



CATHERINE
CHERNOW

LADY *in*
WHITE

Lady in White

The Bride's Inn Series, Book One

By

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Chapter One

"Sereeeeeeenaaaaa..."

Serena Reilly rose from her bed, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"I'm coming!"

Outside her bedroom window a spring storm raged, battering Long Island's rocky north shore. A flash of lightening lit up the night sky as the rain fell in sheets, pounding against the windowpanes, the howl of the wind echoing a mournful cry in the pitch-black night.

"Sereeeeeeenaaaaa..."

The eerie voice echoed a sad wail like the low howl of the wind whipping through the trees outside. Serena shoved her arms into the sleeves of her robe, shuddering against the cold, damp night air. She rushed out of her bedroom, anxious to get to her elderly charge, Clarice Masters. As she ran down the hallway towards Clarice's room, she heard the heartrending cry once more.

"Sereeeeeeenaaaaa..."

Her heart pounded as she rushed down the long corridor, stopping in front of Clarice's room. She opened the door and stepped inside, the absolute stillness of Clarice's darkened bedroom greeting her. Serena padded towards the bed to find her charge sound asleep.

She eased into a nearby chair, her body trembling. Night after night, she heard that eerie voice calling to her. It sounded like a woman...a sad, lonely woman.

Serena shrank back in the chair, her fingers tightening on the arms when she heard a deep rumbling and a crack of thunder that shook the entire house. She covered her ears to block the sound of a loud crash, squinting when bright, blinding light illuminated the sky and a jagged stroke of lightening struck the ancient oak tree right outside Clarice's bedroom window. It split the branch from the tree trunk in one stroke, the tips of the branches grazing the windowpane as it fell to the ground, the sound like fingernails scraping against a chalkboard.

Serena trembled, every nerve ending in her body vibrating as she watched the scene unfold through terror-filled eyes. She huddled in the chair, pulling her shaking legs up onto the seat, wrapping her arms around her knees to stop their knocking.

“My nephew used to climb that tree when he was little.”

Serena jumped at the sound of Clarice’s voice. The older woman sat up in bed, her eyes settling on the rain as it ran down the windowpane.

“Are you all right?” Serena asked, struggling to keep her voice steady. She reached over and fluffed the pillow behind Clarice’s snow-white curls. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Serena gently took the older woman’s hands in her own. She rubbed them, warming the thin skin.

Clarice angled her head, her large blue eyes intense. “I’m fine, dear. Why do you ask?”

“I thought I heard...never mind.” Serena chose to not say anything about the mysterious voice she heard in the dead of night. It would only frighten Clarice. “Well, since I’m up, can I get you anything?” Serena asked.

Clarice smiled, the corners of her mouth lifting in a wide grin. “A glass of warm milk would be nice.” Then she yawned, ruining the effect.

Serena hid a grimace and wondered, not for the first time, how Clarice could drink that concoction she loved of warm milk and...butter. Yuck.

She forced a cheerful smile. “Coming right up.”

She padded down the main staircase and entered the kitchen, flipping on the light switch. As she walked towards the refrigerator to retrieve a bottle of milk, the hairs on the back of her neck rose. A cold breeze wafted by, swirling around her ankles, lightly brushing her shoulder. She turned, fully expecting to see someone watching her from the shadows.

No one was there.

"I've got to get a grip," she muttered. After blowing out a shaky breath, she warmed some milk in a pan on the stove and when she finished, topped it off with a piece of butter. The butter floated on the top, forming a nasty yellow film. Screwing up her face, she stirred the butter into the milk, all the while muttering, “Yuck, yuck, yuck....”

Serena filled a glass almost to the brim with the warm milk and butter. She jumped when thunder boomed in the distance, startling her once more. She set the milk on the tray, willing her hands to remain steady.

She left the kitchen and made her way towards the wide staircase in the center hall, steadily balancing the tray as she began her ascent up the long staircase. Confident that she had re-gained her calm, she glanced up, freezing in mid-stride as her gaze fell upon a woman who stood at the top of the stairs.

A thin, white veil shrouded her face and she wore a long, white gown studded with beads and flowers. Serena blinked as she gazed at the woman, the dress appearing...ancient. As the woman neared, Serena could see that some of the exquisite beadwork and tiny, white flowers had yellowed with age.

“Who are you?” Serena whispered, her voice trembling with fear.

No answer.

