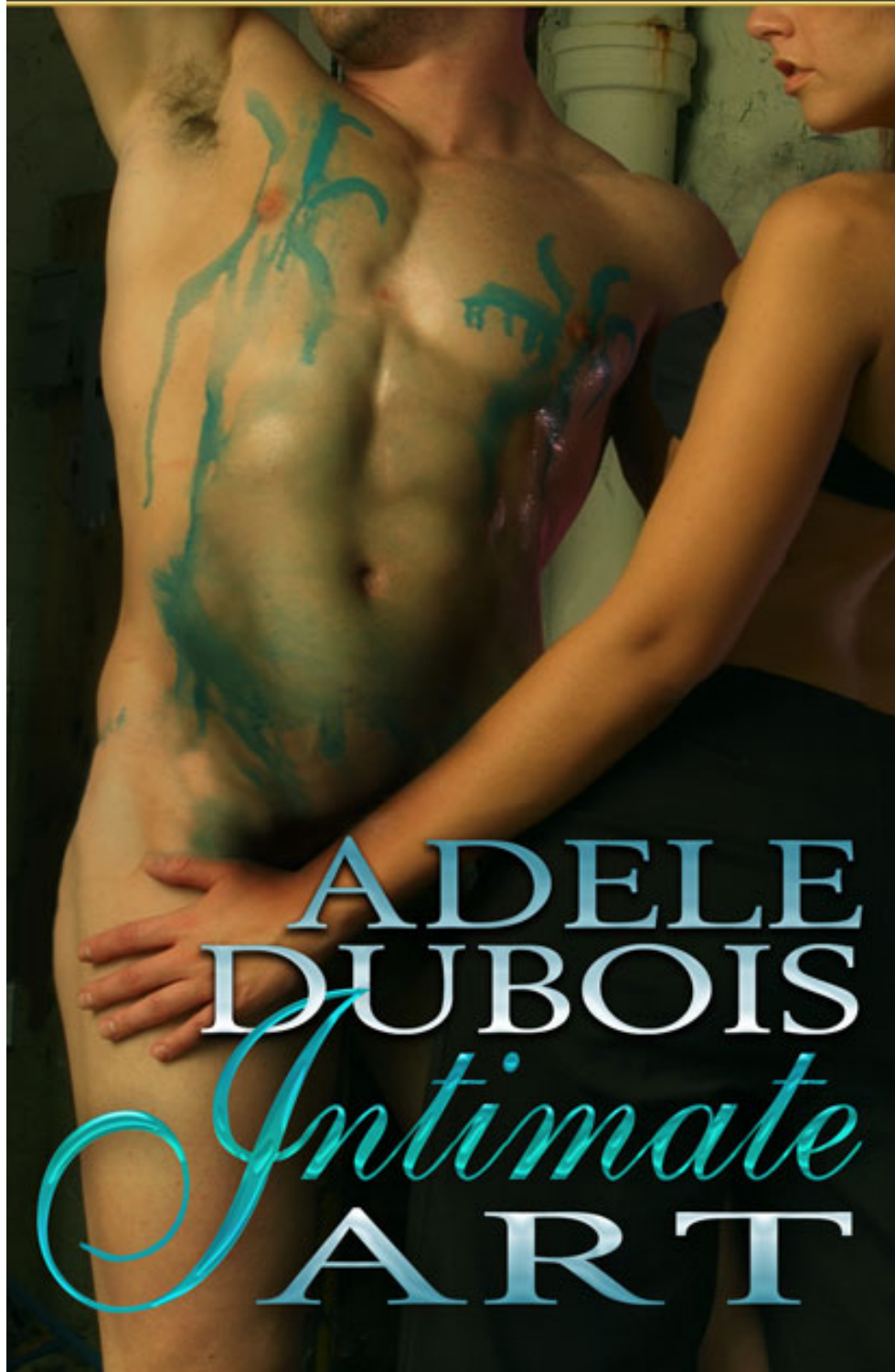


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



ADELE
DUBOIS

Intimate
ART

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Intimate Art

ISBN 9781419915321

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Intimate Art Copyright © 2008 Adele Dubois

Edited by Briana St. James.

Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication April 2008

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>)

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

INTIMATE ART

Adele Dubois

Dedication

For Pamela, remembering when our parents told ghost stories while pressing flashlights under their chins to create eerie yellow faces. They'd chase us through the house in the dark making monster noises. We'd hover beneath the sheets of my big double bed, clinging and squealing with delighted fear.

Acknowledgements

My husband, who never doubted for a moment that I could write a book if I wanted to. My parents, who filled my childhood home with the arts, including books and stories of paranormal events and science fiction. My teens, who surprised me by saying they think it's cool their mom writes sexy romance novels. Editor Briana St. James, who believes in me and brings magic to my life.

Author Note

"If it is not erotic, it is not interesting." — Fernando Arrabal

Trademarks Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Burning Love, Fire and Ice, Pink Singe, Smoldering Coals, Sizzle, Spring Romance, Sultry, Sumptuous Silk, Sweet Simmer: Valspar Signature Colors from Lowe's.

Coke, Diet Coke: The Coca-Cola Company Corporation

Home Depot: Home Depot, Inc.

Kodak: Eastman Kodak Company

Super Bowl: National Football League

Swiss Army: Wenger S.A.

White Diamonds by Elizabeth Taylor: Elizabeth Arden

Prologue

Cloris speaks

Everyone in Hartsville knew that Jack Harris knocked boots with Legs Anderson. Still, every morning when he strode into the Special-T café wearing his *fresh laid* grin and tight blue jeans hot enough to melt glass, Legs ignored him. That might not sit right with some men, but Jack just slid into a chair at his favorite corner table and sat back for the cup of coffee he knew she'd bring when she felt like it. Smart woman that Legs was, she never made him wait long. She'd fix his cup with real cream just the way he liked it, with a hot plate of eggs over easy, hash browns and fresh bacon right behind.

Legs would sashay to his side, her long brown ponytail swinging in time with her slim hips, and deliver his breakfast with an easy casualness, not making eye contact until he'd had his first jolt of caffeine. When their eyes finally met, you could almost see the smoke curl above their heads.

The air around Jack and Legs crackled like pressurized, high-intensity erotic fuel that could singe the hair on your arms from three paces. Old Man Benson had a five-dollar bet with Clifford Jones that one day they'd detonate, rip each other's clothes off and rut like mad across a café table. Benson prayed he'd live long enough to see the show. Since every woman between the ages of birth and death in Hartsville loved Jack, and every man from puberty to the nursing home worshipped Legs, their public display would become immortalized in the town's collective memories.

Needless to say, Legs Anderson's willingness to keep Jack at bay was Hartsville's most bemusing mystery. Except to me. My name is Cloris. As the owner of Special-T for over forty years, I saw and heard everything. I was the only one who seemed to have a clue. Jack Harris had a tender spot for sassy, independent women whose affections he had to fight for. The man was hard-headed when it came to a challenge.

Jack had been determined to win Legs Anderson since they were kids. Sharing his bed with her ten years later wasn't the same as winning her heart, but he seemed to be making progress.

Legs, on the other hand, played indifferent to Jack, which only added fuel to his fire. And what man could resist her? She had clear, creamy skin born of good genes and youth, expressive dark eyes that flashed when she was riled, high cheekbones and a full, promising mouth.

Sometimes those cheekbones and lips made me wonder if a spirited Anderson pioneer once hid a Native American lover in the barn.

Legs got all the right mixings of her ancestors, though, whoever they might have been. I should be jealous just on principle, but I love her like my own child.

Truth was, if Legs had gotten all needy on Jack, he'd run like a deer. That's what happened with his last girlfriend. She'd clung, scratched and clawed with her endless insecurities and needless doubts until she'd nearly gutted and drained him. Legs was too sure-footed for that.

Regulars in the café watched the game between Legs and Jack instead of reading the paper or listening to the morning news. They ordered coffee refills and seconds of hash browns or biscuits while eavesdropping shamelessly on the conversation they knew would come in one form or another.

"Move in with me, dammit. You're the most stubborn woman I ever knew."

"No more stubborn than you, since you keep askin' the same old question. I have my own place."

Jack frowned and stabbed his egg yolks, making them run. "Then let me live with you."

"In my aunt's house?" Legs asked like he was crazy.

"It's your house now."

"I'm trying to fix it up. I have to patch and paint. There's no room for your stuff."

"I'll help you, and then you'll have plenty of space for me. And my junk."

"Ada won't like it. She'll think it's immoral."

"You talk about her like she's still with us. She's been gone over a year, sweetheart." His voice dropped an octave and his brows creased. "Don't you think she'd give in after all this time?"

Legs wrinkled her nose. "No. She thinks you're a wanderer."

Jack tossed down his fork. "I own a sporting goods store, for *chrissake*! I go fishing!"

He touched her hand when she got close enough and drew little circles around her wrist bone with a fingertip. The preschool teachers from Let's Explore stifled sighs at the next table. "It's time to let go, hon." His expression turned earnest. "She raised you, I know. But I want to be with you now. It's time to let me in."

"Not if that means letting her go. I'm sorry, Jack. I just can't."

Jack sighed and returned to his breakfast. "We'll talk about this again tomorrow."

It seemed like Jack was the only person in town who didn't believe the Anderson place was haunted. Or maybe he pretended not to know. Ada had died, but still stood like a sentry in the two-story white Victorian where she had raised her niece. And it was clear Legs liked it that way. After her parents died in that car crash, she and her aunt had become almost inseparable. Legs still slept in the spare room she used as a child. The master bedroom belonged to her aunt as far as she was concerned.

Legs couldn't bring herself to move into Ada's old room, though she'd hauled out much of the furniture and torn down the old-fashioned curtains. Most of the bigger, fussier antiques in the house had been sold to pay land and inheritance taxes. The rest Legs rearranged to her liking and hoped Ada would approve. But a man moving in? Ada would pitch a fit.

How do I know all this? Ada was my best friend and I've known Legs since before she was born. Her given name is Linda, but I've always called her Legs, 'cause she reminds me of a sleek, long-legged colt. The nickname stuck with customers after her first shift at the café.

I hired Legs as my runner around the time Ada got sick. My knees throb and my feet ache with arthritis, though I still manage the restaurant and take orders at the counter. Legs had just graduated college when she came home to nurse Ada. It was nice of her to help me around the café too, and then stay on after her aunt died. I'm a realist though—I know our arrangement can't last much longer. The girl has a business degree to make use of.

Back at Jack's table, Legs shook her head as if further talk would make no difference. Her ponytail swished between her slim shoulder blades. "I'll be painting all weekend. You can help if you want, but I make no promises about you moving in. Ever."

A satisfied smile curved Jack's lips. He held Legs' large brown eyes with his deep cobalt blues. "I'll bring coffee and biscuits. I'll be there by eight."

Legs nodded once. "Okay. Guess I could use an extra pair of hands."

Every other woman in Hartsville would have passed Jack a paintbrush with her teeth if he brought those rugged, strong-looking hands to her house. Yet there was an unspoken, but palpable, admiration for Legs the other women seemed to share. They liked that she could handle him—probably better than they could. Legs had an unshakable confidence that earned other women's respect.

I think Jack liked that about her too.

Chapter One

Legs had the walls of her tiny bedroom plastered and sanded by the time Jack climbed the stairs to the second floor, hot coffee and breakfast in a cardboard carrier in one hand. His other hand clutched a large plastic bag from Home Depot. Sticking out a back pocket of his jeans were color charts so vivid it looked like his hind end had been splashed with paint.

"What are those?" Legs asked as she stepped to the open doorway, took the carrier he offered and met his startling blue eyes. The penetrating stare he returned made her gulp, though she hadn't sipped her coffee yet. Her heart raced as his hand brushed hers, sending tiny shivers coursing along the fine hairs on her arm.

The carrier swayed and tilted, and she eased it onto her desktop, wishing his effect on her wasn't so damned...unsettling. Taking a breath, she handed him a cup and took another for herself. He had already added the cream and sugar. He was thoughtful that way.

Damn him.

"Color samples for the master bedroom." He waggled the Home Depot bag. "And I brought small paint cans to match. Just to try the colors. If you like any of them, I'll go back and pick up what you need."

Legs frowned. "You know I wasn't planning to repaint my aunt's room yet. Only mine and the guest room."

"Haven't you stalled long enough?" Without waiting for an answer, Jack disappeared down the hall and shouted to her from the master bedroom. His voice made hollow echoes through the upstairs. "You've already got most of the furniture out. The wallpaper's stripped. I can fill the holes in no time. Let's lay dropcloths and get started."

Legs set her coffee cup down on the desk and moved to the oak-trimmed doorway of her aunt's room. Jack was pushing too hard and she was growing more defensive by the minute. "I need to ask her first. Men aren't allowed in her bedroom."

"You're really serious about her haunting the place, aren't you?" His question was heavy with controlled annoyance.

Legs nodded and folded her arms across her chest. "And she has very strong opinions about what you and I have been doing."

His smirk told her he couldn't care less. "Then we don't need to sneak around anymore, do we? She knows." He set his coffee cup on the dresser and plunked the Home Depot bag on the floor. "Just because her husband ran out on her doesn't mean you shouldn't have a life. I'm not like your miserable drunk of an uncle."

He shifted his gaze around the room, a frown forming on his handsome, angular face. Glints of gold in his long, thick hair caught the morning light, and Legs sucked in an admiring breath. His hair was combed back from his face and trailed to the center of his neck like rich butterscotch fudge glazed with real vanilla. She almost wanted to take a bite.

The last time they'd made love she'd run her hands through the smooth strands, combing his tight scalp with her fingertips. She'd reveled in the creamy texture while he licked the swell of her breasts and sucked her erect nipples, groaning as his cock strained tight against her naked thigh. The memory of hot skin against skin made her tremble inside. Some of her defenses fell away.

