chastise him for his lack of appetite. He knew it was the disease, but he hated feeling so helpless, so unable to do anything to make Philip well.

"I know they were insane." He fell back on the bed and lay there while Jonathan unfastened the buttons holding his wool pants on. "But, I still wouldn't trust a woman as far as I could throw a horse." He lifted his bum clear of the bed allowing his pants and underpants to be pulled down and off. The final garments were flung over Jonathan's shoulder, where they joined those already scattered around the room.

"Scoot up and let's get you into bed properly."

"Yes, mother Jon." Once he was covered to the waist, the pillows fluffed and mounded behind him, Philip sighed and closed his eyes. "Let me rest for a couple of hours and I'll be right as rain." His voice softened, faded, and he was asleep almost as soon as the sentence as finished.

Jonathan went around the room, picking up his clothes and folding them, all the while worrying, planning, hating the insidious illness that simply wouldn't release his love. Tidied up, he returned to the bedside and gazed down at the sleeping man, then bent and tenderly kissed him on the forehead. He longed for more. He ached for the lusty man who drove him wild with need. *It's all so unfair*, he thought as he left the room, closing the door silently behind him.

Downstairs, he found a pile of mail that had been forwarded to him on the wide desk in the den—a lovely room of dark wood and

413 Remembrance Lane

bookshelves, with a door that opened onto a small patio where he and Philip would be able to hide from the world. A room he'd love to sit and ponder his next story or book. His life, his writing, had been put on hold for the time being. He sat, reading, and discovered the help he'd arranged for would be arriving on the afternoon of the following day. He'd be free to take care of his lover.

Chapter TWO

The physician was well-known and highly thought of in all the right circles. After examining Philip, he'd nodded and given him tablets which he'd said would help. Drugs, morphine, and other concoctions they'd both been so sure would help did no good at all. Jonathan watched as moment by moment his lover weakened. At first, he'd seemed to improve. He was animated and sociable, but that faded all too soon. Finally, he'd raved about hallucinations no one else could see. Just over a month later, Philip went for a nap in the afternoon and never woke up. The ending had been almost a blessing—almost.

Jonathan was inconsolable. The man he'd shared everything with was gone, and he wallowed in the mourning of him. For weeks he slept only when the mixture of exhaustion and alcohol dragged him into a restless, nightmarish slumber. It was little more than a few hours of unconsciousness, broken by flashes of memory he could never remember when he woke, sweating and out of breath. The servants tiptoed around, afraid of his vile temper or ravings when the gin took over. He didn't bathe. He stopped shaving and changing his clothing. He stank and didn't care. Neighbors, those who had taken pity and tried to console him, turned away, afraid of his outrages, unwilling to chance his ire. His grief was monumental. He couldn't push the loss of his love away; it was too sharp.

One day, he simply collapsed. He'd warred through almost a month of inconsolable sorrow, but the lack of food and excessive drink took its toll. One afternoon, while he lay sprawled behind his desk in the study, gazing drunkenly at their private patio, he passed out.

The cook found him.

* * * *

His head felt as if it had exploded and been hammered back together. Moving was impossible. Everything whirled around him at a sickening rate. He opened his eyes, but quickly closed them against the

blinding light. His stomach lurched and he groaned. That was a mistake. His stomach lurched again, and bile rose.

Gritting his teeth, he took several deep breaths, hoping to convince his stomach to settle down, just for awhile. He'd be sick later, if necessary. When he could open his eyes and stumble outside.

It worked. He remained still and kept his eyes closed until he realized he had to get up anyway. He needed to pee.

He groaned and bit his lip. The pain helped take his mind off his stomach, but not much. Still, he forced himself to roll over. The pillow felt wonderfully cool against the side of his face and he wished he could stay there. He did for as long as he could, but soon enough the need to urinate became too great and he pushed himself up. Sitting with his feet firmly on the floor, he took an extra moment or two to simply regain some sense of balance.

Something smelled awful.

He glanced down and realized he'd vomited on himself. His stomach churned. Pushing himself to his feet, he turned and stumbled out the door. Down the stairs, weak-kneed and trembling, he headed for the back door and into the night. The privy was close; thank heavens, but still the race up the hill took every bit of strength he had left. Flinging open the door, he barely got his fly open in time. The stench hit him, and his stomach rebelled. A long stream of piss entered the black maw just as he vomited.

He'd never felt more miserable or alone in his life than at that moment. No one cared. No one would notice if he died face down in the outhouse.

When the retching stopped, he wiped his mouth with the back of his forearm and almost retched again. He fastened the buttons on his fly and slumped against the wall. A few moments later, he'd gathered enough strength to return to the house. The night was cool and he was thankful for that. He stank and, for the first time since Philip died, he wanted a bath.

He locked the door behind himself. It was late, middle of the night late, or there'd be someone about, a servant or someone in the street. It didn't matter, he wanted, no, needed to bathe and he would. He hauled himself up the stairs and into the bathing room, glad that the owners had the forethought to install that one luxury. *The owners*, he mused, and for a moment couldn't bear the thought of being asked to leave.

Diary of a House

Filling the huge claw-foot tub with tepid water, he shrugged out of his wretched clothing. Soiled and reeking of his grief, tossed into the hall. He glanced at himself in the mirror and cringed. Even in the dim light of the moon filtering through the window, he saw too much. He'd lost weight, as much as Philip had. He was filthy. He could count his ribs, and instead of being firm and tight his stomach was hollow. The muscles he'd worked so hard for on his chest and arms were gone. His flesh was sallow, and there were scabs on his knees from where he'd obviously crawled instead of walked. He needed a shave. The hair on his head was greasy and hung like ropes to his shoulders. His eyes were sunken, haunted, and his cheekbones protruded.

"Christ, you look awful," he muttered to himself. Turning away, he climbed into the tub and sighed. The water closed around him like a cloak. When he lay back against the side of the tub, its coolness sent a shudder of pleasure through him. The first pleasurable feeling since... He forced the rest of that thought aside, unfinished.

He took up the washcloth and soap and set about cleaning himself. While running the soft cloth over his chest and ribs, he couldn't believe how bony he was. He scrubbed his hair twice until he was satisfied that the worst of the oil and grime were out of the thick mass. The water was gray when he finished, but he felt almost human again.

Climbing out, he pulled the drain plug and reached for the towel. With it wrapped around his waist, another rubbing his hair, he headed for his room—his room, not theirs anymore. The pile of rank clothing on the floor he left. Someone would pick it up in the morning.

The bed was a mess. Ashamed of his drunken behavior, he pulled the covers off and tossed them into the hall on top of his clothing, then went to one of the smaller bedrooms. The green room was clean and smelled of mint. A large vase of it sat on a table under the window.

The bed called to him. The earlier exhaustion returned full force. He dropped the towels and climbed under the covers. The sheets were cool against his limbs, his torso. His cock, dormant since he'd lost Philip, twitched. He slid his hand down into the thick forest of his pubes and cupped himself. Then, there was nothing.

* * * *

Soft wetness surrounded his cock. A gentle tugging, sucking, encouraged an erection. His balls churned. His hips rose, buttocks clenching to extract the last ounce of pleasure from...

The head of his cock brushed the back of a throat. He knew it was a throat—Philip's.

He twisted to his side. The mouth followed; the sucking increased. He groaned. His hips pulled back, then thrust forward. The sensation was exquisite. Hot, tight, and the air brushing his belly was the sweetest tickle. His heart drummed wildly, threatening to burst from the emaciated confines of his chest. He slipped his hand down and paused, afraid.

He balled his hands into fists; one at his side with the sheet gripped tight, the other empty, aching, on his belly. His hips found a rhythm, a gentle thrusting, that had him breathless with desire. Teeth scraped along his shaft, Philip's signature sucking technique. Lips pressed to the base of his cock; again he was sure they were his lover's. His climax neared, balls churned and crept in close to his body.

"Please!" He woke with a start. His heart raced. Sweat trickled from under his arms and formed a pool of coolness beneath him. Automatically, he rolled onto his back, right hand going to his groin, to his cock. Aching, rampantly erect and throbbing, he was a heartbeat away from spewing. "Philip," he groaned, bewildered, filled with lust.

Thrusting the bedclothes aside, he stroked himself. The hard length slid through his hands easily, pre-come slick. A stroke, and his body tensed, another and his balls boiled. Too long without release, too long alone, he shuddered and sobbed as a stream of spunk arced then splattered against his chest. Another followed a moment later; his toes curled. He choked back a sob and thrust himself into his fist. The next few pulses coaxed only an oozing stream of his essence from him and coated his fingers. He squirmed for a moment, enraptured in the much needed release.

But, then his dream came back to him. Philip's mouth. Philip's teeth and tongue. And then the memories of his death hit.

"No!" The single word tore from him, a vehement denial of his loss, his longing, and the heart-wrenching sorrow that just wouldn't leave him alone. But, even as he remembered the dream and thought of how much he'd loved Philip, the pain was just a little less.

* * * *

Leaving the bed, he returned to the master bedchamber to dress. The pile of bedding, as well as his filthy clothing he'd left in the hallway, were gone, thank heavens. He couldn't get the memory of the dream out

Diary of a House

of his mind. Philip had been there, he was sure of it. But, that was insane. Or was it?

The bedroom was a shambles. Clothing was strewn from one end to the other. The bed was unmade; medicines still sat on the night table, forgotten.

While he dressed, he made a decision. He would buy the house. The thought of leaving it was more than he could bear, and he knew the owners would sell. It was as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Dressed in trousers and a loose fitting shirt, he went to the kitchen. His gait was lighter than it had been for weeks. He was hungry—famished. He looked through one of the many windows and saw that it was sunny. A new day.

The pleasantly plump, dark-skinned woman looked up from the bowl she'd been stirring and stared. "Mr. Strand. Sir, what you be doing in the kitchen?"

"Good morning...." He paused, shocked that he didn't know her name.

"It's Becky, sir. Are you all right?" Her look of concern was endearing.

"Yes, Becky, I'm fine. Thank you for asking." He looked around the room, unfamiliar with the make-up of a proper kitchen. "I want breakfast today. Something light. I don't think my stomach could take more."

"Yes, sir," she replied in a soft voice. "Toast, maybe a little honey?"

His stomach rumbled. "Yes, and do we have any fruit? Apples, pears, anything?"

"Yes, sir, there's apples in the cellar. I'll have Joshua get you some."

"Thank you, Becky." He walked to the window over the cast iron sink and gazed out over the kitchen garden. The weather was still warm, but not uncomfortable as it had been a couple of months ago. A walk in the garden appealed to him. Turning to Becky, he said, "I'll be just outside. When my breakfast's ready, call."

Getting to her feet, she answered, "Yes, sir. I'll have Joshua get you. Is that all right?"

"Sure is." He left then, but not before he saw her pull a large round loaf of bread out of the cupboard and place it on the counter. Life, it seemed, would go on. He walked out into the garden.

Chapter Three

"Sign here and the place is yours, Jonathan." The elderly Cecil Deveraux, father of the man who'd allowed them to use the house, stood beside him, a gnarled index finger at the line at the bottom of the document where he should sign.

"Thank you, Cecil," he humored the man and leaned forward, affixing his signature and date to the deed. When he put the pen down and straightened up, it felt as if he'd stepped over some threshold into a new life.

Signed and witnessed by the only other occupant in the room, Cecil's bank manager, the house transfer was done. It belonged to Jonathan.

Holding his hand out, Cecil gave a surprisingly strong handshake and said, "I hope you're happy there, Jonathan. I know your friend died there, but life does go on." His voice held a note of distant sadness, as if he, too, understood the loneliness of loss.

"Thank you, Cecil. I'm sure I will be. I just need time, and this house seems the perfect place to let it pass." The paperwork done, the money wired and accepted; Jonathan took his leave. The carriage ride home gave him time to ponder. He knew he had to find a way to get on with his life; somehow he had to get over Philip's death. Writing, perhaps, but not soon. The thought of trying to create something beautiful was beyond him.

He spent the rest of that evening wandering the house, sipping wine and inspecting his new property. Each room held memories of Philip. He'd held him in his arms there in the dining room. They'd made gentle love in each of the bedrooms. They'd gotten crazy drunk one night and blundered through the house naked, fumbling and caressing each other whenever and wherever one would catch the other.

His glass soon emptied and he poured another as his thoughts went from one encounter to another, each more bittersweet than the last.

Diary of a House

Sprawling in an easy chair in the front room, he let his thoughts follow and embellish on a particularly hot memory of a lovemaking session.

They'd been out drinking with friends and had arrived home very late, and very horny. Stepping through the front door, they'd pulled each other's clothes off, fumbling and laughing with each new expanse of naked flesh revealed. Philip had felt well that night and he'd forced Jonathan to his knees even before they'd climbed the stairs. The lovely man had teased him by rubbing his cock all over his face and neck, then held it an inch from his tongue while bemoaning his need to come, and masturbating. Jonathan had finally lunged forward, and while Philip laughed, then groaned, Jonathan had lavished the man's genitals with kisses and slurping licks until an orgasm dropped Phillip to his knees. The fucking, moments later, still took his breath. Amazing was too simple a word—an expression, breathtaking, incredible, miraculous, all came close, but it had been more.

They both knew, deep down, that Philip was going to die. That lovemaking had been their farewell, their bonding, their promise of an everlasting love. He'd remember it for the rest of his life, of that he was sure.

Coming back to the present, he stared at the bed. It called to him and he was glad to be sleeping better, finally. Drink helped as long as he didn't overdo it, and he was learning to limit himself. He rose and climbed the stairs, still deep in the memories of Philip and the love they shared. He could smile at those memories finally, yet still wished he wasn't alone.

He stripped and crawled into the rumpled bed, still their bed and still much too big for him to feel comfortable in alone. His head sank into the pillow and he breathed a huge sigh as his eyelids drooped. He felt himself going, falling into a calm place where sleep reached for him. Darkness enfolded him in its soft embrace.

His skin tingled. Something soft brushed across his right nipple and he shivered. His erection twitched, the head tapping on his belly. That something soft trailed across his chest, flicking deliciously around, finding his other nipple. Circling, teasing, he arched his back, wanting more of the sweet torment.

"Relax and let me play you, my love," came the deeply masculine voice he'd missed for weeks. He wanted to open his eyes. He wanted to see him, to kiss him, to fuck him, to be fucked.

"Yes," Jonathan hissed through clenched teeth. His muscles tightened, fingers digging into the bedding, clenching, twisting as what could only have been a feather swirled around the sensitive nubbin of his nipple. He dared not move, afraid the sensation would end. He craved more, his loins aching, but he froze, unwilling to chance being deserted.

"You've got to find something, Jonathan." Philip's voice was mesmerizing.

"Find something?" he questioned, and lost the thought when a warm gush of air wafted across his glans. His buttocks tightened, pushing his hips forward, his cock swinging into the air. He was naked, the covers gone, pushed onto the floor at the foot of the bed. When, how, he didn't know, didn't care—just the teasing of the feather and breath were enough to make him crazy for more.

"A book," Philip whispered, then again that delicious breath of air caressed him. "You must find a diary." And then his tongue flicked across the tip of his cock—swirled around the trembling head as Jonathan fought to keep still.

"Yes, anything," he raved, flinging his head back and forth. He'd never felt so filled with lust. His balls churned and tumbled in their sack.

"Spread your legs."

For an instant, the words caught him off guard. When they registered, he eased his knees wide. His sack tightened, his balls crept closer to the warmth of his body.

Soft sparse hair tickled his inner thighs. Then, as the bed moved, hot damp flesh pressed against his inner thighs. Philip's legs, but how could that be?

"Philip?" he ventured, afraid to ask, afraid of the reply. But there was no answer, just the soft wetness of a tongue flicking over the crown of his cock. He thought he'd go mad. His body trembled uncontrollably. His mind sunk into a sea of lust, and all he could think of was *suck me*, a litany repeated over and over as he endured the tongue's dance. His cock pulsed, the crown swelled, the eye gaped to release its copious stream of clear nectar. He saw none of it, but he knew in his mind and saw in his dreams.

His knees rose, legs spread even wider as they climbed into the air—draping themselves over sweat damp shoulders. He was spread, his buttocks held wide by the position of his legs and knees. The deep cleft of his ass, the dark flower nestled between, was held open and vulnerable, accessible for whatever was going to transpire.

Diary of a House

Something tapped his inner thigh, leather. Something tightened around the base of his cock. More leather. The smell enraptured him. His balls ached with painful fullness, and were pulled and twisted, sucked gently, beautifully, then tapped with something hard and cool.

"Is our room finished yet?"

From out of nowhere, the question made his heart leap. Their room, the spare room that they'd dragged their toys into, then left when illness forbade their play. He'd left it locked. "No, it's locked, abandoned when you..."

His ass clenched at the sudden touch of cold against the tight pucker.

Gasping, trembling, he wanted to beg. The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he held them there. A book, he had to find, what?

"A diary. Look in the den." The words were there, filling in the blanks for him.

His ass clenched. Cold, hard wetness slithered into him. Insinuating itself past the crinkled dark flower, easing past the ring of muscle he strained to open. His cock throbbed in response.

"Finish our room." Blunt, direct words, a command he knew he had to obey. He always obeyed his lover.

He wriggled his hips, pushing down, spreading himself. Inviting more. "Yes, Sir." He was surprised at how his heart beat faster at those two words. An instant later, he groaned in sweet agony as the cool something entering him turned ice cold.

He tried to pull away, to push the offending intruder out, but his muscles refused to heed his brain. The insidious probe twisted and turned, spreading him wider and delving in just a little deeper with each passing second. While he lay gasping, trembling from both the cold and excitement, whatever was inside him found his sweet spot. A noise came from deep inside him, a soft moan he couldn't stop and had no desire to even if he could. Each beat of his heart made his cock pulse. Each tiny shiver or twinge sent a shuddering thrill through him. Sweat covered him, cooled him.

A sudden thought sent a racing shudder of a different kind through him. Would Philip allow him to climax? His body ached for release. Would Philip free his cock and let him shoot, or would he frustrate him as he had done so many times in the past. Even that thought thrilled him: the hours of lust-filled ranting, the cold sweat drying on him later as his

excitement faded, the ache in his balls, and the frustration of knowing he'd do it again, loved complying with his slender young master's wishes.

"I love your body when it's tight like this," the soft, sultry voice whispered. He felt the gentle puff of breath against his ear, and the scent of good wine, the drink of preference they'd shared until the end. "Are you close, my pet?"

Jonathan strained upward, his cock twitching uselessly into the still air. The probe buried in his rectum shifted, nudged his sweet spot, and nearly took him over the edge. "Yes, I'm close, Sir." The desperation in his voice surprised him and turned him on even more.

"Would you like to come?"

"God, yes," he cried without thinking. Instantly, he knew there'd be a price, there always was.

"Can you come with the leather straps that tight—with the cold prod in your ass?"

Jonathan groaned, agonized. The torment was incredible, his need, more than he could bear, but could he climax? He knew he'd be given one chance. "Yes, please, yes."

"Settle down then and feel what I do. Let the sensation take you."

He sank back, and the smooth probe slid a little deeper into his ass. He tried to calm himself, but also reveled in the feeling of being penetrated, and of being tormented.

For the next while, he simply endured and basked in the gentle touch of his lover. Hot breath and cool caresses intermingled with the icy cold phallus stretching him. He groaned his need, and howled when he couldn't contain the cry any longer. He shuddered and twisted, endeavoring to speed his release, but was thwarted at every attempt. Finally, when he was sure his mind was mush, the tempo increased and his plateau reached.

"Please, yes," he sobbed, the gut-wrenching climax tearing through him. With each spasm the prod thrust in hard. The strap around the base of his cock dug into him, and he could have sworn blood mingled with his seed, but the pleasure far surpassed any thought of the damage done.

And indeed, when he could breathe again and dared to open his eyes, he found that he was naked and alone, no strap tightly wrapped and tied around the base of his cock, and no probe penetrating him, no lover held him. His heart felt as if it were broken.

"Find the diary," a deep masculine voice whispered in his ear.

Diary of a House

He turned his head, hoping to see Philip, but was disappointed. Nothing, no one was there. He lowered his legs and a pool of stickiness on his belly drew his attention. A long ribbon of it trailed up his chest, a few splattered decorations on his stomach. He reached for a handkerchief and wiped himself down, thinking of where he'd find a diary.

Chapter Four

"Morning Becky," he chimed, walking into the kitchen. Becky was used to him appearing for a visit when he came down in the morning. From the way her face brightened and she smiled at him, he thought she actually welcomed the company.

"Good morning, sir," she replied in her deep, sensual voice. Though she was a big woman, her voice always sent a chill through him.

"What have you made me for breakfast this morning?" He stood behind her, peering over her shoulder at the concoction she had in the large cast iron skillet. It smelled wonderful, but he had no idea what it all was.

"Kinda omelet, you might call it. My mammy taught me this when I was just a child. Been makin' it for lotta years now, and ain't found no one who don't like it."

"Excellent." He smiled, and realized he felt more at ease and happier than he had in weeks. "I'll take it in the den. Could you bring it when it's ready, please, Becky?"

"Yes, sir, it'll just be a few more minutes." She eyed him over her shoulder, as if making sure it was really him. He knew he'd been an ogre for as long as she'd worked in the house, and she was obviously surprised by his good humor. "Would you like coffee with your breakfast?"

He glanced over his shoulder on his way out, and said, "Yes, coffee. Black, no sugar."

He went into the den. Sitting behind the big oak desk, he let his gaze wander over the shelves of books lining the walls across from him and wondered if he'd have to search them all to find the book Philip had told him to find. Leaning back, he looked up to the high, vaulted ceiling. It would be a perfect place for his work, perhaps.

Something caught his eye. He saw the corner of something peeking over the top. He cocked his head and rose, his eyes on the tiny, dark, triangular protrusion.

Diary of a House

It couldn't be that easy, he thought, sliding the rolling ladder across the floor. Positioned directly under the protrusion, he slowly climbed. Getting closer, he knew it was a book—dark leather by the look of it. He reached up for it and a tingling sensation went from his fingertips all the way up his arm.

"Mr. Jonathan!" Becky's voice was shrill, concerned.

He turned and faced her from near the top of the ladder and smiled. "It's okay. I just saw something hanging over the top of the bookcase. It's a book. I wonder why no one's seen it before."

"Might be 'cause I just dusted up there. I use a big ole' mop and musta knocked it forward." She came all the way into the room and placed his breakfast tray on the desk before approaching the foot of the ladder. Looking up at him, she asked, "What is it?"

Jonathan turned the book over in his hand and saw no title, no description, just the dark leather cover, the front held together by a gold clasp. "I've no idea. It's a book, but why would it have a lock?" He chuckled and turned it so the spine was facing him, and he noticed a slight fraying at one end. "Looks old. Might have been up here for years and years."

"You come on down from there, Mr. Jonathan, before you stop ole' Becky's heart." She reached up for him, her fingers curling toward herself, urging him down. "You been feeling poorly and I know you ain't been eatin' right."

"It's all right, Becky, I'm fine—really." But he climbed down anyway, book clutched firmly in hand. "That my breakfast, my omelet kind of?"

Beaming, she looked at the meal she'd left on the desk. "Yes, sir, just like you asked, with coffee."

"Thank you, Becky." Going to his desk, he sat behind it and put the book beside the food-laden tray. "That'll be all."

"Yes, sir," she said, and a moment later closed the door behind her.

His thoughts remained on the book and Philip's request for him to find it, while he ate his breakfast of eggs, mixed with ham and a variety of vegetables. He looked at the book and sensed it was the diary he was supposed to find. He couldn't help but wonder how Philip knew there was a diary.

Suddenly, a chill raced down his spine. He wasn't alone. The forkful of food he'd lifted to his mouth was ice-cold when he touched it to his lips.

He listened, but couldn't hear a thing other than Becky's muted voice, singing from the kitchen. He eased the forkful of egg into his mouth. His mouth filled with flavor and saliva. Glancing down at his plate, he slid his fork into the mixture and filled it. He ate and enjoyed the entire plateful, all the while wondering about the book. Whom had it belonged to? Why would someone hide it on top of the bookcase?

Pushing his empty plate away, he reached for the book. An inch-wide gold hasp crossed over the pages, a tiny gold padlock inserted in the slot held it closed. Curious, he tugged at the lock, but it was secure and he didn't want to damage it. He flipped it over. On the back was a beautifully embossed profile of a cutlass. He turned the book over and looked more closely at the front, thinking perhaps the title had worn off or been colored in. *Some pirate story*, he thought, but he couldn't find any title.

Looking again, he remembered seeing a cutlass hanging over the fireplace in the front room. Excited, he rushed out and went in search of the blade. He stepped into the room and there it was, just as he remembered over the mantel. Taking it down, he inspected it carefully. He compared to picture on the book to the weapon in his hand. They looked the same. Wait, the image of a key had been engraved into the end of the hilt.

He twisted the end. It turned easily and came off in his hand. A key fell onto the floor at his feet.

Feeling very much like a child on his birthday, he retrieved the key and somehow knew it would fit the clasp. His heart rose in his throat. He returned the cutlass to its place over the mantel and inserted the key into the clasp. There came the faintest click, and the key turned.

With the book open, he went into the study and sat at his desk. Flipping through it, he noticed it was handwritten, and that the script varied several times. The writing ended less than halfway through. Curious, he flipped to the last page and was a saw there was something written there.

Before he could read it, a soft, deep, voice whispered, "You found it."

He spun around, nearly falling out of his chair. Philip's voice, it had been him, he knew it. Dreaming was one thing, but to hear him while he was awake?

Clutching the book to his chest, he quickly left the room. Was he going crazy? He thought he might be. For an instant, he thought of

Diary of a House

telling Becky what he'd heard, but changed his mind just as fast. She'd surely drag him to some voodoo witchdoctor and he wasn't quite ready for that—at least, not yet.

He headed upstairs, two steps at a time until he reached the landing at the top. A glance down assured him that he was alone. Breathing a sigh of relief, he went to his room.

* * * *

With the door locked and the curtains drawn, Jonathan laid across the bed. The diary lay before him, its dark cover a striking contrast to the white sheets of the unmade bed.

"Open it," came the expected whisper from so close behind him, he should have felt the man's body pressed against his own.

He flipped the book open to the middle and wondered if he should read the words of whomever had entered their stories before him. Would he enter his own?

Heart-stopping words echoed, "Do you want me back?"

Jonathan rolled over and found no one there. He glanced around, searching, and in his heart of hearts, wished to the very depth of his soul that Philip was with him. "Yes," he sobbed, and knew he'd do anything if it could only be so. He loved Philip more than he'd ever loved anyone before and knew he'd never find a man who understood him as well.

"Turn to the last page."

Again, the words seemed to come from behind him, but when he rolled onto his stomach to turn the pages of the book, he saw that he was still alone. He flipped the pages until he was looking at the last page. The ink had faded somewhat, but the text was still legible. He bent to read it, but the words formed in his mind instead.

To whomever opens the book,

The diary has the power to grant you one wish. But, be warned, the price is steep and irreversible. You must decide how important your wish is by the price you are willing to pay. A word of advice: Think carefully before you make your wish. You get only one and the price must be right for it to work the way you want. You must first write your story here, and then you are to make your wish.

That was it. Philip's voice faded, leaving him breathless with hope. He wanted to jump up and scream his wish, his need. His limbs trembled. He was light-headed. Could it really be true? Could he really have Philip back? His lover, his beautiful, young master?

"Yes, you can have me back." Soft breath on the back of his neck made him shudder. "You must think it through clearly first and decide what your wish is worth."

"Yes, and I must write our story."

"Yes, you must write our story, everything that's taken place in this house."

"Give me this day and it will be done." Jonathan pushed off the bed and, with the book in hand, hurried to find a pen. He dared not go down to the study. Becky might drop by to offer him coffee while he worked, and he couldn't chance her seeing what he wrote. There was also the chance that Philip would come, but only if he was in their room.

The house became deathly silent while he wrote his tale. He told of Philip's illness and how he'd suffered so greatly, and how they'd loved so well. He told of their nights of passion, those very special nights when he knelt to his master's hand. For a moment, his mind wandered to the time they'd gone out drinking. He'd purposely angered Philip and later paid the price. A smile tugged at his lips at the memory of his cane wielding young master, and the agony he'd born the next day. He'd been unable to sit for two.

Hour by hour, he wrote and relived the time they'd spent in the house. He tried to put in as much detail as possible, hoping that would somehow make a difference. When he put the final words down and laid his pen to rest, he was exhausted.

The exhilaration he'd felt when he began writing had faded to a quiet satisfaction. He'd also had time to think about what he wanted more than anything else in the world and what he was willing to give up. It was simple; he wanted Philip, his lover and master, his soul-mate, healthy.

He placed the diary on the bedside table, then went to look out the window over the beautiful garden that had transfixed him so many times. The colors were amazing, and the scent masked the ugliness that he'd at first thought was all he'd ever smell in New Orleans.

Hands on his shoulder thrilled him. "You're done, then?" The soft whisper made his shiver, then smile.

"Yes, all done." His heart beat wildly. He believed in what the diary said. He believed he'd soon have his lover with him again. And, he believed he'd have to give up something very important to make it work. "There's nothing as important to me as you, my love. All day I've been writing and thinking about us and what we had. And, all day I've been

Diary of a House

wondering if there's anything I can give up that will match my need to have you back."

Philip chuckled, very softly behind him. Then his lips brushed the crook of Jonathan's neck. "You have exactly what is needed. The book seems to know; and I've missed you so much."

Warm breath on his neck, followed by the soft caress of his lover's lips and tongue, dragged a groan from deep inside Jonathan. To have him back, to hold him and love him again, would be a fantasy come true. But, could he give it up? It had been so long since he'd set pen to paper, the very thought of it made his breath catch. He longed for its return.

He stepped away from the window and turned, facing the empty room. With a tightening in his throat, he said, "Writing was my life, before Philip became ill. It's my other love." The words came hard, in jerks and stumbles, but he kept going, knowing it was the right thing. "To have Philip back, healthy and just as he was before the illness struck, I will give up my other love." His voice caught. For an instant, he was terrified. He'd always been a writer. Where would the stories go? Where would his mind go? The characters, the plots? Would he suddenly be a dullard with no imagination?

"Never, my love, my toy, you're going to be fine." Another kiss brushed his neck. "Trust me."

The final words came out as a sob. "Bring back my Philip and I'll never write again." Instantly, he felt light-headed and the room swayed. Leaning against the wall to steady himself, he thought he might faint.

Suddenly, Philip stood in front of him. He was naked and smiling—and healthy. The blush of health and youth shone on his face.

Jonathan reached for him. "Philip, it worked. You're really here."

"Yes, I'm here." That deep sensual voice he loved so much. There was no weakness, just the hint of lust that made him tremble.

"You know..." Jonathan lowered his eyes, the sentence unfinished between them.

"Yes, I know what you gave up. Thank you." He took a step forward and wrapped his arms around Jonathan. "You'll never regret it."

"I know. I've been lost without you."

"Take off your clothes," he said, and before Jonathan could respond, added, "Excite me."

Epilogue

And those were the last words Jonathan wrote. He never seemed to miss it, though, the writing. We made up for it with our play—our sex, I mean. That night was spectacular. Read on:

"Yes, Sir," Jonathan's voice had softened, turned husky with lust. His jacket hit the floor, followed a moment later by the dark vest beneath it. But when he got to his shirt, he smiled and swayed his hips, all the while looking at me. The bugger knew what he was doing, that's for sure. He turned his back and looked over his shoulder at me while slipping the white cotton garment down his arms. As the shirt dropped to the floor, his hands went to his middle and I knew he was working on his fly buttons. I couldn't take my eyes off his ass, though. Even in his slacks, it was taut and round, and I wanted to simply reach out and take hold. When he lowered his pants, he didn't just drop them and step out, as I'd expected him to. No, not my Jonathan. He held them and slowly bent forward, dragging the waistband down over his bottom, then down his thighs.

"Bugger," I growled as the white cotton underpants stretching across his ass came into view.

"Bugger me," he quipped back and smiled over his shoulder at me.

The cheeky bastard, I thought, but couldn't keep from smiling. He pushed those slacks right down to his ankles and managed to step out of them without rising. He trailed his fingers up the backs of his legs and I'd had enough just as his hands reached his ass.

"Stop," I commanded. The voice must have been right, because he stopped instantly. "Spread your feet apart. Wider."

He complied, of course. A moment later, I was behind him, running my hands over his haunches and thrusting my cock between his cotton covered ass cheeks. He clenched and I moaned, and then smiled. I was, well, something I hadn't been for some time, and the simple joy of dry humping him was almost too much for me to take.

Diary of a House

I stepped back and took a firm hold of my cock, then slapped his bottom with my other hand. He groaned then—a deep, guttural animal sound that enraptured me.

"Ask." A single word, which I'd used on him so many times before. I loved to make him beg, and he'd always loved begging.

There was a pause, as if he was gauging whether I meant business, or if he could perhaps bend me to his will, this one time. I refused to allow it and, reaching out, jerked his underpants down to his knees. With no warning, I slapped his naked ass twice, once to each side.

"Please, Sir," exploded from him. He took a moment to catch his breath, then more docilely, "Please fuck me, Sir."

I took him then, but not fast and furious as I might have liked, but more tenderly, gently easing my cock into his hole. I cupped his balls in my hand as I eased in and out of him. Sweat covered his back. I slid my belly over his smooth skin, and kissed his neck, all the while stroking and teasing him. When he moved, I pulled out and whacked him on the ass. When he whimpered and begged for more, I squeezed his balls. When he pleaded with me to let him come, I masturbated him and laughed when his body trembled and jerked.

"Come for me now," I whispered in his ear just as my own body tightened for the final thrust forward. The slapping of flesh on flesh echoed in the still summer evening air, the cries of bliss were music to my ears. Gut wrenching spasms tore at me as I filled him with my spunk, and he filled my hand with his.

He howled and thrashed beneath me, his climax more powerful than any I'd felt him go through before. His ass gripped me, held me captive inside him, as if he would finally be the master, if only for a moment.

Spent, overjoyed to be with him again, I leaned across his back and kissed him. My lover, my life.

413 Remembrance Lane

The war within – 1945

D. Musgrave

Diary of a House

Also by D. MUSGRAVE

Blood Creek Haunting

chapter one

August 21

Catching sight of the old house, it was as if a vise gripped his chest. Spanish moss hung from the huge oak trees lining the front yard. It reminded him of carefree days before the war. Days he and Sheila would spend under the canopy, lounging on a blanket, making plans for their future. Gazing past the trees to the two-story brick house, he remembered the first time he laid eyes on it. It'd been in bad shape and needed lots of work, but even at first sight he knew it would be his home. Convincing Sheila to take a chance on the "money-pit" had been easy. Maybe she saw its potential as well.