The woman continued her steady descent and Serena backed up, alarm filling her with every step the mysterious woman took. She appeared to float down the stairs, her slippered feet barely skimming each tread.

Serena fought a rising tide of panic. Who was this woman? What if she was here to hurt Clarice? She would never forgive herself if something happened to her elderly charge. Mustering her courage, she took a deep breath and willed her feet to move, her hands shaking as she gripped the tray, determined to toss its contents at the stranger if she dared try to harm her.

The woman did not appear to notice Serena as she drew near, clutching a bouquet of white roses in her hands, her gaze focused beyond Serena. She lifted her arm then, and pointed at the front door. Serena glanced back at the entrance, peering through the glass pane on the door.

A shadow moved outside.

Frantic, she turned back towards the stairs but the strange woman had vanished. She blinked, thinking she was losing her mind. First, the fierce storm had her jumping out of her skin, and now it seemed that her fuzzy mind played tricks on her.

The doorknob rattled, followed by fierce pounding. A face pressed against the glass, the nose and lips grotesquely distorted, a dark monster staring through the small pane of glass.

She dropped the tray, the tumbler containing Clarice’s treat shattering into a thousand shards as milk spilled everywhere, seeping across the polished wood floor.

Chapter Two

Serena wished the prowler outside would disappear like that strange woman, but more pounding and door rattling soon followed.

She hurried back to the kitchen. Thinking quickly, she grabbed the first thing she laid eyes on--the saucepan from the stove. It was heavy and solid, and could likely cause damage if she managed to hit the intruder in the head with it. She held her breath as she heard the front door fly open, banging against the doorjamb, wind and rain following in its wake. Heavy footfalls echoed as the door closed against another gust of wind.

Armed with the heavy pan, she flew out of the kitchen and swung it with all her might at the intruder, but he turned, lifting his arm to ward off her attack, ducking his head as the pan came flying towards him. She lifted the pan again, but he dodged the blow once more, snaking an arm around her waist, lifting her clear off the floor, her arms and legs flailing as Serena sailed through the air. The pan slipped from her hand and crashed to the floor, sliding across the puddles of milk.

She landed on her back on the couch in Clarice's parlor, the breath whooshing from her lungs as a heavy weight descended on her, pinning her to the cushions.

The intruder locked Serena's hands in one swift movement, forcing them above her head. She squirmed under his weight but realized her mistake when she felt the hard length of him against her thigh. A handsome, chiseled face and dark eyes met her green ones.

"This is a hell of a way to get acquainted," he said lightly.

He had the sexiest smile; it seemed...familiar.

"Seth Masters," he continued to grin. "I'm Clarice's nephew."

She groaned. How could she not have recognized him? Clarice had scores of photos of him scattered around the house and always referred to him as "that darling boy."

But this was no boy. He was all man...and becoming more so with every move Serena made.

“Let me up,” she demanded.

“Uh-uh.” He shook his head, keeping a tight hold on her hands. Droplets of water that clung to his shiny dark locks dripped onto the couch...and her.

She squirmed again, her pelvis colliding with his groin. His grin widened when Serena brushed against him. The water from his hair continued to drip onto her face, one droplet landing on her heated cheek. She swore she could hear her skin sizzle as the moisture slid down the side of her face.

“This isn’t a joke,” she felt the start of tears. Her legs trembled, followed by the rest of her body. Her pulse raced, she could feel it beating at the base of her neck. She shoved against him, he simply held her captive. It clawed at her insides, causing her to squirm and push harder. “Get off me!”

Thunder boomed in the distance, followed by a crack of thunder. Serena couldn’t be sure in that moment if the vibrations she felt came from that or her trembling body. When she gazed into his face, he still wore that same, sexy grin.

“I’ll release you if you stop your squirming.” His self-satisfied grin remained in place as he spoke. “I think I’ll be safe enough, now that I’ve taken your weapon.”

Serena blinked once, knitting her brows into a frown.

He laughed, running the pad of his thumb gently across her furrowed brow. “Your pan. You scared the shit out of me.”

“I scared *you*! Why you—” Serena reached out to smack him, fear making her lash out. Her heart still raced like a runaway train and he had the nerve to say *she* scared *him*!

Another crack of thunder shook the house. She cried out, but stopped when she felt his arms slide under her shoulders, pulling her against his chest. “Hey, it’s okay,” he said, his warm breath tickling her lobe. “I’m sorry I scared you.” He continued to hold her as thunder boomed in the distance. “Don’t be frightened of the thunder,” he whispered. “Just listen. The storm’s moving away. There’s more time between each crack of thunder, and soon it will drift into the distance.”