Legs could tell Jack recognized the scent of Ada's White Diamonds perfume gaining strength in the air by the way he tilted his head as his nostrils flared. His blue eyes flashed defiance. He looked around, shouting at corners. "Do you hear me, Ada? I'm not like he was."

A cold chill swept through the room. Legs shivered against the draft and looked hard into the air, trying to focus through the dust motes in the early morning sun. If she

stared in just the right way, and at just the right angle, she might see glimmers of her aunt. It had happened before.

Jack narrowed his eyes. "I know how to get her out of here. Tough love."

"What?"

He reached out and pulled her into his arms. The scent of fresh lime soap and musk aftershave filled her senses, dousing the White Diamonds. Arms of sleek steel hugged her to his broad, muscled chest. The smell and feel of him drifted over her like a safe, sensuous blanket.

She pressed her cheek against his shirt and rubbed her face across the nipple that had hardened beneath his black t-shirt. The fullness of her bottom lip clung to the tip and she resisted the primal urge to nip it with her teeth and poke it with her tongue through the fabric.

His voice was gruff. "We'll fuck her out of here."

"Jack!" Legs slapped his bicep and pushed away from him. "Don't talk like that about her. I don't want her to go." She glared at him, daring him to change her mind.

He stepped back, threw up his hands, and shouted in clear frustration, "Then at least let me sleep here once in a while. Overnight. No more sneaking around like we're kids. I've had enough of that."

He let out a loud grumble and then lowered his voice, modulating it for her as he continued. "It's time, Linda. I know you're still mourning her, but can't you allow yourself one simple luxury to share with me?"

She eyed the queen-size bed in the center of the room, stripped clean of her aunt's linens. Of course Jack was right, she was being ridiculous. Childish. She was a grown woman of twenty-three. She'd been procrastinating for months with this room, emptying it a bit at a time. She couldn't keep staying at Jack's apartment and avoid letting him sleep here.

Yet her stubbornness wouldn't let her give in. At least, that's what she told herself. She didn't want to admit her fear of losing her aunt forever. "We can patch it, but that's as far as I'll go for now. Let me think about things. I can never replace my aunt." She left the unspoken ...*but men die or leave* hang in the air with the scent of Ada's perfume. A gentle gust, like approval, stroked the back of her neck and prickled the skin on her arms. She hugged herself and looked away from the hurt in Jack's eyes.

"Yeah. Great." He yanked the color charts from his back pocket and threw them beside his coffee cup. Cardboard squares ricocheted off the cup and skittered to the floor. The hardwood looked like a paint box had shattered across its shining surface.

Legs picked them up and then stacked the charts like a small deck of cards. Her fingers slid over the glossy surfaces. She eyed the sample at the top of the pile. "Oh...this one is pretty."

She fanned out the charts, stunned by the sensitivity of the colors. The apparent thought he had given to the choices took her off guard. She shuffled. Mauves and dusty roses called Spring Romance, Sweet Simmer and Sizzle looked romantic but not sugary. Deeper shades like Sumptuous Silk and Sultry were bolder and perfect for baseboards and windowsills. If she had picked them herself, she couldn't have done a better job.

Her face flushed and she turned away slightly so that Jack wouldn't see. Maybe he'd meant what he'd said the other night. She closed her eyes, recalling the warmth of his sun-kissed skin and the husky sound of his voice as she'd lain, sated, with her head on his shoulder, gliding her palm over the downy hair that covered his chest, while tucked in the crook of his sturdy, bare arm.

"I'm falling in love with you," he'd whispered. He'd run his index finger down the length of her nose and circled the tip before pressing a kiss to her forehead. "My infatuation has turned into something more. I always knew it would if you let me get close enough."

Legs had shifted out of his arms and sat up with her bare back to him, her long hair in a tangle, too flummoxed to reply. By entering into a heated affair with a Harris she

had rebelled against her aunt's strictest rule. She had always wanted Jack, had longed for him since she was a girl, and her desire for him now seemed unquenchable. But love? The prospect terrified her.

She wasn't sure how to love him in return without losing him. Her need was too great; the armor she wore to cloak her emotions was most vulnerable to him. He thought she was tough. High-spirited. He couldn't know she was a fraud. She'd already lost the most cherished loves of her life and couldn't face another loss if Jack left her. It would be like the fatal blow her aunt had suffered at the hands of her uncle.

Legs remembered Ada's life of regret and recriminations and shivered. No, she couldn't end up alone and bitter that way.

Jack's hands gripped her shoulders from behind and massaged them tenderly, bringing her back to the present. He lifted one hand to tuck long, stray strands of hair behind her ear and pressed his mouth to the sensitive hollow below her earlobe. Soft breath touched the delicate skin and raised tingles along her arms and across her small, tight breasts. Her nipples puckered against the lace of her lavender bra.

He whispered, "Did you ever consider that Ada isn't standing guard to keep us apart? That whatever grudge she held against my family died with her? Maybe what she really wants is to see you happy before she goes."

Legs choked back a startled sob. Dear God, she'd never thought of that.

Her life had been spent beneath the impenetrable shelter of her fearless, generous aunt's love, staving off the world to keep her safe after her parents died. Though Ada had also been gentle and warm, Legs had prized her fierce protectiveness most. Her protection had fostered a fiery spirit that dared the world to hurt her again. She strode through life with her head up and her chest out. The worst had happened when her parents died and she had survived. There was nothing she couldn't handle.

Except the matter of loving Jack Harris.

Jack watched Legs from his spot on the floor in the hallway while she drained the last of her coffee and licked butter and honey from the tips of two smooth fingers. He liked watching her. She wasn't easily distracted and gave her complete attention to whatever task was at hand. Even when she made love she seemed to savor each separate moment. When she reached climax he knew without a doubt she'd been fully satisfied.

His cock twitched at the sight of her pink tongue and mouth working the oval ends of her fingers. He watched her suck a slather of honey from her thumb and stifled a groan. Legs glanced at him and her brown eyes sparked with an unspoken reprimand. *I know what you're thinking*, they said. And her bright eyes were right. Longing for Legs Anderson's mouth on him kept him awake nights.

"Do that again," he said.

She leered at him, eyes flashing amusement as she tore open another packet of honey and drizzled the warm, sticky liquid slowly down her thumb. "Mmm," she teased, touching her thumb to the tip of her tongue and tasting. She drew her lips back and narrowed her eyes as her teeth skimmed the nail and thumb pad before sucking the top whole into her wet mouth.

Jack's heart pounded as her lips captured her thumb one excruciating segment at a time. Honey ran down the back of her hand in rivulets and Jack's jaw went slack. His breathing labored. She worked her mouth to the base and then pulled her thumb out again slow enough to cause him pain. Sticky honey glistened on her lips, torturing him with unspoken promises.

Jack reached out and brought her hand to his mouth, sucking the remaining honey from her skin. His tongue searched her palm to lave the sensitive curve at its center. Legs shivered lightly as his tongue flickered upward with featherlike softness to the space between her thumb and forefinger. She trembled as he traced the length of her forefinger, gliding his tongue up, circling the tip and then drifting down again to the bottom of her middle finger.

She sighed then, and her hand relaxed as he sucked her longest finger into his mouth and withdrew it slowly. Her skin was smooth and silky and tasted sweet. His tongue moved to her ring finger, lapping skin and knuckles up and then down to the space beside her little finger. His tongue flashed up and then down again until his lips nibbled the curve along the outside edge of her hand. When she closed her eyes, he grazed her wrist with his teeth and worked his tongue back to the center of her palm.

The delicate bones of her hand surprised him. He didn't know why he hadn't realized before how slight she was. Legs had always seemed so formidable. Sure of herself. The tiny bones lent her a fragility he'd never acknowledged. He pressed his mouth to her small, pink palm. Maybe he needed to rethink his image of Legs Anderson.

He returned to the warm pulse point inside her wrist, laid a row of small kisses there, and then nipped the tender skin with his front teeth. He was rewarded with a soft moan and tiny smile. When he finally released her hand, her eyelids fluttered. She brought her palm back to her lap and sighed aloud.

Jack exhaled and cleared his throat. He ignored the wild throb inside his jeans and shifted his weight on the floor. "Guess we won't get any work done if we keep this up." His voice cracked though he struggled to keep it steady.

"True. But that was nice." Her smile was warm this time—more welcoming than the greeting she'd offered when he'd arrived. He hoped this meant they had reached a tacit agreement to accept his presence in the house. He wanted to break down her barriers the way she'd shattered his. His exposed core was bloodied and raw from wanting her. Unlike other women he had known, her unique blend of gentleness and strength could bring him to his knees if he wasn't careful.

If she didn't love him, maybe it was time to admit defeat and, finally, just walk away.

The house seemed to whisper, "Too late." He frowned and looked up at the thick plaster walls. He reminded himself that his own stubbornness had brought him here.

He had pushed and stretched her boundaries over and over again until she relented. After years of restraint, she had finally defied her aunt's wishes and slept with him. A Harris. If he intended to become part of her life he had to be patient.

He couldn't just...wander.

"Damn you, Ada," he muttered. He looked down the hall, half expecting to see her there. She had been a handsome woman in her day, with upswept black hair and dark, mysterious eyes filled with sadness. The corners of her mouth had tightened every time she saw him, though he'd never figured out why.

Jack had known Ada since he was a child. She'd always seemed a little wary of him, like he was some wild halfling adopted from the woods. She didn't seem to understand large families with loud, unruly boys and a harried mother with sunburned skin and creased hands. It was common knowledge that Ada had considered his father a roughneck who hunted, fished, drank, gambled and swore.

Yet his parents had sat right across the aisle from Ada at church every Sunday with all seven kids in tow, scrubbed and polished as brass knobs. Jack, the youngest, couldn't help but notice the flash in Ada's eyes when his father took his mother's hand in his during prayer or touched her arm during a sermon. It wasn't until later, when he was almost grown, that he'd realized the furtive glances Ada had darted his parents' way weren't looks of disapproval...but longing.

After that Jack had made more effort to speak to the older woman. And as her niece Linda blossomed into the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, he had even more incentive to be friendly. Ada was wily though and saw through his crush like cheesecloth. She had stood in the way ever since, refusing to let him near Linda outside of church. The summer before her eighteenth birthday she was packed off to college. He barely saw her over the next four years.

He'd hoped Ada would relent when he visited the house during her last, difficult months. He'd even sat with her a few times and fed her broth while Legs went to work. He thought they'd finally connected, bridged some unspoken, unresolved gap. The look

in her eyes had softened when her gaze met his the last time he'd read to her. He'd hoped that whatever barrier stood between them had finally fallen away.

For the first time, he imagined Ada's presence in the house. He squinted, trying to see through the strands of light in the hall. Legs breathed quietly beside him, watching his expression.

Legs leaned forward and searched his eyes. "You feel her, don't you?" She didn't wait for a reply. "I told you she was here. You never believed me. You just played along."

"Your aunt was never an easy woman to ignore." He tried to grin but failed miserably. "Look, let's be honest. She thought I was just like my father. She did everything possible to keep us apart. It was only after she died that you and I had a chance." He released a rush of breath and balled his fist against the hardwood floor. "If she were alive, would I be sitting here with you? Inside this house?"

Legs flushed slightly and looked away.

That was all the answer he needed.

"Right. So why believe she's still around? I don't want to give in to her another day. I'm tired of obstacles."

As his words echoed through the master bedroom opposite their places in the hall he knew their relationship had reached a crossroad. His heart hammered and beads of sweat formed a damp line along the back of his neck. If Legs refused him now he'd have to let her go. There was no other choice. Being stubborn was one thing, playing the fool another.

And Jack Harris was nobody's fool.

To his relief, she touched his hand. "Part of the reason she kept you away from me was because she thought you were," Legs looked down at the floor and paused. She met his eyes again and blushed, "too sure of yourself. Too cocky and handsome for a serious relationship. Risky. It was no secret around town that you could have any girl you wanted."

Jack didn't know whether to punch a wall or laugh out loud. He scrambled to his feet and pointed down at Legs on the hallway floor. "Dammit! That's the most infuriating... Argh! I couldn't have you. She made that clear. What was I supposed to do, never see another girl the rest of my life?"

"I think Aunt would have been more convinced you wanted me if you hadn't."

Jack pounded his fist against the rose-covered plaster wall and bellowed in frustration. "That's an excuse and you know it. She was hiding something." He raked his fingers through his blond hair. "When you came back to town she could see I still cared for you. We weren't kids anymore! She should have backed off." Jack's eyes challenged hers. "You should have made sure she did."

He stomped into the master bedroom and shouted into the half-empty room, "I love your niece, Ada! Do you hear me? I've loved her since she was sixteen, and you're not keeping me away from her another day, understand?" The pulse point in his jaw throbbed and his neck muscles strained.

In quick strides he returned to the hallway, reached down and lifted Legs off the hardwood floor by her forearms. Her brown eyes widened and her hair flew as her hips left the ground. The sound of her chest crashing against his released an "umph" from her throat. The toes of her sneakers scraped the floorboards in little rubbery bumps. She tried suddenly to find her footing and push him away, but he tightened his grip.

"Why else did she interfere?" he demanded.

"I don't know," she stammered. "She wouldn't tell me."

"This is it, Linda," he said in a gravelly whisper beside her ear. "The day you decide once and for all who you want. Her or me. I've damn well had enough." He searched her eyes then, his stare boring into hers. Her breath brushed his face as she shuddered beneath his steely glare.

"Choose."

Chapter Two

Her angry breath came in hard pants as she lowered her face to his neck. Her arm muscles tensed beneath his grasp and her body stiffened. She stood stock still against him, not fighting but not giving in either. She could have kicked or scratched, insisting he let her go. Instead, she leaned her body into his, alert, chest heaving, as if daring him to hurt her.

He gripped her jaw then, tilted her face and crushed his lips against the fullness of hers until the muscles in her neck loosened and her breathing slowed. He figured she could have ended the kiss right then and pulled away from him. Instead, she opened her mouth.