He closed his eyes and inhaled, trying to concentrate on the familiar smells of the moisture-thick bayou air. Not long ago he thought he'd never see the house or his wife again. Suddenly, the throat-tightening scent of war flooded his mind. The stench of mud, blood, and death overtook the sweet scent of the bayou.

Shaking his head, he pushed it away, but it persisted, forcing itself on him. He squeezed his eyes shut and the visions rushed into the darkness. He heard the wretched screams of dying men over the roar of battle. The smell of death seemed to be permanently burned into his mind, along with tortured screams. Many times in the last few days, he'd wondered whether he'd ever be free of those gripping fears.

The thick, rolling accent of the Creole taxi driver wrenched him from his reverie. "Hey, mister. Y'all gonna be paying fer tha ride?"

"Sorry," William Beauregard replied. Dropping his Army-issue duffel bag, he paid the fare.

The taxi cab rolled away, and William turned back to look at the old house. It had been a plantation, and before that he'd heard rumors of it being the home of a notorious pirate. There were also stories of hauntings and ghosts, but he'd never seen anything like that in his time there.

Diary of a House

Bending down, he grabbed the duffel bag and slung the strap over his shoulder. He began the walk up the long driveway to the front door. He knew Sheila wasn't expecting him. He'd managed to talk his way onto a cargo plane from Fiji before a troop transport could be arranged. His service to the country had been completed and all he owed the Army was to turn in his weapons, which he did in San Diego.

The walk to the house seemed longer than he remembered, but he figured that was because part of him was nervous about seeing Sheila again. He knew he wasn't the same man who'd left her three years earlier. It was easy to hide how the war had affected him in letters. He didn't want her to worry more than she already was, so in his letters he made it seem as if his part in the war was more of a clean up effort instead of the slow, trudging, bloody job of leading men onto the shores to break through the beachheads of the Japanese.

Suddenly, he heard a scream behind him. He turned, but no one was there. The scream came again, this time to his right and closer. It was the same heart-stopping war cry he'd heard when Japanese guerillas attacked his platoon. Their battle cries were a mixture of rage and total abandon, as if they wanted to be spotted and their targets know they were about to die.

He spun on his heels, ready to defend himself, but nothing was there. A cold chill wrapped him in its clammy embrace. He'd felt that chill once before—in the back of the cargo plane, alone, trying to sleep on the metal floor behind a stack of ammo crates.

A voice whispered coldly in his ears, "Save me," then all was silent. His heart hammered in his chest. He wanted to run for cover, but couldn't make his legs move. Another scream rang in his ears. It seemed to come from the house. This one was different. It wasn't the blood-chilling yell he'd heard before. It was a shriek of surprise.

Spinning, he saw someone running from the house. He dropped to one knee and reached for his duffel bag. His service revolver was in there and he prayed it was on top. Ripping the zipper open, he glanced up and a chill gripped his heart. The person running toward him wasn't a Japanese soldier; it wasn't even a man, it was his wife, Sheila.

He pulled his hands out of the duffel bag and stood. He took a step toward her, then suddenly was running, everything blurring as tears filled his eyes. Catching her as she launched herself at him, he spun and squeezed her tight to his chest. He mashed his lips to the side of her face,

kissing her. Her wails rang in his ears, but it was a welcome sound. It wasn't the screams of war.

She moved her head back and looked at him. She scanned his face as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Her face was wet with tears and her lipstick smeared from kissing him. She opened her mouth to speak, but she only shuddered and breathed on him. The scent of her breath, laced with the spicy tang of gumbo, was the best odor he'd smelled in months. It reminded him that he was indeed home. He kissed her open mouth, his tongue automatically finding hers. Their first kiss since he'd left for the war those years earlier.

Dropping from his embrace, she took his hand and flashed him a playful grin. He turned to grab the duffel bag, but she pulled harder. "That can wait," she said in a husky voice.

He glanced up at her, knowing by the sound of her voice she wasn't going to wait. In that moment, he agreed, his Army gear could rot for all he cared. There was only one thing in the bag he wanted: Sheila's picture he'd carried during the war.

He pulled his hand free of hers. "Just a second." Digging into the duffel bag, he flicked on the safety and pushed the pistol to the bottom. He then found the metal cigarette box which held her picture and pulled it out.

She glanced at it, smiling, "You still have that?"

"I carried it with me every time I went out on missions."

Her smile brightened even more. Pulling him close, she said, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

She patted his back with the same signal she'd always used when she was ready to break a hug—right, left, then right.

William couldn't hold back the chuckle. "Some things never change."

Sheila pushed him back playfully, "Hey, I can't help it. I don't even know when I do that." She pouted, but it wasn't real, her beaming smile gave her away. Grabbing his hand again, she pulled him toward the house, "C'mon, we have three years of lost time."

Laughing, he let her lead him to the house, up the front steps, and inside. He scanned her bare legs, showing under the knee-length summer dress as he followed her. He couldn't help but notice that her calves were shapelier than he remembered. Taking care of the house and working in the canning factory had been good for her body.

Diary of a House

She continued to pull on his hand as she led him up the stairs to the second floor landing. Her insistence told him she was taking charge in their reunion sex. He wasn't surprised. In the time they had together before the war, sex had almost always been initiated by him. But the week before he was to ship out to Boot Camp, she'd taken the lead and had practically thrown herself on him.

Turning down the hallway, Sheila led him to the large door at the end. When they reached the dark paneled door, he broke her grip and reached for the knob. It was locked.

As if she could read his mind, she said, "I haven't slept in our bed since you left."

"What? Why not?"

"This is *our* bed and I couldn't make myself sleep in it alone. I'd smell you in the sheets and on your pillow. It would have killed me."

William stared at her, unsure what to say. Sheila pulled a key out of the hip pocket on her sundress and unlocked the door. Pushing it open, she stood to the side. William looked into the room. Standing in the middle, as it always had, was their large four-poster bed. Everything looked the same; the bed was even covered with the same quilt.

Grabbing his hand again, she pulled him into the room. As she reached the end of the bed, William turned her. She spun, a surprised look on her face. Before she could say a word, he guided her onto her back on the soft feather bed. William dropped to his knees and hiked up her dress.

He crawled up to her, without any pretense of romance. Hooking his fingers into the elastic waistband of her panties, he yanked them down to her knees. Glancing up her body to her face, he leaned in and kissed her furred mound. He pressed his nose into the soft curls and inhaled deeply. Her scent was there, and even after the long time apart he knew her smell.

Moving his face lower, he gazed up the curves of her body. He flicked out his tongue, grazing the tip along her outer lips. Just like her scent, she tasted the same and it thrilled him. Too much had changed within him; he needed some things to stay the same.

He watched her lay back, arching her chest and groaning deeply. Smiling, he parted her wet lips with the tip of his tongue and delved into her depths. He tasted her cream and was again flooded with a remembrance of something familiar and unchanged.

Closing his eyes, he buried his face in her pussy. He slid his tongue deep, tasting her essence. He puckered his lips and sucked in the engorged knot of nerves. Flicking his tongue as fast as he could, he brought her to the edge and stopped. He guessed that since so much was the same, she'd still have a hair trigger.

He listened to her shuddered breathing, then dragged the flat of his tongue across her clit. Sure enough, she bucked and thrust her hips up, mashing her clit against his nose. She keened in a high-pitched wail as her body rocked and bounced. A warm flood of cream flowed onto his chin and down his neck. He was so intent on giving her the most complete orgasm, he let the heady flavor of her come pass without sampling.

He continued to work on her clit, watching her writhe, listening to her gasping breaths. He alternated between hard, fast licks and soft, gentle caresses, keeping her from getting accustomed to a level of stimulation. He played her out, knowing that soon her clit would become numb and she'd regain control of her body. It was another thing that hadn't changed.

Slowly, her legs sagged open. She relaxed on her back and exhaled loudly, "God, how I missed you."

William stood and chuckled. "And I missed you."

She sat up, looking at his crotch, her left brow rising slightly. "We need to do something about your condition."

Glancing down at the bulge tenting the front of his olive drab Army pants, he asked, "What have you got in your wicked little mind, my dear?"

Looking up to his face, she bit the side of her lower lip. Her eyes became doe-like and she blinked slowly. "Maybe I can return the favor."

William was dumb-founded. Sucking his dick was something Sheila had only tried once, and then she only took his head in her mouth. She said it made her feel dirty. If he'd heard right and she was truly offering to suck him off, something else had changed. Unlike the changes in himself, this was a change he welcomed.

Sheila pushed herself up, grabbed his hands, and guided him to the foot of the bed. She shoved him onto the mattress and glanced down at his crotch, a wicked half-smile on her face.

The images of her lips wrapped around his cock made his already hard member swell further. It throbbed dully, his cock head wedging

Diary of a House

between the elastic of his skivvies and his stomach. His sensitive glans rubbed beautifully against the constricting waistband.

He went to grab himself and adjust his cock, but she gripped his hands. "No you don't. That's for me now."

William couldn't help the chuckle that rumbled up his throat. It had been an understanding that during their time apart they'd do what they had to not to cheat. Now that they were finally together again, there was no need to rely on themselves for release.

She dropped to her knees in front of William. She looked up at him with those dark eyes. She pouted in the sexiest way possible. He wanted to yank his pants down and slide his cock past those soft, wet lips, but he knew patience would make it hotter.

She unfastened his belt and yanked it through the loops. She let it fall to the floor, curling her fingers into the front of his pants. It only took her seconds to unfasten the buttons of his fly. She glanced up again as she pulled his pants down over his hips.

As she worked them down, she leaned forward, pressing the side of her face against his crotch. Even through the thick cotton skivvies, he felt the heat from her face. Her eyes were open just enough to keep eye contact with him. Rubbing her cheek along the length of his bulge, she hummed, "I've been dying to taste you for three years."

Smiling, he caressed her head. Internally, he questioned the change, but decided to enjoy it and prayed it wasn't just the one time.

Sheila reached up and hooked her fingers in the waistband of his boxers. She paused. It seemed as if she were waiting for him to say or do something. Just when he was about to ask if something was wrong, his shorts were yanked down. In the sudden move, Sheila caught his cock head between her lips and sucked it in. She did all this while maintaining eye contact.

William groaned as warm wetness closed on his cock head. He'd dreamt of this for years, tried to imagine how her mouth would feel. But now that the moment had arrived, he was shocked at just how great it felt.

Staring down at her, he focused on the bright red painted lips as she sucked him. He felt a flick of her tongue across the most sensitive spot, just below the front of the crown. It was enough to make him shudder and thrust his hips, driving his cock deep into her mouth. Sheila opened her throat, taking him in. She sucked his cock, burying her nose into the dark curls of his public mound.

Again, William groaned and flexed as his cock head wedged into the back of her throat. He closed his eyes and cradled the back of her head, concentrating on the gripping and releasing of Sheila's throat muscles. She had him quickly on the edge of shooting.

He pulled back to begin a rhythm of stroking his cock in her mouth. He gripped the back of her head, fisting her hair. Suddenly, coldness shot through him, followed by a pain-filled wail echoing in his ears. "Help me." His eyes opened, trying to find the voice—nothing but an empty bedroom and white walls surrounded him.

It came again, more raspy and weak. This time he knew it was in his head. Blinking, he tried to refocus, but found himself inside a small room with stained walls and a lone light bulb hanging down on a wire from the even dingier ceiling.

The wetness enveloping his cock shook him and he looked down. He saw a woman bent over in front of him, her ass cheeks pressed against him. Long, straight black hair cascaded down her back. She turned her head to look at him. In shock, William saw the face of a young Filipino woman—not Sheila's. He scanned the tiny room and tried to back away, but couldn't move.

He looked down at his right arm. There on the back of his forearm was Jimmy Stroud's tattoo of the Ace of Spades. A chill raced through William, he was inside Jimmy's body. He tried to get away from the woman and get out of the room, but it was no use, he might as well be Jimmy himself.

Jimmy, one of his platoon buddies, had been killed in a sex club in the Philippines. For as long as the platoon had been in the Philippines, Jimmy had chased after women and constantly bragged about going to the clubs in the back streets of Manila.

The night Jimmy disappeared, he'd gone off-base in search of one such parlor. He'd heard a Marine bragging about a five-minute sex club. The rumor went that a man would pay a fee and be led to a small curtained room. A woman would come in and do whatever he wanted for five minutes, then a bell would sound and she'd leave, only to be replaced by another woman. This would go on for as long as the man stayed in the booth.

Scanning the tiny room, he saw a red curtain in front of the woman. Jimmy had found the five-minute sex club. He looked on the floor and saw several wet spots. William fought back a wave of disgust. They

Diary of a House

could have come from the woman, or whoever was in the booth earlier. The thought that he was standing barefoot made his stomach turn.

He tried to back away, but was still trapped inside Jimmy. Over the internal struggle to escape the scene, he heard the ringing of a bell. The woman straightened, removing herself from their joining and walked out. She didn't even look back.

As he stood there gaping, another woman entered through the curtain. She was dressed as a Japanese Geisha, complete with kimono and white face paint. He heard Jimmy chuckle and order the Geisha to her knees.

With his cock still glistening from the pussy juice of the previous woman, she took him into her mouth. William both loved the feeling of her mouth and warred against what was happening. The Geisha took him deep into her throat and hollowed her cheeks with suction. Her hands pulled on his ass cheeks, pressing her nose into the dark curls of Jimmy's crotch.

Jimmy's body bucked and William felt the surge of his orgasm race through him. The spasms gripped him and he came deep in the throat of the woman. She continued to suck on him as if his seed would give her sustenance.

Slowly, the Geisha removed her mouth from his cock. She looked up at him with a practiced smile, a bubble of his come trickling out the side of her mouth. She shifted and removed her hands from his ass and reached into her robes.

Suddenly, she pulled out a dagger, and before he could think to react she stabbed him in the side, forcing the knife between his ribs and into his lung. Instead of feeling the stab of the dagger, William felt a tearing in his entire body, followed by a loud snap. He found himself standing on the side of the room watching the woman stab Jimmy.

He couldn't move to save his friend. He just stared in disbelief as Jimmy collapsed to the floor, blood foaming out of the corners of his mouth. Sprawled prone on the floor, Jimmy's eyes wide in terror stared blankly.

William was only able to watch as the woman leaned over and whispered into Jimmy's ear, "You know you wanted it." The woman stood and walked out of the tiny room without so much as a backward glance. She simply left Jimmy there, bleeding to death as if he were nothing.

She'd been gone only long enough for the curtain covering the doorway to stop swaying, when Jimmy's body shook and he gurgled a large glob of blood. His eyes glazed over and his head rolled to the side.

When the bell rang again, a naked woman with tousled hair and gaunt features walked into the booth. As soon as she saw Jimmy lying on the floor, she screamed and ran out of the booth.

Unable to follow the woman and call for help, William stared at his dead buddy. Black blood oozed from Jimmy's mouth, trickling down the side of his face and pooling in his ear. Helpless, he wanted more than anything to have been able to stop his friend's death.

A sharp pain stabbed the small of William's back. He flinched and looked down. A Geisha was sucking his cock. Remembering what had just happened to Jimmy, he reacted in self-defense. He forced his arms down between his body and the arms circling his waist. The woman leaned back, his cock popping free of her mouth. He briefly noticed that the woman had a look of surprise on her face, but it passed too quickly to register. He heard a whispered, "You know you want it," but the lips of the woman at his feet didn't move.

She leaned back toward his cock, with the obvious intent of finishing the job of stabbing him as she had Jimmy. But before she could get her arms around him to pull him in, he reared back and struck her across the cheek with the back of his hand. He heard a distant scream as the woman fell back. Jumping forward, he was ready to attack and avenge his buddy's death. He stood over the prone woman and checked his back. There was no gash or blood.

Looking down at her, he noticed that her clothes had gone from that of a Geisha's to a rumpled sun dress. The woman was curled on her side, covering her head and face. He heard a soft, whimpering cry, "Why?" The voice was familiar. It wasn't that of the stilted English of the Geisha.

At that moment, it hit him. The woman on the floor, curled into the fetal position, was Sheila. He'd had another flashback.

Chapter TWO

Two mornings later, William sat in the corner chair, watching the quilt covering Sheila rise and fall with her steady breathing. She turned over and faced him, still asleep. He grimaced when he saw the angry purple bruise circling her swollen eye. He hated himself for how he'd lashed out at her.

He'd explained what had happened as best he could, the flashbacks and nightmares, but he left out just how deeply the voices and images haunted him. There, with the room faintly lit by the sun filtering through the curtains, he felt the presence of spirits.

They'd followed him in. He didn't bother to look. He'd learned he only saw them when they wanted him to. A chilling wail assaulted his ears. They were the same cries he'd heard when he'd been a prisoner on the island of Bataan. The guards would pick a different prisoner each day to interrogate. Those who were lucky, or unlucky enough to survive, were tossed into a four-foot square bamboo cage hanging over the camp's sewage pit. They were left there for three days without food or water, to heal or die.

He'd had three turns in the cycle. He was never sure if they got the information out of him. Each time they interrogated him, he was stripped, strung up by his wrists, and beaten with oil-soaked bamboo canes. He blacked out every time. If he talked, he didn't remember. But that didn't stop his captors from thanking him, or the other prisoners for telling them where the Army Headquarters were. But, after supposedly having the information they wanted, the cycles of torture continued, telling William their captors were only interested in meting out punishment.

Sheila groaned and shifted again, bringing him out of his reverie. She turned on her back, facing the ceiling. Her eyes fluttered but didn't open; her breathing remained in the steady rhythm of sleep. Staring at her bruised profile, William still wanted her, but was afraid he'd never be

able to push the demons away long enough. It pained him that he'd hurt her.

After the incident, he'd decided to sleep in one of the other bedrooms. He couldn't risk lashing out again, hurting Sheila, or worse. As he stared at his wife's swollen face, he decided he would do anything to keep from hurting her again.

He'd heard rumors of a voodoo witch living in the swamps. She was supposed to have abilities to chase off bad spirits and talk with the dead. Though he didn't hold much stock in all the voodoo mumbo jumbo, he figured he had nothing to lose.

He pushed himself up from beside the bed and eased out of the room. After dressing in civilian clothes, he found Sheila's writing pad and left her a note. He told her he was going to town and would be back later. He couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth of where he was going. He knew she'd never understand and would try to stop him.

He left the car behind. Where he was going a Packard would just draw unwanted attention. Glancing back at the house, he hoped Sheila wasn't awake and looking out the window. He decided to chance it anyway and turned to the west, away from town. He began the long walk to Kookoo's Bar.

From there, William hoped he could find someone to take him into the snake and alligator infested water of the back bayous. It was a good five-mile walk to the bar, but knowing where he was going made it seem like he was on the march after the Battle of Bataan.

The August heat and humidity had him dripping with sweat long before he reached Kookoo's. But as uncomfortable as he was, it was nothing compared to what he'd endured in the jungles of the South Pacific. At least now, he didn't have to carry a fifty-pound pack.

Eventually he spotted the ramshackle tin huts forming Kookoo's Bar. He could smell the stale sweat and body odor of the regulars clear out in the parking lot. He paused outside the metal door, his hand resting on the handle. The last time he'd been in Kookoo's was two weeks before he'd left for Boot Camp. He'd gotten so drunk on Ralphie's special Kookoo brew he didn't know how he got home. He woke up on the front porch, feeling like an axe was buried in his forehead.

Opening the door and stepping into the bar, he reminded himself of the promise he'd made that he'd never drink that stuff again. Standing inside the dark interior, he heard the tinny speakers of the jukebox playing Zydeco music. A stench of stale beer and even staler smelling

Diary of a House

men assaulted him. Fighting through the initial stink, he let the door swing shut and bang loudly.

He felt eyes on him, but it was too dark to make out more than the dim lights hanging over the bar. Moving to the side of the doorway, he waited for his eyes to adjust.

Finally, he was able to make out the inside of the room. It was nearly empty; three men huddled at the end of the bar. William looked to the other end and located Ralphie. He was standing at the other end, wiping it down—his usual spot. He wouldn't be surprised if the bartender was using the same dirty rag he'd always used.

William headed across the bar toward Ralphie. As he neared, he noticed that he looked pretty much the same—silver hair, gray eyes, and bushy eyebrows. His face looked more haggard than he remembered, but then Ralphie would be in his sixties. Running a bar late every night would make anyone look tired.

A blinding pain shot through William's brain, staggering him. From the other end of the room came familiar voices. The voices of the guards from the Bataan prison camp. He looked over and saw three men dressed in Japanese uniforms watching him.

He was back in the prison camp. One of the men called for him to come over and clean the mud off his boots. He spoke in the stilted, broken English the guards used when they wanted to be sure the prisoners understood. William felt a sudden urge to lash out, but knew it wasn't real; they weren't his captors. He wasn't in the prison camp.

Shaking himself, he fought against voices and images. Another searing pain arced in his head. He stumbled forward and fell chest first across the front edge of the wooden bar. That sudden, real physical pain jarred him back to the present. He heard Ralphie's voice, "Whoa. Easy there, Willie."

He walked around and helped William into a chair near a table. "You okay?"

The voices of his former Japanese captors still echoing in his ears, William managed a weak, "Yeah, just tripped."

Ralphie looked at him suspiciously, narrowing his eyes, making his deep crow's feet deeper. "So, when did you get back in town?"

"A couple of days ago." He tried to act as if nothing had just happened.

Ralphie smiled knowingly. "Is your wife able to walk?" He laughed in his usual cackle at his own joke.

William managed a weak chuckle in response. He wondered what everyone would say if they knew what had happened.

"What's wrong, Willie? You don't seem like yourself."

"I'm not myself. Not anymore. If you'd seen what I've seen, you'd be different, too."

"Pretty rough over there, huh?"

William looked back at the men still huddled at the far end of the bar. They no longer looked like Japanese prison guards. "You could say that."

Ralphie leaned back in his chair, the legs creaking under the strain. He stared at William. "There's more, isn't there?"

William turned and looked at him, "Yes."

"You want to go to my office to talk about it?"

"That's probably best."

Ralphie pushed up from his chair. He scanned the men at the bar, then walked to the back of the room. When he opened a door, a rectangular shaft of yellow light shot into the dark bar. He stood in the light and mumbled something William couldn't hear. From inside the room came a groan, followed by the round bulk of Charlotte moving to block most of the doorway.

She stepped past Ralphie and growled, "Don't take too long. I have those damned books to finish."

He got out of her way. "Okay, we won't be long."

The scowl on her face vanished the second she looked up and saw William sitting at the table. Her grin was wide, full of teeth. She spoke in a syrupy-thick drawl, "Well, Lord almighty. Willie! Come here and give old Charlotte a hug."

William stood and walked toward the short, round woman. She looked a bit older and a bit rounder, but she still had the pretty face, her eyes brightened as she smiled at William. She'd made it no secret that she'd have him if he'd just say the word. But he loved Sheila and she'd never tried to break that bond.

She pulled him into a tight hug, squeezing the air out of him. For a moment, he thought he felt her grind her crotch into his thigh, but he pushed that thought away. She broke the hug and hollered back at Ralphie, "Why didn't you tell me Willie was here?"

Ralphie shrugged. He knew about Charlotte's infatuation with William, too. "I guess I wanted it to be a surprise."

Diary of a House

Charlotte squeezed William again; this time there was no mistaking it, she pressed her crotch to his thigh. "It's so good to see you again. We were all so worried when you were..." She paused and released her grip.

"When I was missing," William finished the sentence for her.

Charlotte nodded but didn't make eye contact. She looked at Ralphie and said, "Don't be giving Willie none of that nasty brew of yours in there. I'm sure his wife wants him to be one hundred percent." She looked up at William and winked. "If I were ten years younger—"

"I'd let you catch me," he played along.

She smiled her big, toothy grin and backed away toward the bar. Ralphie cleared his throat, "Come on in, Willie." He held the office door open.

William stepped through and sat in the chair facing an old desk. It was piled high with stacks of papers and clutter. He wondered how Charlotte could find anything in that mess.

Ralphie moved behind the desk and sagged into the high-backed chair. He leaned over and pulled open the bottom drawer. The clinking of glass on glass came from behind the desk. Rising up, Ralphie sat two shot glasses on the only clear spot on the desk. He held up a jug with a cork stuffed in the spout.

He pulled the cork out with his teeth and said through clenched teeth, "You want a nip?"

William knew by the jug that it was Kookoo's brew. Shaking his head, he said, "I need to keep my head clear." He worried that if he were drunk the ghosts would take over.

Ralphie poured himself a shot and said, "Suit yourself." He stuffed the cork back into the jug and picked up the full shot glass. "Here's to bayou mud in your eye." He downed the dark swill and slammed the shot glass upside down on the desktop.

After a long grimace and an ensuing shudder, he looked up at William. His eyes seemed clearer, as if the hooch had melted the fog from his brain. "So, what's wrong?"

"I need to see the Bayou Witch."

Ralphie sputtered, "You what?"

William repeated himself.

Ralphie calmed, but was still shaken. "The Bayou Witch is just a story old-timers tell to scare kids from wandering into the swamps."

William watched him, knowing he was lying. "That's not what I hear."

Ralphie looked away and stared at the door. Finally, he shook his head. "Let's just say for the sake of argument she's real. Why do you need to see her?"

William didn't know how much he needed to tell Ralphie about the ghosts. He knew he had to give him enough so he'd help him find the Bayou Witch. "Okay," William sighed. "I've heard she can get rid of bad spirits."

"You have some bad juju?"

"You could say that." William paused, and glanced at the jug of Kookoo's brew. The pull of the voices warred in his brain. He had no choice, but to lay it all out for Ralphie. He looked up at the older man, staring into his gray eyes. "I'm being haunted by ghosts from the war."

Ralphie leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. He stared back at William for a few moments, then said, "Holy shit. You're not kidding."

"I wish I was." William looked away, unable to maintain eye contact. "I've been having flashbacks since before I got back to the states. I hear and see all the men in my platoon who died. I'm reliving their deaths in my dreams." He looked up at Ralphie, "I'm also seeing Japanese soldiers everywhere. It's like they're after me, wanting to finish the job. They won't leave me alone." William forced the last bit out in a rush before his voice cracked.

Ralphie leaned back in his chair. "That's what happened in the bar, isn't it?"

He nodded.

Ralphie stared up at the ceiling, seemingly deep in thought, as if he was trying to make a decision. Finally, he took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay, the Bayou Witch is real. I've been sending her supplies for years. But you've got to know, she's a real witch. She's a very old woman who knows voodoo magic."

"So, will you tell me how to find her?"

Ralphie smiled. "I'll do you one better. I'll take you to her."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You can't ask me not to. I know the way. You'll get lost, or worse. The 'gators don't care why you're out there, only that you'd make a great dinner."

William knew he was right. "Okay. When can you take me?"

"How about this Sunday morning? I have to close the bar for the blue law anyway."

"Sounds good. I'll meet you here after church."

Diary of a House

Ralphie shook his head, "No. We should head out before sunrise. It's a long way back in the swamps." He pulled the cork out of the jug and poured another shot of his brew. "Let's plan to leave by four."

William nodded. "Works for me." He'd gotten used to early mornings during the war and he wasn't sleeping much anyway. He hoped an earlier morning start would mean an earlier end the hauntings.

Tossing back his drink, Ralphie stared up at the ceiling as he inhaled through his teeth. "Bring your rifle with you. I'll have everything else we need."

He watched Ralphie. He had a look in his eyes William had never seen before. It was almost fear, but there was something else there, too—resignation perhaps.

William got the feeling that they were done. He stood and stepped toward the door. Looking back, he said. "I'll see you Sunday morning."

Ralphie nodded. "Yeah, Sunday morning."

Chapter Three

William shot up in bed, swinging at the face that wasn't there. All he saw was empty night. The nightmare images faded, but not fast enough. He still remembered the look of glee on the guard's face as he swung the oil-soaked kendo stick across his bare belly.

His heart hammering against his ribs, he reached out to lean on the concrete wall, but nothing was there. He touched a mattress. He knew he wasn't in the prison cell, but where, he couldn't guess. A muffled grunt reached through the wall. It wasn't the same as the cries he'd heard before. It wasn't a pain-filled plea for escape—it was Sheila's voice.

He snapped back to reality. He was home, safe. That should have calmed him, but he heard another grunt, this time followed by a moan. It was definitely Sheila, and the thought of his ghosts attacking her chilled him.

Bolting from his bed, he felt his way down the darkened hallway, stopping just outside the master bedroom. He was about to open it and rush in, but heard Sheila groan out a loud, "Yes." It was the same yes she'd said when she was about to come. But that couldn't be, she was alone. Or at least, she was when he'd kissed her goodnight in the hall.

Suddenly suspicious, he pressed his ear to the door. The rhythmic squeaking of bedsprings joined her grunts and moans. Holding his breath, he listened. Muffled through the door came not only the sounds he'd already heard, but of Sheila talking dirty. Between grunts, she hissed in staccato exclamations. He was unable to decipher all the words, but he had no doubt she was having sex.

William backed away from the door. He stared at the knob as questions flew through his mind. Should he barge in and catch her cheating? Could he blame her? He had pushed her away since his return. One question shot into his mind, louder than the rest. What if she wasn't having sex? What if his ghosts were haunting her?

He grabbed the knob, but instead of twisting it and shoving the door open, he eased it open just enough for the latch to clear the jamb, he

Diary of a House

craned his neck to listen. She continued to pant and grunt, the bed springs squeaking even louder.

He released the knob and pushed the door open further. At first, he could only see the one wall and the corner of the bed. But slowly, as the door opened wider, he saw more and more of the bed. There, on the bed, was Sheila, naked.

He stared in disbelief. Her knees were in the air, splayed widely. He scanned the V formed by her thighs. She'd spread her pink lips open with one hand, and delved two fingers deep in her pussy.

Breaking his stare, he scanned up her body and was shocked to find that her chest was covered in Army green. For a moment, he couldn't imagine why she'd have that on. But when she pulled the material up to her face and inhaled, William saw his name above the left pocket.

As if he didn't have enough evidence that Sheila was thinking of him, she moaned, "Oh, William. Fuck me." Then she twisted her fingers deep in her pussy.

His hard-on wedged into the elastic waistband of his boxers. Instinctively, he reached down and gave his shaft a squeeze. Staring at his wife's wet pussy, the thought of sliding his tongue into her had him hungry for a taste.

He gripped his hardness tighter through the cotton shorts and stroked the length slowly. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Her wetness glistened in the flickering candlelight. It made more than his mouth water. He felt his pre-come cool on the front of his boxers. Stroking his cock dragged the elastic across his glans in a beautifully painful scrape.

As he gazed at his wife's near naked body, watching her masturbate, he heard a voice whisper, "Help me." Coldness wrapped around him. He knew it was one of his ghosts.

He concentrated on Sheila. He tried to ignore the repeated cry for help, but it was louder and more powerful. William knew the images would soon follow. He gripped his shaft tighter, hoping the squeeze would help him fight off the visions. It failed.

The room spun and turned black. He released his cock and held onto the door frame. A blinding flash slammed into his brain, buckling his knees with a sharp stab behind his eyes. He squeezed his eyes tight, but the pain was too strong and he felt himself falling.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion shook the ground and split his head apart. The sound reverberated and rolled in the air like a clap of thunder. Then all was silent, cold, and wet. He opened his eyes and was looking

up at the sky with gray smoke blocking out the sun. Turning to the side, he saw that he was in a hole—a foxhole.

He tried to fight off the images he knew weren't real. But the acrid stench of burned gunpowder and flesh belied that belief. He couldn't move. Looking at his feet, he couldn't find them; his legs were gone from the knees down. He felt no pain, he wondered if that was from shock or part of his vision. Maybe he didn't always feel what the victims had. He swallowed back the bile in his throat.

A soft moan pierced the jarring sounds of rifle fire and cluster bombs. The moan was soft, too soft for a cry of pain. It was so soft he shouldn't have been able to hear it. That fact struck him. The sound wasn't from his vision, it was Sheila.

Another flash of blinding pain burned into his brain and the world of the foxhole turned black. He forced his eyes to stay open. He had to see what happened during the transition. Maybe there was something there he could use to get the ghosts to stop haunting him.

He quickly realized that was a bad idea. Flashes of the faces of dead buddies appeared in the blackness. Some were as he remembered them from boot camp, but others were partially blown away or rotted skulls. He squeezed his eyes shut, but it was too late—the images were burned into his memory.

Again, all fell silent. The roar of battle faded into nothingness. In its place were grunts coming from the master bedroom. He fought his way back to his feet.

Sheila had moved. She'd rolled over and crawled to the end of the bed. She stood on her tiptoes, her body draped over the mattress. Her ass was facing him and he groaned inwardly. It had always been his favorite view of his wife. But seeing her like that now, and knowing he couldn't trust himself to be with her, was a painful reminder.

Tears burned his eyes and he did the only thing he knew to do. He backed away and pulled the door closed. It was bad enough knowing he was couldn't be with her. It was unbearable to know that she was having to find release without him, wishing he was with her. He crept back to his room down the hall and spent the rest of the night sitting in a chair looking out the window at the darkness.

Chapter Four

William stood one step from the front porch of Kookoo's Bar. He was early. The lights were still off. Not knowing how long it would be before Ralphie got up, William sat on the long wooden bench on the end of the porch.

He'd slipped out of the back door a little after three. Before he left, he checked in on Sheila and found her sound asleep. They'd talked a few days ago about why he couldn't trust himself to have sex with her. She said she understood, but he saw the hurt and disappointment in her eyes, and couldn't bring himself to tell her he'd caught her masturbating.

Sitting there in the dark, he knew he wasn't alone. The ghosts were there. They'd haunted most of his waking and sleeping moments. He wanted them gone, but nothing he'd tried worked. If anything, the harder he pushed, the more the ghosts fought to stay. It was as if they were becoming a part of him.

He'd even tried to use his memories of his life before the war to fight them off, but it was no use. He cherished those carefree memories of growing up with, then dating, and finally wooing Sheila, filled the gaps between the hauntings. He recalled their shared dream of living in the old house on 413 Remembrance Lane, and having a passel of kids. All that was before he'd gotten the letter in the mail—his draft notice.

The screen door slammed shut, yanking William out of his reverie. He looked up and saw Ralphie standing on the edge of the porch. He was staring toward the parking lot.

"Good morning, Ralphie."

Ralphie jumped and spun to face him. He brought up his hands, the silhouette of a rifle visible in the faint back light of the bayou moon aimed at William's chest.