His deep, soothing voice washed over, easing the tension from her body. Her rapid heartbeat slowed to a normal, steady rhythm as she listened. His hands worked magic on her stiff shoulders, kneading the tense, tight muscles. Thunder boomed once more, but it sounded far away, just like he’d said.

“See?” he murmured in her ear, seeming to read her thoughts. “The storm’s almost over.”

That one might be, but the one raging inside her grew as his hands moved to the base of her neck, his fingers skimming across her skin.

A shudder of pure pleasure snaked down her spine as he settled his big body between her legs, but this time, she didn’t struggle. Shocked by her reaction to the feel of his muscled thighs, her pulse resumed its frantic beat. Serena knew she should push him away but when Seth shifted and pulled her close, cuddling her against his chest, she felt safe, protected, and for one crazy minute, cherished.

He smelled of wind, rain, and a scent that she could only describe as him—a combination of citrus and musk. Serena inhaled deeply causing her breasts to rise up against his chest. Her nipples peaked when she slid them across the rough material of his shirt.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said pulling back slightly to look at her. His motion only made things worse as the tiny buds at the end of her breasts hardened in response.

Her face heated when she caught him staring at her breasts, the dark-brown crests of her nipples lay outlined against the thin silk of her pajama top.

“I didn’t know women still blushed.” He perused her face lazily. “You have a beautiful mouth,” he said softly, just before his lips claimed hers, her combined sound of pleasure and protest muffled as his mouth teased hers into oblivion.

Seth nibbled her lower lip then he kissed the corner of her mouth, right where her little beauty mark lay. Her arms curled around his neck, pulling him closer. Oh, his mouth was pure heaven! Each time he sipped at her lips, her breasts tingled and a delicious, throbbing ache built between her legs.

She surrendered, giving in to the sublime feeling as she slid her lips across his. She parted her lips just a little, allowing Seth’s tongue to slip inside. He ran the tip gently across her teeth, enticing her to engage in a bold game of hide and seek as his tongue battled playfully with hers. When he eased his tongue from the inner recesses of her mouth, she felt strangely bereft, but Seth filled the void quickly, fusing his mouth with hers, his lips a moist, white-hot brand.

She felt his chest move, heard his ragged intake of breath. Her own breathing grew frantic as he angled his head and kissed her first one way...then another...and another...as though he couldn’t get enough of her. Her toes tingled and curved upwards when he deepened the kiss, his mouth consuming hers.

She let go of a deep sigh, a moan filled with every ounce of pleasure she felt. As the delicious, pounding ache intensified between her legs, her breasts grew heavy. Serena shifted beneath him, her legs filled with restless urgency. She lifted one foot and ran the tip of her big toe against his muscled calf, her instep skimming the rough material of his jeans.

Seth shifted his body. In a bold move, he reached out to capture one of her breasts in his hands, running his thumb against the swollen crest. He lowered his head again, his mouth covering hers as he slid the hard length of his erect member against her thigh, the tip nudging the folds of flesh covering the little bud that lay hidden there. Serena loved the feel of the rough denim of his jeans as he slid his groin against the thin, silky material of her pajamas.

Seth shifted his body, the tip of his rock-hard cock stroking her clit as the delicious, throbbing ache grew into a crescendo of exquisite pleasure. Serena dug her nails into the cushions beneath her, reveling in the sweet torture. Each time he nudged the little cleft between her thighs, the silky material of her pajamas rubbed against her clit.

“Serena! Serena, where are you?”

The sound of Clarice’s voice sent them both tumbling off the couch into an inglorious heap of entwined body parts. Seth scrambled to his feet, extending his hand. Serena grabbed for it like a lifeline as he pulled her upright. Dizziness made her head swim.

“Easy,” Seth whispered in her ear, his warm breath caressing the sensitive skin of her lobe. “I’ve got you,” he murmured as he steadied her trembling body, his hands spanning her waist.

When the room stopped spinning, Serena gazed at him. His jet-black hair was swept back from his forehead, the strands glistening as the few remaining beads of water clung to the ends. Dark, penetrating eyes bored into hers, making her feel like he could read her every thought. She noticed a little cleft in the center of his beard-shadowed chin. She lifted her hand, the tip of her finger resting inside the small indentation.