Her tongue tasted sweet like honey and hazelnut coffee, and he deepened the kiss, thrusting into her mouth. One hand massaged her upper arm beneath the sleeve of her red t-shirt, fingers noting the tiny goose bumps peppering her skin. He liked that she responded that way to him.

She raised her arms to wrap them around his neck. He brought his hand down to her waist while she raked the nape of his neck with her fingertips and plunged into his hair, massaging the back of his head while pulling him tighter against her. She met his tongue thrust for thrust and returned his kiss with a fervor she hadn't offered before. The soft orbs of her breasts pressed against his chest and her groin rubbed the length of his erection inside his jeans. His pulse thrummed in his ears and his cock ached with each twist of her hips. The muscles in his stomach clenched as he realized that for the first time, she seemed lost in him.

He kissed her again and traced the line of her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue before cupping her face in his hands and then releasing her to take a step back.

"Come with me." He led her by the hand into her aunt's bedroom. She followed, her brown eyes flashing more curiosity than suspicion now, emboldening him. He reached the plastic shopping bag on the floor and dropped her hand, stooping with his back turned and blocking her view as he rummaged for the items he wanted.

Sweet Simmer. That was it. He shook the small can of paint, laid a sheet of old newspaper beneath it on the floor and popped the lid with the Swiss Army knife he kept in his pocket. He pulled a wooden stick from the bag and stirred the contents. The smell of fresh paint wafted into the room. He stuck a new paintbrush into the back pocket of his jeans.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes were wary.

Jack lifted the paint can. "You'll see." He strode a few paces across the room and stood inches from a plaster wall. He reached into his back pocket with the other hand for the paintbrush.

"Wait!" Legs hollered, lunging at him. She reached out for the paint can to grab it away, but her fingertips bumped the rim instead. *Sweet Simmer* flew from the top of the can over the back of Jack's hand and splattered onto the wall. Jack watched her expression change from resentment to horror as the color dripped down the surface in long, thin tendrils. She stood stock still with nostrils open, eyes glinting, her mouth a round O of surprise.

Jack struggled to ignore her reaction and pretended to study the wall. He cocked his head as if viewing a portrait. "I like it." He feigned nonchalance as he stared at the slashes of color, hoping he looked more confident than he felt. He held the paint can steady against the side of his leg like a matador's cape, giving the bull wide berth. Her breathing slowed a notch—a good sign—as he turned back to her with his most practiced, innocent grin.

Her eyes flickered from the wall to his face and then back again in clear disbelief, and he could tell by the set of her jaw that she struggled with a decision.

"Maybe you'll like *Spring Romance* better?" He pointed to the Home Depot bag.

He expected the house to shake by its foundations then, rattling them around like earthquake victims inside a splintering building. He waited, but the house remained still. Would the walls expand and contract with Ada's rage, like the house in *Amityville Horror*? Jack's eyes scoured the room, but nothing happened. Not even a breeze stirred the air with White Diamonds in its wake. Jack remained thoughtful. Maybe Ada wasn't as all-powerful as Legs imagined or he'd allowed himself to assume.

He should have challenged the old bat sooner.

Jack wiped the back of his hand across the thigh of his jeans, trailing *Sweet Simmer*. "The paint is water soluble. This was only supposed to be a color test. We take different colors of paint, brush them in patches on the wall, and then you pick your favorites when they dry. See? Like fabric swatches." He turned back to the dripping paint. "This shade looks good already, don't you think?"

The set of her shoulders told him she was angry, but the softening at the corners of her mouth and eyes said she forgave him. The knot inside his chest loosened.

She chewed her lips and stared at the color. "It's okay," she said grudgingly. Her expression looked doubtful as her gaze flickered to his.

"You sound like you're not sure. Like you think Ada will be angry if you say you like it."

She shrugged. "Maybe."

Jack decided to go for broke. "Let's try something else." He went to the bag on the floor and found *Spring Romance*. Legs watched in silence as he removed the lid and stirred the fresh can of paint. He laid the stir stick over the open lid on the newspaper and returned to her side by the wall. Using a clean brush, he dipped the bristles into the paint and spread a slash of color beside the *Sweet Simmer*.

"What do you think?" he asked, half-turning toward her.

She took a deep inhalation of breath and let it out for what seemed a long time. Her eyes stayed focused on the wall as she pursed her lips, clearly struggling with some emotion she wouldn't share. Finally, she turned his way and offered a tiny smile.

He extended the paintbrush to her. "You try."

Legs took the brush gingerly, as if she were touching an explosive device. She stared at it as if she'd never painted, though Jack knew she was accomplished at home maintenance and repair. She dipped the tip of the brush into the top of the can, raised her arm and brought the bristles across a clean patch of wall space. As she did, a groan escaped from deep inside her chest.

It seemed like the gesture released her from some dark, inexplicable spell. She stared at the streak on the wall with wide, unfocused eyes, blinked and then shook her head as if emerging from a trance.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked, wondering what the hell had just happened.

For a long moment Legs didn't reply. She stepped back a few paces from the wall, lifted her chin and raised her eyes toward the ceiling. She seemed to be waiting for something. Listening.

The room was still. No breezes stirred against the windowpanes. No fragrance had been conjured or floorboards creaked. Nothing.

"Were you expecting the sky to fall?" Jack quipped, reaching out to wrap his arm around her shoulder. They examined the colors on the flat surface, side by side, as if studying a Picasso. Jack tilted his head to touch his temple to the crown of her hair. "Maybe Ada likes *Spring Romance*."

Legs giggled then, and the tension in the room shattered. Despite his tactical offense she hadn't thrown him out. Jack began to relax.

"I like it," she murmured, "even if you are a persistent S.O.B." She turned to him and raised her arms as if reaching for a kiss. Jack lowered his face to meet hers. But instead of the kiss he expected, the soft, cold bristles of the paintbrush Legs held sliced his cheek.

"Hey!" He leaped backward and touched the wet spot on his face. *Spring Romance* transferred to his fingers.

Legs pretended to admire her work. "I always wondered what you'd look like with rosy cheeks." She chuckled.

"I'll give *you* rosy cheeks." Jack grabbed her up in his arms and hugged her tight. Legs laughed and pressed her face against his shoulder.

He gripped the cheeks of her butt, squeezed and then slapped her backside with his painted hand, transferring pink fingerprints on the rear of her jeans.

"Your ass is mine," he growled into her ear, trying to sound serious.

"You got paint on my pants, didn't you?" she shot back, groaning.

"Yup. Guess you'd better shimmy them off."

* * * * *

"Take my jeans off? How are we supposed to get any work done?"

"You didn't want to paint a few minutes ago." Jack grinned down at her with fire in his eyes as he brought his mouth to hers.

She should protest...this was her aunt's room...there were strict rules about having men in here...but the feel of his lips and his hot breath on her face weakened her knees and her resolve. She kissed him back fervently...didn't want him to leave. He was the one, true constant in her life since Ada had gotten sick. He would have stood by her sooner if she'd fought for him, defended him.

But how could she? She had adored her doting aunt. Rebelliousness was out of the question. She was a kid when Ada sent her away to college. By the time she returned to town, Ada was ill. Who had the strength to defy a dying woman?

Legs trailed her fingers along Jack's taut abdomen and savored the feel of his muscles shuddering and tightening beneath her touch. She lifted his shirt and skimmed her palm across his warm, tight stomach and then raised her hand to his chest. When her fingertips brushed the fine hairs across his pectorals and nipples, he groaned and kissed her again. His mouth was hungry and insistent and she sucked the center of his bottom lip and then nipped it with her teeth.

Strong fingers unbuttoned her jeans and yanked the zipper down. He pulled the front of her pants open wide and then thrust them over her hips in one swift motion.

She leaned into him and tweaked his nipples one at a time, flicking the ends with the tips of her nails. He grunted and cupped the halves of her buttocks inside his palms, kneading and stroking her skin. One long finger dragged the length of her thong and probed the edge of elastic at her waist.

Legs sighed and held on to him, reveling in the feel of his strong body against hers. Her emotions welled. If she refused him she would create the self-fulfilling prophecy of loneliness and bitterness she feared. She'd met other men in college. Dated several good-looking, interesting guys. But Jack was the only man who had ever mattered to her. Why not let him love her? Love him?

The length of his hard rod pressed against her groin and her pussy throbbed with an ache that left her defenseless. Moisture soaked the lining of her thong. She took a hard breath and kissed him again, tongue meeting his and clashing, caressing, while his hands roamed beneath her shirt and circled her navel. Her skin tingled and she trembled beneath his touch, yearning for more.

Sure but gentle hands drifted up to fondle her breasts. He brought his mouth to her neck and suckled while his fingers worked the front clasp of her bra, releasing her breasts from the confines of lavender lace. Her nipples cinched as he traced the areolas with his fingertips and then pulled and pinched the hard tips. The motions sent rockets of electrical currents straight to her core. She lifted her hips and swayed faster against his steely erection, moaning with pleasure as the throb between her legs grew wilder.

Without warning, he lifted her off the floor by her upper arms, took three steps forward and pressed her against the wall. The back of her head, shoulders and buttocks bumped the surface as he pinned her tight. Hands like iron gripped her while his knee worked her denims past her thighs and down to her calves.

"Pull your panties down," he murmured. He loosened his grasp to free her hands.

She hooked the elastic bands of her thong with her thumbs and wiggled the panties over her hips. The scent of her musk and moisture wafted between them. Jack's eyes flashed and he licked his lips as he stared down at her short, trimmed curls. He raised his knee to open her thighs wider. Her labia parted with the motion, exposing her ready, pink folds.

His expression turned pensive and his voice became husky with excitement. He seemed to have a new idea. "Turn around and face the wall, will you?"

This wasn't what she expected. All she wanted at the moment was his tongue inside her, lapping and sucking her to orgasm. By the gleam in his eyes, she could tell he had other ideas. But what?

There was a cool, wet spot on the wall beneath her bottom that made little squishing noises when she moved her hips.

"I think this will be fun," he whispered.

Fun? Right now she couldn't think of a single thing more fun than having a climax. Why wasn't he *doing* something? She opened her legs a bit wider and arched her hips, beckoning. Demanding.

"Perfect," he grinned in reply. "Turn around, just like that."

She frowned at him but decided to trust his lead. Jack was an inventive, considerate lover who always met her needs with enthusiasm and...even artistry. Why not let him have his way with her? The expression made her giggle.

His smile widened at her laugh, and he helped her pivot toward the wall.

"Okay, now take two steps sideways," he said.

"Are we dancing or making love?" she grumbled, realizing all at once that she hadn't thought of her aunt since Jack had undone her pants. A pang of guilt struck that she chased away. This was not the time to think of Ada.

"Both, sugar. You'll see."

She stepped to the right and then felt his hands press hard against the expanse of her hips. The sounds of his breathing seemed to fill the room, and she realized he was panting with arousal.

“Press your pussy against the wall,” he said in a hush.

She complied, and as she did, understood. The moist, still fresh paint on the wall clung to her pubic hair and labia. The smooth texture sent a sensual shiver over her mound. She pressed tighter against the wall, tingling with pleasure.

Jack’s mouth touched her ear, and her skin turned to gooseflesh with the rush of his breath. Her nipples peaked and her arms tingled.

“Do it again, okay?” he murmured against her hair. “Take two steps and push yourself against the wall.”

They were making stenciled pictures of the most intimate parts of her body. The expanse of wall was their life-size canvas.

He tugged the hem of her t-shirt and she lifted her arms in unspoken compliance as he pulled it off and tossed it on the floor. The unclasped bra followed. “Take off your pants and shoes. Give me a minute,” Jack said softly. He moved away from the wall while she stepped out of her sneakers, socks, jeans and thong.

Jack returned to the wall with four tiny cans of paint and some brushes. One by one he popped the lids.

She watched as he stirred the colors *Fire and Ice*, *Smoldering Coals*, *Pink Singe* and *Burning Love*. She pursed her lips. Her aunt’s voice pierced her brain, telling her to stop this obscene graffiti right this instant!

But when Jack looked up at her with eagerness in his eyes, she knew she couldn’t say no.

Legs looked back at the stencils of her buttocks and nether lips and had to admit they were...interesting. Jack was right—this was fun. A smile broke over her face despite her initial wariness. He never failed to surprise her.

When Jack finished prepping the paint he stood before her and stripped off his shirt. The large, round muscles of his biceps flexed with the motion, and Legs swallowed a moan of appreciation. She stepped closer, uninhibited by her nakedness, and let his eyes devour each part of her. As she unfastened his jeans and pulled down his zipper, he traced the line of her back with his fingers. She shivered beneath his touch.

His caress moved around her waist and up to skim her stomach and her breasts. Magic fingers pressed and squeezed until her nipples were hard as oyster pearls. Jack stooped to suck them in turn, and Legs crooned softly with him. A cry caught in her throat as his tongue traced the points and flicked over the ends. She was ready for sex and wanted to cry out, "Now!" to him, but held her tongue. Though the thrumming between her legs had become like steady thunder, she knew Jack would linger with foreplay as long as he liked.

Cool air wafted over her skin and goose bumps peppered her arms and chest when Jack's mouth came away from her breasts. He crouched on the floor at her feet. Seconds later he returned to standing holding a thin paintbrush filled with rose paint. He held the brush to her breasts and his amazing blue eyes sparkled with the question, "May I?"

Legs nodded and offered a wry grin.

Chapter Three

The paintbrush colored the curves of her breasts and nipples in soft, sensuous strokes that made her heart flutter with her ragged breath. She closed her eyes and savored the feel of sable against her skin. The moist, smooth paint floated like satin in Jack's able hand.

He turned her again to face the wall. Knowing what he wanted this time, she pressed her freshly painted breasts against the clean surface to leave her impressions behind.