William stepped to the side and out of the shadow of the porch.

"Y-you sonofabitch! Don't do that."

Fighting the urge to chuckle, William said, "Sorry."

Ralphie lowered the rifle and leaned against a support beams. "Shit, man, I don't need that kind of jolt this early." He took a breath and seemed to compose himself. "I guess that's kind of how those ghosts make you feel, huh?"

"Sort of. I'm getting used to them."

Ralphie looked at him. "They're here, aren't they?"

"Not right now. Your gun scared them off," William lied. He knew Ralphie was jumpy enough as it was. If he knew there were at least two ghosts swirling around them both, he might back out of taking William to the Bayou Witch.

Ralphie eyed him suspiciously, "Are you ready to do this?"

"Yeah, as ready as I can be."

Ralphie turned and stepped back into the dark bar. William grabbed his duffel bag and rifle and followed him inside. There were a couple of lanterns burning at the far end of the bar.

They weaved around the tables. From both corners of his eyes, William saw movement. He knew it was the ghosts, but one movement was too real, too solid.

"Willie. Good morning," came Charlotte's greeting.

She walked out of the shadows, wearing only a sleeping gown. It was simple, and not what he'd consider sexy, but the thin cotton barely covered her enormous breasts. Even in the faint light of the bar, her nipples strained against the stretched material. William averted his gaze. He didn't want her to get the wrong idea.

She walked up to William and gave him a hug. Her breath was warm on his chest as she said, "You be careful out there. There're ain't no fish worth getting chewed up by a gator."

William glanced at Ralphie, who nodded once, then said, "Hey! What about me?"

Charlotte broke the hug and said, "There ain't no gators that could stomach you. They'd spit you out after one bite."

Ralphie turned and grumbled something he couldn't hear. He slung his rifle over his shoulder, grabbed a lantern, and looked back at William, "We best get going. I want to get to the best fishing spot before sunrise."

William nodded and followed Ralphie outside.

As the door slammed shut behind them, Ralphie glanced back. "I figured it was best Charlotte didn't know where we're going. She'd probably run and tell your wifey."

Diary of a House

"Probably."

They climbed into the sixteen-foot flat bottom boat Ralphie used for fishing and pushed off from the dock. In minutes, the shore became nothing more than a large darker hump on the horizon and the old Evinrude outboard sputtered behind the boat. The air was cooler, but more humid out on the open water.

"So you going to tell me where we're going?"

Ralphie nodded, "She lives on an island way back in the swamps."

"Island? She lives on an island?"

"Yes and she's the only human living on it. She doesn't have anything to do with civilization anymore. I don't know why, I never asked. I figured if she wanted to tell me she would."

"Does she still help people then?"

"Some. Not many, and before you ask, money won't help. If she wants to help you, that's her decision."

The hum of the outboard fed into his worried thoughts, but he knew that dwelling on the what-ifs wouldn't help. He gazed up at the stars. The sky had begun its transformation from the black of night to the varying shades of blue and purple of early morning. The air, the sound of the water, even the smell of the bayou reminded him of the recon missions he'd been on in the jungles. A chill enveloped him, and he wondered if it was real or imagined.

He chose not to decide. He couldn't fight the visions, and if he tried, it might cause Ralphie to turn the boat around and head back. Instead, William set his rifle down on his lap and gripped the sides of the boat. He stared at the inky blackness yawning before them.

William wasn't sure how long he'd been staring, but suddenly, looming in the distance, was a low black line just above the water's edge. The pitch of the outboard dropped a few octaves. The boat shifted forward, then a hand on his shoulder.

"We need to put out the lanterns before we get too close to the swamps." The voice was Ralphie's but the face didn't match. In the flickering light from his lantern, his face was painted in camouflage and he wore a jungle hat. William knew it was one of his ghosts and gritted his teeth, the fear gnawing at him. He nodded and killed his lantern. He grabbed his rifle and made sure it was loaded.

The Evinrude revved up again. Air rushed past and for a moment, William felt as if the ghosts had been left behind. He glanced back, but it was still too dark to see.

Ralphie nosed the boat straight for the swamp. He never slowed the motor as they raced headlong toward the black-green of the jungle. William wondered if Ralphie was going to slow down. It didn't seem that there was any opening in the wall of Cyprus trees and Spanish moss.

Just before William was sure they'd crash into the trees, blinding rays of sunlight shot overhead and illuminated the edge of the swamp. There, dead ahead, was a narrow opening between the wide bases of two huge trees.

William didn't have time to be scared. They entered the near total darkness in a second. Just as the boat seemed to be swallowed by the swamp, Ralphie cut the motor down to idle.

Over the hum of the motor, Ralphie said, "Get your gun ready. Now's when we're going to need it."

He didn't ask what that meant. He knew Ralphie wouldn't say it if it weren't true. Holding his rifle across his chest, he scanned back and forth in front of the boat. He didn't know if that meant alligators, snakes, or what.

"Watch for stumps," Ralphie said, then revved the engine up a bit, sending the boat moving through the black water.

William gave a quick thumbs-up and focused his attention to the water ahead. He pointed one way, then another, directing Ralphie where to steer. It seemed as if they weren't moving very fast, but William had no way to gauge their speed.

William was getting tired and he knew they'd been working their way through the stumps for a long time. How long, he couldn't tell because the canopy of Cypress and Spanish moss blocked out all but the most meager of sunlight.

Suddenly, the stumps disappeared. The engine dropped back to idle. William looked up and saw a huge lagoon. The swamp spread out behind them and it looked as if the edge of the trees were mowed down, but there was still an overhanging layer of Spanish moss.

William looked at Ralphie. He was staring ahead wide-eyed. Following his gaze, William saw that what he thought was the other side of the lagoon was actually an island.

Before he could ask, Ralphie said, "That's it. That's the Bayou Witch's island."

The shore was bare of any vegetation. It was muddy and had what looked like ruts dug into the soil. It looked as if something huge had been

Diary of a House

crawling in and out of the water, but he couldn't imagine what would be that big.

The engine went silent. Looking back, William saw Ralphie holding up a paddle. "Here, take this. We have to be quiet or we'll make Damien mad."

"Damien?"

"Yes, her gator. He's huge and very protective. He normally stays in the water, except for feeding time."

Looking back at the ruts, William asked, "Are those from Damien?"

"Yup. He's got to be at least twenty-five feet long, only hell knows how much he weighs."

"Shit."

"Tell me about it."

"Where is he, then?" Panic rose in his stomach.

Pointing to the left side of the lagoon, Ralphie said, "I saw a wake moving away from over there when we floated into the lagoon."

William looked over to that side of the lagoon. "Can you see him?"

"No, but I know where he usually hides. Just keep from slapping the water and hitting the sides of the boat with the oars and we'll be fine."

His hands were shaking, but he gripped the wooden paddle tight and slipped it into the water. He continually scanned the left side of the lagoon as he pulled the oar through the water. Sweat stung his eyes, but he didn't dare wipe them and risk hitting the side of the boat with the paddle.

He lurched forward, nearly slamming the oar into the gunwales when as the boat came to a sudden and silent halt. Looking ahead, he saw that they'd hit the muddy shore. Ralphie said, "Okay, ease out and pull me up as far as you can."

William thought Ralphie was crazy.

"It's okay. I've found Damien's eyes. He's still in his hiding spot."

With a big swallow, William eased out of the front of the boat. He grabbed the tow rope and gave it a pull. The bow of the flat bottom boat slid up the bank easily.

Ralphie handed William a large duffle bag and climbed out. William reached for his rifle, but was stopped when Ralphie said, "Leave it. She's too powerful."

"I thought you said we'd need it."

"She's not a threat. But she has powers and can cast spells." Ralphie pulled up his shirt. There was a bullet wound in his side. "See this? My

first time here, I took a shot at Damien. She deflected the bullet. Trust me, your gun is useless now that we're on the island. Besides, she already knows we're here."

William looked around, not sure what he was expecting to find. How could she know they were there? Ralphie had told him she was blind.

Scanning across the lagoon, William saw the faint wisps of three ghosts. They were on the other side of the lagoon, darting from side to side, their empty soulless eyes staring at him. It looked as if they were trying to get to him, but something was stopping them. Their anguished wails echoed in his head, but that was all that reached him.

Ralphie clapped his hand on William's shoulder, startling him. "Don't worry, we're safe. Damien won't bother us now that we're on the island."

William looked at Ralphie, "How do you know?"

"Simple. If she didn't want us here, he would have stopped us. I don't know how, but she communicates with him."

William looked back and saw a large hump come out of the water between him and the apparitions. It looked as if Damien was blocking the ghosts, but that couldn't be.

Ralphie interrupted his thoughts again. "Come on, let's go. I'd like to get out of the swamp by nightfall." He shouldered the duffle bag and took off up the bank to the trees that shrouded the interior of the island.

The two of them weaved along a narrow path through the densely packed trees. It was dark. There was just enough sunlight filtering through the canopy for them to see a couple of feet in front of them. Ralphie took the lead and walked faster than William thought possible in the faint light. He'd obviously made this trek many times before.

Rounding a sharp turn in the path, William saw a flame dancing in the distance. It seemed to be floating in the air. Ralphie looked back at him. "She's expecting us."

"How do you know?"

"She's blind. The flame is for us."

William nodded, but wasn't sure he believed Ralphie.

"Let's go. She's willing to see us. Maybe she can help you." Ralphie walked toward the light without waiting for William.

He went to follow, but was stopped by a blood-chilling scream. It was a cry of rage and made the hairs on his arm stand on end. He spun around, but only saw the dark emptiness of the swamp. The scream

Diary of a House

echoed again. This time it sounded as if it came from deep in the swamp. Cold gripped his heart. The ghosts were back and they were looking for him.

Suddenly, a hand grasped his shoulder and he spun around, ready to fight. In front of him was the face of an old woman, floating in the air. She was transparent and he could see Ralphie still walking away through her wispy presence.

He refocused his eyes to look at the face closer. Her eyes were a milky-white. She was impossibly old, her face wrinkled, the tiny lines like a crumpled piece of parchment. Without being told, he knew he was looking into the face of the Bayou Witch.

Another scream echoed, but this time it wasn't just a wail. There was a long, drawn out, "No." William stared at the floating face. The wail hadn't come from her, but her the expression on her weathered face became one of distress.

A loud pop shot into his ears, followed by a sharp pain between his eyes. He squeezed them shut to push out the pain, and it flew away as fast as it came. When he opened his eyes, the woman had disappeared, but so had the swamp. He spun around, looking at the walls of a windowless room.

The walls were black, as if they'd been charred. Still there was enough light to see. It seemed as if the ceiling had a luminescence. He spotted a small table with two chairs at the far end of the room. The top of the table was black, too, as if it too had been burned. In the middle of the scarred table stood a round pot setting on top of a three-legged stand. The legs of the stand itself looked more like the legs and claws of an owl than a stand.

William opened his mouth to call for Ralphie, but a raspy voice stopped him. "He's safe."

The voice came from the darkest corner of the room. A movement in the inky blackness caught his attention. He stared in disbelief as a stooped, frail old woman materialized. She looked so fragile that William half expected her to collapse under the weight of her own skin. Still, she shuffled toward the table with slow, but steady progress. Her face looked even more weathered in the dim light. Shadows from her brows shrouded her eyes, but he could see the glowing white of her bleached pupils.

She waved a hand above one of the wooden chairs and it slid back away from the table. Sitting, she motioned at the other chair and it slid

out as the first had. "Please sit down. Ralphie is safe. So are you. For now."

That last statement jarred him, but he numbly settled into the chair across from the Bayou Witch. He wanted to ask what she meant, but he was still trying to comprehend what she had just done with a simple wave of a hand.

She passed both of her hands over the pot on the stand and a small flame flickered to life, sending a thin ribbon of white smoke up into the air. As the dancing yellow flame illuminated the room, she raised her head and seemed to look directly at him.

Reaching across the table, she turned both of her hands, palms up, one on each side of the pot. He wasn't sure why, but he had the sense that she wanted him to put his hands in hers. When he did, she curled her bony fingers around his. She shuddered, her grip warmed and tightened.

Suddenly, her body stiffened. "You are in grave danger. So is everyone near you." She paused. "The visions and flashes of your past are real...very real."

"H-how do you know?"

"I see more without my eyes than most do with theirs."

He nodded, confused, but wanting to believe she could help.

"You're safe here. Your ghosts aren't here. As long as you're on the island, you'll be safe."

"Where are they?"

"The other side of the lagoon," she said, then began a low humming.

It was a long, monotone hum and went on without her needing to take a breath. William watched her blank stare, not sure what to expect. Her body trembled, slightly at first, then growing until her entire body shook. Her mouth fell slack and the moaning became more guttural. She slumped forward and her grip on his hands tightened.

Her head snapped up, her lips curled into a snarl, and her eyes opened widely, staring lifelessly forward. The thin ribbon of smoke rising between them widened and formed into a swirling cloud of gray smoke above the smudge pot. It shrouded her face, thickening until he could no longer see even the outline.

He watched the smoke, unable to look away. It seemed to have a life of its own and had a pull on him. Slowly, a face formed in the swirling smoke. The face came toward him, forming fully. The eyes were black and squinted into angry slits. There was a long scar down one side of the

Diary of a House

face and the head was wrapped in a bandana. To William the face looked like that of a pirate.

He stared, unable to speak or even think of anything to say. The black eyes locked on his and seemed more real. A gruff male voice boomed out of the smoke-shrouded face, "You can't let them win."

William was frozen. Was this pirate talking about his ghosts? If so, who was he and how did he know about them?

The pirate's face softened, but remained pensive. "I'm not one of your ghosts. I was known as the privateer Captain Miles Chadwick, but my real name was Drew Townsend. I now live in the house."

William heard himself mutter, "My house?"

"No," Drew boomed. "Our house."

Our house. William didn't understand, but remembered the rumor of a pirate once living in his house.

Drew's face moved closer. "I've lived quietly in the house on Remembrance Lane for centuries. I had no reason to contact the living world. That is, until you brought them home with you."

"You mean the ghosts of the war?"

The pirate nodded. "They have disturbed the balance. They can't stay."

"But I don't want them here, either," William argued. "I'm here to try to get rid of them."

A hand appeared in the smoke. "I know. I also know they won't go easy." He paused, his face becoming sad. "If you can't banish the ghosts back to where they came from, you will be lost."

"Lost? What are you saying?"

"They want your soul. Every time they take you back to the memories of the war, they take a part of your soul. Eventually, you'll be an empty shell. Then they'll go after Sheila."

Panic rose in William's chest. His stomach churned, the room spun. He pressed his feet to the floor to brace himself and try to stop the nausea from overwhelming him.

The gravelly voiced pirate stemmed the panic. "There's a way to stop them."

"I'll do it, whatever it is."

"There is a cost."

"I don't have a choice. If I don't do something, it won't matter." William forced his panic down. "What do I have to do?"

Drew nodded, but his face remained stoic. "There's a diary in the house. Find it."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. I'm not able to see it. Your ghosts have forced me to the only safe place in the house, the attic."

"Then how do I find it?" The panic rose again, nearly overwhelming William.

Drew held up his hand again. "It's a leather-bound book with a locking clasp. On the back is a symbol. It's the code for where to find the key. You have to use the key or the magic within the diary will be broken."

"Can you tell me where to find the key?"

"If I tell you and the ghosts try to take you, they'll read your mind and find it first. They know about the magic of the diary and will take the key for themselves. They aren't strong enough to destroy the diary, only a human can do that, but they can make you do it, if they take control of your spirit."

"Okay. I find the diary and the key, then what?"

"Write your story after the last entry. When finished, make a wish for what you want the magic of the diary to do."

"What if the ghosts try to take me after I've opened the diary?"

"The magic of the diary is powerful. It'll keep the ghosts away. They won't risk getting near it if opened."

"Why can't I just unlock it and leave it open?"

"The magic of the diary will drain away if left unlocked. You must write your story as quickly as you can. Leave nothing out. When you're finished, make your wish."

"That's it?" William felt hope. For the first time in a long time, he thought he might get his life back. All he had to do was write his story and wish for the ghosts to go away. It seemed so easy.

"Yes and no. Once you make the wish, lock the diary, and hide both it and the key. Your wish will then be granted." The pirate paused for a moment, his face becoming even more serious. "There's one more thing. You'll have to give up something important to you."

William stared in disbelief; he knew it sounded too easy.

"You won't get to choose what it is that you'll lose. The diary will decide a fair price for your wish."

Before William could think of anything more to say, the smoke thinned and faded into nothingness and the face blew away.

Diary of a House

Across from him sat the old woman. She was slumped forward, her head drooping toward the table. If it wasn't for her slight swaying and gasping pants, he would've thought her dead. As if on cue, her grip tightened and she raised her head. She looked more tired than she had earlier.

She sighed and rasped, "You have your answer. I must ask that you leave. I'm tired and weak."

William started to thank her, but there was a loud pop in his ears and the sharp pain between his eyes again. He was no longer in the room with the Bayou Witch. He was beside the torch, on the island, where he'd been earlier.

Ralphie's voice came from behind him. "You okay?"

"I-I think so," he wasn't sure he believed it.

"Did she give you any answers?"

William nodded.

"Good, let's get going. It'll be dark before too long."

Chapter Five

The trip back to the mainland was a blur. William's mind was stuck on what had happened on the island. It all seemed surreal. A ghost was helping him to get rid of ghosts.

He walked down the stairs to the foyer, still groggy from sleep, unsure how long he'd slept, a day or two. But it was his first uninterrupted sleep in weeks.

Looking around the large room, he wondered if Drew was in the attic. He wished the pirate was there to help him. He tried to remember what Drew said. The key wasn't with the book. There was also supposed to be a clue on the cover to help him find it. But he had to find the diary first.

Glancing up the stairs, he thought about going to the attic. Maybe he could make contact with Drew. He shook it off. The pirate had already told him he couldn't see the book.

The clanking of dishes caught his attention. Walking through the dining room, he stood in the doorway and watched Sheila dry and put the dishes away. She must have sensed his presence because she smiled when she turned and saw him. "Feeling better, sleepy head?"

"Yeah." He wasn't sure.

"Was Ralphie able to help?"

William stammered, "W-what do you mean? We went fishing."

Sheila walked to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You don't have to protect me. I'm stronger than I was before the war."

He was dumbfounded. "How did you know?"

She smiled up at him. "You took your rifle instead of your fishing poles."

William knew lying was pointless. "Okay, you got me. Ralphie took me to see the Bayou Witch." He waited for her to react.

Instead, she asked, "And?"

Diary of a House

He started to tell her about the pirate, but remembered what Drew said about the ghosts eventually coming after her. "We came up with a plan to stop the hauntings."

"What are you going to do?" Her eyes widened.

"I need to find a diary. It's supposed to be hidden somewhere in the house."

Sheila uncoiled her arms from his neck and pressed her open palms on his chest. "A leather diary with a locking clasp?"

"You've seen it?"

She nodded, "A couple of years ago. But I never found the key."

"Where is it?" William blurted.

"I can't remember. The library, I think."

He pulled her in tight, hugging her. After a few seconds, the ghosts warring for control over him screamed in his mind and he let her go. He had to find that diary.

He headed for the library. Once there, he didn't know where to start. Scanning the room, he spotted the library ladder and decided to try the top row of the shelves. He paused at the bottom step. What would the ghosts do when he found it? Would they try to take it?

As he stood looking up, he remembered what Drew said. They couldn't destroy the diary themselves. They'd have to get a mortal to do it. Relieved, he climbed the ladder.

At the top, he scanned the upper row of the bookshelf and found ledgers, but no diaries. He noticed that the top of the bookcase didn't reach the ceiling. Climbing a couple of rungs higher, he peered over the top.

In the back, nestled in the corner, was a book. He reached to the back and slid it out. He flipped the book over and wiped away the dust. Embossed into the leather were two crossed swords, forming an 'X'.

Instantly, he remembered seeing that image before—the first time he saw the inside of the house. In the formal living room, above the fireplace was a display of two cutlasses. They shone as if recently polished and stood out because they were so pristine.

It suddenly hit William that the ghosts were quiet. Either they were gone or they were waiting for him to find the key. That last thought raised the hair on his neck. Panic gripped him as he raced down the ladder. He had to get to the swords before the ghosts figured out where the key was. Sliding to a stop in front of the fireplace, he stared up in

relief. The two swords rested in the display, as always. Grabbing a footstool, he stepped closer.

He stared at the two swords, but nothing jumped out at him. He leaned in closer, scanning the intricate carvings in the grips of the swords, still, nothing that lead him to the key.

Leaning in closer, he saw a design in the milky-white bone grip. It was of an open book. Looking closer, he saw the end appeared to be a cap and not a solid bone handle.

He pulled the sword off the bracket. He held the flat of the blade between his knees and gripped the cap. Giving it a twist, he spun the end free. His heart thrummed.

Peering inside, he found a fountain pen. He pulled it out, wondering how the pen would lead him to the key. Suddenly, a thought struck him. He stuffed the fountain pen in his shirt pocket and quickly removed the other sword and held it so he could see the pommel. There it was. Scrimshawed in the end was the silhouette of a skeleton key.

His hands shook. He was close.

Looking up, he saw Sheila standing on the other side of the room.

Turning back to the cutlass, he unscrewed the cap. He looked inside the handle and saw black velvet. He wedged his forefinger into the opening and eased the cloth out. He quickly spun the cap back on the sword and set it down on the floor beside the other.

He placed the velvet on the mantle and unrolled it. It was a pouch with a drawstring. On the front of the pouch was the monogram *A. T.*

A. T.? What did *A. T.* mean? It didn't make sense. He stared at it for a second, then remembered Drew's last name, Townsend. Then it hit him, *A. T.* had to stand for Andrew Townsend. Drew was short for Andrew. Even without opening the pouch, he knew it had to be the key. Why else would those initials be on there?

William grasped the pouch and took a step away from the fireplace, then stopped. He had a feeling he must put the display back as he found it. Glancing down at his hand, he realized he'd not actually found the key, or at least his ghosts hadn't seen it. Maybe they wouldn't attack him until they saw the key in his hand.

He stuffed the black pouch in his pocket and put the swords back on the rack. After making sure everything was as he'd found it, he walked back toward Sheila. She smiled and gave him a hug, kissing him on the neck.

Diary of a House

She broke the embrace and looked up at him. Trailing a finger down his arm, she whispered, "Be careful. I'll always be here waiting for you."

"How do you know—?"

She stopped the rest of the question by cupping his crotch with her hand. Shushing him, she said, "You'll find out in time."

He gazed into her eyes. There was strength and self-confidence he'd never seen before. It was as if she'd known of this path all along, but that couldn't be.

She broke his reverie with a squeeze of his growing bulge. "Go. I'll be waiting." She turned, went through the living room, and up the stairs to the second floor. When she reached the landing, she glanced back and winked, before stepping out of his sight.

He was dumbfounded. His mind was full of wild speculations. Had Sheila been a party to this whole string of events? Had she known he'd attack her in the throes of his flashbacks?

A sudden wail slammed into his mind, shaking him, nearly dropping him to his knees. His ghosts must have sensed Sheila was more aware than she'd let on, too. Maybe that was why they hadn't attacked—she was too strong for the ghosts.

William took a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm. Pushing away from the door, he walked down the hall to the library. Each step was met with punishing waves of pain that wracked his mind and soul as the spirits warred within him. They sent him visions of the diary burning in the fireplace.

William focused on what Sheila meant to him. She was his world and the memory of their lives growing up together and falling in love were the only things that kept him sane during the war. He hadn't given up then, and it wasn't going to happen now.

Finally, he made his way to the library. Another wave blasted his ear and he grabbed the door frame to keep from collapsing. He held on until the pain behind his eyes faded enough for him to see the ladder across the room. His ears and brain ached. Flashes of destroying the diary blinded him, but he fought them off.

He staggered across the room and somehow climbed the ladder, despite the constant barrages of imagery and sensation. He stood, gripping the ladder tight and grabbed the diary, clutching it to his chest. Without any hesitation, he slid the key into the clasp and gave it a turn. The clasp slid free, unlocking the diary.

Silence washed over him. The wailing ceased and the pain vanished as if it hadn't happened. He felt a calmness he hadn't felt in months. The ghosts were afraid of the diary's magic. As long as it was open, he'd be safe. More importantly, so was Sheila.

William gazed down at the opening page of the diary. There, on the front page, was a handwritten warning. It read:

Warning fair reader and take heed.

You who decide to make a wish upon this diary must search your heart. If the granting of the wish is worth anything nearest and dearest to your heart, then do as you will. Remember, though, once sacrificed it cannot be retrieved.

That said, if your wish is something you desire with all your heart and soul and worth anything in your possession. Wish away...

William stared at the warning. What would he have to lose if his wish came true? What was as valuable as Sheila's safety? It only took him a moment to decide he'd pay any price to know she was safe.

Climbing down, he remembered what Drew had said. The magic keeping the ghosts at bay wasn't permanent. It would run out if the book was left open too long. Not knowing how much time he had, William hurried to the lone table in the library and set the open diary down.

Flipping through the pages, he noticed several different handwriting styles. He wanted to stop and read each passage, but forced himself to keep searching for the last entry—he could go back later and read the stories. First, he had to read the last entry and most importantly write his story.

He finally found the last story and was about to settle in and begin reading when a voice whispered almost imperceptibly. He looked up expecting to see Sheila, but the library was empty.

The voice came again, this time louder. "The library isn't safe."

William recognized the gruff voice—it was Drew.

"They're waiting for the diary to weaken," Drew's voice came again. "You can feel them if you try."

He nodded and stared at the far wall. There, barely visible against the white-washed wall, were the outlines of three figures. It looked as if they were more inside the wall than in front of it.

William whispered, "I see them. Where do I go?"

Diary of a House

"I can't tell you that. They will read your thoughts like they did when they discovered you had the key."

Drew was right. He looked down at the diary and remembered something else. He snatched up the diary and ran toward the ghosts. As he anticipated, they wailed and melted into the wall.

With their howls fading, he slammed the diary closed and ran from the room, bounding up the stairs to the second floor. He launched himself down the hallway and skidded to a stop beneath the trap-door to the attic. With the diary clutched to his chest, he jumped up and grabbed the rope dangling from the door. It only took him seconds to unfold the ladder, climb up to the attic, and slam the door closed behind him, but it seemed to take forever.

As a cloud of dust rose, William scanned the attic. It was almost too dark to see. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the dark and he spotted the kerosene lantern he'd left on a crate. He smiled and held it up, seeing oil sloshing in the clear base. He lit the lamp, flooding the attic with yellow light.

He found a small desk nestled against the angled ceiling. He cleaned off the clutter and dust and set the lamp and diary on the table. Searching again, he spotted a chest in a corner and dragged it over for a place to sit.

Settling, he remembered the fountain pen and pulled it out of his pocket. He needed ink and was just about to get up and go down the ladder to look for an inkwell when a chill washed over him. Fear gripped him as he expected to hear the wail of his ghosts. Instead, he heard Drew's voice. "Look in the desk drawer."

William slid the drawer open and spotted an inkwell. He pulled it out and set the fountain pen in the opening.

Drew spoke again. "You're safe here. The other ghosts won't come up here with me and the open diary."

William sighed. "Thanks."

He took a long breath and opened the diary to the last story. It was several pages long and he settled in for what looked to be a long stretch of reading, then writing his own story.

chapter six

William stared at the last line he'd written in the diary. It was of him writing his story in the diary. It felt like a circle, a never ending story. He imagined the story being like that of lining up two mirrors to make an endless reflection of reflections.

All that was left for him to do was to write down his wish. He stared at the page, wondering just how to word it. It had to be clear. He couldn't risk any chance of it not coming true exactly as he wanted.

Finally, the words came to him. Not stopping to give himself time to change his mind, he wrote one simple sentence.

I, William Jackson Beauregard, wish the ghosts and visions of the war to leave me forever.

He waited for the ink to dry, then closed the diary and locked it. It sounded almost like a large metal door had been slammed closed and the lock had been turned.

Shaking his head, he figured his mind was playing with him. Leaning back, he stretched his arms above his head. His neck and back were knotted with tension from the long hours of sitting hunched over the desk. He glanced around the attic, noticing it was night through the far window.

A cold breeze brushed the back of his neck. He knew it was Drew. He looked up and said to the dark, "It's done."

Drew's voice was a whispered echo. "Not yet. To make the magic work, you have to put everything back the way you found it."

"Then what?"

"Then, if you've followed the rules, your wish will be granted."

"When will I know?"

"That I can't answer."

"Can't or won't?"

Diary of a House

Drew chuckled. "You're learning. You'll find out when the time's right."

"I thought there'd be some sign."

"Sometimes there is. Sometimes, not."

Just then, William remembered the sound of the clasp when he'd locked it—the slamming of the door and the click of the tumblers. Could that have been the sign? He expected there to be some struggle by the ghosts, something loud and painful as they tried to drag him with them to the other side.

A wispy form appeared in front of William—it was Drew.

William saw sadness in his eyes, a look of resignation. He sensed there was more Drew hadn't told him. It struck William that Drew had the look of someone saying goodbye. "I'm never going to see you again, am I?"

"If your wish comes true, not only will your ghosts be gone, so will I."

"Where will you go?"

Drew's face became clearer in the swirling fog. He was smiling wistfully. "I'll finally be with my dear Catherine again. I've been without her for more years than I can count." His smile faded somewhat, and he spun around. "I'll miss this house, though."

It struck him he was helping Drew's wish come true, too.

Drew turned back to face William. "I couldn't tell you."

William nodded. "I understand. Thanks for everything." He wanted to say more, but no words came to mind.

Drew moved closer. "No, thank you." He reached out and placed a cold hand on William's shoulder. He then disappeared.

For several moments, William stared at the spot where Drew had been, then grabbed the diary, key, and pen. He blew out the lamp and climbed down from the attic. Moving as quickly as possible, he replaced key and the fountain pen in their respective hiding places in the swords.

Standing in the doorway of the library, he looked down at the diary. He wanted to read the rest of the stories, but didn't want to risk taking any more time.

He walked across the room and climbed the ladder. All the while he was listening, ready for the ghosts to attack. He stood on the ladder, looking over the top of the bookcase at the square in the dust where the book had set for all those years. He gave the diary one last glance and

reached over the top of the bookcase, setting the leather-bound book in the very spot he'd found it.

The moment it touched the wood, a raspy sigh echoed in the library. It sounded as if it were miles away and right next to him at the same time. Coldness surged through him from his back, to his chest, and down his arm. It flowed out his fingers, still touching the diary, and seemed to seep into the book.

William stared at the diary. Was it done? Was that the sign? He hoped it was, but he knew only time would tell.

He climbed down the ladder and stood in the middle of the library. Looking through the windows, he was again reminded that it was late. How late, he couldn't guess. His stomach growled, but he didn't want to take the time to eat. He wanted to get to sleep so the morning would arrive quicker, and so would his wish.

He crept back up the stairs and turned down the hall toward the master bedroom. Standing outside the door, he wondered if it was safe to go in. The ghosts hadn't come back, and he prayed his wish had already come true. Still, he couldn't trust that they'd stay away. He'd been fooled by them before.

Easing the door open, he decided to check on Sheila. A square of moonlight on the floor cast the room in a faint blue. It was just bright enough to see the tiny lump of Sheila's sleeping form under the blankets.

He moved silently across the room to the side of the bed. The sheets were pulled down, revealing her bare breasts. She was sleeping naked, something she only did when she was feeling randy.

He suddenly wanted her and knew he'd never get to sleep after knowing she was naked. As quietly as possible, he stripped out of his clothes and slipped into bed beside his wife. It was the first time he'd been in the same bed with her since that horrible day when he lashed out in the fog of a haunting.

Looking down at her, he watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed. He had to taste her again. He leaned over and placed his mouth over her breast. Just as he flicked his tongue across her nipple, he heard a scream.

Sheila flinched and grabbed his head. But instead of pushing him away, she curled her fingers in his hair, arching her back. She groaned out his name, pulling his head tight to her chest. He was glad the scream was hers. If it had been the ghosts, he didn't know if he could have taken another haunting.

Diary of a House

She whispered, "Are the ghosts gone?"

He raised his head. "I don't know. I did what I was supposed to do. Now, I have to wait." He couldn't bring himself to mention that he was going to lose something.

Out of nowhere, she said, "It's worth it."

What did she mean? How much did she know? "What's worth it?"

She shifted and rolled onto her side, facing him. "William, I've had visits by a ghost. He told me I couldn't tell you about it until you completed the task."

"He? A pirate?"

"Yes."

William was dumbfounded.

Sheila cupped his chin. "Drew first visited me when you were on the way back from the Bayou Witch's island. He told me what you had to do."

"Everything?"

She nodded. "Your ghosts weren't contacting me and Drew knew you needed my help. You just couldn't know it."

"What did you do?"

"I was supposed to make sure you found the diary. Also if you had trouble with the clue, I was supposed to help, without making it look like I knew anything."

William sagged onto his back, staring up at the canopy above the bed. "Did you know that my ghosts would come after you once they had me?"

"Yes. I was scared, but had to stay calm so you could complete your task."

"Did he also tell you I'd have to give up something important to get my wish?"

"He told me, yes. But I don't know what it is that you'll lose. I just have to trust that it's worth it."

William smiled. It was like her to find the positive. He leaned in and kissed her. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him on top of her. They rolled over and he ended up on top of his wife for the first time in three years.

Passion rose and he let his weight press Sheila into the mattress. He kissed his way down the side of her face to her ear lobe. Sucking the sensitive flesh between his lips, he smiled as Sheila groaned and breathed hotly on his shoulder. He nibbled her lobe for a few moments, then

worked his way to the long tendon of her neck. As expected, she turned her head making that part of her neck more accessible.

William fought the urge to chuckle as he bit on her proffered flesh. He worked his mouth up and down the side of her neck, alternating between gentle nibbles to more passionate bites. Her reaction was perfect, beginning with a series of low grunts and moans, which quickly transformed into her writhing underneath him.

Using her signals, he shifted across to the other side of her neck, kissing and nibbling as he went. He then slid his right hand down her ribs, letting his fingertips lightly tickle her on the way down to her stomach. She thrashed, but not hard enough to push him off, or to give him the sign she truly wanted him to stop.

He slid his palm across her soft belly at the same time, lowering his mouth to her right breast. The soft curls of her pubic hair tickled the tips of his fingers as he closed his lips on her nipple and sucked the hard knot. He curled his fingers down over her mound, cupping her sex.