“Seth, you darling boy, you’re a day early.” Clarice stood in the doorway, smiling.

Serena dropped her hand. Her body trembled, but it had nothing to do with the chill in the air. He was probably a womanizer, a rogue...

A man who would shatter her heart without a moment’s thought.

Serena stepped away from Seth, hoping the distance between them would calm the racing beat of her heart, and her runaway hormones.

Seth turned, leaning down to hug Clarice.

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s been so long.” Clarice wiped away a tear, then she straightened her shoulders, her voice filled with pride, “Serena Reilly, this is my nephew, Seth Masters.”

“We’ve met.” Serena pulled her robe over the thin material of her pajama top, but it was little defense against Seth’s dark, probing gaze. His eyes traveled the length of her, stopping at the juncture between her thighs where her robe parted. He smiled a knowing grin, making Serena wonder if he knew just how much she enjoyed the exquisite, erotic feeling of silk against bare skin.

Clarice turned her attention towards the mess on the floor, glancing at the broken glass and spilled milk.

Seth’s dark eyes traveled upwards, where they lingered on Serena’s mouth. Her lips still tingled from their earlier mating with his. He quirked one dark brow, raising a hand to his own lips, a cocky grin emerging there.

She met his look of challenge with one of her own.

Clarice tugged on the sleeve of Serena’s robe, breaking the hazy, sensual trance Serena had with Seth.

“What happened?” Clarice asked, raising her brows as she gazed at the mess on the floor.

Serena pulled her eyes away from Seth’s, pursing her lips. “I’m sorry, Clarice, I—”

“It was my fault,” Seth interjected. “My unannounced arrival startled your guest.”

Serena frowned. “I’m not a guest...I’m—”

“She’s my companion,” Clarice cut in, placing an arm around Serena’s shoulders, giving them a squeeze.

“That’s a new one,” Seth muttered, shaking his head.

“I heard that!” Clarice admonished. She shook her index finger at him. “You behave.”

Seth laughed then his eyes settled on Serena’s foot. She looked down to see blood pooling beneath her toes, grimacing when she felt a sharp, stabbing pain on the bottom of her foot.

“You cut yourself,” he stated, his voice flat. “Didn’t you feel it?”

“It’s nothing,” she replied in an attempt to ignore the throbbing pain.

“You could have glass in your foot.” Seth scowled, drawing his dark brows together.

Before Serena could utter a word of protest, Seth scooped her up, his steely forearm supporting her bottom as he cradled her against his chest. She heard the steady beat of his heart, the sound soothing as a lullaby, as he carried her down the hallway towards the small bathroom on the first floor.

Seconds later, he flipped on the bathroom light, easing Serena down on the edge of the bathtub. The marble felt cold beneath her bottom as he bent to examine her foot. She pulled it away, biting down on her lower lip.

“Let me see,” he commanded, reaching for it again.

Serena shook her head, her eyes filling with tears as pain shot through her foot.

Seth reached out to wipe away the lone tear that coursed down her cheek, the pad of his thumb caressing her skin. “Hey,” he said, cradling her chin in his warm palm, “It’s going to be okay. Let me see...”

Serena couldn’t move—didn’t want to—as he gently took her foot in his hand and turned it to examine the wound. He ran a finger over the cut. Serena felt the pain ease as his magic hands slid across the arch, the touch of his fingers soothing. “No glass, but that gash looks deep.” He rose to his feet, grabbing a bottle from the medicine cabinet.

“What’s that?” Serena croaked; her voice barely above a whisper.

“Peroxide.”

“Oh no!” Her hand flew to her mouth, her fingers shaking. “I hate peroxide.” She pulled her foot away.

“Relax,” he reached for her foot. “This won’t hurt.” She bit her lower lip as he tenderly cleaned the cut then blew on the wound. It seemed like he paid homage to her injured foot, treating it like it the most precious jewel in the world. Serena wondered what it would feel like to have him touch her like that - all over. Her face heated at the thought. “All better,” he murmured as he wrapped her foot in gauze, gently knotting the bandage. She rose from the tub, wobbling as she tried to balance on one foot.

Seth caught her just as her hands collided with his chest. He gripped her upper arms in a gentle, but firm hold, pulling her close, wrapping her in a warm embrace. He placed a hand on the back of her head, massaging her scalp with his fingers, trailing them down her neck to knead the tight muscles. “You’ve had quite a night, haven’t you?” he murmured. He buried his lips in her hair, placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

Serena sank into the embrace, unable to recall the last time someone had taken care of *her*.