Before she could step away, Jack's hand fondled her buttocks and one finger traced the line between her ass cheeks. She gasped with pleasure and surprise as one finger became two and they dipped inside the opening of her pussy.

She bucked on impulse, taking the length of his fingers inside her, and released the hungry cry she'd been holding. Her body stretched higher against the wall as she raised her hands over her head and clawed the surface for support. The ends of her hair brushed her shoulder blades, feather-soft, as her head tipped back. His fingers thrust harder inside her, stroking her clitoris with each forward motion. The muscles in her legs flexed and her clit swelled and throbbed. If she moved, she'd lose her center of balance, yet her body screamed for more thrusts and parries against the rhythm of Jack's hand.

Colors in blue, lavender, pink and green formed behind her eyes as orgasm loomed. Her breathing spun out of control in short, hard gasps. She licked her lips and gulped, trying to prolong the pleasure, but Jack read her body well. He slid his wet fingers from her passage to her silken folds, freed her erect bud from its covering and rubbed her swollen clit until the colors behind her eyes exploded.

She heard herself scream. The orgasm rocketed through her, shattering her into pieces against the wall. Her fingers clutched and clung for support, but she was losing the upright battle, as her shuddering body grew limp. Jack reached around her waist and held her tight against him, supporting her back and legs while the spasms continued. He decreased the pressure on her clit, slowing the pace while her climax subsided, bringing her back to his space and time in tiny, loving increments.

Finally, her eyes fluttered open. The wall before her blurred and faded with her satisfied, drowsy gaze.

Jack kissed the back of her neck and nipped her shoulder in small, greedy bites. His erection pressed tight against the center of her buttocks, throbbing against her tailbone with an unmistakable need. Her instinct told her to lean forward, arch her back and allow him entry from behind.

She pushed away from the wall instead, effectively causing Jack to stumble and lose his grip. She turned to face him, feeling playful in her afterglow.

A little *quid pro quo* was in order.

"Take off your clothes," she said. Her eyelids were still heavy with post-orgasmic pleasure. She licked her mouth to rewet her lips and dragged her hands over the sides of her breasts, sighing with contentment as her thumbs fondled her nipples.

Jack watched her every move, his eyes devouring her body with a manic lust she had never seen in them before. His piercing gaze lifted to her face and caught her coy, languorous glance. His stare was a challenge, a dare.

Could she let go of her inhibitions with him on this day, in this place? Legs held his eyes and lifted her chin, mirroring him.

Oh yes, she was woman enough for the task.

He left his clothes in a heap on the floor next to hers and stood facing the wall like she asked. Jack's heart pounded in his chest as he swallowed his hope that, finally, Legs was shedding her fears about this house.

"Lift your arms," she whispered near his ear. She might have said, "I want to lick your body from toe to ear," by the way his cock strained at her lush voice. Jack raised his arms chest-high and widened his stance, finding his points of balance. Legs pressed her palms against his shoulder blades, forcing him closer.

He turned his profile to the west, cheek hugging the wall's cool, hard surface. The smell of plaster dust and new paint filled his nostrils and he fought back a sneeze. He smiled to himself. He was happier than a pig in shit to be in the old bat's bedroom at last.

Especially naked and harder than seasoned oak.

He listened to the room, straining to hear subtle sounds beneath the lawnmower whirr in a neighbor's yard and the engine whine from a passing car. What he tried to sense was Ada, watching them. The disapproving, predictable frown he imagined on her dour face made him chuckle.

Something tickled his foot and ankle and then swept along the length of his shin to the curve of his knee, following the line of his thigh. The soft flutter lifted the hairs on his legs and sent a rush of goose bumps across his skin. His nipples got hard as stream pebbles and his erection jerked against the wall, sending a fresh burst of tremors through him.

God, he wanted her right now. Hard. He wanted to grab her, throw her against her aunt's bed and fuck her into exhaustion.

He pulled in a breath and let it out, feeling his chest rise and fall against the raw, stripped wall. Spots of old wallpaper paste scratched his chest.

Patience, man, he reminded himself. He and Legs had come a long way. Yesterday she wouldn't let him step foot in this room. Today she was body painting with him. If that wasn't progress, he didn't know what was.

Legs traced his hand with satin paint that clung to a wide sable paintbrush. He squinted, trying to see the color. *Smoldering Coals*. Good choice. He smiled as the paintbrush grazed his fingertips, enjoying both the sensations of the bristles against his skin and the irony of what they were doing. Ada had never wanted him here. Now she had his full-size image splayed on her bedroom wall.

"Should I turn around now?" he asked with a grin he couldn't hold back.

"You know I'm only half done, smart aleck. Let me finish your other half."

"*Then* can I turn around? There's a *big* part of me that hurts squashed against this wall. It needs your special, very *personal* attention."

"Oh be quiet," Legs snapped, slapping him lightly on a butt cheek. "I know what you want, but you're not getting it."

"Yet, you mean. Not *yet*. Right?" He hoped he didn't sound pathetic. But *Jeezus* he was turned on.

Legs finished tracing his body, but when he tried to move, she pushed him flat against the hard surface again. "Don't be in such a hurry...there's more."

She murmured those last two words like the most carnal promise he'd ever heard. An erotic blast like the spray of a scattergun shot through him. The sound of his blood pulsing through his veins pounded in his ears.

"You can put your arms down at your sides now," she added. Jack relaxed. A little. The soft stroke of a small paintbrush glided over his buttocks, making swirls and curlicues. Jack swallowed a groan.

"Feel good?" Legs asked. Her mouth was close. Her breath skimmed his ass and the base of his sac. His cock jerked again in response. He wanted to turn around. Her lips were so near he could almost feel them part, ready to take him inside her warm, wet mouth.

He squeezed his eyes closed and worked to steady his breathing. His heart pounded. Her mouth found the hollow where the inside of his thigh met his ass, and

her tongue lashed out, tasting, taunting. Jack's thigh muscles tightened and his abdomen clenched as the soft, moist tongue traced the split in his cheeks and traveled up to the small of his back.

Her breath came faster in steady, warm bursts against his skin, as if her arousal kept pace with his. She enjoyed teasing him, but that was okay. He could take all the taunting she could dish out. And then some.

While her mouth traveled across the line of his waist, trailing tiny, electric kisses, her hands reached around to stroke his cock and knead his balls lightly. Sensations like bursting filaments inside neon lights shot through his rod and into his solar plexus. He grunted when her grip grew stronger, stroking and pleasuring. His mouth grew dry and he licked his lips. His balls tightened and his semen rose, but he fought back the urge to climax.

No. Not yet.

Her hands hovered over the tip and then stroked the droplets that had oozed from the slit. The feel of her fingers sliding over the sensitive head made his knees shake. He needed to turn around, let her finish him. His body screamed for her perfect mouth.

Just then, the bedroom door slammed shut with a loud crash and the windows rattled in their frames. Jack's eyes flew open as his foot jerked involuntarily, kicking the thick oak molding at the base of the wall. "Ouch!" he hollered. "Damn it!" His toes throbbed with needle-sharp pain.

Legs pushed away from him and stared down at the floor. Jack grimaced. *WTF?* His erection slowly went south. The only appendage that throbbed now was his sore, aching foot.

"What in the world is that?" she asked, pointing, his pleasure forgotten. He gritted his teeth and forced back another curse.

Jack didn't much give a damn, but he followed the line of her index finger. He was feeling grouchy at the moment, and so the sight of the ornate wooden box hidden inside

the exposed wall didn't rouse his curiosity much. The only thing he'd wanted roused had been summarily dismissed.

Shit.

Ada's bitch of a ghost had messed with him again.

* * * * *

"Do you think she was trying to tell us something?" Legs asked, excitement cracking her voice.

Jack wasn't feeling too cooperative. "Yeah. She was trying to tell you to get your hands off my cock." He scowled at the seashell-covered box, refusing to acknowledge its fine, antique artistry.

They sat on the floor cross-legged and naked, wearing only their dried paint, with the intricately designed box placed between them. Legs ran the tips of her fingers over the patterns on the lid. The artist had laid seashells across the box surface, using sequences of clever turns to create the illusion of a floral bouquet. Mother-of-pearl had been carved into leafy shapes to accent the flowers. Glued to the center was a small, faded picture of a seaside boardwalk, edged in delicate shells of nearly the same elongated shapes.

Jack recognized most of the shells from his saltwater fishing trips. These were North Atlantic beach shells. There were tiny brown and white spindles, red nose cockleshells, limpets and miniature clams—the smallest he'd ever seen.

Grudgingly, Jack admitted the box was impressive, though it was dusty and several of the shells had come loose. It was probably worth hundreds of dollars on the collectibles market. He pushed away his resentment for the interruption to his climax and focused his attention on the box. The find was important to Legs.

She opened the lid. Inside was a half-used bottle of White Diamonds. Legs frowned slightly, creasing her forehead. "Well, I guess we know why my aunt's perfume keeps wafting through this room. Nothing supernatural about that." She lifted the container

and set it on the floor. "I wonder why she kept this particular bottle in the box? She must have had others. There was always a fresh bottle on her bureau."

Jack shook his head. "Who knows?" He started to add, "She was a bitter old battleaxe, and who cares?" but held his tongue.

"Look! Pictures! And postcards! A few letters too." Legs' frown deepened as she stared at the old Kodaks. "Is this your...*father* hugging my aunt in all these photos? He's thinner here and his hair is still dark but...isn't this him?" She looked expectantly at Jack.

"What?" Jack took the pictures from her hand and shuffled. His heartbeat quickened. Small groups of huddled teens and a few men in their twenties stood with arms entwined, grinning at the camera from a seaside boardwalk with the ocean frothing behind them. All, that was, except Ada...and his father, looking about twenty.

Gerald Harris was gazing directly into Ada Anderson's eyes.

Holy freakin shit.

There were three more photos of them together. One showed them sitting on a towel in the sun, holding a beach ball. Another shot captured them snuggling on a Ferris wheel. In the third, Ada held a cotton candy, her head resting on Gerald's shoulder. Her large, dark eyes stared straight into the camera lens. A tiny, knowing smile lifted the corners of her mouth. There was no mistaking the dreamy, satisfied look that had been captured on her face.

Freshly fucked.

"I had no idea my father was...involved with Ada." *Jeezus*. Jack's stomach tightened as his blood pressure spiked. He let out a resigned sigh. "What else is inside there?"

"Oh now you care," Legs chided, tweaking his arm. "A few minutes ago this box didn't interest you."

"A few minutes ago you were stroking the head of my dick. Why would I want you to stop?" At least his foot didn't hurt anymore.

Legs grinned. "We'll get back to that. Right now, I want to read these notes."

Jack became more hopeful. His mood lifted. "Okay."

She examined a vintage color postcard. "This is marked *Rehoboth Beach, Delaware*. So are the rest." She held up the first message.

Dearest Gerald, Wish you didn't go. I never should have told you. I didn't say anything sooner because I didn't want to worry you in case it was nothing. I miss you.

"Hmm. I don't like the sound of that. And what were they doing in Rehoboth Beach anyway?" Jack asked. He'd never heard his father mention Delaware.

"My aunt told me once that she volunteered in the summertime. Missionaries built Rehoboth and Bethany Beaches during the last century, and the towns have long histories of charitable work. I bet the people in these pictures were an outreach team."

Legs pulled another postcard from the short stack.

My darling, The project is going well, but you are sorely missed. I think loving thoughts of you every day. Everything is okay now. Won't you come back for the end of summer?

"I wonder what project she's talking about? And what worry?" Suspicion and doubt tugged at Jack.

Legs scanned a third postcard and glanced up at him. A frown lined her forehead. "The messages are getting more desperate. Listen to this."

Gerald – No fun here without you. I love you so much. I thought you loved me. How can you do this? Please come back for Labor Day weekend.

She bit her lips and sighed. "My aunt was hopelessly in love with your father."

Jack rubbed his face and then dropped his hands to his thighs. Anger and bewilderment surged through him. "He never said a word to me about her in all these years."

"He must have returned these postcards when the relationship ended." She waved the short stack. "They probably explain why my aunt was so bitter about your dad."

"Though I wonder if they had second thoughts." His gaze locked on the bottle of White Diamonds. "I'm beginning to see things a little clearer."

"What do you mean?"

Jack shook his head. He didn't want to speculate yet. "I'm still putting pieces together."

Legs reached for the perfume. "This fragrance wasn't sold until the early Nineties. Why did she save something more than twenty years older than the rest of the stuff in here?"

The cold fingers of dread wrapped around Jack's spine. The Nineties. A time when his parents went through what his mom had called "a bad patch". They hadn't separated, they were too devout for that, but the timing didn't bode well.

"Is there a card from that time period? Birthday? Christmas?"

Legs rummaged through the box. "Here's a birthday card that doesn't look too old." She opened it, her expression tentative. Her deep brown eyes flashed with uncertainty. "It's from your dad."

Jack ran his fingers through his hair and clutched the back of his skull. His head spun with possibilities—some that made his pulse pound. The air in the room grew stale, and he found it harder to breathe.

He took the card from her outstretched hand. Sure enough, the name *Gerald* had been scrawled across the bottom of the white cardboard surface. To Jack's relief, no additional words of love had been included with the signature.

He laid the card in the box, forced gulps of clean oxygen and decided to give his father the benefit of doubt. "Maybe my dad gave this to your aunt at a birthday party. Did she celebrate her fortieth? The timing's about right."

"I was only about seven then – too young to remember."

Jack watched as she nibbled the end of her thumb. She looked at the nail and then returned the thumb to her mouth, covering the tip with her full, sweet lips. Jack tried to stay focused on their conversation, but the sight of her mouth sucking her thumb pad hardened him instantly. His eyes narrowed, watching her.

"Cloris would know," he said, not taking his eyes from her lips.

Legs stared back at him over her hand. She pulled her thumb out slowly and flicked the end with her tongue, finishing whatever ministrations she was tending. "We could ask her."