Her pussy was creamy and warm. When he pressed the heel of his palm against her clit, her wetness squished. Sheila arched her back, mashing her tit to his face, and sighed. She wriggled her hips in small circles, rubbing her clit against his palm.

Rising up on an elbow, he curled two fingers and slipped them between her velvet folds. He gazed down at her in the pale blue light. Her eyes were closed and her mouth hung open. To him, she was beauty personified. He instantly felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her, and he did.

He started with soft teasing pecks, matching his kisses with the pumping of his fingers inside her. He slowly increased the intensity of both his lips and digits as he worked to drive her wild. Moving his mouth from hers, he nipped and licked his way down the front of her throat.

Sheila groaned and pawed at his head, guiding him lower to her breasts. He let her push him to one of her tits, but he held his mouth just far enough away so his tongue would barely reach the hard nipple, begging for attention.

He slid his fingers out of her pussy, dragging them lightly across her clit. He fought the urge to sink his mouth down on her breast and slide his fingers back into her pussy. He wanted to tease her unmercifully. She pouted and whined when he'd teased her all those years ago, but when he did, she'd have the hardest orgasms.

Diary of a House

Dancing his fingertips across her sensitive knot of nerves, he slowly eased his lips down to cover her nipple, but didn't suck. Instead, he pressed her nipple flat with his tongue. At the same time, he pressed two fingers against the base of her clit, one on either side. He pinched her tiny bud, wrenching a keening wail from deep in her throat.

She threw her arms around his neck, raising her knees in the air. He sucked her nipple hard and slashed his tongue across the swelled bud, while sliding his fingers down her furrow and pushing them deep into her seething core.

She shook for a moment, then suddenly locked in a tense spasm. Her pussy squeezed his fingers and flooded his palm with her hot juices. He fought against the tightness of her clutching pussy and twisted his fingers deep inside her. She thrashed her head from side to side and groaned in a low animal growl. Her legs trembled and finally fell slack to the bed as the orgasm overtook her, zapping her strength.

Slowly, she calmed as her body seemed to melt into the mattress. William slid his fingers out to barely touch Sheila's wet outer lips. He moved them in deliberate circles, making sure not to over-stimulate her clit.

He shifted to his knees so he could see her face better. She was flushed and her forehead glistened with sweat. A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. He'd missed the heady feeling of making Sheila moan again. It had been worse when he was finally home and still couldn't touch her.

Suddenly, thoughts gripped his mind. Where were the ghosts? Had the magic of the diary already worked? He thought back to the echoed sigh when he'd slide the diary into the corner on top of the bookcase. Maybe the spell had rid him of the menace of the ghosts.

Pushing those thoughts out of his head, he focused on staying in the moment. The past was just that, the past. He was finally with Sheila and there were no ghosts trying to take him away. He believed the magic had worked—the hauntings had stopped. The price he had to pay would come later.

He suddenly noticed that Sheila had stopped moving. She had a look of concern knitted into her forehead. "Are they here?" She asked.

"No. I was just thinking about how much I missed being with you."

Sheila smiled and pushed herself up. She curled the fingers of her right hand around his hard cock. Giving him a squeeze, she stroked his

length. "I missed you, too." She then pushed him onto his back and climbed on top of him.

She stared deep into his eyes as she climbed astride his waist and dragged his cock head through her wet furrow. Holding his shaft steady, she lowered herself just enough that her labia closed around his glans. A deep guttural moan rolled up from her chest, her pussy clutching on his prick.

William reached up and covered her tits with his hands. He squeezed that soft flesh, feeling her hard nipples press into his palms. He loved the softness of her tits, and added that to his mental list of things he'd missed.

Sheila arched her back, forcing her tits into his grip. She shuddered and quaked, but somehow managed to keep from sinking down his throbbing shaft. She took a deep breath and held it as she rotated her hips in exaggerated circles.

Wetness trickled down his swollen cock. The dragging of her labia across his glans wrenched an involuntary twitch and flex of his shaft. William slid his hands from her tits down her ribs, finally resting on the curve of her waist. A brief smile sparkled in her eyes, then she let her weight fall, impaling herself.

Their genitals melded with a glorious squish. The inner walls of her pussy were hot and creamy wet. Her muscles contracted faster. Her mouth hung slack and her eyebrows wrinkled in a look of both equal amounts of pain and pleasure.

She rose up and slid forcefully back down. She began a bouncing rhythm. Faster she went until she leaned forward and placed her open palms on his chest. She continued to build her speed, literally pounding on him frantically.

Her eyes locked on his and she dug her nails into his flesh. She panted and grunted with each bounce. It wasn't romantic, it was pure animal lust. She was taking her pleasure and William loved it.

Pressing down on his chest, she was effectively pinning him to the mattress. The only movement he could manage was to thrust his hips up to meet her downward stroke. He barely noticed the sharp pains of her nails piercing his chest. If anything, the sting added to the sensations of Sheila's pussy gripping his cock in her rapid bouncing.

Suddenly, she sank down, her full weight pinning him to the bed. Her head dropped forward, her hair falling over her shoulders. A keening

Diary of a House

scream filled the bedroom and a flood of warm wetness spread across William's middle.

Her pussy milked him as she came. The pulsing squeezes sent him soaring. His shaft jumped and throbbed, his own orgasm taking over. He shot deep inside her clutching pussy. William felt her more intensely than ever before. They rode together in a bliss-filled flight, blending together into one being, soaring above all that had happened.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, they floated back to reality—like a feather on a dying breeze. Sheila sagged and collapsed on top of him. Together, they remained entwined as William rolled them over onto their sides, facing each other.

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared into his. She whispered, "Welcome home."

He didn't speak. No words were needed. None would fit.

Sheila guided him onto his back and laid her head on his chest. Sleep came quickly to them both and they drifted off in each other's arm for the first time in years.

Chapter seven

A shaft of brilliant sunlight landed to the side of William's face and he turned his head away with a groan. He stretched his arms above his head. The pull of the stretch felt wonderful—especially since he'd not slept in a comfortable bed in over three years.

Suddenly, he became aware of weight pushing down on the left side of his chest. There was a shifting in the bed beside him, followed by a soft, feminine murmur. His eyes shot open and he looked down to see the top of a woman's head, her auburn hair fanned out across his chest.

In a flash, he rolled out from under the woman's head and stood gaping down at her. He watched her raise her head and look at him with sleepy eyes. He was confused. Who was this woman? Why was she in his bed? Why was she naked? He felt a breeze brush across his flesh. Why was he naked?

He grabbed for the blanket to cover himself. "What are you doing in my bed?"

The woman sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She seemed completely unashamed at her nakedness. She drew a circle on the bed with her fingers. "Come back to bed, William. We've got years to make up."

Despite himself, he felt his shaft swell. His body warred with his mind. His brain screamed that she was a stranger, but his cock was telling him otherwise.

He thought back to the night before. He hadn't been drinking. In fact, when he finally got in from the long trip home from the war, he was too tired to think of doing anything but sleeping in his own bed. Yet, somehow, she was there, and knew his name. She was in his bed, but try as he might, he didn't remember her.

She spoke again, breaking his reverie. "You don't remember me." It was a statement, not a question.

William shook his head.

Diary of a House

She blinked and turned away. She rolled to the other side of the bed and grabbed a robe from the back of a chair. After pulling it over her shoulders, she turned back to face him, her eyes wet with tears. She croaked, "I was told this might happen. I just didn't want to believe it."

"What are you talking about?"

She picked up another robe and handed it to William. "Here, put this on." She turned her back to give him privacy. While he slipped the robe on, the woman said, "I can't really explain it. The whole thing is crazy."

"Try me. You seem to know me well enough."

She looked over her shoulder. "I do know you. You used to know me, too." Her eyes got misty. "My name's Sheila Beauregard."

"Wait a minute. You're not saying we're married, are you?"

She nodded. "We've been married for more than three years."

"But that's impossible. I was overseas in the war for the last three years."

"I know, but we were married before you got drafted. We were childhood friends, then fell in love."

William looked out the window. He thought back to just before the war. He'd just completed restoring the old house on Remembrance Lane when he got the draft notice. Thinking back to his days as a kid, he was able to remember all of his friends. If he and Sheila had been childhood friends, why couldn't he remember her?

Sheila stepped closer to him. She had a calm, understanding look on her face. "It's okay, we'll get through this."

"Get through what? I-I don't understand." Panic churned in his stomach.

Sheila put a hand on his chest, her finger touching him between the folds of the robe. "I know you're confused and you don't remember me. But you're going to have to trust me."

William looked down at her hand on his chest. Her touch felt good and right, like it was meant to be. Without understanding, he nodded. "Okay."

She pulled him into a hug and he found himself kissing the top of her head. A soft murmur brushed across his chest, then she patted his back—right hand, left, then right again. A smile pulled at his lips, but he didn't know why.

Sheila stepped back and looked up at him. Her eyes searched his, as if she was trying to read him. Finally, she said, "You must be starving. You want some breakfast?"

He nodded. Until she'd asked, he'd been too distracted by his confusion to notice, but now he was famished.

"Good. I'll fix us something to eat, then we can talk."

He followed her down to the kitchen. Walking behind her, he scanned the house and noticed several pictures and paintings he'd never seen before. He assumed they had to be Sheila's. As they passed through the front room, he saw the two crossed swords above the fireplace, finally something that hadn't changed in the house.

She made bacon and eggs while he made a pot of coffee. He poured her cup and put two lumps of sugar in it without even thinking. Before he could say anything, Sheila said, "You remembered I take my coffee with two sugars?"

He gaped. He wasn't sure he remembered or just got lucky.

Sheila dished out the breakfast and sat across from him. For the first few minutes, they ate in silence. Finally, she looked at him and said, "I know this must all seem strange. You wake up next to a stranger claiming to be your wife."

Swallowing a mouthful of food, he nodded. "Strange doesn't quite cut it. Crazy maybe." William didn't know what else to say, so stuck another fork of eggs in his mouth.

Sheila then said, "There's one way to explain everything, but I don't know if it's safe."

"Safe?" William stopped eating. "What's not safe about explaining what happened?"

She took a long breath. Her forehead furrowed as she stared at a spot beyond William. Suddenly, her face softened and she nodded. Focusing on him, she said, "It's not safe if I tell you how to find the answer."

He was even more confused. Sheila wasn't making any sense. She seemed to be talking in riddles. "Then how do I find out?"

She looked down at the table for a moment. "All I can say is, the answers can be found in the library."

"Library? There's nothing but old books in there."

She smiled, but didn't say a word.

Could the answer be in one of the old books? He picked at his eggs, suddenly not hungry. Looking up, he asked, "Are you sure you can't tell me more?"

"Only that things will be looking up."

Diary of a House

She *was* talking in riddles. Exasperated, he pushed his chair back away from the kitchen table and stood. "I guess I need to go spend some time in the library."

She smiled up at him. "Good luck."

* * * *

William stared at the tall bookcase. He didn't know where to start. There were several rows of book on shelves, reaching almost to the ceiling.

Staring at the top of the bookcase, he remembered the clue Sheila gave him. *Things will be looking up.*

At the far end of the library stood a ladder. William felt drawn to it and decided to trust his instincts. He climbed the ladder and looked at the top shelf.

There was a row of old, dusty books, none of which seemed even remotely connected to his search. They were all old ledgers. He grabbed one and flipped through it to confirm it was little more than page after page of numbers and financial records.

Just as he was about to climb down to the next row, he noticed that the front edge of the top of the bookcase looked wiped clean. He swiped his hand across a spot next to the clean looking area. Dust sprinkled down on his face.

He climbed to the top of the ladder to get a closer look. Peering over the top, he saw a small book. He pulled it toward him and found it was a leather-bound book with a locking clasp—a diary. Holding the book, he felt a power resonate to his heart. He knew this was where he'd find his answers.

William climbed down and put the book on the table. He pulled up a chair and stared at it. He looked at the clasp, wondering how to open it. Maybe there was a key on the top of the bookcase too. He quickly climbed up, but found no key.

Back at the table, he flipped the book over and saw the two crossed swords. He'd seen that before and remembered exactly where. He ran down the hall to the fireplace in the front room.

It all came to him—the swords, the scrimshaw of the skeleton key, and where the key lay hidden. A moment later, it was in his hands. He sped back to the library and tried it in the clasp. The lock clicked and the metal tab slipped out of the lock.

* * * *

Closing the diary, he looked through the window. It was dark outside. He'd spent the day reading and re-reading his entry in the diary, trying to understand what was written in the leather-bound book.

One thing continued to resonate with him. To rid himself of the hauntings, he had to lose something dear to him—something that would be equal to the cost of the hauntings. That price was his memories of Sheila. He knew it had to be true, or he wanted it to be. He'd copied some of the passages onto a blank sheet of paper. The handwriting matched.

He felt as if someone was watching him, and for a moment he wondered if reading his passage had canceled the magic of the diary. He turned to look behind him, not sure who, or more frighteningly, what he expected to see. He saw Sheila standing in the doorway.

She had changed into a sundress and was drying her hands with a dishtowel. Her voice was small as she asked, "You finished reading?"

William nodded.

"You want to talk about it?"

"I think so."

She pulled a chair up to the opposite side of the table and sat down. Placing her hands on the table, over his, she asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"I'm not sure. I know I wrote it, but I don't remember any of it."

"Including me—"

"I want to remember you," he croaked, suddenly overcome with emotion.

She looked back at him, tears rimming her eyes. "You don't have to say things just to make me feel better."

"I'm not." He squeezed her hands. "There's something about you that's drawing me in. It's as if my heart knows what my brain can't remember."

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stared at him. She mouthed, "Thank you."

"I'm just going to need time. This is all so crazy."

She nodded and looked away. "I'll let you have the master bedroom—"

"No." He cut her off. "We're going to sleep in the same bed." He wasn't sure why he'd said it, but it seemed natural.

She gazed into his eyes, again searching him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Diary of a House

That night, he slept in bed with a stranger. Sleep wasn't an accurate description. He was awake most of the night. His mind raced with thoughts of what he'd read in the diary, and how close he'd come to losing more than just his memory. Add that he was in bed with a desirable woman who clearly wanted him, made sleep impossible.

Chapter Eight

William finally fell asleep and when he woke up, he was alone in bed. At first, he thought the whole thing had been a dream, but the smell of a woman's perfume on the pillow beside him belied that possibility.

After splashing some water on his face, he threw on a robe and made his way downstairs. He stopped in the library and found the closed and locked diary. He wasn't sure why, but he had the sudden thought that he needed to put it back in its resting place.

Once done, he walked into the kitchen. Sheila was at the table, with her back to the door. He softly said, "Good morning."

She turned her head and smiled. "You sleep well?"

"Yeah," he lied. "Sure beats Army cots."

"I bet." She stood and walked to the stove. "You want some pancakes?"

"You don't have to do that."

"Already got them made." She raised a lid on a skillet, revealing a stack of golden-brown pancakes.

"That sounds great."

She dished him a plate of cakes and poured him a cup of black coffee. While he ate, she sat at the table watching him. After a few bites, he joked, "Did you miss me that bad, that you have to watch me eat?"

"Oh, shush." She pushed his shoulder and they shared a genuine laugh. The first since he woke up without a memory of her.

After he finished eating, it was his turn to stare at her. While Shelia washed the dishes, William sat at the kitchen table, watching her. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. He stared at her legs under her sundress as she stood with her back facing him. Images flowed through his mind of those sculpted legs wrapped around his back, pulling him in as he drove into her.

He shook his head. He kept thinking he shouldn't be having these thoughts about this woman. But he couldn't stop himself. Even though

Diary of a House

he'd read about their love in the diary, he still couldn't remember her. He wanted to, but he just couldn't.

The clearing of her throat made him look up from her legs. She was gazing at him with a knowing smile on her face. She pursed her lips, then stared down at his lap, "You getting cold over there?"

William looked down and saw his robe had fallen open below the waist, his hard cock tenting the front of his shorts lewdly. He clambered to cover himself, "Sorry."

"Why be sorry? It seems a shame to hide something that obviously wants out."

His face grew hot and he couldn't look her in the eyes.

She walked up to him and dropped to her knees. Pushing his hands off his lap, she looked up at him with doe-like eyes.

That look jarred him and he pushed the chair back. He'd seen it before. But where and when he couldn't guess. Could it have been from Sheila?

She tilted her head and asked, "You remembering something?"

"I-uh-I think so."

"What?" Her face brightened.

"That look in your eyes. I've seen it before."

Sheila crawled up to him and put her hands on his knees. She kept her eyes focused up on him. "Maybe this will jar your memory." She slipped her right hand up his thigh and gripped his cock.

He stared, frozen in place. A woman had never taken control like that before. He remembered fantasizing about it, but had dismissed it as impossible. Women just didn't take charge—at least, none he'd remembered.

Sheila moved slowly, deliberately. She stroked his cock lazily and kissed her way up one of his thighs. Her hand felt good, familiar, so did her lips. He didn't know if it was real or imagined, but he had the sense that she'd done this before.

Her fist worked up his shaft, a bubble of pre-come formed at the tip of his cock head. She dragged her thumb across it, smearing the thick wetness across his glans. She used it as lubrication to stroke him to even fuller hardness, all the while working her mouth closer to his crotch.

She gazed up at him, her eyes full of hunger. She moved her face so close, he felt her warm breath fan his crotch. He didn't dare move. His mind raced from wanting her to take his cock in her mouth, back to stopping her because he didn't remember her.

She slid her fist down to the base of his prick. Keeping her eyes locked on his, she snaked out her tongue. Any argument he may have mustered flew away. All he could do was watch her tease him.

Flicking the tip of her tongue tantalizingly close to his swelled cock head, she smiled with her eyes. He knew she'd read him. The fact that he'd flexed in her grip gave him away, too. Swirling her tongue in circles around his crown, had him tense and holding his breath. When she dragged the flat of her tongue down the front of his cock, he nearly shot.

He rolled his hips, pushing his cock up and rubbing his sweet spot across her tongue. Shelia retreated, keeping him from gaining more than a brief moment of contact.

She dragged her tongue up his shaft, stopping for a moment to gather the bubble of pre-come that had formed at the tip of his cock. Gazing up at him, she let him watch her rolled the droplet into her mouth. She winked, then pulled his cock down toward her, the head sliding into her open mouth. She held him there, looking up at him with that same stare, only it had become hungrier.

A shudder deep in his back, quickly rushed through his body and he thrust up. His cock slid deep into her mouth. He rolled his head back, fighting the urge to shoot into her glorious mouth.

She drew her mouth up his shaft. He somehow managed to refocus and open his eyes. Looking down at her, he saw her perfect lips as they slid down the full length of his hard cock. She twisted her head from side to side, then drew back. His cock was shiny with her saliva. He watched in unblinking disbelief as she sank back down, burying her nose in the dark curls of his crotch.

His cock buried deep, he felt her throat muscles contract, milking him. He squeezed his eyes shut from the intense sensation. It was all he could do to keep from grabbed her head and flooding her with his seed. He'd never felt anything like it. At least, he didn't remember it. That thought ran through his mind. Had she done this before? If so, how could any magic be strong enough to erase it from his memory?

Suddenly, a vibration hummed against his cock head. He snapped his eyes open, the pulsating was coming from Sheila's throat. She was moaning as he flexed and throbbed deep in her mouth.

With a sudden resolve he didn't know he had, he reached up and fisted her hair in his hands. He pulled her head back, freeing his cock from her mouth, just in time to stop the inevitable rush of his orgasm. His cock twitched wildly, but he didn't shoot.

Diary of a House

Glancing down, he saw that her eyes were wide with fear. She whispered weakly, "William. It's me. Not the ghosts. Remember?"

"I know you're not the ghosts," he answered, but stopped there. He desperately wanted to remember her, but he couldn't lie to her and say he did.

Her fear faded some. He knew why she was afraid. He remembered from the diary how he'd struck her when she'd been going down on him and he'd had a haunting.

He tried to reassure her more. "I'll never hit you again. The ghosts are gone for good."

She smiled and reached up to grip his cock, but he stopped her by grabbing her wrist. Looking down at her as she flashed that hungry look yet again. He pulled her up, bringing her mouth up to his. Mashing his lips to hers, he shuddered as the taste and feel of her lips against his jarred him. It was familiar—too familiar to be just his desire. He'd kissed her before and he knew it. There was no other explanation.

He broke the kiss and looked into her eyes. They were familiar too. He stared at her, trying to understand how and why he was having these flashes of remembrance.

She leaned in and kissed him again. She pressed her lips to his, kissing him with even more ardor. He shuddered as the soft cotton of her sundress rubbed across his still hard cock, re-firing his desire.

Overwhelmed by the heady swirl of passion in his mind, he broke the kiss and guided her to her feet. He didn't give her time to object or question his sudden change. He turned her around and bent her over the end of the kitchen table. Hiking her dress up, he revealed her lower half, discovering she wasn't wearing any panties.

His cock throbbed as he gazed at her perfectly exposed ass. A soft moan caused him to glance up to her face. She was looking at him over her shoulder, a wry smile on her face. For some reason, he had the feeling that this position was a favorite of one or both of them.

He put his right palm on the small of her back, causing her to arch. She spread her legs at the same time, revealing her pink pussy lips to his hungry gaze. The view brought another flicker of memory. It hit him with a blinding flash and he dropped to his knees behind her.

He stared at her exposed pussy and ass, as she was bent prone over the table. Suddenly, a loud pop snapped in his ears followed by a quick stab of pain shooting through his brain. He squinted his eyes shut and shook his head, trying to clear the sting.

When he reopened his eyes, everything was muted. It was as if a heavy veil of fog had enveloped him. He shook his head again, but it remained.

A voice echoed in his ears. "Live the rest of your life. The past is there if you choose to see it."

He froze. The voice was familiar. He looked around but couldn't see past the swirling fog. Suddenly, he recognized the voice. It was Drew. He wondered how he remembered that. He didn't grow up with anyone named Drew. He didn't know anyone from the war named Drew.

A face appeared in the mist, it was a man's face. He knew it was Drew. Beside him appeared a woman. She was smiling, her eyes beaming with joy. It was Catherine. He didn't question why or how, he just knew.

Drew spoke again, "Thank you, friend. You completed the task and you're back. The ghosts have been sent where they belong." He looked at Catherine, then back at William. "We're going, too, but I had to let you know you can now live your life. Your ending has yet to be written. Goodbye, my friend."

Before William could open his mouth to speak, the fog blew away as if it never existed. He turned back around and saw Sheila looking back at him over her shoulder. She pouted her lips and cooed, "Are you going to make me wait all day?"

He chuckled and dropped to his knees. Leaning forward to kiss the back of one of her thighs, he whispered, "Hardly. I'm not that patient."

He kissed his way up her thigh, gently nipping as he went. Reaching up, he caressed her cheeks, and moved closer to her sex. He inhaled her unique scent of excitement. He remembered the first time he'd smelled her and it brought back memories of the games they'd play before the war.

Dragging his tongue up the back of her thigh, he tasted her flesh and loved the memory of it. He followed the upward curve of her ass, moving across from one cheek to the other, then back down. When he reached the backside of her other knee, he went back up, this time dragging his teeth instead.

He continued to tease her with his teeth and mouth. It was one of the games they used to play. He'd tease her and she'd try to fight her baser urges and not let him know. She'd always failed in the end. When she'd give in, she'd let all her inhibitions go and the sex between them was always draining and memorable.

Diary of a House

William paused at the top of her ass. He alternated between gentle flicks of his tongue between her cheeks, to full mouth kisses on the flat just above her dark flower. All the while, he listened for her to moan and inhaled the ever growing scent of her wet pussy.

He circled her anus, making tighter circles with each pass. Biting and sucking her cheeks until they were shiny with his saliva, he waited for her to give in. He paused, hovering just above her winking bud. He knew she was on the verge of caving in and he decided to push her over the edge.

Snaking his tongue out, he danced it in the lightest of touches around the sensitive flesh surrounding her rosebud. Sheila arched her back and groaned in a deep growl. William smiled and pressed the tip of his tongue across her tight opening. She bucked and leaned back against his face. Her hips moved in tight circles as she ground her ass into his face.

The way she moved, told William she wanted more. He wanted it, too, and obliged. Moving back a fraction, he reached up and spread her cheeks apart. He aimed his tongue at her dark flower and eased the tip in past the outer ring. Her body froze and she exhaled in a long heaving sigh.

He moved his tongue in slow, stroking motions, giving her time to become accustomed to the feel of it. The taste of her was tangy, but sweet. He'd missed it and hadn't realized how much until that moment.

Eventually, Sheila relaxed and sagged onto the table. She reached back with one hand and stroked his head. She cooed just loud enough for him to hear, "I want you in my ass."

His cock jumped. In all the times, he'd tongued her ass, he'd prayed for her to say that, but she never had. He wasn't about to question it now. There'd be time for that later. He just hoped he could last long enough.

Standing behind her, he scanned the line of her spine from just above her ass to where it disappeared in her hair. Her skin was glistening and tiny beads of sweat had formed in the valley at the small of her back.

Sheila looked back at him and said, "Bathroom, medicine cabinet. I have a tube in there called KY-something. The doc gave it to me when I complained that working in the cannery made my butt sore from all the walking."

Turning, he rushed to the bathroom and found a small white tube that had the label KY-Jelly on it. He carried it back into the kitchen and

found Sheila on her back on top of the table. She had her feet propped up, with her knees in the air.

He walked up to her and handed her the tube. She opened the cap and said, "Hold out your hand." When he did, she squirted a glob of the thick, clear liquid in his palm. She then said, "Rub it on my ass. Make it all slick."

William dropped to his knees again. He looked up at her open and wet pussy. His mouth watered and he leaned forward. Dragging his tongue through her furrow, he sucked in her juices. She shuddered and rolled her hips up, rubbing her pussy across his chin.

While he continued to suck her pussy, he slipped his hand with the gel up under his chin and spread the fluid around her anus. She bucked and hissed, "Yes."

Moving his mouth from her pussy, he pressed a finger against her ass and was shocked at how easily the lubricant made it for his finger to slip in. He held it still and listened for her to tell him to stop. What he heard instead was just the opposite. She panted and begged, "More. I need more."

Taking her at her word, he slipped another finger in beside the first.

She wriggled her hips and grunted several times, then said, "Fuck me. Fuck me with your fingers."

He stared at her pussy as he stroked his fingers in and out of her ass slowly. He gradually increased the speed until his fingers were moving in and out as fast as he could and still control his arm.

After a few moments, she rose up on her elbows, and looked down at him. Her eyes were half-closed and her mouth hung slack. She had to take two attempts at speaking before she managed to say, "Fuck me. I want your cock in my ass."

William had never seen her so wanton before. He knew it wasn't something he'd forgotten. Even in her most excited state, she had always been somewhat reserved. He decided he was going to take her to this point as many times as he could for the rest of their years together.

Climbing up to his feet, he stood with his thighs pressing against the edge of the table. He reached down beside Sheila, grabbed the tube of KY, and squirted a large glob in his palm. He wrapped his fingers around his prick and slid his fist down his shaft. It was super slick and he had to bite his tongue to keep from shooting right then.

He released his cock, grabbed her thighs, and pulled her ass to the edge of the table. Aiming his cock head at her slick and ready anus, he

Diary of a House

pressed forward, just a fraction. He looked up into her face and she nodded once. He shifted forward a bit more. Then it happened.

His cock head popped in past her outer ring. The grip of her ass was glorious. The pulse of a heartbeat surrounded his cock. He didn't know if it was his, hers, or both. He didn't care.

He watched her eyes and she watched his. She nodded again. She was ready for more.

He pressed in further. Inch by beautiful inch, he slid into her gripping ass. Minutes past and they still didn't break eye contact, nor did they speak. Even the sting of sweat in his eyes didn't cause him to blink. Eventually, he felt the warm softness of her ass cheeks against his thighs. He was in all the way.

She opened her mouth then and mouthed, *Fuck me*.

He moved his hips back until her fluttering anus encased just the head. He hovered there for a moment, watching her. When her eyes widened slightly, he thrust forward. He drove his cock into her ass until his balls slapped against that flat spot below her anus. It smacked sweetly, signaling their union.

She exhaled, her hot breath fanning out across his chest. She nodded and whispered, "Yes."

He pulled back and slammed into her again. His own attempts to remain calm flew away. He grunted and pounded into her again. He built up more speed and in moments was driving into her so hard the kitchen table was moving across the floor.

Each time he slammed into her there was the wet smack of their bodies together followed by the sharp screech of the metal capped table legs sliding across the tile floor. Neither cared. All that mattered was the moment and trying to make it last as long as possible.

Sheila was nearing her climax and William drove into her harder. She grunted out a gravely yes with each pounding thrust into her and her body began to quake. Her eyelids fluttered with each stroke and her eyes rolled back in her head.

Suddenly, her body locked and she screamed. A jet of warm come sprayed William's stomach as he continued to drive his cock into her ass. He never slowed; instead, he gripped the table tighter and gave her everything he had.

Her ass milked him with every stroke and he knew he wasn't going to last another minute. A tightness began in his lower back and quickly shot through his lower body. Liquid fire raced up his shaft and he

managed one last inward drive before his cock spewed into her clutching backdoor.

She launched into another set of convulsions, taking them both together to a place they'd never reached. At the moment, they were one. He collapsed on top of her, their bodies seeming to meld into each other.

Time passed, and neither moved. Sometime later, his cock slipped out of her anus and they managed to breathe normally again.

Rising from the table, William gave her his hand and helped her stand. He picked her up and looked into her eyes. William stared at her face as all the memories of their life together came rushing back into his head. He was back. There were no gaps in the history. He was fully back and smiled as he remembered what Drew had told him. Their ending had yet to be written.

Diary of a House

Let the sunshine in – 1971

Jamie Hill

413 Remembrance Lane

Also by Jamie Hill

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III

chapter one

May, 1971

Scott Walker sprang up in bed, listening intently. The howling sounded as if it were right outside the bedroom balcony door.

"What's wrong?" His wife Terri rolled over and yawned sleepily.

"Didn't you hear that?"

"Hear what, babe?"

"The howling. It sounded like a wounded animal. And it sounded close—like it was right outside the door."

Terri chuckled and brushed the hair from her face. "It's just someone's dog or cat. You know the door's locked."

Scott looked at her. She was much braver since they'd moved from Los Angeles to the outskirts of New Orleans. Glancing at the balcony door, he muttered, "I guess so. It just sounded so...painful. Like whatever it was, was in agony."

"Go check." She nodded toward the door.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" He slid under the covers and spooned his body around hers. Nestling his arms under her voluptuous breasts, he pressed into her. Terri tried not to respond, but she'd have to be dead not to feel his hard-on pressed against her ass.

Scott smiled, leaning up to examine her from the side. Even roused from sleep, in the middle of the night, she was a beauty. Tousled brown hair framed her pretty face and fell around shoulders. Two of her most attractive features, not discounting her shapely ass and large, supple breasts, were her spectacular green eyes. People often commented on how they seemed to glow.

He bent down, pressing a kiss on her cheek.

Terri patted his thigh and yawned. "It's late, Scott. I'm tired." She moved away from him, yanking the covers with her.

"Of course you are," he murmured, rolling away from her and trying to pull back enough of the sheet to cover himself.

413 Remembrance Lane

"Don't get pissy," she spouted, allowing some of the sheet to move back his way. "There's always tomorrow."

"Okay. Night, Terri." Scott closed his eyes. By the time he awoke in the morning, she'd be gone and dressed. Terri was an early riser, always had been. She *hadn't* always looked for ways to avoid sex, though, that was a recent thing. It started before they'd moved cross country and settled into the lovely old house near New Orleans.

Scott hoped getting out of California would make a difference. Unfortunate things were happening in their home state. Harsh, seemingly random crimes scared Terri and, frankly, him as well. The place overflowed with hippies and anti-war activists. While he and Terri embraced the hippy messages of peace and love, the violence was frightening.

The Manson trial was all over the news and, living in California, it was hard to get away from. The "family" members were responsible for a crime spree which left at least seven people dead. That event had shaken Terri the most. Her fear surprised Scott. His wife was usually unflappable. But the idea of innocent people being murdered in their own homes shook her to the core.

Terri suffered a miscarriage shortly after the murderers of Sharon Tate and her unborn baby were convicted. The miscarriage was hard for them both, but worse for Terri, especially when the doctor told her she might not be able to conceive again. She was devastated. After that, their sex life went down the tubes.

Scott tried to be understanding. He suggested therapy, but Terri insisted everything was fine. She gave him sex occasionally, but it wasn't the same level of passion. It was more functional and routine. He wanted desperately to discuss it with her, but her mind was closed.

Scott's father, the last of their relatives in California, passed away suddenly. He left them enough money which, if invested properly, would establish them for life. He also left them a house in New Orleans, a place Scott never knew existed. Apparently, his aunt lived here before she died. He never really knew his father's family; they lived across the country, and for some reason, kept to themselves.

Scott and Terri jumped at the opportunity for a fresh start. They moved from their apartment in Los Angeles straight into the beautiful large home at 413 Remembrance Lane outside New Orleans.

The house was old but remarkably well maintained. Since they had money, they updated it. The kitchen especially was in need of

Diary of a House

remodeling. Scott spared no expense and gave Terri the best appliances in the newest hip shade of deep avocado green.

Lying in bed, unable to sleep, he worked out more kitchen plans in his head. He had been doing most of the work himself. It was new to him, but something he wanted to try. So far, he'd done a decent job.

Scott smiled. If the guys in his old accounting office could see him now, wielding a hammer and installing cabinets, they'd never believe it. He wasn't the athletic type. Though he was fit, his body was on the scrawny side. The kind of guy you'd see behind a desk, crunching numbers with a calculator. He'd been ready to break free of that mold, and enjoyed working on the house.

I need to get to sleep, he told himself. His hard-on had long since deflated. He wasn't sure exactly what was keeping him awake. Something had him feeling uneasy. He tried to put it out of his mind and willed himself to fall asleep. *Must sleep.*

* * * *

Terri was gone when he woke the next morning, as he expected. After showering, Scott inspected his appearance in the mirror. He was no Hercules, but he wasn't exactly a ninety-eight pound weakling, either. His chest was firm, arms and legs nicely proportioned and since they had moved here, slightly tanned.

He brushed his short blond hair and shaved, a part of the morning routine he rarely missed. Scott liked looking neat. He inserted his contact lenses, settling the hard little discs into his eyes. He'd heard that soon people would be able to buy colored contacts, that idea appealed to him. His eyes were a dull hazel. He'd love to have sparkling, bright eyes like Terri.

So where was she? He dressed and strolled down the stairs, finding her in the study, unpacking a box of books they'd brought with them.

"Good morning," he told her softly.