He tipped her head back, placing a light kiss on the tip of her nose, trailing his lips across her right cheek, sliding them down the side of her chin. “Does it hurt to stand?” His deep voice was silky and soothing. He steadied her, his palms warm and gentle as he placed them on her upper arms.

Oh, this man was dangerous.

Her heart beat wildly with each pass of his lips across her chin. He nuzzled her neck, trailing his lips over the soft part of her earlobe. She shivered in response, her body alternately burning then cooling with each pass of his mouth against her ear and neck.

Serena placed her foot on the cool marble tile, realizing the throbbing ache had subsided a little—just enough to enable her to place her foot down on the floor.

He grinned. “I’ll gladly carry you if—”

Oh, no. Serena didn’t think her hormones could stand it if she felt that steely forearm of his caress her bottom one more time.

“I can walk,” she squeaked, limping out of the bathroom as quickly as her injured foot would tolerate, feeling his dark eyes on her back the entire time.

Clarice waited in the parlor. “Are you all right?” She fretted, wringing her hands.

“I’m fine.” Serena reached for the older woman’s hands, giving them a light squeeze. “I’ll clean up the mess.” She bent to pick up the broken glass, but Seth’s strong arm circled her waist, pulling her against his lean, hard body.

“No,” he stated emphatically. “You could get cut again.”

Her bottom brushed his groin. Serena shuddered as his hard shaft skimmed the twin moons of her backside. Seth brushed some hair from her cheek, whispering in her ear. “You are, without a doubt, one of the most stubborn women I’ve ever met.” He eyed her thoughtfully, his face splitting into a wide grin. “Must be that red hair.” He buried his nose in her auburn curls, inhaling deeply.

The mention of her long, red curly hair—the bane of her existence—made her blush again.

“Come, Serena.” Clarice extended her hand. “Seth’s right. You and I are off to bed. Seth can clean up down here.” Clarice leaned over to kiss his cheek. “It’s good to have you home,” she told him.

Serena nodded, her shoulders sagging with fatigue. Her adrenaline rush brought on by Seth’s harrowing arrival, and his overpoweringly male presence, had disappeared. Now, all she felt was a crushing weight on her shoulders as weariness took over her body. She gazed at Seth, realizing she had enough of Clarice’s “darling boy” for one night.

She was half way up the staircase when she gazed back at him.

“Good night, Serena,” Seth called out. He leaned negligently against the polished oak banister, his shirt stretched across his wide chest, pinning her with his dark, hot gaze.

She thought she’d go up in flames as heat washed over her once more.

Chapter Three

Seth walked into the kitchen the next morning to find Serena leaning over a man's shoulder, pouring coffee.

"This is wonderful, Clarice," the stranger said and held out his coffee cup as Serena filled it with the dark, steaming brew. "I'm going to get some great photos and this 'haunted house' angle is something I hadn't counted on. I'd love to hear more about it."

Seth scowled, fixing his gaze on Serena. She wore a pair of jeans that molded her tight little butt—one he'd had the pleasure of holding last night when he carried her into the bathroom. Sunlight streamed in through the window behind her, setting her red hair aflame, like a beautiful, fiery goddess.

Seth thought about the kisses they shared, about the feel of her breasts as they brushed his chest. He shifted his stance in an attempt to tamp down his arousal, but it didn't do much good as he recalled how Serena's beautiful breast filled his palm, how her nipple peaked and hardened when he stroked it...how she loved the feel of silk against her bare skin.

He wanted to touch her again. Badly. He imagined stripping every last shred of clothing from her body, and his. Then he would lay her down on the kitchen table and drive into her, slaking his burning need.

He struggled to put a damper on his erotic thoughts and had no more success than he had since meeting Serena. He had tossed and turned in his bed the entire night, his body on fire, his cock stiff with desire. Recalling her reaction to him the previous evening, he knew that whatever else she might be, Serena was one passionate woman.

Last night he'd felt pangs in his chest when he saw Serena's tear-filled eyes, wanting to cut off one of his own feet in order to spare her any pain. Seth needed that feeling like he needed another hole in his head; he had enough to worry about without Serena Reilly tugging at his heartstrings.

He gazed at her tall, curvy form, marveling at how nicely she had fit against his shoulder, her head resting just right.

Damn, but he'd been too long without a woman.

"Good morning, Seth, did you sleep well?"