"We will." He leaned closer, meeting her eyes. "But first, we have more urgent business to attend to." He didn't want to think about his father or Ada anymore. Not now. He wasn't going to let the past ruin his day the way it had dogged him the last decade. He and Legs were making real headway in their relationship. Nothing was going to spoil that. Not even his father.

Legs released a harsh, incredulous laugh. "Don't you want to read the rest of these letters?"

"Sure. Later. They've been here for almost forty years. Another couple of hours won't matter."

"Don't you ever think about anything but your cock? Haven't you got anything else to say?" Legs demanded. But there was no heat in her voice. The accusation was drenched with hidden laughter.

"Of course I have things to say. You. Me. But when you and me sit together, my cock always comes up."

Legs rolled her eyes. "That's the most pathetic middle school joke I ever heard."

She pushed off his biceps with her palms, but before she could move away, he gripped her by the upper arms and pulled her close. Their eyes locked. The flecks of green in her eyes grew brighter and her pupils expanded, flashing a challenge. He could feel her heat penetrate the skin on his jaw as she panted softly. A wry smile tugged her lips. She licked her mouth to taunt him, wetting it with her extended, pointed tongue.

“You’re a little tease, aren’t you?”

“I don’t tease, you know that.” Her pupils dilated, large and black. Her nostrils flared as she let out a long, low breath.

“I’m going to fuck you until you break,” he said.

“You can try,” she replied, and leaned forward for a long, deep kiss.

Chapter Four

"Again?" she asked, laughing. Jack's erection poked her thigh. The man was insatiable. Legs stretched luxuriously on the bed and snuggled closer. Her stomach rumbled. "Okay, but then I want something to eat. I'm starving."

Jack rolled on top of her and pinned her wrists to the bare mattress. He kissed her with renewed fervor. Hot shivers tingled across her chest. "Anything you want, darlin'. How 'bout a big, juicy burger?"

"Yummm..." Her reply was stifled by another luscious kiss. A cheeseburger sounded exactly right. With big, fat onion rings and a Diet Coke. Jack released her hands and she wrapped them around his neck, deepening the kiss.

When they made love in this room for the first time today, she'd been riddled with guilt, yet clearly not enough to stop wanting Jack. Instead, she'd pushed thoughts of Ada from her mind. Although she was dying to know the truth about her aunt and Gerald Harris, Jack was right not to let buried secrets derail their day. It had taken her too long to allow Jack in this room to become distracted.

Which was probably just what her aunt had intended.

Legs broke the kiss and hugged Jack tight, glancing around her aunt's old room over his shoulder, waiting for the hairs along the back of her neck to prickle. Nothing happened. Legs listened hard, sifting through the stillness of the house and its typical creaking and settling, but heard nothing out of the ordinary. She had no idea where her aunt might be. She let out a sigh of relief and leaned back to meet her lover's eyes.

His amazing blue irises flashed lust and love and kindness, and she wondered why she had made him wait this long for her. An overwhelming rush of regret swept through her, bringing a lump to her throat. "Kiss me again." She choked on the words, tears welling.

The fullness of his lips met hers, warm and welcoming. Their tongues touched, and she pulled his into her mouth to suck it gently. Jack moaned and cupped one breast, circling the tip of her nipple with his thumb as he kneaded the orb inside his hand.

She moved her mouth to his ear. "I'm so sorry," she murmured.

Jack pulled back, a question forming on his face. His brows furrowed as he stared down at her. He was so handsome and virile she ached from wanting him.

"For what, sweetheart? You haven't done anything."

"That's the point." Her tears threatened to fall but she blinked them back. "I didn't fight hard enough for you. I should have kept trying." The thought of losing him filled her with dread.

He kissed her forehead and grazed her cheek with his lips. "I never blamed you. Ada was very protective. You were young. Then she got sick. I understood." His mouth traveled down the line of her neck, tasted the hollow above her collarbone and then nibbled the curve of her shoulder. Tremors ran across her chest. "We're together now, that's all that matters." He turned his attention to her breasts.

"They've still got some paint on them," she said, offhand. "I don't think I got it all off."

"It's non-toxic," he drawled, laying light kisses that sent jolts up her spine.

"Won't it reactivate in your mouth?" She hoped it wouldn't, because she didn't want him to stop.

"Probably not, but it doesn't matter. You're delicious, even with a splash of semi-gloss."

She chuckled then, and sighed, and tried to focus on the subject at hand. "Ada was in love with your father. Maybe he loved her too. Don't you think it's hypocritical that she fought so hard to keep us apart?"

Indignation shot through her, causing her to jolt as Jack's mouth covered her nipple. He flinched in response but continued to lick and suck as if he hadn't heard. She

looked down at him and pursed her lips, waiting for a reply. He stroked the side of her breast with his hand and then nibbled the plump skin.

He paused finally and lifted his head. "No, I don't. Actually, it makes sense." He brought his fingers to her mouth and said, "Shhh. Let's talk over lunch. Bring the letters and postcards with you." He moved to her stomach and flickered his tongue like little butterflies inside her navel. She gasped and laughed at the same time, as the sensations he created shot straight to her core.

"More," she breathed, closing her eyes, all thoughts of her aunt floating from her mind. Her thighs parted purely by reflex and the thrill of anticipation charged through her. He grunted over the line of her short pubic hair in knowing reply, laying quick kisses across her *Spring Romance*-painted mons. His breath felt fiery on the surface of her skin, and her abdomen tightened. She edged her hips closer, urging him on.

She let go her inhibitions when his mouth hovered over her slit, and spread her legs wide in invitation. He stretched out between her open thighs and ran his palms along the insides, where the skin was softest, trailing goose bumps with his caresses.

His thumbs grazed the deep, inside curves of her ass and glided over the small, silky opening of her anus. She tried not to jump, he had never touched her there before, but her legs trembled in reply, and shockwaves of desire shot through her as he played there. His large, able hands fanned across the tops of her thighs as if framing her most intimate places.

"Your pussy is so beautiful," he murmured, his voice husky with arousal. He tasted her delicately at first, tentatively, as if presented with a luscious feast and choosing where to start. She shuddered with the thrill of his tongue nudging the pink folds of her vulva apart and then lapping softly, rhythmically, over her engorged clitoris. Sparks flew behind her closed eyelids as the hood slipped away and his tongue circled the hard, throbbing bud.

She thrust her hips higher, crushing her vulva against his mouth, her fingers gripping the stark mattress as she writhed with pleasure. The scent of her essence

wafted between them, affirming her readiness. Her gasps rang across the room as she caught her breath, held it and released it in tiny rushes. Shivers rippled across her chest and rolled down her solar plexus to her abdomen, clenching and heaving until a groan burst from her throat.

Faster, she screamed inside her head, and as if he'd heard, his tongue quickened its pace across her pleasure center, urging her closer to climax. Spots formed behind her eyes while perspiration gathered behind her knees, between her breasts and under her arms. The last breath she held rushed past her lips, but she gasped again in short, staccato bursts. Her heart pounded wildly inside her chest. Her hips thrust of their own accord, begging him to enter her.

His tongue circled the nub again and then slid downward toward her channel, stroking the sweet spot in the narrow hollow between her clitoris and vagina. She came up on her elbows then, chin touching her chest, as his tongue lingered there.

When she thought she would faint with the intensity of her pleasure, he thrust his tongue into her passage and stretched it inside her. Thunderbolts shot through her and she shivered in response while his tongue pumped in and out until she struggled for air. Her legs shook upon the bed like volts of electrical currents ran through them.

She knew she couldn't last much longer, yet she prayed he wouldn't stop. His tongue rode the slick hollow upward again to her clit and licked furiously while his hands caressed the curves of her buttocks. His tongue lashed and circled her clitoris in rhythmic whirls until she could no longer hold back.

Legs released a long, low howl. The room filled with the ecstatic sound, became charged with it. The thick echo spiraled like a twister and paused over her head in a blur of blended colors. When she toppled into the abyss the colors splashed away like raindrops striking pavement.

White-hot lights flashed behind her eyes and she grasped a handful of Jack's hair, holding on as she came. Every muscle in her body tensed with the spasms, and all sound vanished outside the perimeter of her erratic breaths. The mattress beneath her

soaked through from their mingled juices as they trickled between the split of her buttocks.

She didn't know she'd bitten her bottom lip when she came. The warm, metallic taste of blood pooled at the corner of her mouth as her senses revived, though she kept her eyes closed. She didn't want to return to the world just yet. Her wet folds tingled and pulsed. Her tongue licked the wound to the faint sounds of crackling paper. It was a familiar sound that made her smile even as her tongue nursed her lip.

Jack lifted her hips off the bed in one mighty heave, forcing her to bring her ankles to his shoulders for support while he stood on the floor with his shins propped against the edge of the bed. Powerful hands gripped her tight, holding her steady as he thrust his sheathed cock into her with a force that made her yelp with both shock and satisfaction.

He filled and stretched her, using his toes for leverage against the floorboards. When he had taken her to the limit and could go no deeper, he held his swollen cock inside her, seeming to savor the sensations of stillness before moving again. The primal masculine smells of sweat, oil and musk mingled with her feminine juices, perfuming the air. She tasted the scent on the back of her throat and breathed it into her lungs. Her hunger for him grew.

Slowly and with precision, he slid out of her passage to the head of his meaty cock, held the position and then plunged hard into her again to the brink. His balls and the tops of his thighs slapped her buttocks loudly. She gasped and cried out with delight. Inside her, his cock throbbed, shooting currents outward like tiny fingers across the surface of her pleasure center. Her channel pulsed against the giant straining for more. She pressed tighter against him to offer him more room.

Perspiration formed at Jack's brow and his chest wore a patina of sweat. His stomach rippled with the force of his thrusts and his muscular thighs quaked with power as he gained momentum. The cords in his neck bulged, his jaw clenched as his

lips pulled back, and he gritted his white, perfect teeth as his body moved mightily against hers.

His straight, powerful hips thrust his cock in and out of her passage, pounding her like a human jackhammer, the animal sounds of his grunts and groans rising above the sucking, slapping sounds their drenched bodies made.

Over and over he thrust and withdrew, until waves of orgasm spiraled through her, poised high above her body and crashed over her again.

She screamed then, sure her ecstatic sounds cracked each window in the room while her hips bucked and swayed. Her temperature soared like a thermometer that popped, but subsided again quickly, coating her body with pleasant, simmering warmth. Her pink areolas puckered until her nipples had stiffened to two tight points.

Almost instantly, she wanted to sleep.

Jack thrust into her a final time, gripped her bottom with his fingers so hard she was sure she would bruise, and came with a rush so powerful he threw his head back, stiffened his legs and bellowed into the ceiling like a Viking.

* * * * *

"Okay, you win, I think you broke me." Legs awoke from their nap, untangled their languid limbs and sat up on the bed. Jack lay stretched out below her, his eyes opening slowly to slits. He yawned loudly and pressed his fist against his mouth. His stomach growled loud enough for her to hear.

"I think we've graduated from burgers to steak dinners," he said.

Hunger pangs struck her insides like razor-sharp picks. "With mashed potatoes and gravy." She could eat a horse. "Let me run downstairs to the kitchen and get us some Cokes and appetizers. I can't wait until we get to the café to eat something."

"Sounds great. I'll save room for you in the shower." Jack sat up slowly and stretched his shoulders toward his back. The crackle of tendons and bones sounded. He rolled his head to loosen his neck. "Ahhh, that feels good."

He reached out to touch her hair, forming tendrils around two of his fingers. "I don't sense Ada, do you?" He chuckled deep inside his throat. He was never convinced she'd been much of a threat. Dead, anyhow.

"I knew my plan would work. We fucked her out of here, but good." He looked around the room while he scratched the skin beneath his pubic hair. "That is, unless she's the type who likes to watch."

Legs rolled her eyes. "You're a pig."

"Absolutely. And right now I'm happier than Porky." He flashed a bright, satisfied smirk toward the door. "Hear that, Ada? In case you're lurking in the hallway, we've fucked ourselves silly and I'm not afraid of you anymore. So bring it."

As if by request, a foul smell like dirty, stinking, wet dog permeated the room.

"Ugh! Was that you?" Legs looked accusingly at Jack.

He laughed and shrugged. "Nope. Honest." His gaze trailed over the walls. "That the best you got, Ada? Fart smells?" He scooted off the edge of the bed and scrubbed his hands down the length of his chest and stomach while he let out a loud, contented growl. "Who cares? I can live with that. I have four brothers." He chuckled again.

Legs pulled on her t-shirt and shook her head. Her tangled hair fell around her shoulders. She'd undone her ponytail hours ago. "You're incorrigible." She blew him a kiss and walked toward the door, her exquisite bare bottom peeking at him as she crossed the room. "Be back in a minute with some snacks."

Jack ran a hand across his cheek and noted the early five o'clock shadow. He made his way naked toward the master bathroom in search of a disposable razor and some shave cream.

The bathroom was decorated in lavender and white Early Girly-Girl, probably done thirty years before. It was a sure bet no man had ever used this room. The old-fashioned purple-y floral wallpaper was faded in places and alternately brown in spots where the roof had once leaked. Jack knew that Legs had had the roof replaced.

A thick lavender candle with a pack of matches in a crystal holder and a bowl of silk violets rested atop the toilet tank on a white crocheted doily. Jack scowled. If Legs let him move in, the doilies in this house were headed for the trash. He scanned the walls. So was this wallpaper. He sucked in a breath and blew it out. Guess he'd better take a refresher course at Home Depot on wallpaper hanging.

He wondered idly about the lack of men in Ada's life after her husband John had left her. Why hadn't she remarried? She wasn't bad looking in her day. She could have found someone else. He considered the bottle of White Diamonds in the vintage box on the floor. Could Ada have carried a torch for his dad all those years?

What had happened between Ada and his father? Annoyance shot through him. He couldn't understand why his dad hadn't confided in him. Gerald knew about the obstacles Ada had created, that she'd made Jack's life miserable. Why hadn't his father explained?