"Hi." She smiled, apparently unaware that her rebuff last night had hurt his feelings. Everything was business as usual—light and friendly. "How'd you sleep?"

Scott shrugged. "Pretty good. You?"

"Fine. I've slept like a log since we got here. Must be the clean air."

"Must be." He glanced over the stack of books.

"Hey, look what I found!" She picked up a dusty, leather bound book with a locking clasp across the end. "It seems to be some type of

diary. It was tucked way up high on the bookshelf. I knocked it off as I was dusting."

He inspected the book for a moment. "Interesting," he said blandly.

"Oh, yeah, I found this, too." She held up a small skeleton key. "I think it opens the diary."

Setting the book back on the desk, he asked, "What's for breakfast? I need to eat before I get started."

"The kitchen's pretty well torn up. I thought we could go to the coffee shop in town."

"I suppose." Scott shrugged.

"Good." Terri smiled, picked up the diary, and dusted it off. "I think I'll take this to read."

"I'll stick with the newspaper." He gathered his keys and sunglasses.

It was just a ten minute drive to town. The coffee shop they frequented was on a corner lot with several outside tables. The spring weather was mild, so they chose one of those tables. He bought a newspaper from the machine and thumbed through it after the waitress took their order.

Terri settled in across from him, leather diary in hand. "*Dear Diary*," she read aloud.

"Yeah, uh huh," Scott replied, only half listening. He browsed through the newspaper and said, "This is interesting. They're getting ready to break ground on what's going to be called the Louisiana Superdome. It'll be a huge covered stadium that seats up to seventy thousand people."

"Interesting," Terri repeated absently.

She was already engrossed in the diary. Chuckling, Scott turned back to his paper. "Looks like the South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York is almost done. It'll be the second tallest building in the world." He looked up. "Do you know what the tallest building is?"

"Hmmm?" She glanced at him. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if you knew what the tallest building in the world is."

"Empire State Building," she answered, her nose once again buried in the diary.

Scott turned the page of his newspaper disgustedly. "Here's one: President Nixon just signed an amendment to the Constitution into law, allowing eighteen-year-olds to vote. Which number of amendment was it?"

"Hmmm?" She didn't look up.

Diary of a House

Folding up his paper, he set it on the corner of the table. He knew she wasn't listening, but he muttered anyway, "Twenty-sixth amendment. Nixon's a great president. He's going to go down in history, mark my words." Someone brushed past their table and Scott's newspaper fluttered to the ground.

"I'm so sorry." A man dressed in black bent to retrieve the paper. He straightened and handed it to Scott with a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry. I had a gruesomely long night, and then I came here for coffee only to find I left my wallet at home. My day promises to be simply delightful."

Scott looked the man over, thinking he looked strangely familiar. Unkempt, shaggy brown hair touched the collar of the long black trench coat he wore over jeans. His appearance was striking, and for some reason Scott felt an almost magnetic pull toward the stranger. He glanced at the man's face and inhaled sharply—bright green, almost glowing eyes looked back at him.

"Have we met before?" Scott was floored, but he wasn't sure why.

"I don't think so." The man smiled kindly. "I'd remember such an attractive couple. Perhaps you've seen my picture in the papers. I'm a painter, and when I moved here the local press made a spectacle of it."

"A painter? Wow, that's great. I'm remodeling the kitchen in our new house and I might be able to use your help. I've never done much..." he trailed off as he noticed his wife giving him an incredible stare. "What?"

She snapped the diary closed and shook her head. "I don't think he's *that type* of a painter, dear."

Scott glanced up at the man, who offered a small smile. "Actually, I'm not. But I wield a mean paintbrush so I might be able to give you a hand."

He felt his face heat up with embarrassment. Scott shook his head. "No, I wouldn't ask that of you. Of course, I should have realized what type of a painter you are. I'm sorry."

The man clasped a firm hand on Scott's shoulder. "No apology required, friend. Although, I'd kill for a cup of that coffee." He nodded toward the carafe on their table. "I could ask the waitress for a to-go cup."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Scott motioned to the empty chair between him and Terri. "Please, join us. Our food should be out shortly, but we can put in an order for you."

Grasping the empty chair, the man said, "You know I forgot my wallet."

"That's okay. Sit." Scott was intrigued with their new friend. "Please."

Bowing, the man sat. He smiled at Scott, and they both glanced at Terri.

She looked at them wide-eyed.

"Honey, this is—" Scott stopped, realizing he didn't know the painter's name.

"Rafe McAllister," the man spoke up, extending a hand to Terri.

She shook it gingerly, staring at him.

"Rafe," Scott repeated. "Well, Rafe, this is my wife, Terri. I'm Scott Walker."

Rafe turned back to Scott and held his hand out. When Scott grasped it for a handshake, he was surprised by the calluses. He hadn't realized painting was such physical labor. He was also surprised by the strength of Rafe's grip. It felt as though the other man could crush all the bones in his hand with little effort. He didn't feel threatened, though, quite the opposite.

"So, you've recently moved to New Orleans?" Scott finally asked.

"A month ago. I love the city, but needed a place with some privacy. I found just what I wanted out on Mill Creek Road."

"Mill Creek Road!" Scott exclaimed. "We live just off Mill Creek Road." Terri kicked him under the table, but he continued, "On Remembrance Lane. 413 Remembrance Lane, to be exact, the big white two-story with the wrought iron railings."

A strange look crossed Rafe's face, something Scott couldn't identify. The look disappeared quickly. "I'm not sure I know the place. I'd love to see it, and see what you're doing with it."

"Of course, you're welcome any time. I'm sure Terri'd love to see your place, too. She's more of an art lover than I am." He glanced over Rafe one more time, still feeling a strong pull toward the man. "You may have to teach me some of the finer points."

Rafe grinned. "I'll bore you to tears if I try teaching you everything I know. But we can take it slowly." He touched Scott's hand lightly.

"Sounds good!" Scott agreed, and when the waitress approached he ordered a coffee cup and breakfast for their guest.

"What are you reading?" Rafe asked Terri.

Diary of a House

She'd been sitting back, watching. "It's a diary I found in our new house. It's amazing, really. Former owners recorded journal entries, and everyone left it in the house for the next tenant."

"Sounds intriguing." Rafe ran one finger over the leather book.

Terri snatched it away from him. "It's *very* intriguing. What some of them went through... well, never mind. I shouldn't have taken it out of the house. I need to put it back and leave it there."

"We'll be going home soon," Scott told her, in no hurry to leave. "You can stuff it back on the shelf when we get there. Can we just enjoy our brunch, please?"

"Yes." She made a face at him, and they all smiled.

Rafe's food arrived and they ate and visited. Scott was pleased to see Terri warming to the man. She'd seemed put off when Scott first invited him to join them, but now everyone was getting along famously. He was glad. He liked Rafe, and wanted Terri to like him, too.

"What do you two do for enjoyment?" Rafe asked sipping his final cup of coffee.

"We haven't done much since we moved here," Scott admitted. "We've been busy settling in. We used to love walking along the beach, or taking in a movie."

"There's a new one coming to the theater we want to see," Terri reminded him. "*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. It opens in June."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a jazz club, or a blues bar," Rafe commented. "The city is full of them. Do you like that style of music?"

"It's okay," Terri replied. "We're actually more into rock."

"I love jazz," he continued. "But I can forgive an attraction to rock music. I'll let you know up front, I'm going to try to swing you over to my side. Classical, blues, jazz, I adore them and blast out the stereo speakers when I'm painting."

Scott smirked. "I'm not adverse to friendly persuasion. I'm willing to give anything a try."

"I'm very glad to hear that." Rafe touched Scott's hand again. He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Your generous hospitality has made me feel human again. I'm ready to face the day, or more precisely, my filthy house. I'm embarrassed to admit what a mess it is. But I'd like to repay your kindness. Would you allow me to bring dinner to your home tonight?"

"That's not necessary," Terri replied as they all stood.

"But we'd enjoy it, wouldn't we dear?" Scott looked at her.

She gave him an irritated look back. "Not tonight, *dear*. We've got plans."

"Oh, yes." Scott answered dejectedly, knowing of no such plans.

"Tomorrow night?" Rafe piped up.

Scott glanced hopefully at Terri. She shrugged and said, "Sure. Tomorrow night would be fine."

"Excellent." Rafe extended his hand to Scott, and they clasped.

Scott felt a jolt of electricity shoot up his arm, and it excited him. He wasn't sure why, but he felt more excited than he had in a long time.

"Tomorrow night," he said, looking forward to it immensely.

"Seven o'clock work for you?" Rafe asked Terri.

She smiled and nodded. "Sounds good. See you then."

Rafe turned to leave, winking at Scott. Scott grinned, nodded, and took Terri's arm. They stopped at the front register and paid the check, and Scott tossed a dollar on the counter as a tip.

"Scotty has a new friend," she teased as they settled in their vehicle.

"Wasn't he something?" Scott started the engine. "Wow. I liked him."

"Very captivating," she agreed.

"Then why did you put him off for tonight?"

"I don't know. This diary has me weirded out. I wanted to talk to you about it."

"Okay. Well, thanks for agreeing to tomorrow anyway."

"Rafe is definitely an interesting man. I think he may show us a world we never knew existed."

"I'm open to it, sweetheart, how about you?"

"Sure. I love art. Jazz clubs and Blues bars sound like fun. We'll see what Mr. Rafe McAllister has to show us."

"Great!" Scott agreed, happy about their new friend. He was in the best mood, anxious to go home and get to work.

Chapter TWO

Scott felt a tongue lick the length of his cock from base to tip. Startled, he clutched the bed sheet as his flaccid member sprang to life. More long, slow licks had him fully erect in a matter of moments.

He sighed pleasantly and settled back. It'd been some time since Terri had given him a blow job, and he was going to enjoy it.

She swallowed his length and Scott felt her nose nuzzling the wiry hair at the base of his cock. "Oh yeah!" he groaned at the excruciatingly delightful sensation. He bucked his hips and Terri stayed with him like never before, sucking on his cock as it filled her mouth.

"I'm close," he warned as his balls drew up. Expecting her to pull away, he was surprised when she sucked him more fully into her mouth.

Groaning, he shot his load down her throat. She *always* backed off, causing a momentary interruption that sometimes spoiled the moment. Nothing spoiled this moment. Rockets went off in his head as she gobbled down the last of his come.

When her hand cupped his balls, Scott felt rough calluses against his soft sac. His eyes bolted open and he looked down.

Rafe watched him, pulling back slowly, allowing Scott's cock to slip out of his mouth. "Feel good?" he asked, his face sticky and wet.

Scott bolted upright in bed. *What the fuck?* He glanced around, but the bedroom was empty. He looked under the sheet and found he was still wearing his boxer shorts. His cock tented the front of them, so he obviously hadn't...but, damn, he felt as if he had.

He glanced around, looking for Terri, but she was gone. Scott breathed deeply a few times, trying to calm himself. *Where had that dream come from?* Sex with Rafe? The idea horrified him. He'd never been remotely interested in another man. He had a couple former coworkers who were queer, and they were nice enough guys. But it just wasn't his thing.

Scott glanced down at his erection, still standing proud. *If it wasn't his thing, why did the very idea have his cock hard as a rock?* Swinging

his legs over the side of the bed, he ignored his hard-on and reached for some pajamas. He needed to find Terri.

She was standing in front of the stove in the torn up kitchen, boiling water in the tea kettle.

"Can't sleep?" Scott asked.

Terri jumped, startled. "No. I had a creepy dream." She had a strange look on her face as she glanced at him. "It felt so real."

"That's funny, so did I." He pulled a chair from under the table and sat.

"Want some herbal tea?"

"Sure." He watched her reach for another cup and teabag. "So what was your dream about?"

Terri poured water over both their tea bags and turned toward the table. She set both cups down and sat across from him. "I don't want to say," she replied nervously. "What was yours about?"

"I don't want to say, either."

They glanced at each other, then stared into their cups as they dipped their tea bags.

She finally broke the silence. "I've never been unfaithful to you. You know that, don't you, Scott?"

"Of course. Same goes here. We've never has reason to doubt each other."

She looked up guiltily. "I had a dream. Honestly, I have no idea where it came from! I swear to you, I wasn't thinking about him in that way."

Scott's heart skipped a beat. "Him? Who?" he asked, but he knew the answer.

"Rafe McAllister."

Scott didn't know what to think.

Terri clasped his hand. "He was eating my pussy. I swear, I thought it was you! It felt like you were between my legs and at first, I was pissed, but then it felt good. I really got into it. *I came!* I don't remember ever *coming* in a dream before. I've always woken up before it got that far. But this time, I had a fantastic orgasm." She paused, her eyes searching his. "And after, when I started talking to you, it was Rafe who crawled up from between my legs. That's when I woke up."

Scott chuckled, and then laughed. He laughed uncontrollably.

"It's not funny!" She slapped his arm, pouting. "It freaked me out big time!"

Diary of a House

Finally, he calmed and wiping the tears from his eyes, said, "I'm not laughing at you. You'll never believe my dream."

Terri's eyes widened. "No!"

"Yes!" He nodded his head. "I was embarrassed to tell you because you might think I have queer fantasies or something. Rafe sucked me off. I thought it was you! Until he touched me, and I felt the calluses on his hands. Talk about being freaked out!"

"Oh my God!" Terri shook her head, laughing with him now. Suddenly, she stopped laughing and looked at him. "This is too weird! Scott, do you realize how freaky this is?"

"Yeah, it's pretty bizarre."

She looked around the kitchen. "It's this house. Other people have experienced freaky things in this house. They wrote them down in the diary. I told you some of them last night."

He waved a hand in the air. "That's fiction, Terri. You have no idea who wrote that stuff. A bored author could have penned the whole thing."

"But the dates!" she insisted. "The diary dates back to 1750."

"Or so someone wants you to believe. It's *fiction*, Terri. Easily explainable."

"What about our dreams?" she countered. "How do you explain them?"

He fiddled with his tea bag again. "I have no idea."

"It was so strange," she leaned back into her chair, a far away look in her eyes. "I hate to admit this, but it felt good. Wonderful, really."

"I hate to admit it even more, because I sound like a homo. But that was one hell of a blow job."

Terri looked at him. "I think people get too hung up on sexuality. Why shouldn't a man give a great blow job? I mean, you have a penis, after all. You should know what feels good."

"That's true." Scott had never thought about it like that. It wasn't something he'd discuss in public, but right now, in the privacy of his own home, he could admit it. "The Rafe in my dream gave a *fanfuckingtastic* blow job."

Terri laughed, then suddenly froze. "Oh, Scott! How can we face him tomorrow?"

He thought about welcoming the man into their home. *Would it be uncomfortable?* "Do we need to call it off?" he asked, not sure he wanted to do that.

Terri thought about it and answered slowly. "I don't think so. We're adults, we can handle ourselves, don't you think?"

"I'm sure we can."

* * * *

The next day, he put the dream out of his mind as much as possible. Scott wrapped up his work early so he'd have time to clean the house and grab a shower before Rafe arrived.

The doorbell rang promptly at seven. Scott glanced at Terri, thinking how pretty she looked in her purple bell-bottomed slacks and lavender blouse. He'd slipped into a comfortable pair of plaid trousers with a white button down shirt. Scott opened the door.

"Good evening!" Rafe greeted them amiably. He wore the same black trench coat as the day before, hanging open loosely over jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Hello! I see you found us okay." Scott ushered the man in.

"Yes, no problem." He stepped inside, glancing around. "Your home is lovely."

"We've got a lot more to do," Terri said, "but we think it's beautiful, too."

Rafe smiled at her. He held up two casserole dishes, stacked on top of each other. "I brought beef stroganoff and broccoli almandine. I hope you approve."

"Oh, my gosh!" She took the dishes from his hands. "You shouldn't have gone to such trouble. We would've been satisfied with pizza." She headed toward the kitchen with both men following.

Rafe pulled a bottle of wine from under his coat. "Ah, tonight is about so much more than just being satisfied. Tonight is about *experiencing*."

Scott exchanged glances with Terri. "Okay," he replied hesitantly.

From his pocket Rafe pulled out an eight-track tape. "You have a player, I hope?"

"We do," Scott answered, reaching for the tape. "I'll pop this in."

"Excellent," Rafe responded. "If you'll get me some glasses, I'll pour the wine."

Terri found three glasses and a corkscrew, and let Rafe handle the beverage. She dished out three plates of food and carried them to the living room with forks and napkins. She settled onto one end of the sofa and Scott chose the other.

Diary of a House

Rafe peeled off his coat and tossed it on the back of an empty chair. He sat on the floor cross-legged in front of their coffee table.

Pushing his sweatshirt up to his elbows, Rafe prepared to eat. Scott couldn't help noticing the thick, black hair covering the man's forearms. Even around the neckline of Rafe's sweatshirt, dark strands of hair poked out. Body hair was a foreign concept to Scott, who was virtually smooth-skinned.

He glanced at Terri, who was looking at her food. "This is wonderful, Rafe," she finally said. "You're a chef, too. Is there anything you can't do?"

Rafe grinned as he ate. "Actually, I can pretty much do whatever I set my mind to do. I find it exhilarating to be accomplished in many fields."

"You choose a good wine." Scott raised his empty glass in salute.

"Here, please." Rafe refilled all their glasses, repeatedly, until the bottle was empty.

After the meal, they chatted well into the evening. The music changed and a jazzy number came on the stereo. "This is a great song," Terri commented. "It makes me want to dance."

"You should!" Rafe encouraged. He nodded at Scott. "Dance with the pretty woman."

Scott stood, extending his hand and pulled Terri up with him. They went behind the sofa to an open spot on the floor.

Rafe stretched out on the floor watching them. Soon, he stood and moved to where they danced, saying, "Allow me." He held a hand out to Terri, and she raised her eyebrows at Scott.

"Sure." Scott released her to Rafe and started to back away.

"Stay," Rafe grabbed his arm. "There are no formalities here. We can all dance together."

Scott shrugged and nodded, stepping off to the side just a little.

Rafe swung Terri into his arms and twirled her around the floor in quick movements. She laughed and struggled to keep up.

"Now, you try." Rafe grabbed Scott by the hips and moved him in front of his wife. Rafe stood behind him, showing Scott the moves he'd just used. For an instant, Rafe's body was pressed against Scott's thigh, and Scott felt the man's solid erection. It startled him, causing him to jump.

"Don't be nervous, you're among friends!" Rafe encouraged, and sent Scott and Terri off in a spin around the room. "See, you did it!" He caught Scott from behind by the hips and held on.

"Yeah," Scott answered, his mouth dry.

Terri laughed. "I'm sorry, but I need to pee. That wine is going right through me." She headed for the bathroom. "Save the next dance for me—or not, if you two want to dance, go ahead!" Laughing merrily, she left the room.

Rafe tightened his grasp on Scott's hips and pressed their bodies together. This time, he felt the man's erection actually throb as it pressed into his ass cheeks. Rafe whispered into his ear, "Want to dance with me?"

"Um, I don't think so," he answered nervously.

"Don't tell me I've gotten the wrong idea." Rafe snaked his hand around front and brushed Scott's crotch.

He was embarrassed to feel his cock twitch to life.

"Ah, good," Rafe purred in his ear. "I don't have the wrong idea. You want me as much as I want you." He released his grip long enough to shove his hand down the front of Scott's trousers and boxers. "Yeah, that's better." Curling a hand around Scott's rigid cock, Rafe flicked his tongue around his ear.

Scott squirmed. "I don't, uh, that is, I've never..." he trailed off.

"You've never had sex with a man."

"No," he whispered. He'd intended to say he wasn't interested, but heaven help him—*he was*.

"Really?" Rafe drew the word out into two long syllables. "Intriguing. You want me to be your first?"

Scott wanted to answer *No*, but Rafe's hand had massaged his cock into a throbbing time-bomb and he could feel a trickle of pre-come already oozing out. "Terri." He muttered, a sob.

"Oh, I like Terri. As much as I like any woman, that is. She has gorgeous tits. Are you willing to share?"

His balls drew up and his climax built. When he heard the toilet flush, he reached out to the wall for support. Rafe pulled his hand away quickly, ending the stimulation and effectively cutting off the orgasm.

Scott glanced back at him and Rafe smiled, licking the sticky clear pre-come from his hand. "We could have good times, my friend. Just the three of us."

Diary of a House

Scott's mind raced as he heard Terri's footsteps in the hall. "We'll need more wine," he finally announced. "I've got some in the kitchen."
"Get it." Rafe nodded.

Chapter Three

Scott hurried to the kitchen for another bottle of wine. He took a moment to compose himself. His dick still throbbed. He needed to get calm and slow things down. He thought Terri might be agreeable, but they needed to approach her carefully.

He couldn't remember ever feeling this excited. Unsure of what Rafe might do to him, Scott felt tingles up and down his spine. When his hard-on had drooped to half-mast, he ventured back into the living room.

Rafe and Terri sat side-by-side on the sofa. He held her hand in his, and was tracing a line on her palm with his finger. "This is your life line," he told her, and glanced up at Scott. "Hey, you found some."

"Yep. Might not be quite as good as what you brought."

"It'll be fine." Rafe reached for the bottle and popped it open. He filled their glasses and passed them out.

"I probably shouldn't have any more," Terri said. "I'm already feeling giddy."

Rafe touched her knee. "We're here to have fun. Let's see if we can get past giddy and on to ebullient!"

Scott slipped in behind Terri on the sofa. He draped an arm around her shoulder and allowed his hand to casually touch her breast. "Honey, I think we should tell Rafe about our dreams."

"What?" She turned to him, her eyes wide. "You're crazy!"

He brushed the side of her breast. "Rafe's cool. He'll get a kick out of it."

"What dreams?" Rafe settled back into the sofa.

Scott looked at him. "Um, they were, shall we say, *sexual*. Both Terri and I had dreams involving you last night. Needless to say, we were freaked out."

Terri glanced around the room. "It's this house," she said with a slurred voice. "I believe it's haunted."

"Really?" Rafe replied with apparent interest, leaning in to her. "That's fascinating."

Diary of a House

"I think so, too." She nodded vehemently. "You'd think it would scare me. I used to scare pretty easily back in California. But something about this feels different. Not sinister. It feels more...magical."

"I like that." Rafe ran a finger over her forearm. "You're very perceptive."

"Yes, you are." Scott cupped her breast and pressed a kiss into her temple.

She turned and he kissed her mouth hungrily. Terri resisted at first, then parted her lips and allowed his tongue entry. Scott groaned at her acceptance, and what it might mean for the night ahead. He glanced at Rafe, who watched their kiss intently, almost longingly.

Looking back at Terri, Scott murmured, "You're so beautiful."

Terri moaned, her eyes closed.

He unfastened the buttons of her shirt slowly, one by one. Pushing the fabric open, he slid his hands around behind and unhooked her functional white bra. It dropped to her lap, exposing her full breasts.

Terri's eyes flashed open, but Scott cupped her chin and turned her face toward his. "Relax," he whispered. "You're safe. I won't let anything happen that you don't want."

She nodded, and he released her face. He watched Terri close her eyes, and he smiled. Glancing at Rafe, he nodded.

Rafe dropped to his knees in front of Terri. As Scott leaned in to suckle her left breast, Rafe targeted her right. She gasped as the second mouth closed on her nipple, but she didn't open her eyes. Instead, she arched her back and brought her hands around, cupping each man's head.

He groaned at her eagerness. He had thought he might be able to bring her around, but didn't realize how easy it would be. As he licked and sucked one nipple, and Rafe nipped and tugged on the other more intensely, Terri pressed their faces into her tits, silently demanding more.

Rafe clutched her tit and squeezed. Terri cried out suddenly, and Scott wondered if the pain might be too much. Before he could intervene, he felt Rafe's right hand slip in between his legs, reaching for his cock.

"Yes," he moaned into Terri's tit.

The bigger man squeezed Terri's breast against the one he toyed with, so their faces were almost touching. He stuck out his tongue to lick her nipple and ended up licking Scott's cheek.

He turned to face Rafe, only to find their lips pressed together. He was startled at how much he enjoyed Rafe's rough, scratchy face against

his own. It was so arousing that Scott shoved his tongue deeper into Rafe's mouth.

Both men continued tweaking Terri's nipples as they kissed. Rafe unzipped Scott's trousers and worked his hand inside them again. Instantly, Scott knew it wouldn't take much to make him shoot his load, but he didn't want to do it in his pants. He jerked his hips at Rafe, who seemed to understand.

"Here," Rafe murmured in Scott's ear. "You suck on these fabulous tits. I found something else to suck."

Scott groaned and pulled himself closer to Terri's breasts. Her nipples were taut little nubs by this time, and he sucked on them vigorously. She moaned, her head thrown back against the sofa cushion.

He didn't know what would happen if she opened her eyes. Would she be shocked to see Rafe's face buried in Scott's crotch? Or did she realize what was happening, and keeping her eyes closed was her way of dealing with it for now? He wasn't sure, but he did know he loved the feeling of Rafe's mouth on his dick. The man was skilled.

He raised his hips, allowing Rafe to push his trousers away. Incredible feelings raced through him. The rough scrape of Rafe's chin and his strong, callused hands were added sensations, which made this sex unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Rafe sucked his cock with more suction than he thought possible and Scott knew he wouldn't last long.

Rafe pressed a finger into the underside of his balls, and Scott climaxed. Hot pulsing streams of come shot down Rafe's throat, and Scott could do little but grasp on to Terri's tits as waves of pleasure washed through him. When he finally gathered his senses and looked at Rafe, he was pleased to see the other man smiling, come dripping from the corner of his mouth. Scott enjoyed it more than he'd dreamt possible.

Rafe wiped his face on his sleeve as he climbed onto the sofa next to Terri. He leaned across her, reaching for Scott and pulling his face to him for a kiss. "You taste fantastic," he murmured before thrusting his tongue in Scott's mouth.

Scott tasted himself on Rafe's tongue and groaned. His tongue battled against Rafe's for a moment before he pulled back. "Your mouth felt amazing."

Rafe grinned, caressing Scott's right cheek. "Wait until you feel my cock. *That's* going to be amazing."

Diary of a House

"Oh, I want to!" Scott reached between Rafe's legs, but Rafe blocked his hand.

"Not yet. I believe the lovely Terri needs some attention before she gets sleepy. That wine seems to have almost knocked her out." He squeezed her tit and whispered, "What would you like us to do to you, Terri? Would you like to feel my face between your legs?"

She nodded groggily, eyes still closed. "Yes."

"Excellent." Rafe nipped at her earlobe and lowered his body. "Let's just get rid of these." He unbuttoned her slacks and Scott helped him drag them down her body, along with her white cotton panties.

"Mmm." Rafe ran a hand over her flat stomach and down to the dark patch of hair between her legs. "I love a hairy cunt."

Scott watched as he spread her folds open and ran his tongue along the crease.

Terri squirmed and moaned.

"She likes that," Scott encouraged, and positioned himself so he could watch Rafe while he played with Terri's tits.

"So pretty," Rafe murmured between long, tormenting strokes.

Scott could tell from the way his wife squirmed she was desperate for more. "Use your fingers," he instructed the other man.

He plunged two fingers into Terri's pussy and she grunted in pleasure. Rafe let his other hand wander between Scott's legs, fondling his balls. He groaned. His flaccid cock could easily come back to life with this treatment. He spread his legs to give Rafe better access.

Rafe smiled up at him and they watched each other suck and lick Terri. Suddenly, she let out a low, keening moan. "I'm coming!"

"Come on, baby," Scott suckled her harder, pinching her other nipple.

Rafe's fingers plunged in and out of her body as he flicked his tongue rapidly over her clit. Terri cried out and climaxed with quivering shudders. It seemed to Scott that she quaked for a long time.

"Sweet Jesus," she finally muttered, and both men pushed away. "That was incredible. Like my dream, only better." She ran a hand through Scott's hair.

"You're so beautiful, baby." He leaned up to kiss her lips.

"I'm so exhausted. Don't want to move." She stretched and yawned.

"Then why move?" Rafe stood up and reached for the afghan on the back of the sofa.

Scott swung Terri's legs around so she was lying on the sofa. "Just rest."

Rafe covered her naked body and patted her ass through the afghan. "Sleep now. We'll see you later."

Terri nodded and snuggled into the sofa, never opening her eyes.

Rafe looked at him. "Why don't we retire to the other room?" He picked up the half-empty bottle of wine and smiled.

Scott felt a chill run down his spine. The idea of being alone with Rafe both terrified and thrilled him. The way his cock twitched, he knew which feeling would win. "This way." He clutched his pants around his waist and stepped backwards toward the stairs.

Rafe faced him, walking slowly. "We need some lubricant."

Scott thought about that. "There's, um, Vaseline in the medicine cabinet." He nodded toward the downstairs bathroom.

"Excellent." Rafe turned up the volume on the stereo as he passed it. "I like to be loud. Do you like to be loud, Scott?"

Scott continued walking backwards nervously. "Um, sure, I guess." He bumped into the hallway wall and stopped.

Rafe chuckled, shoving the wine bottle at Scott. "Go on up to your bedroom and get ready for me. I'll grab the lube and meet you there." He leaned in and whispered, "I can't wait to get into your virgin ass."

Scott shuddered at the thought. His cock was raging hard, and Rafe's words turned him on as he'd never been turned on before. It was as if he'd entered a whole new realm of consciousness. Leaning in to Rafe, he planted a quick kiss on the other man's lips and then hurried up the stairs. Rafe's deep laughter sent more shivers down his spine.

In the bedroom, he glanced at the wine bottle, raising it to his lips. He chugged a few swallows and set the bottle aside. He stripped and pulled back the bed covers. He couldn't believe he was preparing to have sex with a man. His cock twitched at the thought.

"Ah, nice bedroom." Rafe entered and looked around. "A balcony. I love sex on a balcony. Maybe next time."

"Next time," Scott repeated, breathing heavily. The idea of *next time* sent another chill to his core. He glanced at the bottle on the dresser. "There's the wine, but we don't have glasses."

Rafe smiled, raised the bottle to his lips and drank. He stepped forward, handing it to Scott. "I seem to be entirely overdressed."

Scott drank greedily, gulping down more wine. He thought it might help to be a little drunk for what was going to happen next. While the

Diary of a House

idea of it thrilled, the actual logistics scared the crap out of him. He took another long drink.

Rafe kicked off his boots and tugged his socks after them. Peeling his sweatshirt over his head, he tossed it on the back of a chair.

Scott inhaled at the amount of dark hair that covered the man's chest. Stomach to neck was covered by a thick layer of fur. "Wow," he murmured.

"Yeah," Rafe smirked. "I obviously come from a more hirsute lineage than you."

Scott eyed the man's chest with desire. "I like it."

Rafe unsnapped his jeans. "Shall we see if I have anything else you like?"

"Please." Scott practically drooled, watching the jeans lower to the floor. To his surprise, Rafe wore no briefs. The man was hung like a horse. A thick cock, appearing at least twice the length and width of his own, sprang forward.

"Jesus!" Scott muttered.

Rafe smiled as he kicked away his jeans and stepped closer to Scott. "Do I meet with your approval?"

"Oh, shit!" Scott dropped to his knees in front of the man and breathed on the massive cock. "I've never seen a cock so huge in my life!"

Rafe thrust his hips forward and Scott leaned in hesitantly. He'd never touched another man's dick before. It seemed strangely awkward, scary.

A warm, hazy feeling settled in his belly. Suddenly, Scott wasn't scared anymore. He eyed the large hunk of flesh jutting out from a mass of curly black hair, and wanted it in his mouth.

A light flick of his tongue whetted his appetite. He licked the head of Rafe's cock tentatively. It was warm and salty. He wanted more. Opening his mouth wider, he allowed the organ to slip past his lips. He closed his lips and sucked.

Rafe groaned and thrust his hips forward, forcing the massive cock down Scott's throat. Gagging, he jerked back. "Sorry," he muttered, embarrassed.

"No problem." Rafe ran a hand through Scott's hair. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I got a little carried away. Your mouth feels so hot I couldn't help myself."

Scott examined the thick cock in front of him, nervously wondering how *this thing* was going to fit into his asshole. "Maybe I should just suck you off tonight, you know, get used to things slowly."

Rafe reached under Scott's arms and dragged him upward. When the two men were face to face, he ran a hand over Scott's face. "I want to be inside you. I need to fuck you." He kissed Scott tenderly, then pulled back. "Please, let me fuck you."

Scott melted, the words arousing him beyond belief. "I've never had anyone inside me. I want that, too, more than anything." He kissed Rafe ravenously. Rafe growled and forced Scott onto the bed under him. Scott looked into the glowing green eyes. "You'll have to show me what to do. Should I roll over?"

"That's one way to do it," Rafe agreed. "But we're going to start with this way." He settled himself between Scott's legs, shoving his knees forward. "The thing I like about this position," he traced a finger from Scott's nipple to his belly button, "is that I can see your face while I fuck you. I can feel your cock rubbing against my belly as I thrust into you."

Scott shuddered. "I'd like that, too."

Rafe reached for the jar of Vaseline and dipped in his fingers. He brought a thick glob out and stroked the length of his shaft.

Scott licked his lips, watching. He saw Rafe dip one finger into the jar, then felt that finger circle the rim of his anus.

Leaning over him, looking into his eyes, Rafe inserted the finger slowly into him. "Jesus, you're nice and tight." He shuddered with apparent anticipation.

"That feels pretty good," Scott told him as the slick finger entered his ass.

Rafe jammed it in quickly and Scott flinched. "Oof!"

Smirking, Rafe removed the finger, leaning down to lick Scott's trembling lips. "Kiss me."

Scott rose to meet Rafe's mouth, sliding his arms around the other man's neck. "You're sadistic," he murmured, only half teasing. "You like to inflict pain."

"Ah, pain," Rafe repeated, his mouth pressed against Scott's. "So close to pleasure. Sometimes, I can barely tell the difference."

"I can," Scott admitted.

"Shhh," Rafe drove his tongue into Scott's mouth again. "I'm going to bring you pain, my love. And then I'll bring you pleasure. Once you've

Diary of a House

experienced the exquisiteness of it, you'll be begging for the pain again. I promise." He reached between them, working one finger back into the puckering anus.

Scott felt another finger join the first, and he inhaled. His body accepted the intrusion.

Rafe drove his slick fingers in and out slowly. "Ready for more?"

Another finger slipped inside and he groaned. He was already in love with the feel of this man's firm body on top of him. Now a new, exquisite sensation had been added. He bucked his hips. "I'm ready. Rafe. I want it bad. But I'm weak. I'm afraid."

"Do you trust me?" Rafe looked into his eyes.