Jack opened the vanity cabinet in search of the razor and shave cream he needed. Tomorrow, he'd confront his dad. Now he just wanted a shower, shave and some dinner.

He found an open pack of disposable razors and some strawberries and cream shave gel. Guess they would have to do. He found the clean towels, pulled back the shower curtain and leaned into the bathtub to turn on the hot water.

Within minutes, steam gathered inside the small bathroom. Jack paused to listen for Legs' footfalls in the hallway. Nothing yet.

Cold drafts like the frozen winds of a bleak winter storm hit him square between the shoulder blades, though hot steam rose to the bathroom ceiling. Icicle shivers drove into his back and came out through the front of his chest. A silvery voice rang inside his head like a bell tolling, "How dare you!" though the angry words were spoken softer than a whisper.

The ghost had punched through him like an invisible fist. He trembled to the soul with cold. His breaths shot icy blasts into the air though hot steam swirled around his head.

Jack had done enough camping to know a hundred ghost stories. He knew about cold spots, places where a ghost's presence sucked the energy from a room. He also knew ghosts could walk through you. They could do some of the things humans did too, like rattle doors and windows or create bad smells. But one thing ghosts couldn't do was hurt you. Not unless they scared you to death.

Well, Jack didn't scare easy.

A second cold blast hit the side of his face like an ice tray had frozen to his cheek, and then quickly evaporated. He touched his skin, feeling only humidity and heat from the steam-filled room. Jack leaned into the shower to turn the water off.

Guess it was time to admit Ada still "lived" here. She wouldn't tolerate being ignored. Jack frowned and clenched his hands into fists. "Look, Ada, we need to come to an understanding."

The rancid smell of garbage wafted from the floor.

"Is that your new potpourri? Fits your personality."

The lavender curtains on the window shook with angry force and the steamy glass clattered.

"Temper, temper, Ada. You might break something. Remember, this is your niece's house now. You gave it to her. Be nice to Linda. Show her some respect."

A force blanketed his body like a prickly wool sweater hugging his bare back, making him itch. He grabbed a towel, spun it into a roll and buffed away the sensations. "Good one, Ada."

He stood his ground. "This is ridiculous. Linda is a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions. I love her. And unless she tells me it's over, I'm not leaving her. So you'd better get used to having me around, or else buzz off."

A frigid blast lifted the shower curtain straight into the room and shook it like a frozen sheet on a clothesline. Within seconds, the air gusted out the door, leaving an arctic trail in its wake.

Jack followed the blast and stepped shivering back into the bedroom just as Legs arrived with a small tray of sliced apples and cheese.

"Wow! It's freaking cold in here." She glanced at Jack. His return stare must have said it all because realization dawned on her face.

"She's here."

Jack nodded. "And pissed off as hell."

"Did she do that to your cheek?" Legs put the snacks on the bureau and moved closer to take a better look.

"What do you mean?" His hand skimmed his bristly five o' clock shadow.

"There's a handprint on it as red as a beet."

He thought back to the cold snap he'd felt on his face. "Ada and I had a few words." He met her eyes. There was a long, thoughtful pause before he continued. "I admit she's real, by the way. Her ghost is here."

The cold draft whooshed across the floor, rattling the postcards and letters still lying there. The unread letters lifted with the breeze and clattered again to the floorboards.

Jack talked into the air. "We'll read them at supper, okay? Now, please, I'm asking you kindly. Give us our privacy."

The temperature in the room returned rapidly to normal, and as it did, the bedroom door slammed shut with an alarming bang. Legs jumped at the sound. The walls around the oak-trimmed doorway reverberated with the impact.

"Guess she left," Legs said, wide-eyed with surprise.

"Maybe she's finally taking the guest room."

Jack couldn't help himself. He tilted his head back and laughed.

Chapter Five

Cloris rushed over with hello hugs when they came through the Special-T café door. She stepped back and eyed them knowingly with her tongue pressed to the inside of her cheek. "It's about time I saw you two in here together – and not just at the same time."

Legs could feel herself color under the older woman's scrutiny. Legs might as well have stuck a note to her forehead that said, "I've had five orgasms today". Her limbs felt like putty, but her skin was as glossy as the erotic etchings on the wall of her new bedroom, and her mood was bright. She was so hungry she could eat one of everything on the menu.

"We want two of the biggest steaks you've got," Jack said, bussing Cloris' papery thin, powdered cheek. "Medium. With the works. Diet Coke and iced tea to drink."

"Have a seat wherever you like." Cloris' curvy, ample figure moved off to put in their order.

The café was closed for breakfast on Saturday and the lunch crowd had already gone. Legs and Jack had most of the place to themselves, with the exception of a few late afternoon shoppers sipping coffee and eating pie at the counter, and an older couple immersed in deep conversation in one corner.

Legs chose a table with a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth in the opposite corner and sat facing the room. Jack sat to her right and reached out to stroke the back of her hand. They sat in companionable silence, waiting for their meal.

Legs realized she hadn't felt this relaxed in...well, she didn't know when. She looked over at Jack's handsome, angular face and muscular shoulders and tried not to think about sex, but their vigorous acts this afternoon replayed in her head. Picture

flashes in vivid color of touches and thrusts, writhing and sweat returned the low, primal hum of arousal to each nerve ending while Jack caressed her wrist.

As if reading her thoughts, he leaned over and kissed her tenderly but soundly on the mouth. His tongue touched hers, sending shivers down her arms and across her chest. Her nipples hardened like raisins beneath the cloth of her thin cotton t-shirt. His hand skimmed her bare thigh beneath the tablecloth, sliding under her short denim skirt and moving upward. The heat of his hand against her skin was like the fire from a white-hot brand, and she gasped with both pleasure and shock at his brazenness.

She glanced anxiously around the restaurant, checking to be sure no one watched them.

Sensing her fear, Jack moved his chair in a half turn, so that his back faced the room. He leaned one elbow on the table and rested his head in his hand, posing as if they were in deep conversation. His body blocked most of hers from every angle. No one would bother them now.

Her heart pounded in her chest as her thighs parted, allowing him entry as his hand slipped between the warm V of her legs, and his fingers probed her slit over the silky fabric of her thong. Instantly, her panties dampened and her labia swelled and throbbed. The inside of her mouth went dry as he stared into her eyes.

"The next time you climax, I'm going to look straight into your eyes and watch," Jack said, his extraordinary blue eyes flashing hungry desire.

Legs swallowed, trying to moisten her throat. "If you keep moving your fingers like that, the next time will be in about thirty seconds." Her voice was low and rough, her breathing ragged.

"I'd better stop then, right?" Jack teased, seeming to know full well that she was close to orgasm.

"No." She gasped out the word though the dark waves were gathering around her.

"Let go, darlin'. No one can see past our tablecloth and my back is blocking the room."

Jack's fingers moved faster, harder over the nub beneath her panties until the waves lifted high above her head and into the clouds, paused like giant, welcoming arms and then crashed over her, knocking her flat against the back of her chair and stealing the breath from her lungs. She gripped the edges of her faux leather seat with both hands, trying not to shout as his expert fingers circled.

"Look at me," he said, studying her face. "Don't close your eyes."

Legs struggled to comply, her vision blurring as she fought to keep her focus on Jack's perfect face. Her eyelids fluttered, but she gave him what he wanted and let him watch her pupils while her climax peaked and ebbed. Involuntarily, she sucked her bottom lip, wanting him to taste her mouth while her chest heaved and her body shuddered. She wondered fleetingly what he read in her expression as the spasms subsided and her breathing slowly returned to normal.

"I'm hard as stone," Jack murmured, stroking her mons gently before releasing his hand. He rested his palm against the inside of her thigh near her knee, watching her as she recovered.

Legs took a last, trembling breath before she sat forward again, trying to act as if nothing unusual had just happened. Absently, she smoothed her hair. After a moment she couldn't resist smirking at him. "Sorry I can't return the favor."

"Yeah. Guys get to pee in the bushes on camping trips. In restaurants, we get the short end of the stick."

"Bad analogy, but true," Legs replied. Jack's stick was anything but short end. His cock was long and thick and pressed all her buttons in exactly the right spots.

Thinking about his cock inside her made her hope Cloris brought their drinks soon. She was burning up.

"That was great. I almost want to say thank you." She giggled like a schoolgirl then, she couldn't help herself. The entire day had been a wild, crazy ride.

On impulse, Legs pressed her lips to his in a lingering kiss. She spoke against his slightly parted mouth. "What did you see when you watched my eyes during orgasm?" The whole concept that you could read someone during their peak intrigued her.

Jack's raw, animal masculinity stirred something deep within her she couldn't describe. She nudged the side of his freshly shaved cheek with her nose, reveling in his unique scent behind the smells of soap and cream.

He whispered against the soft lobe of her ear, his warm breath raising the tiny hairs along her hairline. Goose bumps formed on the side of her neck, down to the curve of her shoulder, producing involuntary shivers.

He laid a small kiss above her earring, barely touching her ear with his lips.

"I saw that you love me."

* * * * *

It wasn't the answer she'd expected. The *love* word threw her completely. She leaned away from him, trying to form a reply. She wanted him like she'd never wanted anyone. But love? She wasn't ready to blurt out her feelings.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Cloris, who arrived with a tray of ice-cold drinks and plates filled with porterhouse steaks and mashed potatoes. A gravy boat and sides of fried onions, peas and green beans followed right behind.

Legs' stomach growled at the sight and smell of the food. "I've never been so hungry," she groaned.

Cloris chuckled knowingly. She winked as she served the steaks. "I just bet."

Legs hoped she wasn't blushing. She worried, suddenly, that Cloris had seen their under-the-table activity. She shook off the fear. No. Cloris had been in the kitchen. But Legs was certain she wore the rosy glow of every satisfied woman, a dead giveaway to someone as astute as Cloris.

"Can you sit with us?" Jack asked the older woman. "We have something we need to ask you about."

Cloris put them off with a slight turn of her blonde head. "Finish your meals first. Let me take care of a few things. I'll be back with some apple pie and fresh coffee when you're done. I can lock up for an hour before the dinner rush."

"Did you know my aunt was in love with Gerald Harris?" Legs asked as Cloris shuffled through the old postcards and letters.

Cloris nodded. "Sure. Everyone knew. That was the problem."

Legs stiffened, surprised. "What do you mean?"

Cloris added cream and a spoonful of sugar to her coffee and stirred thoughtfully. "Ada set her sights on Gerald that summer even though she knew he had a girl. I doubt she understood how serious Gerald was about Lilly. Up until then, I think Lilly played hard to get, which only made Gerald more determined to have her."

Cloris pursed her lips and turned to nod at Jack, her eyes glistening with meaning. Legs could almost hear her say, "Like father, like son."

"Ada called me a few times from the beach that summer. I tried to warn her she was playing with fire, but she didn't believe me. She was madly, wildly in love. I reckon she thought Gerald was in love with her simply because she'd fallen into bed with him. He cared about Ada, and maybe he was trying to forget Lilly, but in the end his love for Lilly won out."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Legs asked, trying not to sound accusing but failing miserably.

"Because I promised not to," Cloris answered simply. She laid down her spoon. Her dark eyes became thoughtful. "Ada had been humiliated enough. You were the one person she loved more than anyone else in the world. She didn't want to risk losing your high opinion of her."

"Why would she think that?"

"The *free love* movement passed by Hartsville, sweetheart. At least for girls."

"We all experiment. Everyone gets their heart broken sometime."

"That's modern thinking, dear. It's different for women nowadays. Still, some of us are stronger than others." Cloris eyed the time-worn mail on the table. "I think you'd better read the letters."

Cloris started on her apple pie and purred her approval after the first bite. "Mrs. Clarke baked the pies fresh this morning."

Legs picked up one of the letters and pulled out a sheet of lined notebook paper, the edges brown with age. The letter was dated August 15, 1969.

Dear Ada,

You should have told me sooner instead of worrying by yourself. I don't understand why you waited until the day I was leaving to tell me. I'm relieved things are okay now. Please forgive me. I never meant to mislead you or to hurt you. I hope you find someone else who will love you better than me. I'm sorry. – Gerald

Legs looked up from the note. "He dumped her."

Cloris took a sip of coffee. "He used the old 'it's not you, it's me' excuse. But in this case, I guess it fit."

Jack's mouth tightened and his nostrils flared. "He got her pregnant, didn't he?"

Cloris shook her head. "No, but she thought she was, and it scared her to death. Ada was only seventeen at the time. She either had a miscarriage or it was a false alarm. She was never sure which. In either case, she got it into her head that she was tied by blood to the Harrises forever. Nothing could change her mind."

Jack dropped his fork with a clatter. "Damn. She thought she was pregnant and he left her in Delaware." His face flushed and his blue eyes flashed with anger. "No wonder she hated him."

"Oh no." Cloris corrected. "Wrong on both counts. First, your father would never do such a thing. You should know him better than that." She shook her head and sucked her bottom lip, making tiny disapproving sounds.

"Gerald didn't leave because he thought Ada was pregnant. I have no doubt he would have stood by her if the pregnancy were real, though I'm sure it would have broken his spirit. He went home because he made a choice between Ada and your mother. Lilly wrote him a letter. Maybe she got wind of his affair. It's hard to say. Women just know things sometimes."

Cloris dabbed at her mouth with a white paper napkin.

"Ada didn't tell Gerald she had worried about a pregnancy until the day he went to the bus station. By then she knew there was no baby. I think she was testing his reaction—trying to see if he'd change his mind and stay. Ada was too good a woman to lie about the child in order to hold him."

Cloris patted Jack's thick, muscled arm. "Ada never hated Gerald. The problem was that she never stopped loving him."

"She used to call him a roughneck. I thought she looked down on him," Jack said. He shook his head as if confused.

"That was just talk to cover up her true feelings," Cloris replied. "She stayed angry with him, though, for choosing Lilly over her. There's no denying Ada thought she was the better woman. Anger like that can eat away at a person. I've often wondered if it brought on her cancer."

Legs' heart sank. Her aunt ruined her life loving a man she couldn't have.

Her stomach rumbled and the food inside did a little flip-flop. She wished, suddenly, that she hadn't eaten so much. The steak and the news about her aunt weren't digesting well.

Reluctantly, she picked up the second letter and read aloud.

August 30, 1969

Dear Ada,

I won't be back to Rehoboth to finish building the youth center or to join you for Labor Day. This is goodbye. I told you from the start that I was with Lilly. I feel terrible about lying to her and hurting you. I should say I regret what we did, but that would be a lie too. The simple truth is that I met Lilly first, and though I was smitten with you, we have to stop seeing each other. I've made my choice. Please forgive me. -- Gerald

Legs looked from Jack to Cloris and back again. A lifetime of clues came together. "My aunt used to say 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree'. She was convinced you'd hurt me the way Gerald hurt her. That's why she accused you of being a womanizer."

Jack scowled and tossed his napkin on the table. "Which was never true, and she knew it." His expression turned pensive. "I think her objections went deeper than that. In some distorted way, maybe she saw our families as relations of sorts. Like cousins or something."

"In her mind, the Andersons and Harrises *were* connected," Cloris agreed. "It was irrational, I know. She resented that Gerald had seven children with Lilly, while she lost hers."

"How sad for her that she never let him go." Legs remembered the powerful, possessive love of her aunt and wondered why Ada had never had children with her husband, John Weston. She hadn't even taken his name.

"Ada married John on the rebound," Cloris continued, "about six months after Gerald married Lilly. I guess she didn't want Gerald to know how much he'd hurt her. Although, to be fair, I think Ada cared for John in her own way. Given time, she might have grown to love him. And he would have been a good husband to her."

"Then why did he run off a few years later? The way my aunt told the story, John was a no-good drunk."

"He got tired of waiting. It was as simple and as complicated as that. As it became clearer he'd married badly, he started drinking and staying out all night, which only pushed Ada further away. Sometimes he stayed gone days at a time. Finally, he just vanished. Ada never heard from him again." Cloris leaned back in her chair. She seemed tired all of a sudden. Her thin mouth sagged at the corners and her gaze strayed to her lap, as if caught in a drift of memories.

"When he left, Ada became more bitter than ever," Jack finished the story for her.

Cloris looked up and pointed a knobby, pink manicured finger at him. She nodded her head. "Right. And held on tighter to Linda after her parents died."

"We found an old bottle of White Diamonds perfume and a birthday card from my father. Do you know anything about those?"

Cloris thought for a minute. "I threw a party for Ada's fortieth here at the café. I invited a lot of people in town, including your parents. They didn't come, but your dad dropped off the gift with the card. Ada attached more significance to it than she should have. She used to joke that they were the only diamonds she ever got."

Jack blew out a breath and cast a sidelong glance at Legs. "I wish she'd told you about all this before she died. We could have cleared up a lot of misunderstandings." He touched Legs' forearm. "I guess it's not too late to reach her now though, is it?"

Cloris' penciled brows rose. "So the rumors are true? Ada really is haunting the house?"

Legs hedged, embarrassed to admit another painful truth about her eccentric aunt. An overwhelming feeling of protectiveness washed over her. Ada had stood by her all her life. She was honor bound to do the same. "Well..."

Jack nodded once. "Yes."

Cloris looked from one to the other. "That's a switch."

"Yeah, well, I'm finally a believer." He ran one hand through his blond hair and then shook his head sadly. "I feel real bad about Ada's history, but it's time she let go of the past and moved on. We need to shake free of her."

He skimmed the ridges of Legs' knuckles, brushing her skin so softly the hairs on her arms prickled. His grin became wolfish. "Legs and I are working day and night on Ada's relocation. We developed an exhaustive plan to chase her from the house."

Jack turned again to face her. His blue eyes darkened with lust and his tongue touched his lips, moistening them. "Right, hon?"

She wanted him, no doubt about it. Legs stared back into his beautiful eyes and watched his long brown lashes lift and lower. A small, intimate smile tugged one corner of his mouth. Her gaze wandered over his gorgeous face and sculpted upper body, acknowledging he was all the man she would ever need.

Yet... She couldn't make herself bring him home after what she'd just learned. Forcing Ada from the house after knowing she'd been abandoned—twice—seemed heartless and cruel. She just couldn't do it. Legs had agreed earlier because she didn't want to disappoint Jack. But things had changed. She couldn't drive Ada from the only home in which she'd felt safe.

"Better get back to it," Jack added. His lascivious smile annoyed her all of a sudden.

"Didn't you hear what Cloris just said?" Legs pushed her chair back from the table and scrambled to her feet, accidentally knocking dishes askew with the back of her hand. Plates and silverware clattered and the chair teetered before settling down again. "I can't go through with it. I'm not that heartless!"

Cloris' eyes grew wide and Jack's jaw dropped as she grabbed her purse. Jack came to half-standing and reached out to her, but she was already moving toward the door.

When she hit the exit running, the early evening breezes cupped and soothed her perspired face. She sucked in giant gulps of fresh air, moving it through her lungs as she sprinted down the street, not looking back when the distant sounds of someone crashing through the café doors jangled in her ears.

Her eyes were glued to the side of the F43 bus sidling next to her at the curb, tires hissing to a stop and the doors squealing as they opened wide. She hopped on the bus and took a seat in front, watching from the passenger windows as the bus moved forward. Jack ran behind, reaching out to pound his fist against the steel frame, his face contorted with frustration as he failed to make contact and bring the bus to a halt.

Legs watched Jack throw his hands in the air and then disappear into the distance as the bus cruised down the street.

Her breathing turned ragged and her blood pounded in her ears. Sweat formed along her hairline and upper lip as the impact of what she had done hit her. She took a deep breath and tried to steady her shaking hands. The food in her stomach did a dangerous flip and she touched trembling fingers to her mouth. Deeper breaths kept her from vomiting on the floor, but she couldn't hold back the tears in her eyes.

The evening sky darkened to a dangerous black on the other side of the windows as her breathing leveled off and her stomach cramps eased. Lightning flickered in the distance.

She wouldn't make it home before a hazy summer thunderstorm struck.

Chapter Six

The sky was midnight black by the time she turned the key in the lock of her front door, and lightning streaked across the inky sky. Thunderclaps roared overhead, so loud her windows rattled in their casings and vibrations seeped up her wet legs. Dogs howled with fear in the quiet neighborhood, while the rain intensified from a steady drizzle to an all-out downpour.

The thunder roared again, startling her as she closed the door behind her and flipped on the lights from the wall switch. Yellow lamps flickered dimly across the faded oriental carpets. Flashes of lightning lit up the walls and filled them with sharp, craggy garden shadows before fading away.

Her hair was soaked and her skin was beaded with rain. Legs walked to the kitchen for paper towels and wiped her face, neck and arms. She took another and towel-dried her hair, knowing she'd have to wait for a hot, soothing bath until after the storm ended. It wasn't safe to bathe with lightning flashing overhead. Her skin prickled and she rubbed her arms against the chill.

Regret punched her stomach, and she leaned over the kitchen sink, taking in gulps of cool air. Why in the world had she run from Jack? What had possessed her to leave him?

Possessed. That was exactly right.

She eyed the walls around her, seeing the house for the first time as the prison it had become and not the home that had once brought her peace. Though she had been orphaned as a toddler, her father's sister had raised her like her own daughter. Legs had never questioned Ada's love. But now... That love was a gag that slowly choked her to death. Ada's hold over her had killed her chances of a future with the man she loved.

“Are you happy now, auntie?” she shouted into the room. Her voice carried from the kitchen into the old-fashioned dining room. She screamed louder, trying to force the sound through the ceiling. Her throat burned with the effort. “You finally got what you wanted. The Harris men are out of our lives for good! It’s just you and me again, like it’s always been.”

Outside, wind rattled the windowpanes and sheets of heavy rain blanketed the glass. Thunder roared loudly after each lightning strike. The kitchen lights flickered on and off, then on again.

Legs lowered her head and covered her eyes with her hands while fear and regret rolled through her. Tears poured down her face as sobs shook her body.

The lights flickered again softly and then went out. Legs wiped her eyes and waited for her vision to adjust to the darkness. There was a battery-operated lantern on top of the refrigerator and plenty of candles in the dining room.

Lightning flashed like a beacon to guide her way to the fridge. She turned on the lamp and went to the dining room to light candles, placing them around the lower level of the house. She carried the lantern with her to the living room and sat in a chair by the window to watch the angry storm outside.

A dark figure strode up the walk toward the house through the teeming rain like a determined swimmer slicing through a pool. Drenched, sagging clothes clung to wet skin and long hair dripped rivulets of water to the shoulders, yet the head was raised to the elements in bold defiance. Below the streaks of lightning and cracks of thunder, someone strode with purpose to her small front porch.

Jack.

Her breath caught and her heart skittered inside her chest. The pulse in her neck jumped.

Fists pummeled her front door, shaking it until the wood crackled and groaned in protest. Only the slightest pause broke the chain to the next series of insistent poundings.

Legs pulled the door open and the wind tore the knob from her hand. Rain blew into the entryway, spraying the floor and splattering her shoes.

Jack stepped into the house, dripping puddles. His jeans and shirt were plastered to his skin. His eyes were half wild and his teeth were bared. Water dripped from his long, drenched hair onto his face.

He pointed to the upstairs. "I know what she wants! I understand!"

Legs shook her head in confusion.

Jack took her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. "Do you love me?"

Legs shrugged in defeat. "What does that matter now? I can't leave her! I can't abandon her like everyone else!"

"Say it, dammit! Tell me the truth! Do you love me?" The intensity of his gaze penetrated her bones to the marrow. Energy surged through her body in tiny shockwaves and she trembled inside the palms of his hands.

"Admit that you love me. Don't say this has all been for nothing. All these years... wasted." With those last words she saw pain flash behind his eyes though he refused to look away.

Of course she loved him. Achingly. Desperately. What was the use of denying her feelings any longer? He knew the truth. She only had to say the words. But loving him wouldn't change a thing. She was still tied to a ghost.

Thunder snapped, startling her from her thoughts. Jack waited while she weighed her reply.

She licked her dry mouth. "You know I do. I always have."

"I want to hear you say it." His hands skimmed down her upper arms to cup her elbows. His voice softened. "Tell me, sweetheart."

The tenderness in his voice pierced her soul like a physical pain. Her resolve slowly crumbled and fell away, leaving her core exposed and raw. She expelled a long, hard breath of surrender.

"I love you." She closed her eyes and reveled in the words she knew to be true. "I will always love you."

He kissed her then, quickly, and moved away toward the stairs. Before he ascended he spoke to her over his shoulder. His tone was firm. "Stay here. I want to handle this my own way."

The lightning outside her windows flashed brighter and the thunder clapped more violently overhead. Legs started, and then wondered if the crash she heard had come from outside...or above the stairs. She glanced up at the living room ceiling, trying to imagine what went on between Jack and her aunt. She had no doubt her aunt would fight Jack's invasion of her bedroom tooth and nail. But could she hurt him?

The house groaned and creaked as the rain pummeled its roof and siding. The very foundations seemed to tremble, much like she was shivering now. She hugged herself to stay warm and wondered if her aunt's ghost had raised the chill in the air. Jack was soaked to the skin – he must be freezing by now.

Was he afraid too? When he disappeared up the stairs he seemed fiercely determined. Few men would dare confront the formidable Ada Anderson in life, let alone challenge her ghost after death. But few men were as steadfast and bold as Jack Harris. Ironical how she'd never admitted that to herself before.

Maybe Aunt Ada should be afraid of Jack.

Her mouth curved into a small smile and she almost chuckled at the thought.

Almost.

The lamps flickered and flashed light against the walls and along every surface, illuminating the room for split seconds, causing temporary blindness as if flashbulbs had burst before her eyes. Legs pressed her fingertips to her eyelids, trying to clear her vision just as a howl filtered into the room from upstairs. Her heart seemed to stop beating inside her chest and a lump in her throat made it hard to swallow. Her feet felt glued to the floor, though she was shaking. What had her aunt done?

When an enormous crash sounded, rattling the floor, Legs moved into action. "Jack!" she screamed. She forced her feet to carry her toward the dark stairs though her pulse pounded like a bass drum.

* * * * *

Jack lay on his back, unconscious on the floor of the master bedroom, arms and legs splayed and the lantern tipped over beside him.

"Jack!" Legs ran to his side. She threw herself on the floor and pressed her ear to his chest. His breathing was shallow but steady, and his heartbeat was regular. She rested his head inside her lap and brushed her fingers across his forehead. His skin was hot.

"What did you do to him?" she screamed into the air with an anguished cry, her head thrown back. Her chest heaved with angry sobs that snaked up her throat. She choked out a threat with teeth bared. Her eyes searched the room. "If you hurt him, Auntie, I'm finished with you, understand? I'll burn this house to the ground!" She swallowed back her fear and became even more resolute. "I love him! Do you hear me? Nothing you can do will change that."

A cool breeze scented with clean, summer rain wafted through her hair, across her face and then caressed her shoulders. The warmth of summer sun penetrated her skin, soothing her jangled nerves, though the storm still raged outside. Peacefulness washed over her, much like the calm she felt as a child when her aunt brushed her hair after a long, hot bubble bath.

Legs tried to see her aunt's ghost in the darkness but found nothing. Only the sensations of warmth and summer breezes let her know her aunt was near.

She reached out to right the lantern on the floor and then lifted the wet hair from Jack's brow with her fingertips. As she did, his eyelids fluttered open. He blinked and met her gaze. A slow, lazy smile crossed his lips. "Hey."

"Hey," she replied, smiling back. An ache filled her with such overwhelming relief and longing she wanted to cry. Instead, she hugged Jack's head to her breast.