Staring back, Scott realized he did. He didn't know why, but he did trust Rafe. "Yes, I trust you."

Rafe removed his fingers, pressing his well-lubed cock against the unyielding hole. He groaned, and pushed.

"Oh!" Scott moaned as the pressure opened his hole and he felt the entry. His first thought was that it hurt, but that wasn't accurate. It felt more like an intense stretch.

Rafe caressed his face. "I need to push past your outer ring. Once it loosens up, the rest will be easy."

"What if you're too big for me?"

Chuckling, Rafe inched his hips forward. "The human body is a remarkably flexible thing. You've got plenty of room, your ass just doesn't realize it yet. Bear with me, this might be a little uncomfortable." He pushed himself deeper.

Scott bit his lip. "*Might?*"

Rafe bent forward and murmured "Kiss me. I'll make you forget the pain."

Scott leaned up for a kiss. Rafe sucked his tongue forcefully and Scott moaned with enjoyment.

With one powerful motion, Rafe plunged into his body. Scott yelped when he felt the sharp, burning sensation, but after a moment, his anus seemed to adapt as Rafe suggested it would. His tunnel gripped the massive cock like a smooth fitting glove.

"Oh, yeah," Rafe panted. "Just had to get past that outer ring. Now your ass is milking me nicely."

"Jesus!" Scott moaned. "This is incredible!"

"Isn't it sweet?" Rafe made a point of rubbing his stomach against Scott's leaking cock. "Look at you, spilling your juice for me already. I wish I could lick it up."

Scott was in ecstasy. He couldn't focus on anything, and was only vaguely aware of his surroundings. His body was engulfed in sensation. Rafe's bristly chest rubbed his nipples to taut peaks, and his cock to a throbbing staff. There was an exquisite sensation of heat in his ass, and he bucked his hips against Rafe to make it stronger.

"Oh! I'm going to come!" His balls drew up, and his cock gushed fluids like a geyser.

Rafe had an arm on either side of Scott's body, supporting his weight. He reached down and scooped a handful of creamy seed from Scott's belly, dipping his fingers into his mouth, some sliding down his chin.

As he looked down at Scott, the sticky liquid dripped onto Scott's face. Rafe grinned. "How was it?"

Scott opened his mouth and let the fluids that dripped from Rafe return to his body. He reached up and swiped his come from Rafe's chin. Bringing his hand to his mouth, he sucked it clean. "It was fantastic, how do you think it was?"

"It's...not...over...yet..." Rafe emphasize his words with thrusts to Scott's ass. "I'm going to shoot you so full, you'll have come leaking out your ears."

"Do it!" Scott braced his body against the pounding thrusts. "Fuck me! Make me feel it!"

Rafe pressed his hands into Scott's knees for support. "Okay, you little cocksucker, you asked for it." He rammed Scott with his full body weight and both men growled with pleasure.

Scott couldn't believe the pummeling he took, and still needed to ask for more. His cock, lying sticky and wet in a pool of cooling spunk, was firming up. He'd never experienced three orgasms in one night, much less two within the same session. But right now, his dick stood swelled to firmness as Rafe leaned back, pounding into his ass.

"Jesus!" Scott grabbed his cock and stroked.

"Oh, yeah!" Rafe licked his lips, his breath coming in hard pants now. "Come on me this time, baby. Shoot it in my mouth so I can gobble it up."

His orgasm building, he pointed his cock straight at Rafe. "I can't believe this," he groaned.

Diary of a House

"Come on, you cocksucker!" Rafe yelled at him. "Let me have it! Come on me now!"

Scott stroked his cock with long, firm pulls, and sighed blissfully as it erupted into the mass of black curls on Rafe's chest. He shuddered and moaned his pleasure, and when it was almost past heard Rafe snarl "Now!"

Rhythmic waves of warmth soared through Scott, and if he hadn't just climaxed he would have done it then. The multiple sensations overwhelmed him, and he thought for a moment he might pass out.

When Rafe stopped shuddering, he lowered Scott's knees and leaned down for a kiss.

"I hope I was okay," Scott mumbled, nearly out of it.

"Are you joking? You were perfect. You're the sexiest person I've ever been with."

"I find that hard to believe."

Rafe chuckled. "Probably because you base your opinion of sexy on tits and ass. While I am a fan of the ass, no doubt, my opinion is formed by the whole picture." He bucked his hips into Scott. "Feel that? Our bodies are a perfect fit. Yours doesn't want to let me go."

Scott closed his eyes. "Stay, then. Stay right where you are."

"Oh, would that I could." Rafe replied. "But there's so much more I want to do to you tonight, and I need more accessibility to do it."

"I'm beat," Scott sighed. "I'm afraid that the wine and fucking are finally kicking in."

"Rest, my love." Rafe brushed the hair back from Scott's face. "I'll be right here next to you."

He clasped Scott's hips and tugged their bodies apart.

Scott's eyes popped open as he felt the unwelcome release of Rafe's cock. "Hey! It shouldn't hurt that damn much coming out!"

"You didn't want me to go." Rafe climbed over Scott's body and reached his face for a kiss. "I'm glad to hear it. So, your first experience was positive?"

"Extremely positive," he murmured into their kiss. "After a few hours sleep, I might be persuaded to do it again."

"Excellent." Rafe smiled, moving lower to suckle Scott's flat nipples.

"Man, I'm beat," he repeated, hoping Rafe would get the message that it was time for sleep.

413 Remembrance Lane

"Then sleep. I have a bit of cleaning up to do." He nosed his way down to the sticky pool on Scott's belly.

"Washcloth's in the bathroom," Scott murmured drowsily.

"Who needs a washcloth?" Rafe extended his tongue, and Scott smiled.

Chapter Four

Shards of morning sunlight didn't wake Scott the next day. The need to pee finally did, around noon. He padded into the bathroom, took care of business, and returned to the bedroom.

Rafe was sprawled across the bed. Scott watched him for a moment, remembering bits and pieces of the things Rafe had done as Scott was trying to fall asleep. The big man was apparently insatiable.

While Scott lay virtually passed out, Rafe had licked him clean, brought him to another orgasm with his mouth, and finally straddled his face so Scott could suck him off. It was all blurry, vague memories to Scott, but he knew they were real. It had been one hell of a night. He wasn't sure how he felt about everything just yet. Terri's reaction might have a lot to do with that.

He slipped into his clothes from the previous night and wandered quietly downstairs. Terri was in the kitchen with a cup of coffee on the table in front of her, and her head down.

Scott touched her shoulder lightly. "You okay?"

"Scott!" She jumped, startled. Glancing behind him as if looking for someone else, she asked, "Where is he?"

Scott smiled. "Still sleeping. He apparently wore himself out."

She glanced at him guiltily. "What have we done?"

Rafe appeared in the doorway wearing nothing but jeans, unsnapped at the waist. "I don't know, but hopefully we can do it again."

They both turned to him. "You're quite a guy," Scott said, shaking his head.

Rafe walked over and squeezed both their shoulders. "I think *we* are quite a threesome. Last night was fantastic, but there's so much more we can do, and experience."

"I don't know," Terri replied hesitantly. "I'm not sure Scott and I are after a lifestyle change."

Scott wasn't sure they didn't need a change. Things were stilted and dull before Rafe. Now his cock twitched when the man entered a room.

And the thought of throwing his beautiful Terri into the mix; it was too wonderful to even consider.

He glanced up at Rafe. "I think Terri and I might need some time to talk."

"Sure. We can talk about whatever you want." Rafe nodded.

Scott and Terri exchanged glances. "Rafe," he said slowly. "I think Terri and I need some time to talk *alone*."

"I see," Rafe replied, his voice clipped. "Do you suppose I could get something to eat before I'm forced back out into the world?"

Terri stood up. "It's not like that, and you know it. Scott and I have been married five years. Last night was a totally new thing for us—*both of us*." She shot Rafe an irritated glance.

Rafe grinned. "A third person always adds something into the mix." He smiled at her and winked at Scott. "I hope you think it's fun."

Scott stood next to Terri. "Can we have some time today, please? I promise I'll call you later."

Rafe wandered to the fridge and opened the door. He pulled out a plate of cinnamon rolls and picked at one. "I'll come back this evening. That should give you plenty of time to talk...and rest." He shoved a bite of roll in his mouth and smiled at Terri. "Shall I bring my furry handcuffs?"

Before she could answer, Scott grabbed her hand and squeezed. "Okay, Rafe, that'll be great. Bring whatever you like. Terri and I will spend the day together. We'll see you tonight."

She looked at him with surprise, but Scott avoided her gaze.

Rafe slowly finished off the cinnamon roll, then licked his fingers clean. "I guess I should go, then." He seemed to be in no hurry.

"Shall I help you with your things?" Scott offered.

Grinning, Rafe hooked a finger through Scott's belt loop. "You want to come back upstairs with me? That would be fun."

"Um, I don't think so, not right now." Scott stepped back. Last night had been one hell of a ride, but he felt self-conscious about it in the stark light of day.

Rafe headed upstairs, and when he finally he reappeared in the kitchen; he looked much the same as he had the previous night when he arrived. "I guess I'm off, then."

"Okay," Scott agreed.

When Rafe wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close for a kiss, Scott felt extremely self-conscious again. But the other man

Diary of a House

didn't seem to mind, his tongue plundered Scott's mouth thoroughly before he released his grasp. "See you tonight."

"Yeah, tonight." Scott inhaled, trying to catch his breath. His cock was at half mast again and it both thrilled him and pissed him off.

Rafe leaned in and kissed Terri chastely on the cheek. "Until tonight, my sweet."

"Goodbye, Rafe," she replied, and Scott watched him leave.

Locking the door behind Rafe, Scott turned to Terri and raised his eyebrows. "Holy cow. Do we ever need to talk."

"Let's get some coffee and take it in the study." Terri poured two mugs full of coffee, and carried the steaming brew into the study. They sat in the tall, overstuffed chairs that graced the room and looked at each other.

"So, what do we do about Rafe?" she finally asked.

Scott hesitated. "What do you *want* to do about Rafe?"

"I asked you first."

They looked at each other again, and Scott laughed. "Could you possibly be having the same dilemma as I am? I mean, it's a hell of a spot, Ter. I love you, have since the day we met. I've never given you any reason to doubt my love."

"I agree."

"But you have to admit our sex life has gone down the tubes recently."

She gave him an evil glance. "You know why that is. The miscarriage..."

"I know," he said softly. "That was tough on both of us. And I've been living with it. I didn't go looking for another relationship."

"No, this relationship found us," she admitted. "Rafe McAllister. He's an enigma, isn't he? So much we don't know."

Scott shrugged. "I like what I *do* know."

Terri laughed. "So do I, for the most part. He's a bit pushy. And he's full of himself."

Smiling, Scott asked, "Do you think he might have reason to be? So far, he seems pretty terrific."

"You really like him, don't you?"

"He's charming, funny, attractive, and as embarrassed as I am to admit it, he turns me on. Big time. There, I've said it."

Terri nodded. "We need to be totally honest right now. He turns me on, too. But he doesn't seem like the casual type. It feels like he wants to

ingratiate himself into our lives. We need to decide if that's what we want."

"Totally honest?" Scott looked at her.

"Absolutely."

"I like him. I wouldn't mind his hanging around for awhile, as long as we're both enjoying it. If one of us feels uncomfortable, then we need to talk about this again. Because bottom line, babe, is you and me. We're a couple and always will be. Rafe can be our third wheel, as long as we both agree."

"I guess that sounds okay," she admitted.

Scott added, "There's one more thing. It's about having children."

Terri frowned. "I thought we'd decided that wasn't going to happen for us?"

He shrugged. "It hasn't happened yet. If the problem's with you, then maybe it won't. But if it's me, and you start having sex with Rafe..." Scott trailed off.

Her eyes widened. "What are you saying?"

Shrugging again, he commented, "Just that it might be a pleasant side effect of our current situation. Rafe is hung, babe. He's hung like a fucking horse. You won't be disappointed making love with him."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I've never been disappointed making love with *you*, Scott. I'm not looking for another partner." Terri tapped her finger on the arm of her chair. "But a baby, I have to admit it's an interesting proposition."

"Worth a shot," Scott told her. "You might have fun trying."

Terri stared down at her coffee, then finally glanced up at him. "It feels strange, thinking about making love with someone else."

"I understand." He didn't elaborate, but he definitely understood.

"Well, if you're all right with it." She looked at Scott, and he grinned.

He was more than 'all right' with the idea. He wanted Rafe in his bed again, and he was more than happy to include Terri. If she got pregnant, he'd have Rafe and Terri would have the baby she'd wanted for so long. It might be the perfect solution.

* * * *

Rafe moved most of his clothes into their house by the end of the week. Terri graciously moved to the guest room, where she could have more privacy and get some sleep. Scott and Rafe included her in their

Diary of a House

lovemaking as often as she desired. But they tended to go longer and more often than she preferred.

Scott was blissfully happy. Rafe worked with him side by side during the day, remodeling the kitchen. The men learned more about each other and became close friends. They shared a bond because they were men. They shared another because they were lovers. Rafe taught him intimacies he never dreamed possible.

Terri seemed happy redecorating her room. Scott felt things were about as perfect as could be.

Rafe returned to his house occasionally to work on his art. Scott suggested he bring his canvasses and paints to their house, but so far Rafe hadn't. One afternoon when he was gone, Scott and Terri decided to go out for a late afternoon coffee.

"Shall we stop by Rafe's and pick him up?" Terri suggested. "I'm dying to get a look at his paintings. I can't believe he won't show us."

"Let's do," Scott agreed, interested in seeing the paintings himself.

Scott knew the general vicinity of Rafe's house, and spotted his sports car in the driveway. "There we go."

"Hmmm," Terri commented. "Not bad. I like our house better."

"Apparently, so does Rafe," Scott teased, and they laughed as they approached the front door. Scott rang the bell.

It took several minutes for Rafe to answer, and when he did he wasn't smiling. "What are you doing here?"

"We're going out for coffee and came by to pick you up." Terri patted Rafe on the stomach and squeezed in the door past him. "We also want to peek at your work." She glanced around.

Grabbing her arm, Rafe held her firmly. "I don't like people seeing my unfinished work."

Scott stepped in. "We're not just *people*, honey. We've seen a lot more of you, than your unfinished artwork." He glanced back to make sure no one was around, then leaned in to nuzzle Rafe's cheek.

Rafe squirmed away and Scott thought he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"What is it?" Scott asked gently.

"You won't understand," Rafe replied, releasing Terri and running his hands through his hair.

Scott swung the door closed and folded the other man into his arms. "We are two of the most understanding people you'll ever meet. Try us."

Rafe pulled Scott close for a lingering kiss, then stepped away and motioned towards the back of the house. "Go ahead."

Terri walked back slowly and Scott followed, with Rafe on his heels.

She glanced around the rooms they passed through. "Your house is, um..."

"Nice," Scott piped up, being polite. Wallpaper hung in shreds from the walls. Deep holes and gouging scratches graced almost every wall. Most of the furniture appeared to be in tatters.

"What happened?" Terri finally asked.

"Keep walking," Rafe replied. "My studio is in the back."

They arrived at the sunlit room and Scott saw numerous partially finished canvasses lying around. They were all painted in deep shades of black, red, and blue, and were very somber looking. "Wow," he said softly.

Terri glanced from one canvas to another. "They're very good, but so dark—scary looking, I guess you'd say."

"They are a bit on the dark side," Scott agreed.

"Well, what do you think of this?" Rafe yanked a canvas from behind a table and slapped it up on an empty easel.

Scott and Terri stood agape. He stepped in for a closer look at the unfinished painting, which was obviously a self-portrait. *Half a self-portrait*, he decided, because the other half of the face belonged to a fierce looking animal. "God, Rafe," Scott murmured. "What is this?"

"It's me," he replied simply.

"You and what animal? Damn, man, this is freaky."

Rafe stepped up in front of them. "It's just me. I didn't want to tell you this, but the full moon is tomorrow night, so I either come clean now or disappear for a few days. If you're truly understanding people, then I guess it's okay to tell you." He paused and took a step back. "I'm a werewolf."

Scott and Terri simply stared at him.

Rafe smiled. "I know it's hard to believe, but I've been one for about ten years, ever since I was bitten in Paris."

"A werewolf," Terri repeated. "Like in Scooby Doo?"

He laughed out loud. "Nothing quite that comical, I'm afraid. You can see my walls and furniture. I'm rather like a mean drunk, making a mess of things without actually realizing it."

Diary of a House

"No." Scott shook his head. It didn't make sense. "This is bullshit. Why are you teasing us this way?"

Rafe gripped Scott's shoulder. "I would never tease about something like this. I know it seems unreal, because there are more Lycanthropes in Europe than here. But look around you, man! Would I choose to live in a house in this condition if I could help it?"

"No, no, no!" Scott repeated vehemently. He tried to pull away, but Rafe captured him in his arms and held tight, speaking into his ear.

"I'm sorry. I know it frightens you. But please understand, this disease can only be passed on by a bite from a werewolf. Oh, and to my children, of course."

Terri swooned and clutched her stomach. Scott knew she'd been experiencing morning sickness, and she held high hopes that she might be pregnant. "You should have told us!" she cried.

"What?" Rafe appeared confused, looking from her to Scott.

"Terri thinks she's pregnant," Scott said softly.

"Pregnant?" Rafe's eyes widened. "You?" he asked Scott.

"Probably not," Scott conceded. "We were having a hard time conceiving. Apparently, the problem is me."

Rafe released his grip and paced around the room. "We've got bigger problems than that, my friends." He stopped in front of Terri. "You won't be able to keep it. I won't do that to a child."

She held her stomach possessively and murmured, "No."

"This is unbelievable!" Rafe stormed. "I guess I wasn't the only one keeping secrets. You were using me!"

"Only me," she said softly. "I wanted a baby so badly that yes, I used you. Scott agreed to the idea because he wanted *you*." She stepped closer to Rafe. "I've never seen him want anything as much as he wants you. I know he loves me, and always will. It's not about that. There's something special between the two of you, even I can see it."

Rafe and Scott glanced at each other. Both had tears rimming their eyes. Terri went on, "I think it's beautiful, really, and I never want to come between you. But I want to be in your lives. I want Scott to be my baby's father. You can be Uncle Rafe, or whatever role you want to play. But I want us to be a family."

"I can't," Rafe cried, shaking his head. "You don't know what this disease does to me!" He paced again. "The last full moon I wound up on your balcony. If I could have gotten in, I would have killed you both. I

have no control over myself for the hours of the full moon. It's unfathomable."

Scott and Terri exchanged horrified glances. "What if you were restrained?" Scott finally asked.

"Any restraints I put on, I can take off," Rafe replied. "I haven't found a way to restrain myself yet."

"What if I restrained you? Handcuffs or something safe? I could keep an eye on you and make sure you didn't harm yourself."

"I could never ask you to do that." Rafe turned his back to Scott.

Scott stepped up, sliding his arms around the other man. "You didn't ask. I offered because I love you, and we need to find a way to live with this."

Rafe sagged against the wall, sobbing. "Don't! Don't love me! You should kill me. We'd all be better off." He wailed into his arms.

Scott whirled him around and shoved Rafe back against the wall. "Never, *ever* say that again! We're going to find a way to live with this, because I love you. Do you hear me? I love you."

Rafe slid into Scott's arms and they kissed passionately. Scott brushed the tears off Rafe's face with his thumbs and said, "We're going to figure this out. And if Terri can't have your baby, we'll find her someone else. I love her, too, and I want her to be happy." He glanced at Terri, who was standing in the corner staring out the window.

"I came to New Orleans because of its reputed magic," Rafe admitted, wiping his face. "There are women here with special powers. I need to find one who can help me."

"That's it," Scott agreed, caressing Rafe's cheek. "We'll find someone together."

"I have another idea," Terri spoke up, turning around. "Do you remember the diary I found in our house, up on the bookshelf?"

"Yeah," Scott remembered.

"There's something magical about that diary. I didn't mention it before, because I wasn't sure it was true. After hearing this, I think I might believe it."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"The diary," she repeated. "There was a passage at the first of the book, which said the bearer can receive one wish. An old Scottish woman, the nanny of some early residents of the house, put a spell on it."

"I'm not sure I believe that." Scott shook his head.

Diary of a House

Rafe looked hopeful. "What have we got to lose? We make the wish, it doesn't come true, and we're no worse off than we are right now."

"There is one caveat," Terri replied.

"What?" Rafe looked desperate.

"If the wish is granted, the bearer loses something dear to them. It doesn't say what, and I don't think we get to choose. We just lose something dear to us."

"*Something dear?*" Scott repeated. "What the hell does that mean?"

"No." Rafe shook his head, not waiting for her answer. "It's too vague, too dangerous. Something dear could mean one of you—or your child. Those are the dearest things you possess. I could never do that to you."

"Wait," Terri paced now. "Let's think this through. If we don't use the wish, Rafe remains a..." she looked at him.

"Lycanthrope...werewolf."

"A werewolf," she continued. "A fate that none of us wants for him. It sounds brutal and painful."

"It's very painful," Rafe agreed sadly.

"Plus, I lose my baby—if there is a baby, that is. Truthfully, I think there is."

"And if we do use the wish?" Scott looked at her.

"We run the risk of losing something dear. It could be our house or one of our possessions. We have no family except each other, so it's possible that it could be one of us."

"Or the baby."

"We can have another baby," Terri told him. "We won't get to keep this one, anyway, if the wish doesn't work." She shivered.

Scott knew she would do everything in her power to keep her baby. He would, too, for her. He truly loved her. "We can always adopt."

She nodded and went to him, sliding her arms around his waist. "I couldn't bear the idea of losing you. We have to decide if this is what we really want to do. If it were I who was taken, you'd still have Rafe. I'd be happy knowing you two were together."

"But if it were me who was taken," Scott reasoned, "you'd have Rafe and the baby." He glanced at his lover. "Would you stand by Terri if anything happened to me? Would you help her raise the baby?"

"You know I would." He joined them in a circle, their arms around each other's waists. "The idea that the two of you would do this for me is

overwhelming. If you decide it's too risky, I'll understand. But if you do use the wish, I'll stand by either or both of you for as long as I live."

They leaned their heads into the circle, touching one another. "We have to do this," Terri finally whispered.

"Please be sure," Rafe whispered back.

Scott nuzzled Rafe's cheek and whispered, "I'm sure. I love you." He leaned over to Terri and nuzzled her as well. "I love you, too."

She looked up and placed a tender kiss on Scott's lips. She placed another kiss on Rafe's, then said, "Let's go home. We need to read the diary and figure out how to make the wish."

Rafe smiled at her and Scott. "I love you guys, too. Let's go home."

Chapter Five

They sat in the study, taking turns reading the leather book. No one came up with any more caveats, or reasons why not to make the wish. It seemed simple enough to do, they merely had to write their wish in the book. After agreeing on the wording, Terri sat at the desk and the men stood behind her.

She wrote neatly in the diary. "Dear Diary, I wish that Rafe McAllister and his unborn children would no longer be werewolves, or Lycanthropes." She signed the entry and closed the book. There'd be time to write more later. Now, they were all nervous wrecks.

They all remained still. There was no sign if the wish was heard or granted. There was nothing but silence.

"What do we do now?" Scott whispered.

"We wait for the full moon," Rafe replied.

"Will you be able to tell if it's happening?"

"Oh yes," he chuckled bitterly. "It's a vicious and painfully horrible transformation. I'll know. We'll have several sets of handcuffs and restraints ready, just in case."

"That's tomorrow night?" Terri asked him.

"Yes," Rafe nodded.

She pulled him and Scott each by the hand toward the stairs. "Then we still have tonight. Come upstairs and let's make love until we can't move. This might be our last chance to be together."

"I pray that's not the case," Rafe muttered.

Scott knew he would feel guilty if something happened to any one of them. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that. "Come on," he nudged Rafe. "Let's not think. Tonight, we only feel."

* * * *

They stayed in bed most of the next day, bringing in food and drinks, talking, laughing, and making love as the mood struck. Scott knew there was something ominous hanging over them, but he tried to

ignore it. Having Terri and Rafe in his bed was the most wonderful thing he could imagine, and he tried to relax and enjoy it.

All too soon, darkness fell and the moon began to rise. Scott noticed, but he didn't think Rafe did. His cock was buried in Terri's pussy, and Scott's cock was balls-deep in Rafe's ass. It took careful orchestration to keep the rhythm going, and Scott was in charge.

Terri's orgasm set off Rafe, whose orgasm blasted Scott out of control and up into orbit. When he made his way back to reality, they were dog-piled in a pleasant heap and the moon was shining bright.

Rafe muttered, "If that's the last orgasm we ever have, it was a hell of a note to go out on!"

"I don't think it'll be our last," Scott murmured to him. "Look outside."

Rafe glanced up. The moon shone brightly in the window. "Son-of-a-bitch!" he hollered. "The full moon!"

"And you're not a wolf!" Terri cried. "Although you're still a damned animal. Get off me, you two, I can't breathe."

"Hang on." Scott pulled his cock out slowly, and Rafe groaned.

He yanked his body off Terri's and flopped on the bed beside her. "Did you call me a damned animal?" He started tickling her and soon they were all laughing, rolling on the bed. When they finally called a truce, both Scott and Terri snuggled up to Rafe and he cradled them in his arms. "I can't believe it," he whispered, tears slowly falling. "It's over. You saved me. How can I ever thank you?"

"I can think of a few ways," Scott grinned at him.

"So can I," Terri teased, and they all laughed again.

Scott knew they were avoiding the one subject that no one dared broach. *What was to be the price for their wish?* He didn't know when they'd find out, so each moment had to be lived to its fullest.

"I need a drink." Scott sat up. "I'll get us some water. When I come back, Rafe can start dishing out some thank yous."

"Oh, me first." Terri stretched then cupped her breasts with both hands. "He can thank me *real* good."

Scott winked at Rafe and both men smiled. As he went to get a glass of water, he heard Rafe sucking Terri's breasts, and her groans of pleasure.

* * * *

Diary of a House

They eventually slept, worn out from two nights of uncertainty and nonstop sex. When the phone rang, Scott bolted up and reached over Terri for the receiver. "Hello," he barked.

"Mr. Walker? This is Jason Burns from Fidelity Investments in Los Angeles. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

Scott rubbed his face, trying to clear his head. "Jason Burns?" He remembered now, the man who invested his father's estate. "Oh, yes. Hello Mr. Burns. What can I do for you?"

"I'm afraid there's been an upset in the stock market—you may have heard about it on the news?"

Scott swallowed guiltily. He hadn't listened to any news. He'd practically done nothing but have sex for days. Holding that little tidbit of information back from Mr. Burns, he said, "No, I actually haven't."

"I'm so sorry to be the one to break this to you, then. Most of your father's investments were tied up in a couple companies he favored. Both have gone belly-up in the last twenty-four hours. I'm not entirely sure of the damage, but I fear your portfolio is nearly gone."

"What?" Scott yelled.

"I'm sorry!" Mr. Burns repeated. "I know these funds were dear to you, and this comes as quite a shock. I assure you, I'll keep on top of the matter, and if we have any recourse, I'll do what I can for you."

Scott smiled at Rafe and Terri, both now awake and looking at him with concern. "Mr. Burns, you're correct. My stock portfolio was quite dear to me. See what you can do to salvage any funds, will you, please? And Mr. Burns, thank you *so much* for the phone call." He hung up the receiver.

Terri rubbed her eyes. "Your stock portfolio?"

"All the money my father left us when he died. It's gone. Belly up. The agent said he knew the funds were quite dear to us."

"Oh my God!" Rafe fell back on the bed, a wide grin across his face.

"We're broke?" Terri asked.

"We're so poor we can't even pay attention," Scott replied.

Rafe started chuckling, and it turned into rolling belly-laugh.

Scott looked at him as if he were crazy.

"Did I ever tell you," Rafe asked between guffaws, "that I'm rich? Excessively, inordinately, butt-loads of money, rich?"

Dropping back on to the bed next to Rafe, Scott smiled. "Loaded, huh?"

"Oh, yeah," Rafe told him, and smiled.

Epilogue

Three Months Later

Scott lay nude on the sofa in the study, trying to maintain his erection.

"Come on, man!" Rafe stood behind his painter's easel. "Play with it or something. If I have to stop and come over there, I'll never get this part painted today."

"That doesn't sound all bad." Scott stroked his cock, now firmer with the notion of Rafe coming to the sofa to join him.

"But I'm in the mood to paint," Rafe protested.

Scott pulled on his shaft. "I'm laying here jerking off. What do you think I'm in the mood for?"

The front door opened and both men glanced in that direction. Terri entered the study. "Oh, what am I missing?"

"Terri. Great!" Rafe exclaimed. "Climb in between his legs and keep his cock hard. I'm trying to finish this part of the painting today."

She stepped up behind the artist and looked at his canvas. "It's just lovely! The colors are so bright and vivid!"

"Why, thank you!" He grinned at her, then reached down and kissed her burgeoning belly. "Hey, little baby. It's Uncle Rafe. As soon as I finish this painting of your daddy, I'm doing you and mommy next." Straightening, he looked at Terri. "I want to photograph you every month and document the changes in your body. Then I'll paint the best images."

"That sounds very cool." She rubbed her head on his shoulder affectionately.

"So, what did the doctor say?" Scott asked.

Terri beamed. "He said that I've passed the first trimester, so the chances of having a miscarriage are greatly reduced. No promises, of course, but the baby looks healthy as can be."

"Excellent!" Rafe kissed her on the cheek.

Diary of a House

Scott climbed off the sofa and strolled over to her. "I'm so happy, sweetheart. I think it's time we started planning a room for the baby. Choose any of the bedrooms close to your room. Whatever you want done, Rafe and I will do it for you." He gave Terri a kiss and she squeezed his cock playfully.

"Thank you, babe." She nodded to the canvas. "This is going to be a beautiful painting."

"My agent already has a buyer and it's only half finished," Rafe admitted to Terri. "He loves all the sketches I made of you, too. Those nudes are going to sell like crazy."

"I'm flattered," she replied, smiling.

"It's a damn good thing," Scott agreed. "I talked to our financial guy today, and the stocks are definitely gone. We've got some money in savings, but that's it."

"Who gives a rat's ass?" Terri muttered jovially.

Rafe chuckled as he touched his brush to the canvas. "That crazy old Scotswoman from the diary didn't count on a couple California hippies like you two."

Scott wrapped an arm around Rafe and the other around his wife. "No shit. Money's not what we hold dear. The only things that are truly important to me are what I've got right here in my hands."

Rafe smiled at him and Terri. "I owe you both my life."

She caressed her stomach and smiled up at him. "A life for a life, my friend. I couldn't be happier."

"Me, too!" Scott kissed her quickly and then turned, pressing his cock into Rafe's leg. "Unless you stopped painting and came to the sofa with me."

"I told you, I'm in the mood to paint!" Rafe playfully pushed Scott away. "Now, go lie down and stroke yourself! Be a good model and I'll make it up to you after the session."

"Awww," Scott pouted, walking to the sofa.

"Terri, get over there between his legs and play with him. I need a few more minutes with that erection and I'll be done."

She reached high on the bookshelf. "Just a minute, and I'll be happy to oblige. I remembered something I need to do, first." Pulling down the leather bound diary, she sat at the desk and picked up a pen. "What's the date today?"

Scott smiled at Rafe, then at her. "August 22, 1971."

413 Remembrance Lane

My vampire, My LOVE – 1993

Skyler Grey

Candice sat down on an unpacked box, she tried opening the weathered book she found but it was locked. Frowning, she bit the corner of her lip and searched the cover of the diary carefully. Gently running her fingers along the outside of the binding, she felt something. Hidden inside the binding of the diary was a small parcel of paper. On it was a crude drawing of a cutlass. Looking around the room, she immediately saw the same cutlass hanging over the fireplace. Excitement filled her as she carefully pulled it off the wall. After inspecting it, she noticed the handle was loose and slowly twisted it until it fell into two pieces. A strange key fell to the carpet at her feet. Staring at it in fascination, she picked it up. Carefully, she unlocked the diary and started to read the first entry. Candy skimmed over the yellow, tattered pages and was mesmerized with its contents.

"Candice! Where are you?" The cry came from her mother in the other room.

Candy almost dropped the diary she'd found, her thoughts lost in the dark, eerie secrets written on the cracked pages. *Is this for real?* she asked herself as she quickly closed the book and slipped it back to where she'd found it, atop an old, dusty bookshelf.

Carefully she shoved it into the far corner. She wiped the dust from her palms, sliding them across the butt of her cut-offs. Turning, she walked toward the door, irritation filling her as she reluctantly answered her mother's call.

It wasn't long before Candy's things were unloaded and *dumped* in the large living room of her new home. She glanced around gloomily, biting the corner of her lower lip and giving her mother and brother a pleading look.

Randy shook his head and backed away, throwing up his hands. "Hell, no! I've already given up half my day just to get you moved in here. You can have at it now. Call one of those cute little girlfriends of yours to help." Then, grinning, he trotted over to their mother, and kissed her on the cheek. In a low tease he whispered, "Watch it, Ma, she's sure to rope you in if you're not careful." With a wink, he blew Candy a kiss, giving her a wide grin. "Have fun, Pop Tart." Then he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

Candy couldn't help the smile that snuck across her face as she looked at her mother. Randy had called her Pop Tart every since she could remember. It had been his pet name for her since the day he came home from school and caught her on the kitchen floor, surrounded with open boxes of Pop Tarts and smeared strawberry on her face. While each hand clutched a tart, she had opened every box, taking a bite of each one until she found her favorite.

Licking her lips, Candy felt an urge to eat a strawberry tart right then.

"Well, Mom, what say you help me out here and let's get things put away?" Then she teased, adding, "Remember, united we get things done, divided we stall, procrastinate, and eat Pop Tarts."

Louise Thibodeaux laughed as she shook her head of rich brown hair. Even at the age of forty-eight, her mother was a beauty. Louise looked at her daughter and nodded. "Only for a little while, Candice, I have to get home and clean the house. With you *finally* moved out, I now have tons of new room and I can't wait to see what I'm going to do with it."

Candy rushed across the room, tickling her mother. She knew her mother was teasing. Just the night before, she had caught her sitting in the kitchen with the lights off, sobbing. Candice was her only daughter and the two were extremely close.

Candy was amazed at how much they got done before her mother left. Saying their goodbyes, Candy saw her mother's eyes brim with tears before she quickly turned away.

Candy wiped her nose with the back of her hand, shoving her fingers firmly into her hip pockets. "I'll be fine, Mom. If I need anything, I'll pick up the phone. Promise."

Louise gave a half-hearted laugh and nodded. "How silly am I being? You'd think I wasn't going to ever see you again."

Candy giggled. "Gee, I can't wait to see how you behave on my wedding day."

Louise shot her a heartsick look, smacking her lightly on the arm. "You're a terrible tease, Candice Jean Thibodeaux."

Candy grinned. "I know, just ask Randy." The two women laughed, then Louise turned, closing the door behind her.

Candy looked around her new home, taking a deep breath. She had been so excited about moving in, and now—with night surrounding

Diary of a House

her—she felt unnerved. Never having been one to spook easily, she chalked it up to the diary she'd found earlier.

Her mind had traveled back to the old, leather bound book several times throughout the day, and she wanted desperately to read it.

It was around midnight when she dragged herself into the shower. Exhausted, she began to scrub her body vigorously with the sponge her mother had bought her. Shampooing her long hair, she rinsed.

She wrapped a thick towel around her damp body and stepped out of the shower, twisting another towel over her head. Crossing over to the sink, she felt an eeriness fill the room. She searched the mirror, too afraid to turn around.

To her relief there was nothing, and she released a soft sigh. She chided herself for being so silly, quipping out loud. "Easy, girl, it's only your imagination."

It was late when Candy climbed into bed, her eyelids already heavy before her head touched the pillow. Just before sleep claimed her, her thoughts traveled back to the diary.

* * * *

It was early morning when the phone rang. She was pissed, throwing a pillow over her head to cover her ears. Unable to stand it any longer, she tossed the pillow across the bed and sat up, shoving her tangled hair out of her face. Planting her feet on the cool floor, she made her way into the hall and peered over the railing. She frowned, seeing the portable lying on the catch-all table near the front door.

Candy clamored down the stairs in bare feet, cursing at the annoying ring. Snatching it up, she caught herself just before she answered. A dial tone sounded on the other end.

"Son of a bitch!" she hissed, slamming it back down. Candy made her way into the kitchen, grumbling to herself. She searched through her cupboards for coffee. Unable to find any, she opened the fridge and reached for a cold soda. *Nothing like an ice cold Coke to perk you up in the morning*, she thought, taking a big sip.

Tears stung the backs of her eyes as she scrunched her nose from the carbonation. *Coffee would have been so much better.*

Candy leaned against the kitchen counter and sighed, looking out the window. Then, smiling, she watched a dove eating seed from the ground. Just as she took another sip, she choked, sputtering her Coke into the sink, watching in horror as a cat pounced on the helpless bird.

She raced outside and found the cat still clutching the bird, determined to not let go. Candy looked at the bird, her heart pounding wildly in her chest as she watched the poor creature struggling to free itself. She hissed at the cat, smacking her hands and stomping her foot.

The cat finally let the bird go and it quickly flew away. Exasperated, Candy watched the injured dove flutter awkwardly, feathers floating in the air as it landed on a telephone wire, warily watching the cat. Candy then turned back toward the culprit. "You little shit, get out of here."

It wasn't until the cat stood that Candy felt her heart tweak. It was bone-skinny, its head bigger than its body as it limped away from her. A lump caught in her throat as she bent, crouching on her heels. Calling sweetly to the cat, she reached out her hand. It froze, looking at her suspiciously. Then, as if deciding it needed a friend, it eased over to her, allowing Candy to gently scratch its head.

Candy smiled as she talked to the straggly tomcat. "Look at you, you dirty thing. I bet you're starving." Glancing up at the bird, she felt guilty. It would have probably been the first meal it had in weeks by the look of the cat.

She stood and started back to the house, the cat quickly following. Not yet wanting him inside until he was clean, she quickly went to get a saucer of milk and brought it out for him. Curling up to it, he greedily lapped up its white sweetness. She stood watching him until he was full, then he lazily began the process of bathing, licking each paw and wiping his face. She reached for the bowl, picked it up, and carried it back inside. Candy knew she had made a new friend and grinned to herself.

Candy ate a quick bite, then began to finish unpacking the rest of her boxes. After emptying out the last one, she carried them out back to the trash. Her new friend rushed to her side and she laughed. Reaching down, she stroked him across his back and up the tail.

Summer was almost over but it was still hot as the humidity hung in the air, quickening her walk back inside. She found the phone and dialed for directory assistance. "Yes, I'd like the number to a pet salon...no, one that is mobile...yes, I'll try that one, thanks."

Candy dialed the number. A pleasant voice picked up on the other end. Candy began, "Hi, I have a cat, a really dirty cat that needs a bath really bad. How soon can you get here? That would be perfect. Thanks so much. If you have a pen, I'll give you my address, okay, ready? It's, 413 Remembrance Lane. I'll see you soon."

Diary of a House

She set the phone down and smiled, happy with the appointment. It would give her just enough time to run into town and fetch a few things before the groomer arrived. Candy cocked her head and thought for a moment. *What should I call him?* she asked herself. Then she smiled, *Tommy-boy!*

The groomer showed up shortly after Candy returned from running errands and shopping for Tommy-boy. After finally luring the dirty cat into her van the woman went to work. Candy could hear his howls and her heart grew heavy.

She set up Tommy-boy's new two-story carpet condo, tossing his squeaky mice on the living room floor. When the groomer brought him to her, she was excited to see her new pet all fresh and clean. He was wrapped tightly in a towel, only his big head peeking out, and Candy looked from the cat to the woman, puzzled. Then Candy's hand flew to her mouth as she noticed the scratches up the woman's arms and across her hands. "Oh, my gosh, did *he* do that?"

The woman was barely polite as she shoved the cat, towel, and all into Candy's arms. In a tone that was nothing short of strained politeness, she answered, "Yes! He did." Then, clearing her throat, she snipped, "Were you given a quote over the phone?"

Candy nodded, "The lady told me for a bath and nail trim, fifteen dollars."

Candy was certain she heard a few colorful words slip past the woman's mouth as she turned away for a moment then back, giving Candy a tight smile.

"Then if we could be paid, we'll be on our way."

With a slight nod, Candy smiled. "Sure, just a minute and I'll get my checkbook." She closed the door and quickly reached for her purse on the dining room table. Seeing a twenty wadded up inside, she grabbed it, wanting to get rid of the irritated woman quickly.

Candy opened the door, holding the money out toward the grumpy woman. "Here you go, and I really appreciate you coming on such short notice. Next time, he won't be so dirty."

The woman's brows shot up. "Next time? Uh, yeah, well, just give us a call." Then she added quickly, "And you *might* want to warn the *next* groomer that he's a biter."

Snatching the bill from Candy's hand, she gave a nod, then left.

She stared dumbfounded after the woman. *How rude*, she thought, closing the door. Reaching for her new pet, she cuddled him, kissing his now soft, furry head.

"That mean ole lady. Well, we won't ever call *her* back again. I'm glad you scratched her, she probably deserved it."

Candy bent, setting him on the floor, and gently unwrapped him. He was fluffier than she'd expected. His black and white fur shined with a clean freshness, which made his bright green eyes stand out even more. He looked around, shaking himself out nervously. Soothing him with soft words, Candy continued to love on him until his motor began to purr. It was no time before Tommy-boy became curious, happily investigating his new surroundings.

Candy plopped onto the couch, her new buddy jumping instantly into her lap. Curling into a ball, he snuggled and began to doze as she scratched his head and neck, his tail twitching with content. She sighed, gently lifting him as she laid him next to her and stood. He didn't move except to roll onto his back and stretch out, snoring as he continued to sleep. Candy climbed the stairs to the bathroom. It was getting dark and she was once again exhausted.

But she couldn't sleep, as tired as she was. Getting up, Candy went back downstairs, finding her new pet still sleeping on the couch. Her eyes turned toward the hall and she headed into the small room that served as a small library. Standing on her tiptoes, she reached up in search of the old diary.

Her fingers felt the tough leather and she pulled the book down as she blew off the dust. Candy curled up on the comfy chaise lounge, turning on the floor lamp. She'd been dying to get back to the diary but had been way too busy and tired. Now she was wide-awake and eager to read the intriguing entries within.

Candy was stunned to learn how old the diary actually was, its first entry going as far back as the mid seventeen hundreds. Catherine Ashbury and her Scottish nanny, Tilly McDonald, made a fascinating pair. Pirates! The thought sent chills of excitement through her. *How romantic*, she thought. Then her heart skipped—the address that Catherine Ashbury used was the same address where she now lived.

Fascinated, she read more, her heart racing with each story. She set the book in her lap for a moment, staring blankly. *Dear God, these stories can't be real. These people and what they went through could not*

Diary of a House

really have happened... could it? Werewolves, ghosts, and all here in this very house? Candy shook her head in disbelief.

As she continued, Candy found herself laughing, crying, and in some parts fearful. Hours later she felt her eyes grow heavy and she stretched, turning to look outside. The rays of morning were spreading across the sky as she yawned, staring dumbly out the window. Candy was stunned that she had stayed up all night reading. Her eyes burning, she blinked several times. Then she got up and headed for the bedroom, clutching the diary to her chest.

She held it close and wondered at the stories. If the diary was authentic, then it meant it had a spell cast upon it by Tilly, the Scottish nanny. The spell gave the legal tenant one wish, but in doing so that person had to give up something very precious to him or her. After reading the sacrifices of the past residents, she was both amazed and intrigued.

Candy climbed into bed and slowly began to fall sleep, so exhausted she barely noticed Tommy-boy jumping up and snuggling at her side as she dreamed of her wish.

* * * *

A week had come and gone since Candy had moved in. Her brother dropped over once, and her mother called every day. She felt completely at home in the old house. Even Tommy-boy prowled bravely around his new home, as if he had lived there for years.

Candy plopped onto the antique chaise, which had quickly become her favorite piece of furniture. She patted the seat and her fluffy tomcat raced across the room, pouncing across her lap, snuggling up next to her.

The phone rang, causing her to jump. As she reached for the cordless that lay next to her she frowned. It was almost midnight. *Who on earth could be calling at this time of night?* Since it must be a wrong number, she ignored it until it stopped. Just when she was ready to once again read the old diary, the phone rang once more.

Irritated, she snatched it up. "Hello!"

Silence on the other end of the phone caused her temper to rise. "I said, *hello*."

Candy caught the faint sound of music in the background, soft, tantalizing. A voice, rich and smooth, spoke.

"May I ask to whom I am speaking?" A stranger asked.

Candy felt her stomach flip as her body came to life. Electricity shot throughout her at the sound of the stranger's deep, sensual tone. Still

slightly annoyed, she responded a bit more gently. "It's very rude to call someone's home, especially this late at night, then ask them their name. Who are you looking for?"

The stranger was silent for a moment before he answered, his voice seductive as he chuckled in her ear. The sound caused goose bumps to spread across her body. Candy thought she could actually feel the heat of his breath through the phone.

"I am sorry, of course, you are right. Please forgive me. I am searching for my uncle's tenant, a Miss Candice Thibodeaux."

Candy sat up instantly, pushing Tommy-boy from her lap, barely noticing him as he sauntered off. "Oh! Yes, that's me."

His voice carried like music through the phone, caressing her.

"May I have a moment of your time, Miss Thibodeaux?"

Candy walked nervously about the room. "Umm, sure. Is there anything wrong, Mister...?"

As if ignoring her indirect question, he continued, "Good, I am most pleased to have caught you at home. I have been trying to reach you for several days. It appears I am in a state of desperation."

His commanding voice caused a pulsing between her thighs and she reached down, gently brushing her fingertips across her sensitive mound. In barely a whisper she inhaled. "Yes?"

"It seems that I am at the moment...*homeless*."

Candy could only listen, unable to form the questions that flooded her brain. *Homeless?* Then, finally able to speak, she asked nervously, "And why have you called me? I'm sorry, you never told me your name."

She could tell he was amused as he spoke, "Avakis Dregan, but please call me Avakis. And as to why I am calling you is this. I had to leave my estate due to a slight emergency, one which has brought me here to New Orleans. My business is now complete, but my estate, I'm sorry to say, caught fire and was burned to the ground."

Candy continued to pace the room as she ran a hand across her forehead. "But, Mr. Avakis, I am confused as to why this concerns me. Not that I'm not sympathetic to what has happened, but I just don't see where *I* fit in."

He sighed audibly. "Miss Thibodeaux, it looks like rain and I'm standing outside your front porch, I would much prefer to have this discussion inside, in person. Would that be possible?"

Candy ran into the living room and peeked through the peephole, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. She strained to see the distorted

Diary of a House

figure in the dark. Nervously, she breathed, "Mr. Avakis, I can't just let you in here. I don't even know you."

He lifted his face slowly, his gaze piercing through the small window. For a moment she could barely breathe. He held the phone to his ear and gave her a slight smile. "I understand, but please believe me when I tell you that I mean you no harm. It is late and I am extremely tired. May I at least have the courtesy of explaining my situation to you, face to face?"

A lump caught in her throat as eyes of purest blue glowed through the small glass. A calm enveloped her like a cloak and she unlocked the door. Sliding the phone from her ear, she stood before him with only a screen to separate them.

Candy was amazed at how strikingly handsome he was. He was tall and lean with long, dark blonde hair combed neatly back into a tight ponytail. His face was smooth, except for the neatly manicured goatee that hid the cleft in his strong chin. His features were intriguing, his skin glowing in the pale moonlight as his full lips slipped into a charming smile across perfectly straight, white teeth.

But it was his eyes that captivated her. She stood frozen. They seemed to carry waves of intoxicating heat across the short distance between them. The heat traveled downward, like the skilled fingers of a lover as his gaze traveled the length of her, caressing bare skin beneath the thin shirt.

Once again his gaze was back on her face. "*Mia Bella*, how captivating your face. How *delicious*...your body."

Candy blinked. His lips never moved, yet she was certain he had spoken. "What did you say?" she asked.

The handsome stranger only smiled as he gave a slight bow.

Candy suddenly felt conscious of her clothing. Not bothering to grab a robe before she opened the door, she stood in her brother's oversized t-shirt that was entirely too thin. To make matters worse, she wore no panties, never had. She felt a cool breeze wrap around her bare legs and slide upwards, causing the sensitive mound between her legs to throb.

Not moving, the stranger only stared.

Candy felt compelled to offer, "Please, come in?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth she gasped. *Was she mad?* She didn't even know this guy and she had just invited him in, and her in barely nothing.

Stumbling over her words, she quickly added, "I mean, let me get a robe and you can come in."

She noticed before turning away his hand reached for the screen door, not caring to wait for her to fetch her robe.

Quickly she rushed toward the stairs, scampering up them as fast as she could, feeling the need to put a safe distance between them both. After entering her room she closed the door and leaned back against it, her chest heaving in a mixture of fright and excitement.

She looked over at Tommy-boy, who raised his head and eyed her lazily. Candy quickly snatched the pink robe her mother had given her last Christmas off a hanger. It was soft and thick, and she nestled deep within its warm comfort.

Her hand on the bedroom door, she opened it and peeked out, half expecting him to be standing on the other side. She was relieved when he wasn't. Easing out into the hall, she crept over to the stairs, placing a socked foot on the top step. When she looked down, she saw him and inhaled sharply.

He stood waiting patiently, unmoving. Then slowly his head lifted and he looked at her and smiled.

Candy felt her heart race as her blood heated. Just one look from him caused her body to quiver, her knees to weaken. Who was this gorgeous guy that caused her senses to go wild?

By the time she reached the bottom step he came forward, and he took her small hand into his, gently lifting it to his sensual lips and kissing it. "*Bella*, you are a rose in a field of thorns."

Candy held her breath as his fingers caressed her open palm and wrist. Her thighs instantly became wet as she licked her lips. She tried to speak, but her voice was weak.

"That is very nice of you to say, Mr. Dregan." She shoved her hands back into her robe pockets. Her skin still tingled from the warmth of his touch, and Candy cleared her throat and stepped back from him.

"Mr. Dregan, I'm really tired and I don't mean to sound rude, but I was just getting ready for bed."

Candy thought she caught a flicker of irritation cross his almost too handsome face. She was unnerved at how her body wanted him, craved him, and she found herself struggling to keep from pressing against him as he stood towering over her. Taking another step back, she felt the wall's solid coolness and she suddenly became scared.

Diary of a House

"*Mia Bella*, I mean you no harm." Reaching out, he lightly caressed her smooth cheek. "I am in search of someone." He leaned closer, bending his head, his lips brushing hers ever so lightly as he gently placed strong fingers on her chin, turning her head away. Exposing her neck to his gaze.

His breath was hot, sweet, as his lips brushed over and across her skin. The feeling was so exquisite Candy felt her knees give way. As if on instinct, Avakis wrapped his arm around her slim waist, pulling her against him. His tongue teased a delicate earlobe as it trailed a heated path down the side of her neck and across her collarbone.

Candy gasped as the feelings he stirred exploded like fireworks within her. He barely touched her and she felt herself peak to a near orgasm. His hands never left her body as her robe opened, exposing her hardened nipples through the shirt.

Candy could only watch, as if standing outside her own body, as he tortured her with sweet caresses and tender kisses. She couldn't—even if she wanted—stop him. Her body had a will of its own and it responded to his, unashamed and openly.

Then, claiming her mouth beneath his, he kissed her hungrily, almost savagely.

Candy felt her robe drop from her body. Suddenly she was on her back across her own bed. Tommy-boy had disappeared. Avakis kissed her everywhere—eyes, her chin, her lips. As it traveled the length of body, his tongue tortured her senses into several light orgasms.

She grabbed handfuls of sheet into her clenched fists as her eyes squeezed shut, allowing the wonderful sensation he caused to spread throughout her. She moaned. "What are you doing to me?"

Avakis only chuckled as his tongue slid relentlessly across her heated flesh. "*Bella*, you taste," he groaned as he continued, "like the finest wine in all of Italy. I must have more of you."

Candy withered in pleasure beneath his touches. Opening her eyes, she found herself lost in the beauty of his gaze then slowly closed them again. She wanted him. Completely, without a doubt, wanted him. Lost in the overwhelming sensations he stirred, she gasped, "I'm yours to do with as you please."

Avakis groaned against her mouth, kissing her deeply. His razor sharp nails cut the thin shirt from her body, exposing her flesh to his touch.

Opening her eyes, she was surprised that he also was naked, and could feel his manhood pressing against her bare thigh. He was huge and hard. She pulled him to her, whimpering as she opened her legs. "Take me, Avakis, I'm ready."

Avakis wrapped his arms around her as he pressed his body into hers, positioning the tip of his cock against the slick folds of her mound, spreading her open. She moaned softly beneath him, which caused his muscles to tense as he growled against her neck.

Avakis found her tight opening which lubricated his stiffened cock with her fluids. Gently he eased inside as he gritted his teeth.

He whispered hoarsely, "Spread wider for me, *Mia Bella*, for I am big and you are tight."

Candy did as she was told, immediately wrapping her long, slender legs around his waist. She slipped her arms once again around his neck, pulling him to her as she kissed him, his touch causing her to gasp against his mouth.

* * * *

Avakis felt the demon within him grow as he fought to maintain control. Its power was almost too much as he slipped the head of his engorged cock deeper inside, then froze, her maidenhead stopping him. *A virgin!* He growled against her satin neck, nipping the pulsating vein that ran along side it.

His teeth were sharp and he tasted the tiny trickle of blood. His nails were like razors and he dug them into the sheets and mattress to keep from slicing her. He fought with himself, willing them back into their nail beds to protect her.

Blood, with a faint taste of rich wine, caused him to almost lose himself as he growled like an animal against her bare flesh. But he held back, refusing to completely bite her as he plunged forward, tearing the thin veil of her virginity apart. This was to be his test. She was to be the sacrifice. Avakis could not think, losing himself to the innocent girl beneath him. Her body was warm, her heart beating rapidly as her chest heaved against his.

Candy screamed as his mouth covered hers, absorbing her cries as she whimpered beneath him. The animal in him devoured her, plunging over and over until his need was near climax. He was shocked to feel her slim hips moving with him—slowly, then faster, as if she herself had a need to quench the fire that burned inside them.

Diary of a House

Avakis drove harder, faster, as they both filled the room with cries of pleasure. He had not felt such an orgasm in years. Centuries even, and he roared, throwing his head back as his hips dug deep between her silken thighs. Grabbing her legs, he lifted them over his shoulders, craving more, demanding more.

* * * *

The mixture of pain and pleasure almost too much. Candy pressed her hands against his smooth chest, the tight muscles rippling beneath her fingertips as his chest pressed her own breasts flat. Each thrust caused her to gasp.

Avakis plunged deeper, his cock filling her to capacity until she thought he would tear her apart. Her pleasure quickly turned to intense pain and she began to claw at his arms and chest, desperately trying to push him off.

Her struggles only seem to ignite his lust as he reached between her legs, caressing her swollen clit between his fingers.

Candy felt her body respond instantly as her legs relaxed, spreading wider for him. She cried out as she soared higher, rapidly until she reached the crest of her climax and together they flew, soaring over waves of their intense orgasm. Candy's cries of passion filled the room, mingling with Avakis' growls of deep pleasure. She clawed his back, her nails raking the flesh beneath them.

She found herself floating among the soft waves of ecstasy as together they gasped, trying to catch their breath.

He gently pulled out of her, then dropped to her side.

Candy could barely breathe, her chest heaving from their lovemaking. She looked over at Avakis, studying the perfect profile of his face. His nose was long and defined, his jawline square and strong. His lips were full and sensuous and she felt her body tingle at the thought of them suckling her still sensitive nipples. His brows were arched, conformed perfectly to his almond shaped eyes, the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen. They were closed, but Candy knew she would never forget them.

Watching him in sleep, she wondered who he was. Where did he come from? She had never allowed herself to give into lust and passion the way she did tonight. She had always guarded herself carefully, avoiding intimate relationships, knowing where they eventually led.

But in the course of one evening she had thrown caution to the wind, making love to a complete stranger. Wonderful, wild, magnificent

love to a man she knew nothing about, giving him her most treasured gift, a gift she had promised to a husband she had yet to meet.

With a sigh, she looked up at the ceiling, then closed her eyes and fell asleep with a smile across her face.

* * * *

Morning came quickly, or so she thought when the sun's rays filled her room. Suddenly, realization came flooding back and she shot up, looking next to her. She was alone, but she knew he had been there. Avakis Dregan, the most handsome man she'd ever met. The indentation of his body still set in her sheets confirmed it. Looking down, she saw the sticky wet blood between her thighs, a final confirmation.

It was real, he had taken her virginity and left, not waking her. Tears formed as she fought to control them. He had used her and disappeared. Unable to stop the stinging flow of tears that spilled down her cheeks, she angrily brushed them away as she stepped from her bed, walking slowly to the shower.

Sitting in only her robe, Candy sipped on a hot cup of coffee. Her heart filled with an ache she couldn't describe. Avakis had not even left her a note, she knew, because she had searched frantically for one. Her legs ached and she dragged herself from the kitchen and went into the library, stretching out onto her favorite chair. Tommy-boy curled next to her, purring softly.

A sadness unlike she'd ever known hung over her the rest of the day, and she found herself unable to shake it. That evening the phone rang, causing her to jump. Her heart racing, she snatched it off the table next to her, lifting it to her ear. Nervously she answered, "Hello."

Silence on the other end of the phone caused her heart to skip. Her voice almost breaking, she whispered, "Avakis?"

He sounded tired, sad, his voice soft. "I ask your forgiveness for having left without saying goodbye. I can't explain, but it was for your own safety. Believe me when I tell you, for I would never want to harm you. It is for that reason I left. You will not see me again and I'm sorry."

Candy felt her heart stop. Fear filled her at the thought of never seeing him again. In an overwhelming panic she gasped, "*No!* Please, don't leave. I have to see you again. Just once...Avakis, please? You can't do this to me, you at least owe me that after what you took from me."

She heard his intake of breath, and finally after a long silence he agreed. "*Si, Bella.* Tonight, at midnight I shall come. I owe you that."

Diary of a House

Relief flooded through Candy as she hung up. She was determined not to lose him. As crazy as it sounded, she believed she loved him.

Her mood was now light and she felt herself almost giddy as she anticipated Avakis' arrival. She would convince him to stay with her. Convince him they could make things work out between them.

She ignored the nagging in the back of her mind. *What had he meant when he said, he had to leave before he hurt her?* It made no sense. But soon, soon he would be once again in her arms. Then, nothing else would matter.

* * * *

At midnight, Candy paced the living room nervously. She had thrown on a short skirt and crop top. *A little temptation can't be all bad*, she'd told herself with a wry grin.

He was there. She knew instinctively and walked toward the door, opening it to him. He was stunning to look at. His hair was now loose and it hung just below his broad shoulders in glorious waves of golden blonde. His eyes glowed as his gaze slowly swept over her body, causing her flesh to heat, her nipples to tighten, and her mound to pulse.

Without words he came in, closing the door behind him.

It took all her strength to keep from throwing herself into his arms. She saw, too, the torture in his own eyes as he held back in silence, his face grim, his jaw clinched.

Suddenly she was nervous, not sure what to say. She motioned for him to sit on the couch.

Avakis sunk onto the cushioned seat next to her, resting his elbows on long muscled legs, enhanced by tight jeans.

Before she could speak, Avakis began, "*Bella*, you must understand that I cannot be with you. If I stay near you, I might..." He gritted his teeth as he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

When he looked at her, Candy almost cried out, reading the pain in his eyes. His voice was hoarse and sounded tortured as he spoke.

"Candice, I will hurt you if I stay, I will not be able to help myself. And for that reason alone, I have to leave. Never to return."

Candy felt tears sting the back of her eyes, Her heart ached, and fear filled her at the thought of losing the only man she might ever love.

She reached out, touching him gently. He flinched, causing her heart to sink. Her voice lined with pain as she pulled her hand away, she whispered, "Do I repulse you so much, Avakis, that you can't even stand me to touch you?"

Avakis looked deep into her tear-filled eyes and slowly his own began to fill. "It is *because* I love you, *Bella*, that I must leave you. I would rather lose you forever than to cause you harm. I am not what you think me to be. I am..." His voice faltered as he took a deep breath, his body shuddering. "I am a vampire. I was commanded to take women for my own pleasure and feed on them until I came across a virgin, my final initiation to my many years of torture by my master. I saw you one evening through the window, though I had no idea you were a virgin. I was ordered to give you over to *him*, to be a slave to his own perversion until he tired of you and decided your fate. But after last night, I couldn't do it. I read in your eyes love, heard in your voice tenderness, felt in your arms passion. I could hear your thoughts as you lay watching me, and I knew then that I could never give you to him."

Candy could only stare at him, her face blank. Was he telling the truth, she wondered. *How? When? Such things didn't exist—did they?* The questions tumbled in her head until she began to put the pieces together.

After their lovemaking and his disappearance, she had found her t-shirt on the floor in shreds. She also found slits cut throughout her bed sheets and into her mattress. Too heartbroken, she had not cared. But now it all came flooding back to her.

Then suddenly, her eyes lit. She pulled him off the couch after her, grabbing his hand and rushing toward the library.

Avakis could only follow, unsure as to what she was up to.

In an excited rush of breath she let go of him and flew across the room to the bookshelf. Slowly reaching up, and with gentle care, she pulled the old, worn leather bound diary from its shelf. Turning to him, she smiled.

As she held it in front of her, she asked, "Do you know this book, Avakis?"

Avakis stared at the book, nodding as he whispered, "It is the Ashbury diary. Yes, I know of it, we all do, but it hides from those other than whom it was meant for."

Candy approached him slowly. "Avakis, if this diary is real, then it has the ability to grant its finder one wish. I know my wish."

Avakis reached out and touched her cheek softly. "*Mia Bella*, you must be careful, for this book has great magic."

Diary of a House

Candy stared lovingly into his eyes and felt a tug on her heart. Her mind was set. She reached out and touched his smooth cheek with the back of her fingertips. "My handsome vampire, I want to set you free."

Avakis shook his head, "No, *Bella*. I will not allow it. No one knows for sure what their sacrifice is, only the diary knows. It is too dangerous and I cannot ask that of you."

Candy saw, if only for a brief second, the flicker of hope in her beautiful lover's eyes, and it was all she needed. Reaching up on tiptoes, she pulled his head down, kissing him softly. Without letting go, she closed her eyes and whispered against his lips. "I wish Avakis Dregan to be free of his prison of darkness and to live the rest of his life as a mortal." After carefully penning her wish into the diary, they went to bed, holding each other tightly until sleep claimed them.

* * * *

Candy woke the next morning, a blanket covering her as she lay curled on the couch the old leather diary still clutched in her hands. She frowned, not remembering falling asleep. Tommy-boy stretched, purring as he rubbed against her cheek, forcing her to sit up.

Her eyes grew wide as her heart beat rapidly. She jumped to her feet, dropping the diary to the floor. "*Avakis!*"

Running from room to room, she cried out his name, all-the-while knowing he was not there. Her heart thumped against her chest, threatening to burst. Tears stung the back of her eyes until they filled and spilled over. She collapsed to her knees on the kitchen floor, covering her face with her hands, and cried.

Her sacrifice must have been Avakis, he would not be a part of her life again. She lay for hours on the floor, her heart broken as she wept until there were no more tears left.

* * * *

It had been almost two years since Candy had rented the house, and her lease would soon be up. She wanted to have a small dinner party for her family before she moved. The owner had contacted her, telling her that the house was already promised to another tenant at the end of her lease. She had been heartbroken because she did not want to leave. It was here that she met her Avakis, her handsome vampire, and she hoped that someday he might come back to her.

Candy had finally given up, believing she could now think of *him* without a lump forming in her throat; accepting the fact that freedom for

Avakis meant a lifetime of ache for her, but also knowing she would do it again, if given the choice.

The doorbell rang and she knew it was her parents, for they were notorious for being early.

She hugged them both as her father made his way into the living room in search of the TV. "Candy, tell your old pappy that you can get the game? If not, I'll be heading for the nearest pub to watch it."

Louise gave him a sharp look as she raised one brow. "I don't believe you'd dare try, Mr. Thibodeaux, unless you're willing to pay the piper?"

In a teasing voice he answered, "Woman, I pay the piper every time you put on that damn David Hasselhoff."

Candy giggled, "Oh, Daddy, you know you like the pretty girls that bounce all over on there."

Her mother smirked. "Hmph! Thanks to the new Wonderbra, I bounce all over, too."

Candy's eyes lit up in surprise. She'd never heard her mother say such things. Had her moving out opened her mother's shy side? She grinned at the thought.

Laughing, Candy walked over to the drawer that kept her controller and handed it to her father. "There ya go, Pops. You won't have to take Mom up on her dare this time."

Her father sat back on the couch, completely relaxed and grinned. "Oh, your pappy doesn't mind taking a dare once in a while."

Louise coughed.

After handing him an ice-cold beer, Candy pulled her mother into the kitchen. "So, is Randy coming?"

Her mother smiled. "Yes, he is. Didn't he tell you?"

Candy caught the mischievous grin on her mother's face and raised a slender brow. "What? Tell me what, mother?"

Louise waved a hand in the air as if to brush off the question. "Oh, nothing. I just thought he might have called to confirm he was coming." Then, under her breath, she added, "And that he's bringing a *friend*."

Candy froze. "Mother, tell me it's not that bitch he's been with for the past two months? Because if he brings her here, I'm going to raise hell, I swear!"

Louise shook her head. "No, no, calm down, for Pete's sake, Candice. You're acting so silly. It's a new friend of your brother's, is all."

Diary of a House

Then, raising a brow at her daughter, Louise added, "Is there a girl your brother has *ever* dated that you've liked, Candice?"

Candy thought a moment then grinned. "Nope."

Both women laughed as they finished setting the table when a knock at the door caused them to smile. Sure it was Randy, Candy eased her way over to let him in as her mother went to sit next to her father. Before she could open the door, Randy popped his head in and smiled.

"Hey there Pop Tart! I hope you fixed something really good and lots of it because me and my buddy are starvin'!"

Walking in, he handed her a book as he kissed her cheek. "I thought you'd enjoy this, just came out today."

Candy looked at the book and blushed, it was Madonna's famous sex book that she had teased him about getting. "Oh my gosh, Randy, you ass! You give this to me in front of Mom and Dad and your...friend?" Her voice wavered as it trailed off.

She froze, her heart pounding wildly as her brother's friend entered behind him. She couldn't speak, a lump formed in her throat and her knees began to tremble. *Avakis!*

The handsome man that followed Randy in smiled, showing perfect white teeth. He looked a bit different with his hair cut short in the back, leaving it a bit longer in the front so it sexily accented his face in highlights of sun-bleached streaks. His once pale skin was now bronzed to a golden tan. But it was his eyes that held her.

She felt her stomach flip when he reached out and took her hand, and a shot of electricity ran up her arm as they locked eyes. He held her hand a bit longer than necessary, his fingers caressing the underneath of her palm.

She smiled at him, her heart soaring as she whispered, "*Avakis.*"

Louise quickly responded, "Why Candice, do you two already know each other?"

Avakis chuckled as he tilted his head. "Yes, actually we met briefly a few years back."

Candy looked at Avakis, then to Randy, her brows raised in confusion.

Avakis spoke up quickly, looking at Candy warmly. "Your brother and I had only met a few days ago by chance. I had just gotten into town and we ran into each other at the breakfast café around the corner. I asked if he was familiar with a young woman named Candice Thibodeaux. When he told me that he was your brother I was pleasantly

surprised. It was Randy that invited me to come with him tonight, I hope you don't mind?"

Mind? Of course she didn't mind and quickly told them. Candy didn't care about anything other than her Avakis was here, now, with her. And she was never losing him again.

Dinner went smoothly with her parents leaving early. Her father hating to drive late at night had made their farewells quick and they left. It wasn't long after that Randy stood, also ready to leave. Candy jumped up, reaching for his arm. "Stay the night, Randy. I have room for both of you."

Randy cocked his head and gave her a sly look. "Do you now?"

She knew what he was implying, and added, "I meant, I haven't seen you in so long, you knuckle head, and that it would be nice if you stayed the night. I'll make breakfast in the morning." She raised her brows in hope.

Randy grinned, then leaned over, kissing her on the forehead. "No Pop Tarts for me, thanks." Laughing he added, "No really, I can't, your brother is in hot demand these days. I've a date with two hot chicks and I can't let them down."

Candy's eyes widened. "Two?"

Her brother laughed as he chucked her under the chin. "One in the morning for breakfast and a massage, the other in the afternoon for dinner and, uh, movie."

Candy folded her arms under her chest and frowned. "Hmph! Two bimbos over your little sister. That's total bullshit, Randal."

Randy raised a brow at her, chuckling, and turned to his friend. "I told you she was a spitfire. Since you say you've only met briefly, I'm sure you haven't seen *this* side of her."