"We won't have any more problems with Ada." His voice was low and gravelly. He cleared his throat. "We worked it out. Guess she couldn't resist me, huh?" He grinned up at her.

Legs wondered how she could ever have pushed this wonderful man away. "I'm sure you're right."

"Bet on it." He nuzzled her cleavage and then slowly shifted to sitting position. He stretched, frowning as he rubbed the back of his head. "Good thing I've got a thick skull or this would be a bloody goose egg instead of a bump."

"What happened?" Legs moved closer and pressed her palm to his chest. His shirt was cold and wet. He shivered beneath the clammy fabric.

"We came to an understanding."

"Let me get some towels and blankets to warm you. We'll talk." She stood, lifted the lantern and headed for the bathroom to retrieve the candle and matches on the toilet tank. Fresh towels and blankets lay folded in the linen closet.

She returned with the things she needed and set the candle on the bureau. Faint gold light brightened the room after she lit the wick. Jack stood and moved the lantern to the side of the bed, casting a yellow glow across the floor.

Legs tossed a clean sheet over the mattress and then held out a towel for Jack to dry his hair. He wiped his face and rubbed his head with the terrycloth, grimacing as the fabric brushed the knot on his scalp.

She held out a blanket next. "Take off your wet clothes."

Jack looked around him and then spoke with authority into the air. "Time for that privacy you promised, Ada." Thunder rumbled outside and the floor creaked in response. There was a whooshing sound like a spinning whirlpool and the bedroom door slammed shut with a bang. Jack smirked. "She loves me too, I just know it."

The warm summer sensations of moments ago vanished, leaving Legs suddenly chilled to the bone. Her own clothes and hair were still damp. "How did you get her to listen?"

Jack unbuttoned his shirt slowly, his eyes trained on her face. "I told her she could stay. That neither of us would try to chase her from the house ever again."

She barked out a laugh. "You said *what*?"

"I let her know that I would spend time here whenever you asked me. And that we would be naked. In this room. Like now." He pulled the soaking shirt from his shoulders and peeled it off his back. The candlelight defined the muscles on his arms and torso like shadows on a charcoal drawing. Legs had the sudden urge to run her hands across his taut nipples and downy chest.

"I told her that we would make love whenever we wanted, and that if she didn't want to be embarrassed she'd better move to another room. Other than that, I saw no reason for her to go. I don't want to come between the two of you. You love her and she loves you. I can live with that."

Legs felt her jaw drop. She closed her mouth and shook her head at him, grinning the whole time. No wonder she loved this incredible man!

"How did she communicate? How did you hear her?"

"Her voice whispered around my head and inside it. She sounded mostly like she did in life, except like she was talking through a filter. And though I couldn't see her, I could feel her presence in the room."

"Yes, that's what happened to me sometimes. At first I thought it was my imagination or wishful thinking. But I came to realize her ghost and I were connecting." She took a step closer. "You were unconscious when I entered the room. What went wrong?"

Jack chuckled, seeming suddenly self-conscious. "I slipped and fell flat on my back. Hit my head. Dropped the lantern. Your aunt didn't do that on purpose. My dripping

jeans made the floorboards wet, is all. When I heard her voice get louder in my head, I got spooked." He laughed out loud at his own pun.

Legs didn't know whether to laugh or feel relieved. Relief won. "Guess I'd better put the carpets back when the walls are painted."

"Good idea." He massaged the back of his head and continued with his story. "Before I knocked myself out, Ada and I talked about something else." He wrapped his wet shirt inside a dry towel and laid them together on the floor. His fingers worked the fly of his pants and he slid the waistband over his hips. Legs eyed the bulge behind his damp, clinging boxer shorts, taking in every single magnificent inch.

"I assured her of something more important. Something I had to be certain about before I confronted her."

Legs dragged her gaze back to his rugged face. "What was that?"

His expression became solemn. There was no bravado in him now. "I convinced her that I love you. And that you love me. This isn't just an affair."

Legs hurried forward and threw her arms around him tight, taking in the scent of his moist skin and reveling in his raw strength as she hugged his body close. She sighed and talked against his shoulder, her voice muffled. "You must have been very persuasive."

"She just needed someone to stand up to her. I told her the truth."

She looked up at him. "You mean she finally *saw* the truth. You were right all along. She wanted to know I was happy. But she had to hear the promises from you." She ran her palms up the muscles of his back and spread her hands across his shoulder blades. He felt like iron-coated satin. She would never tire of touching him.

He kissed the top of her head and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Does this mean I finally get to stay the night?"

She lifted her brow in question. "Condoms?"

"In my back pocket."

She nodded. "Then let's get naked like you warned my aunt we would."

He loved the way she touched him. Tenderly, softly, yet with fire in her hands as her palms stroked the ripples of his abdomen and worked their way to the rounds of his chest. Her thumbs circled his nipples and he moaned as they constricted beneath the friction. When she pressed her wet mouth to his navel, the kiss sizzled against his fevered skin like a wax seal.

Or a brand that bound him to her forever.

Her mouth skimmed his stomach with her full, exquisite lips, and his muscles quivered with each stroke of her mouth and tongue. Sparks shot through him like bursts from raw and exposed electrical cables and spread through his limbs. His cock strained and brushed her jaw.

She tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear and pressed her cheek to his length, rubbing her face up and down his shaft with her eyes closed, seeming to savor the contrast between his granite and her cotton-coated skins. His erection grew stronger—pulsing, demanding, as light flared behind his closed eyelids. An overwhelming ache gripped him from the inside out. All sensory perceptions outside his body ceased in that moment, while his anticipation surged.

Please.

Her mouth grazed the tip of his cock and he cried out with desire. Every fiber in his body tensed, waiting for her mouth to pull him inside. His heart hammered so loud he could hear it beating inside his chest. His pulse raced blood through his ears.

When she ran her tongue around the rim of his cock in circles and then licked and sucked his length, he propped himself up on his arms and raised his chin to the ceiling. Grunts escaped his throat in tandem with the creaks of the old house, buttressed against the raging storm outside, while he fought off the inevitable thunder inside his body.

Not yet.

He touched the top of her head and then ran his fingers along her cheek to her jawline. "Come here," he said in a barely audible, husky whisper. She licked his length once more and then looked up at him, beautiful brown eyes shining in the candlelight. Her mouth was wet with him and her cheeks had flushed.

"I want to taste you too." He leaned back against the pillows and watched while she turned around with her back to him, spread her thighs and straddled his chest with her bent knees hugging his waist. She thrust her buttocks high into the air and scooted backward, lowering her open pussy to his mouth. The faint scent of damp musk, mingled with her natural warmth, washed over him.

Aroused further by the vivid sight of her pink, pearly vulva, he plunged his tongue deep into her vagina and out again, over and over, until she gripped his thighs and clawed the backs of his legs. Her head was thrown back and her dark hair skimmed her long, sleek waist. Moans filled the room while she trembled beneath his hands.

She lowered her head and chest and took his rigid cock into her mouth again, working his length while he tongued her clitoris in small, rhythmic circles. The taste of her silky essence grew stronger, signaling the brink of orgasm. He lapped the narrow channel between her clitoris and vagina and held her tighter while she released him to croon against the thatch of his pubic hair. The skin along her hips and thighs felt hot to the touch, though she shivered.

He moved his mouth back to her clitoris to take her over the brink, but she shifted away from him, panting hard as she spun around to face him. The cool air in the room wafted across his chest, hardening his nipples and leaving a wake of gooseflesh. The rattle of cellophane broke the stillness, forcing awareness that the wind outside had stopped pounding the windows.

The storm that had raged for more than an hour had calmed.

She covered his erection with the condom and then straddled him face forward, swallowing his cock inside her in four aggressive thrusts, grunting until she was penetrated to the hilt. Legs leaned forward and clung to his shoulders while she rode

him hard, gasping as he squeezed and fondled her breasts with each deliberate stroke. His semen rose as she moved up and down, her glazed stare aimed over his head as if she were far away somewhere.

A shudder rained over her and she lurched against the base of his cock, held her hips steady and then thrust one more time before releasing a long, loud cry that reverberated through the room.

Her nipples hardened into pebbles as her orgasm rocked her body. Her hands gripped his shoulders so hard his muscles flexed beneath her fingers. She pumped again and whimpered as the spasms slapped her head backward. Her head lolled to one side and her glazed eyes closed. Her tongue licked her bottom lip and her teeth nipped its fullness, licking and biting fast as she came.

He tensed then, thrusting up and into her with all his might when his resolve was spent, spurting seed and clutching her arms as he shouted her name.

Epilogue

Cloris speaks

Jack Harris strode into the Special-T café on Wednesday morning wearing his fresh-laid grin and marched past a restaurant full of busy tables like a man with a purpose. The preschool teachers at Let's Explore eyed his denim-wrapped butt like a hot buttered bun as he passed by. They exchanged quick, hungry glances and then followed his broad back as he crossed the room.

Jack came up behind Legs Anderson as she set breakfast in front of Clifford Jones and Old Man Benson and kissed the back of her neck, chuckling when she gave a start.

She tilted her head and grinned up at him. "Sit down and I'll bring you some coffee."

"In a minute. I have something to do first." Jack reached out and pulled Legs into his arms, bent her over backward and kissed her passionately only inches from Old Man Benson's head. The white-haired, near toothless old scout gripped his chest like he was having a heart attack, laughing all the while.

Benson and Clifford Jones whooped and hollered as Legs wrapped her arms around Jack's neck and returned the kiss with equal fervor. The preschool teachers giggled and applauded wildly from their table. All the coffee drinkers at the counter turned to watch the show, and some stood to get a better view. Someone rapped a fork against a water glass, demanding more kisses.

Soon the breakfast regulars all tapped their glasses and pounded their feet on the floor, cheering Jack and Legs on. I thought the whole café would fall down around our ears from the vibrations. Clifford Jones reached into his wallet and threw five dollars down on Benson's side of the table with a loud guffaw. The old man chortled with obvious pleasure as he tucked the cash into his shirt pocket.

"More, more!" they screamed.

Jack gave Legs another kiss and then held her by the shoulders at arms length. "Don't move." He turned to me where I stood at the end of the counter, wearing a smirk the size of Indiana on my powdered face. "Cloris, you got that box I asked you to hold for me?"

I nodded and carried the package across the room. I felt like a flower girl at a wedding as all eyes turned to me. Maybe I even blushed a little.

Jack held the wrapped gift out to Legs. She smiled uncertainly and rubbed her hands on her apron before taking it. She fingered the white, pearly paper with the large, shiny gold bow and tore the folded edges. The paper and bow fell away, and she laid them on Old Man Benson's table.

"You fixed it," she said, smiling broadly now. She held a seashell-covered box that looked old, though it was shiny and bright. "The shells have been re-glued and it's been dusted and re-varnished." Her eyes glittered with obvious pleasure. "Thank you. I'm sure my aunt will be...uh, would have been pleased too."

"Open the box," Jack replied. His blue eyes shone with an intensity I'd never seen in them before. My curiosity piqued.

Legs lifted the lid. I craned my neck to see what was inside, but Jack's wide hand reached in and covered the contents. He lifted something out and held it close to his chest.

Suddenly, Jack fell to one knee before her, and all hell broke loose. Everyone in the café scrambled to their feet, hooting and hollering like they'd just seen Manning steal the ball and run for the winning touchdown at the Super Bowl.

Amidst the knowing screams and shouts, Jack opened the top of a navy blue velvet box. Inside was a diamond ring so big it sparkled halfway across the room to the coffee counter. Floor stomping and cheering nearly lifted the café from its foundation.

"Will you marry me?" Jack said simply when the audience settled down, his voice filling the air with warmth and strength. A hush settled over the room.

Legs stared down at him as he held up the engagement ring. Everyone froze like mannequins and held their breaths, straining to hear Legs' reply. Not a utensil clinked or a coffee cup clattered.

She nodded and grinned, seeming shy for the first time since I'd known her. "Yes, I will." Jack placed the engagement ring on her finger. Wolf whistles and hoots swelled as Legs slid to her knees on the floor in front of Jack and reached out to hold him. They hugged tight as the café regulars exploded into cheers and slapped high fives.

Jack and Legs were kissing like mad when I decided it was time to serve fresh rounds of hot coffee and honey-laden biscuits.

* * * * *

Like I said before, Legs had a business degree to make use of and wasn't going to work as my runner forever.

Before my friend Ada died, I promised to watch out for her niece, and to keep her in my heart like she was my own flesh and blood. I honored that promise with the deed to Special-T café.

My arthritic knees and feet finally retired me to Florida with the hefty pension I'd saved over the last forty years, plus stocks and bonds to keep me extra secure. I was widowed ten years ago, but with all the gray-hairs in Miami, I don't expect to be lonely for long.

Legs Anderson Harris owns the Special-T now, and she's added one of those coffee bars that specialize in fancy drinks that don't taste like coffee, and twenty different kinds of cheeseburgers, with fifteen brands of cheese and bales full of toppings that attract the younger crowd. Last I heard the café was making money hand over fist. I'm glad. I'm happy too that Jack still comes in for eggs, hash browns, toast and real coffee every morning before opening his sporting goods store. Legs serves him when she gets around to it. Some traditions should never change.

Rumor has it that Ada stopped haunting the Anderson house the day Jack and Legs got married. Some say ghost hunters shooed her out. Others claim she was never there to begin with. But I know the truth, because I know my best friend.

Ada went to the other side to give true love plenty of room to grow.

About the Author

Adele Dubois is an award-winning, multi-published author and former newspaper and magazine columnist, feature writer, and foreign correspondent published in the Caribbean, UK, and USA.

When not on the beach by the ocean or walking along the quiet shores of a Delaware bay, she and her family enjoy their rural eastern Pennsylvania home where she is currently working on her next novel.

Adele welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Adele Dubois

Dream Traveler



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com