Candy's mouth dropped open as she looked at Randy. Avakis only grinned as he slowly nodded. "Oh, I think I know what you mean." Winking, Avakis looked at Candy.

As if clueless to what was going on between his sister and his friend, Randy shrugged. "Well, I'm off. You drove yourself, pal, so I'll catch ya later. Night, Pop Tart. Thanks for the awesome dinner. Next time I'll stay and we'll watch scary movies all night. I hear there's a good vampire movie coming out this month."

Candy and Avakis shot each other a look and smiled. Giving her brother a big hug, she walked him to the door. "I'm glad you have two

Diary of a House

dates, Randy, that means you're not serious with anyone." The satisfied smirk on her face only made Randy laugh.

Chuckling her under the chin once more, he winked. "You're my only girl right now, little sis, but when I do find the right one, I promise, you'll love her just as much as I do."

Candy shrugged as she gave him a half smile, then closed the door behind him and turned to look at Avakis. Her body began to tremble as she watched him devour her with the same beautiful eyes she saw in her dreams every night for the last two years.

He went to her, pulling her against him. "*Mia Bella*, how I have missed you."

Candy began to cry as she clung to him. The tears spilled down her face as he tried soothing her, kissing the top of her head and caressing her back as he whispered words of love in her ear.

Pulling back, Candy looked up at him, her cheeks flushed as her tears continued to flow. "Avakis, how? I thought I had lost you forever." Pressing her face into his broad chest, she cried, her tears wetting the front of his shirt.

Avakis took her face gently between his hands and lifted it to him, kissing each cheek, the tip of her nose, her chin. Claiming her mouth, he kissed her deeply, stealing her breath as she gasped, leaning into him.

He led her to the couch and sat, pulling her into his lap. He held her close, whispering in her ear, kissing her everywhere. "*Mia Bella*, if not for you, I would still be roaming this world in dark misery. To you, I am forever grateful." Kissing her neck, he slipped his tongue across to her collarbone as he reached underneath her shirt, squeezing her ripened breasts.

"How I have missed you, my love. The memory of your taste has driven me mad over the years. I want you, like never before."

Candy's body shivered as his mouth trailed a searing path across her bare skin. His hands caressing and tweaking her firm, taunt nipples, caused her to moan as her head fell back.

Then, regaining her senses, she stopped him, pushing him back. "Wait, why did you stay away? I wanted to die, Avakis, how could you have not come back for me?"

His face filled with sadness. "*Mia Bella*, you melt my heart with your words. Let me explain what happened.

"After your wish, you passed out and I laid you on the couch. You held the diary tightly in your hands so I left it. I prayed that you would

not forget, that your sacrifice was not the loss of your memory. But for me, I had to leave. By morning I was back in Italy, how I got there I can't tell you because I have no recall. I found myself among friends I did not know and they offered me their home. I stayed for almost two years, but deep within my heart I had an ache I could not ignore. I went to an old woman in the small village that had the power to see the past and read the future. She had been expecting me. She told me of my past, things I had struggled to remember. She helped me to remember the night I was bitten, and how long I had walked the earth with the undead. All things I knew, but had forgotten. She told me that it was now time to leave Italy and come here, to New Orleans and that my heart would unlock the biggest secret of my past."

With a smile, he reached for her hands and pulled them to his lips, kissing each one. "As soon as I arrived, I remembered everything. I was so afraid that you might have moved and I would not have been able to find you."

Candy could only stare as her heart soared with a happiness she thought she had lost.

Avakis shrugged. "I have no clue why the diary kept me from you for two years. Maybe that was the sacrifice. It is said that all good things come to those who wait. Did you, *Mia Bella*, wait for me?"

Candy smiled, throwing her arms around his neck. Pressing her nose to his, she grinned. "My vampire, my love, I would have waited till the end of time for you." Then she added huskily, "We've much catching up to do, *Avakis Dregan*. Two long years, to be exact."

Avakis groaned as she reached for his hand, slipping it up her skirt to the damp wetness between her thighs. He chuckled, "You are a temptress, my sweet flower, a very wicked temptress."

Candy slipped her hand across the huge bulge that pressed against his jeans. "I'm thinking of lots of wicked things I can do with this big boy. Interested?"

Avakis laughed as she pulled him up behind her, both racing for the stairs. Together, they slipped into her bedroom where they planned to make up for lost time.

Tommy-boy licked his lips lazily as he watched them disappear up the stairs. Yawning he stretched, flexing his sharp claws. His belly was full, that was all he cared about.

* * * *

Diary of a House

Avakis and Randy loaded the last of her boxes as Candy sat in her favorite chair. She laid down her pen and gently closed the old leather diary. Her time here was done, even though this old house would forever hold a place in her heart, she was glad to know another would soon take her place, and hoped that if it were meant to be, they would find happiness like her.

Avakis stood in the doorway of her library and smiled, his eyes full of love and adoration. "*Mia Bella*, are you ready?"

Candy nodded, "Yes, I think so. Just give me a minute."

Avakis nodded and left, leaving her to herself for a few minutes longer.

She stood, walking over to the bookshelf and gently placed the leather diary where she had found it. As if talking to a friend she whispered, "Goodbye, and thank you."

She turned to leave and looked down at her now fat cat, who purred loudly, rubbing his head and body against her legs. Scooping him up, she snuggled him, kissing the top of his head. "Come on, handsome. It's time to go."

As Candy sat next to Avakis in the big U-Haul truck they'd rented, with her brother following behind, she whispered, "A new life for us Avakis, for all of us." She quietly looked down and lovingly caressed her stomach. Tommy-boy stretched out lazily on the seat next to her, his eyes droopy.

Avakis placed a kiss on the top of her head and wrapped an arm around her, possessively pulling her closer. "A life I will treasure forever, *Mia Bella*."

Candy felt the sting of tears threatening to spill over and closed her eyes. She had not told Avakis of the child she had lost. His child. She had discovered she was pregnant soon after he disappeared. Unable to find any trace of him, she had quietly kept her secret to herself, feeling the love inside her heart swell for the unborn child.

Candy was in her second month when suddenly, a pain so sharp and intense gripped her belly, causing her to double over in agony. Fearing she was miscarrying, she called her brother. Randy rushed her to the hospital and sat next to her bed, holding her hand as the doctor told her that she had lost the baby. The doctor's voice was sympathetic, as he explained that these things sometimes happen when the fetus is not healthy.

413 Remembrance Lane

But Candy knew the truth. The truth was the unborn baby was to be her sacrifice and she wept openly while her brother held her. It was a secret that both brother and sister shared and one they would never tell.

She smiled and took a deep breath as she looked out the window. Her world had finally become right after two long years of heartache. Candy finally had all she would ever want within arms reach.

Diary of a House

The Life NOT Lived – 2000

Michelle Houston

413 Remembrance Lane

Also by Michelle Houston

Kinky Girls Do

chapter one

November 28

With purposeful strides, Natasha crossed the room to the closet and pulled open the door. Digging around behind her shoe shelf, she found the old diary and pulled it out. Several quick steps took her from the closet to the bed, where she flopped onto the soft suede comforter. Pulling the key out of her pocket, she opened the leather-bound cover and looked at the first entry.

Taking a deep breath, she flipped to the middle, where the diary sat empty—waiting. Claspng her pen so tightly her knuckles were white, she wrote:

I never knew what to think about the entries in this book. I didn't know if the previous owners of the house were all nuts, or if someone with too much time on his hands wrote this whole thing, trying to make it seem legit.

I never intended to add my own entry. After all, I never believed in vampires and ghosts—until three weeks ago. I also never believed in anything that science could not reasonably speculate existed.

Until several months ago, if you had asked me, I would have said my life was perfect. I was content with my husband, both of us professors of science at the University. College sweethearts and colleagues, as well as friends. Then he dropped a bombshell on me—he wanted a divorce. He had found someone else, someone who loved him, whom he felt destined to be with. I guess I should have seen it coming, after all, how late can you really stay with a grad student grading papers? But I told myself I was okay with his indiscretions, that I welcomed them, in fact. Sadly, it's true. In my heart I have lusted, regretted past chances that I never took.

I never knew how deep the regret went, however, until three weeks ago, when the package arrived. Now I find myself about to make my wish

413 Remembrance Lane

*upon the diary, and I hope that I don't come to regret the consequences—
and what I will be giving up.*

*Although I believe in my heart that if I can turn back time and do
things all over again, that it will be worth whatever payment is required
to keep the balance.*

Chapter TWO

Three weeks ago

Natasha Armstrong tossed her keys on the table beside the front door and slammed it shut. She found the sound of the door smacking against its frame oddly refreshing after her day. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on relaxing her jaw, it was sore from smiling politely all day, while inside she'd wanted to scream.

The conference at her university would have normally been pleasant, but with her recent divorce from Andrew, and the fact that they were both tenured professors in the same department, it had been a headache from beginning to end. Everyone seemed to be either pretending there was no tension, or so aware of it that it made it worse.

It didn't help that he had shown up with his "perfect woman" on his arm. Several of their colleagues had made snide remarks about the very obvious age difference between her ex and his grad student girlfriend, as if that helped things. Most of them didn't seem to understand that the divorce was amicable—she got the house and he was able to take anything out of it he wanted.

Striding down the hall, she retreated into the newly remodeled kitchen. After the divorce, she'd started refurnishing the house with antiques, trying to bring a spark of its old life back with items such as the claw foot tub in the master bath and a wood burning stove in the kitchen.

She was just reaching for her teapot, an antique itself, when the doorbell rang.

Ignoring it, she pulled out the tea canister and selected a bag of Earl Grey.

The bell rang again. Sighing, Natasha debated what to do. She could continue to ignore it, and hope whoever it was would get the message and go away, or she could go answer it and have to deal with polite pleasantries when she really wasn't in the mood.

Her decision was made when the bell's usual dribble of *ding dong*, *ding dong*, took on a prolonged melody. Whoever was out there was not going to take no for an answer. Frustrated at having her temporary solace disrupted, Natasha stormed down the hallway and flung the thick wood door open to find a rather cute, petite courier waiting impatiently outside.

"Professor Armstrong?"

"Yes," she snapped.

"I have a package to deliver. If you'll sign here."

Natasha accepted the clipboard, even as her mind raced, wondering who was sending her a package. With everything involved in her divorce, she had decided to take the semester off, and fall term didn't start for another month. It couldn't be her texts; she had to pick those up herself.

"Thank you," Handing the clipboard back, she accepted the package the carrier had tucked under her arm and stepped back. Resisting the urge to shake the bread-loaf-sized box, she politely inclined her head in thanks.

"You're welcome, ma'am, have a nice day." Natasha had the door closed before she even made it off the porch. Suddenly, eager as a child on Christmas morning, she had to know what was in the package. Ignoring the voice that was telling her it wasn't like her to be this impatient, she tore open the tape to find a jeweler's box nested within packing peanuts.

She set the box aside. Curiosity piqued, she couldn't wait a moment longer and flipped open the lid. Inside, on a bed of velvet, sat a necklace. A large oval pendant, the stone a strange swirling blend of ivory and onyx, hung on a delicate gold chain.

Intrigued, she picked up the necklace, feeling it grow warm in her hand. Without being able to control the urge, she donned the necklace, feelings the pendant's weight settle in the valley of her breasts. Digging around in the packing peanuts, she searched for a note, but found nothing. She retrieved the package and looked it over, but the only label on the package itself was her address.

She reached to take the necklace off, uncertain what to do with it, when she remembered a letter from her sister she had gotten. It told of a package that should be coming soon, after customs passed it through, from her sabbatical to Italy.

Shaking her head, she headed back to her kitchen and the waiting teapot. After turning on the stove, she fingered the pendant while the

Diary of a House

water heated, stroking her fingers over the uneven surface. Strange bumps marred the edges. But, they weren't pronounced enough for her to be able to tell what they were.

She still couldn't believe how sweet her sister was, sending her a present, especially one so nice. It had to be a knock-off of some kind.

As the teapot whistled, she let the pendant settle between her breasts and continued about her planned evening, after making a mental note to send her sister and thank you.

* * * *

Several hours later, freshly showered she stepped out of the steamed up bathroom and crossed to her bedroom. Pausing to admire herself in front of the mirror on the closet door, she couldn't help stroking her hand over her naked flesh, exhilarated at being able to walk naked around the house without her husband making a snide remark of her teasing him with something he couldn't have.

Grabbing a gown, she quickly shimmied into the soft blue silk and pulled on matching panties. Ready for bed, she climbed between the sheets and settled against her pillows, the lamp beside the bed casting a warm glow about the room. Opening her nightstand drawer, she pulled a well-worn book out and flipped to her favorite passage. As her gaze trailed over the words, a familiar warmth began between her legs. Running her palm over her breasts, she read the author's description of a Sapphic sixty-nine, the words vivid and fairly springing from the page.

Slipping her hand past the band of her panties, she softly stroked her moist flesh, dipping her finger past her pouting lips to wet it, then slowly circling around her clit. As the characters reached their orgasm, she set the book aside and closed her eyes, letting the sensations of her hand between her legs wash over her.

Ever since she found out about Andrew's affair, she had questioned her life, and her choices. Back in college when they met, he'd seemed like the key to the perfect life she had longed to have. Her dreams of being a professor were suddenly attainable. Even in the advanced day and age of the seventies, with all of the movements beginning and ending, the professional world was still leery of women, especially as college professors, in the science field. A lesbian professor just wasn't heard of.

So, she forced down what she'd always been told were unnatural urges, and had married her friend. The first few years weren't too bad—he hadn't made many demands of her. It was towards the middle of their

thirty years together that he had showed signs of wanting more than she felt she could give.

Her pussy was on fire with needs only a woman could truly fulfill. Natasha couldn't help wondering if she had done them both a disservice by marrying Andrew. She knew she had left her only true love heartbroken, when she had told Lydia that she couldn't be with her the way the blonde had wanted.

Frustrated at the way her thoughts were intruding, she forced them aside and stroked her finger over her clit, ruthlessly manipulating the ball of nerves into a shallow orgasm. Gasping at the sparks that flickered to life within her, she continued her motions, running her finger along her slit and delving past her puffy lips. Cupping one breast with her other hand, Natasha rolled her nipple between her thumb and index finger, pinching it hard enough to sting.

Breathless at the delicious tingle it sparked, she pumped her fingers faster, grinding them hard against the thin veil of skin that covered her pelvic bone beneath her clit. As her inner muscles clenched tight, she withdrew them, returning her attention to her clit. Swirling around the taunt bud, she stimulated it to the point of pain before she was ready to allow herself another orgasm. Pinching her nipple hard, she arched her hips, allowing her body to crest.

She pulled her fingers from her panties and curled onto her side. Her body sated, while her mind was turbulent with conflicting emotions. She hugged her pillow to her chest as a cascade of tears flowed.

Chapter Three

Natasha shifted, not wanting the delicious sensations to end, but her mind demanded she wake up. It definitely ranked as the most erotic dream she'd ever had, including the night after her one and only visit to a strip club.

Shivering at the feel of a hand running up her inner thigh, Natasha's eyes fluttered open, unwillingly banishing the phantom remnants of her dream.

Shrieking, she sat up. Frantically, she pulled away from the strange woman in her bed. With her lush features and flaming red hair, she was attractive in a deeply sensual way. There was nothing subtle about her, and Natasha found herself responding on a deeply primal level.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded, in her best "don't lie to me" professor tone, giving her words a strong bite. Realizing how stupid her actions were, she rolled over and grabbed the phone. She moved back, watchful of her intruder. The woman was gone, vanished.

Looking around the room, she saw the red-haired woman seated on her dresser, mile long legs crossed at the knee. There was no way she could have moved that fast—no mortal could. The medallion resting between her breasts suddenly grew warm.

"Forget who. What the hell are you?"

With a puff of crimson smoke, the woman disappeared, only to join her in bed. This time, she sat cross-legged, Indian style, at the foot. Completely naked.

Natasha licked her suddenly dry lips. Her mind fought the realization that reality was suddenly spinning away from her clear cut world of science. She had to be dreaming, there was no other explanation for what was happening.

A nagging reminder at the back of her consciousness screamed about the strange diary she had finally found the key for a few weeks earlier; the diary that told of all the paranormal exploits of the inhabitants of this very house. Shrugging off the incessant reminder, she confronted

the woman in front of her with the same single-minded determination that had gotten her tenure before many of her colleagues, including her husband.

"I had better start getting some answers here, before I come to my senses and call the cops."

"Your mortal police have no power over me. I will be gone before you get the number dialed, and you will have lost your chance to find the answer to the truly important question you need answered."

Knowing how Alice would have felt as she fell down the rabbit hole, Natasha struggled with the science she chose to believe in and the curiosity that prompted her to question the existence of things science hadn't yet explained.

"Ok, I'll bite—what question should I be asking?"

The woman shook her head, sending her cascade of red tresses swirling in a riot of curls. "I can't tell you the question."

Natasha ground her teeth together in frustration. "Fine. Let's start with what are you?"

"My kind is called succubus, but the stories made up about us are grossly exaggerated."

"How so?" Natasha cocked her head to the side. Her gaze trailed over the luscious curves of the creature before her. She was dreaming, so what did it hurt to look? All the while, the amulet continued to pulse with each beat of her heart.

"Calling us witches, damned to suck the souls out of men, for starters. But really, Professor, do you want to talk about me all night long?"

Natasha blinked and the woman was gone. Moments later, the feel of fingers trailing up her thighs returned and the sheets lifted, covering the form of the creature as she settled herself between Natasha's legs.

Grabbing the edge of the covers, Natasha ripped them off, baring the creature's back to the cool air and to her gaze. The succubus lifted her head, her eyes strikingly blue with desire. The bed dipped slightly as the woman-thing moved up her body, her curves brushing against Natasha's, igniting needs she had long suppressed.

Natasha barely registered as her nightgown and panties were removed. Her normally analytical mind had been short-circuited, and she was riding out the waves. She could feel every slight shift of the nimble body covering her, each brush of skin lightly sprinkled with hair sliding

Diary of a House

against hers. Moist, warm breath whispered over her skin as the creature spoke. "Relax, Professor. This is a dream, right?"

Natasha nodded, more to convince herself than the woman pressed against her.

"Then just let yourself enjoy it." As the creature's lips pressed against hers, she closed her eyes at the sudden explosion of need. If the myths were true and the creature could suck out souls, she could well understand how humans would willingly succumb to them.

Threading her fingers through the creature's red hair, she pulled her closer and they slid down onto the bed together. Wrapping her legs around the succubus' waist, she settled her into the curve of her body. She wept at the intense sensations rushing through her body with just the simplest touch of flesh against flesh.

Her breasts felt heavy with need as the creature's skin brushed against them, so soft and delicate compared to what she was used to. Urgency raced through her at the unexpected opportunity—she could finally stop denying that part of herself.

Relaxing against the creature, Natasha let her hands explore where they would. Stroking along the woman's back, down to the curve of her ass, she pulled her tighter into the V of her thighs, craving the contact of flesh against her pussy. Grinding into the succubus' groin, she gasped as tiny shocks surged between them, igniting a fire of need within her pussy.

The crackle of electricity and the tiny hairs on her arms standing forced her to open her eyes. When her gaze adjusted, she saw tiny sparks dancing between the succubus tresses, like static electricity to the nth degree. A strand landed against her nipple, sending a jolt of pure lust coursing through her.

"This is what you feed on, isn't it? The energy created between two bodies in motion, two sweaty, needy, lust-filled bodies."

"Yes," the creature hissed before leaning down, pressing her lips firmly against Natasha's. Parting her lips, Natasha allowed her tongue entrance, delighting in the feel of the velvety heat rubbing against her own tongue. Closing her eyes again, she focused on the feel of the woman in her arms.

Cupping the succubus' firm breasts, Natasha explored the nipples, rolling them between her fingers, until the creature tore her lips from hers, a moan escaping past them.

"That's it, relax. Just feel," she coaxed, her long fingers stroking over Natasha's body, sliding slowly down to the valley of her thighs.

Arching her hips, Natasha welcomed the touch, her pussy wet with need. As a long digit slipped past her puffy pussy lips, Natasha rocked into the movement, driving it deeper.

"More, please," Natasha gasped, her core clenching around the finger, aching for more friction. In answer, another finger slid past her lips, quickly joined by a third. Gasping in response, Natasha stroked the creature's arms and shoulders, her fingertips tracing over her breasts, until the succubus shrugged them off.

"Touch yourself," the woman ordered, her fingers pumping hard and deep.

Unwilling to disobey, Natasha caressed her own breasts, pinching her nipples. Her knuckle brushed against the amulet and she jerked her hand away from the heat.

While still driving her wild with need, the succubus trailed her long hair over Natasha's body. Everywhere it touched sent a spark throughout her body. Nerve-ending overloaded, Natasha shrieked as the strands landed against her clit.

The hard pebbles of the woman's nipples pressed against her stomach as she moved lower. The wet heat of the creature's tongue licked at navel, then drifted slowly lower until it flicked against her clit.

Jerking at the sudden stinging pleasure, Natasha arched upward, silently begging for more. Another flick had her whimpering in need. The succubus settled between her legs, her hair almost alive flowed around them, brushing here and there over her body without any distinguishable pattern, driving her out of her mind.

Warm lips wrapped around her clit, sucking it hard and deep as a fourth finger was driven into her, rubbing against her slick inner walls. Natasha felt her cream leaking out, damping the sheets beneath her. Undulating against the succubus' movements, her body winding tighter and tighter, she finally realized that what was happening was real. She wasn't dreaming—she was being seduced by a succubus. Just as the thought registered, a hard suck pulled on her clit and Natasha's pussy clenched tight. Screaming, she climaxed, her body pulling tauter than the strings on a violin.

She wasn't sure how long she drifted there in a euphoric limbo, her body warm and sated, before her mind clamored for her attention. As her

Diary of a House

eyelids fluttered open, she caught sight of the creature removing the now glowing amulet and clasping it around her own neck.

"It that my soul?"

The woman chuckled and her sapphire eyes widened. "No. It's extra sexual energy you released, trapped in the stone for later need. Your soul is still where it was, trapped deep within you, held in a cage of your own making."

Floating on the cloud of her desire, it took a moment for the meaning of the woman's words to register. "Why me?"

Without the expected coyness, the creature responded, "Because I was you once. Succubi and incubi aren't witches, damned to hell. We are women and men locked in a prison of our own making."

A brief flicker of memory teased the back of her mind. The diary was important, but at that moment she couldn't remember why. All that mattered was the gift that this woman was freely giving her.

"So why tell me?"

The creature shrugged, her hair falling into a crimson veil around her body, covering her curves from Natasha's view. "You asked. Most simply enjoy what we offer, and then try to pretend it never happened. They only realize their mistake when they die and their souls join our ranks."

Holding out her arms, Natasha welcomed the woman into her embrace. As the succubus settled herself, a strange warmth awakened within Natasha. Softly caressing the succubus' now static-free hair, she sought to process the information she was receiving. Her analytical mind searched for some logical error, even as it registered the improbability of the whole evening.

"So I can still change my fate?"

She could feel the woman nodding against her body. "Yes. You have within your power and the ability to change. Everyone does. But you have to figure out how for yourself."

Continuing to stroke the woman's hair, Natasha turned over the facts, piecing it all together. The diary. One wish. Could it allow her to undo her life and live it all over again? Searching her memories, she found what she thought was the exact moment she went wrong.

Lydia had just come to her home with tickets to a concert, and plans for them going out of town together, including sharing a hotel room. The blonde had haltingly spoke, baring her soul, as she admitted she wanted to take things to the next level and move in together.

Vivid as the day it happened, Natasha remembered the hurt in Lydia's brown eyes as she told her that it was over between them, that they had to forget everything they had shared and move past it. None of it meant anything.

Her heart aching at the memory, Natasha didn't, at first, feel the woman in her arms disappearing.

As a cloud of red smoke swirled about the room, she tightened her hold. "What's going on?"

"The sun's rising. It's time for me to leave."

"Wait! We have to figure out how to free you, too."

A strange glint entered the creature's gaze as it met hers. Her features slowly shifted, her hair changed color. Her mind unable to process the speed at which the changes were taking place, she blinked and the succubus' hair had lost the red gleam, melting into a golden blonde. Her blue eyes had darkened into a rich chocolate brown.

"Lydia!" Natasha gasped. Soft lips pressed against hers, and then her lost love was gone.

"Wait? Lydia!" Natasha screamed, but knew it was too late. Raising her knees, she wrapped her arms around them, despair flooding her heart. She had just figured out the question—*how do I turn back time?*

Chapter Four

Three weeks later, the morning of November 28

Natasha tossed her pen aside in disgust, unable to focus on the grant proposal she was writing, and past the point of willing to try. Ever since the strange dream of Lydia, she hadn't slept much and had eaten less. She was too restless to pay attention to anything. Only a week left, and classes would be starting, and she still hadn't gotten a single lecture planned.

Aggravated and completely fed up, she tried to block out the memory of her dream, but once again failed. Her body could still remember the touch of the creature/Lydia as she licked her way down to her core, her slender fingers thrusting hard within her.

Closing her eyes, she clenched her legs and rubbed them together, generating a slight friction on her pussy. If she tried hard enough, she could feel ghostly fingers brushing over her skin, softly caressing.

Groaning, she opened her eyes and stood up. She crossed the room before she could change her mind. Opening the closet, she pulled the diary from its hiding place and traced fingers over the soft leather cover. On the back, the cutlass embossed into the leather winked at her, catching the sunlight streaming into the room.

She carefully opened the book and read each of the entries, searching for some clue as to the mental instability of the writers, other than the fact all mentioned some paranormal experience. Analyzing the entries, she tried to find some common links that hinted at the same writer, but to her frustration she couldn't find any. Each entry was written by a different person, without any common factors other than details of the house dating back several centuries, which the historical records she'd dug up in the last three weeks confirmed.

The thing seemed to be legit. Completely improbable, but legit nonetheless.

Her mind racing with scenarios, she tried to figure out just what she would be giving up if she gave in and made a wish upon the cursed thing. What was a second chance at happiness worth? Her chest grew warm, at the exact spot where the amulet had rested. Closing her eyes, she rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to relive the tension building there.

She tried to track down who had sent the amulet, but the delivery company had no record of a delivery to her on that date, nor did the delivery man remember her. She had managed to get in touch with her sister, who had no clue what she was talking about. The amulet, more than likely, was a figment of her imagination. Yet she couldn't fight the impulse to believe that what happened wasn't a dream.

Even if it meant that Lydia had become a succubus, more than likely because of her. Even if it meant accepting that she has wasted half her life, casting aside her one true love, for her love of science. And if it wasn't a dream, then her very soul was in danger; after her death she would be trapped as Lydia was. What would she give up to escape that fate? To free the only person she had ever really loved from it?

If only there was some sign that it had happened, and that she wasn't suffering a nervous breakdown, it would be easier to accept.

Something to act on.

Closing the diary, she put it back in its hiding place and slid the closet door closed. She shivered at the click of the latch, feeling like someone has just walked over her grave.

Shaking off the morbid image, she headed downstairs to put the key away. She was halfway down the stairs when she remembered where she had seen the amulet before. Back in college, she had taken Lydia, who was in her archeology phase then, to a museum and they had looked at several artifacts from the Greco-Roman period. The amulet was one that had been attributed to a strange cult that had worshipped Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

She had bought Lydia a rather well done copy of the original in the museum gift shop. Lydia had been wearing it the last time she had seen her.

It wasn't a dream.

Her mind reeled. Natasha turned on the stairs and headed back up. Entering her bedroom, the warmth between her breasts magnified, until it felt like hot wax had been poured on the spot where the amulet had sat, branding her.

Diary of a House

With sure purposeful strides, Natasha crossed the room to the closet and pulled open the door. Digging around behind her shoe shelf, she found the old diary, and pulled it out. Several quick steps took her from the closet to the bed, where she flopped onto the soft suede comforter. Pulling the key out of her pocket, she opened the leather-bound cover and looked at the first entry.

Taking a deep breath, she flipped to the middle, where the diary sat empty—waiting. Claspng her pen so tightly her knuckles were white, she wrote.

Chapter Five

Natasha parked her car and turned off the ignition. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she opened her door and climbed out. Lydia's call scared her at first, until she got her calmed down enough to explain she wasn't hurt, she just needed her to come home. As soon as she reached the walkway, the front door flew open and Lydia rushed out, her pixie-like features pinched with anxiety.

"Natasha," she exclaimed as she threw herself against her. Natasha wrapped her arms around her slender lover and pulled her close. Running her hand through her lover's blonde hair, she whispered soothingly as she coaxed Lydia into the house.

As soon as the door closed, Lydia sprang into action. She clasped Natasha's hand and pulled her down the hall into the library, talking a mile a minute. "I figured out where the key was this afternoon. It was in the pommel of the old cutlass over the fireplace. I couldn't believe it when I opened it. Natasha, you have an entry in it."

"Whoa, slow down, hon." She tried to follow what her love was saying, but she wasn't making much sense. "The key to what?"

Lydia took a deep breath and bent over the back of the couch. As she picked up the leather bound tome they had found months ago in the top of the master bedroom closet, recognition set in. Lydia had found the key to what they had long suspected was a diary from a past owner of the house.

"The diary, Natasha. I found the key. And it isn't just a diary of one owner. It's them all!"

Natasha guided her lover into taking a seat on the couch and dropped down beside her. After taking a moment to stretch and work out the kinks of standing all day in front of a bunch of high school students and trying to get them to concentrate on their studies, she focused her attention on Lydia. "So what does it say?"

Brown eyes wide, Lydia opened and closed her mouth several times, then started to gush out a garbled explanation while quickly

Diary of a House

flipping through the pages until she reached whatever she was looking for. "It isn't what the entries say so much as who has an entry in it. Natasha, you wrote an entry in the diary."

Natasha blinked several times as she tried to process what Lydia was saying. It was impossible. She had never been in this house before she and Lydia moved in two years earlier.

"Look, right here. It says:

"I never knew what to think about the entries in this book. I didn't know if the previous owners of the house were all nuts, or if someone with too much time on his hands wrote this whole thing, trying to make it seem legit. I never intended to add my own entry. After all, I never believed in vampires and ghosts—until three weeks ago. I also never believed in anything that science could not reasonably speculate existed."

"That's your handwriting, and it sounds like you, too. I read the whole thing, and in each entry the owner gave up something for their wish, something dear to them. Your entry mentions me, Natasha. The replica amulet you bought me—" Lydia pulled the necklace from where it rested between her breasts. She never removed it, not even to shower. "And it says that Andrew proposed, and he did. But that's where it strays. The diary entry says that you broke up with me, married him, and went on to become a college professor. You found a new species of butterfly and had it named after you. Oh, Natasha, if this is true, you gave up so much to be with me."

As she spoke, the amulet in her hand started to glow. Both Natasha and Lydia looked down as the chain broke apart and the charm dropped into the diary, where it melted into the pages.

Natasha leaned over and brushed her fingers over the page, feeling the slightly raised surface of the image. Looking into Lydia's eyes, she saw the same fear and wonder that filled her own heart. Cupping her lover's chin in her palm, Natasha pressed a soft kiss against her lips. "I have a wonderful life with you, and even if I could, I wouldn't trade it for anything, let alone a butterfly named after me."

"Now tell me what else it says, from the beginning." Wrapping her arm around Lydia, she pulled her back into her embrace as her lover turned to the first page and started reading aloud.

About the Authors

Cheri Valmont writes: "Writing has always been a lifelong dream for me. After years of devoting myself to a career helping others, I finally decided to give my own dream a chance. Born and raised in South Louisiana but married to a military man, I've traveled far from home. It's definitely been an adventure. I live with my husband of 21 years, along with 2 cats and 2 dogs, and have a very large extended family."

www.cherivalmont.com

* * * *

Emma Wildes loves the infinite variations of romance in all its forms. She believes that passion makes the world go around...and delights in being able to write about it. Come see her at www.emmawildes.com. If you also like traditional romance or mystery, please visit her at www.katherinesmith.net.

* * * *

D. Musgrave grew up being told more often than not that daydreaming was a waste of time. What a crock that turned out to be. Those wild, fanciful dreams were to one day become the fodder for the erotic tales that now flow onto the pages for D.'s stories. If anyone is interested in sampling those daydreams that became stories, please visit D.'s website at www.dmusgrave.com.

* * * *

Jamie Hill was born and raised in the Midwest, where she continues to live with her husband and two sons.

Diary of a House

At one time or another the Hills have shared their home with a rabbit, a cocker spaniel, a bearded dragon lizard, two rat terrier pups and a menagerie of fish in two 55-gallon freshwater aquariums.

She now juggles her spare time to include writing every day, freelance editing, reading as she finds time, tinkering on the computer, listening to country music, as many naps as possible, and watching movies (especially *scary movies*) with her family.

For more information please visit her website: www.jamiehill.biz .

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Born to ride on the back of dragons, to journey among the stars in a ship traveling faster than light, or to dance the night away in the arms of a mysterious vampire, **Michelle Houston** willingly shares the worlds in her mind in an effort to bring them to life.

Writing everything from short and sweet stories, to hot and spicy tales of kink, from contemporary tales of romance to erotic romances featuring Greek Gods, vampires and were-creatures, she has crossed sexualities and has gone wherever her mental muse has guided her. A journey she has never regretted.

Beyond that, she has a love of the natural world around us (except for insects, spiders, snakes, scorpions, and she reserves the right to add more at any time) and hopes to share the enjoyment of the Earth with her students once she finally earns her degree in secondary Biology/Earth Science Education.

In other words, she is an ordinary woman, with an imagination that is only held in bounds by how fast she can type.

* * * *

Skyler Grey is an author of erotic and paranormal romance. "My Vampire, My Love" is her first story with Phaze.

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Jude Mason's imagination frequently leads her astray, and she eagerly follows while trying to keep out of trouble, or at least not get caught. For those of you who know her, you'll know that's not always easy. A picture, a smell, an unexpected glimpse of flesh, or a load of soil in the back of a pick-up, are all fodder for her writing. Her male characters run the gamut from the dominant male ruling his women with an iron fist, to a simpering purple-clad boy-toy, whose only desire is to please. As diverse and as richly depicted, her women find themselves in a myriad of exotic and erotic situations.

At the present time, Jude is writing for Phaze and has several books with them and more coming out in the coming months: *Pink Ribbon*, *Scorpio Tattoo* and *Stage Fright* are just a few of what's available now, and *Jesse's Homecoming*, *Amber's Toy* and *Cat's Claw* due to be released over the next few months.

Jude has work published both online and in print. Google her name and you'll find her.

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