Clarice's voice snapped him out of his languid thoughts.

He walked over to his aunt, placing an arm around her thin shoulders, kissing her temple.

"Yes, I slept very well, thanks."

He glanced at Serena, who stood ramrod straight, her wide beautiful mouth pursed into a tight, thin line. "Good morning to you, too, Sunshine." He grinned, wishing he could kiss that grim look from her face, wanting to trail his lips down her long, swan-like throat.

"Good morning," Serena replied tightly, her hand shaking as she poured coffee into a mug.

So, he thought, watching her hand tremble—her grim façade belied her real feelings.

He imagined walking in on her while she poured that coffee, her beautiful body draped in a swath of sheer, silky material. She'd let it fall, baring all to him. He'd kiss her in every conceivable place—her wide, generous mouth, her eyelids as they fluttered closed, her cheeks, her ears, her long, graceful neck. Then they'd travel down, where he'd kiss her very prominent collarbone, her exquisite breasts. He'd kiss and caress her feminine mound, sucking gently on her little pleasure bud as she writhed on her back on that kitchen table...

He had to stop this. He shifted his stance, his jeans tightening across his aroused member.

Clarice's enthusiastic voice rang out, drawing Seth from his dark erotic thoughts about Serena. She gestured toward the interloper.

"Seth, this is Peter Cullen from *American Homes Magazine*. He's doing a feature article on the house."

Seth's jaw tightened when he noticed Cullen had trouble pulling his eyes away from Serena. He scowled at the reporter, then at Serena. She smiled as she moved closer to Cullen, her hip level with his shoulder as he sat in his chair, sipping the coffee she had prepared for him. When she placed a hand on Cullen's shoulder, Seth had the most unholy urge to bash Cullen's face into the table...several times. Then he wanted to lay his hand across Serena's nicely rounded bottom and give her the spanking of her life.

Seth's hand tingled in response to his dark thoughts. If Serena didn't remove her hand from Cullen's shoulder, he'd march over there right now and...

"You have credentials, Cullen?" he asked, his hand fisting at his side to stop the strange buzzing sensation in his palm. His reaction startled him. He, a man who had never raised a hand to a woman, wanted to spank Serena's bare ass until she begged him to stop, promising never to lay eyes on another man again. His entire body grew hard as stone when he imagined Serena lying across his lap, her bare bottom thrust upwards. He'd make love to her until he wiped Peter Cullen from her mind, and every other man she'd ever known.

"Oh Seth, really," Clarice admonished. "Please—"

"Of course I have credentials." Peter reached into his wallet, withdrawing a business card. "And here's my press pass and my—"

"How long are you staying?" Seth snatched the identification cards from Peter's outstretched hand, studying them, memorizing every word, every detail. He handed them back to Peter, but didn't take his eyes off the reporter.

He hated reporters. They snooped and probed, sticking their noses into situations where they didn't belong. Like now, for instance. The last thing Seth needed was a nosy reporter hanging around his aunt's home, asking questions, taking pictures, and in general, being a royal pain in the ass.

"I'm not really sure. I want as many shots as possible of this great old place." He smiled, turning towards Clarice. "Please tell me about Bride's Inn. I want to know everything."

Serena took a seat next to Peter as Clarice began her tale. "During the Inn's glory days, they catered fancy, high-society weddings," she said. "The brides all loved it because of that elegant, wide staircase leading up to the third floor. They used it to make their grand entrance during the ceremony. During one wedding, however, one of the brides tripped on a stair tread and fell to her death, landing at her groom's feet at the bottom. Some say she was pregnant, and her groom didn't want to marry her, so he paid one of the inn's employees to loosen the treads on the stairs, causing her to fall."

Seth noticed Serena sat still as a board, her face white. He glanced her way, but she avoided his eyes.

"They could never prove anything other than the fact that the poor girl died of a broken neck. Now she haunts Bride's Inn, reliving her fateful journey down that staircase. Some people

who've stayed here claimed to see the 'Lady in White' making her descent, dressed in her wedding finery."

"Have you?" Cullen asked.

"No." Clarice shook her head. "Supposedly, the employee the groom paid to do his dirty work stashed the money in the house. Previous owners have torn walls apart looking for it, but the young man who actually did the deed was never heard from again."

"Fascinating," Peter replied, his eyes glittering with excitement.

"I saw the 'Lady in White'," Serena finally spoke, her voice barely above a whisper.

Seth wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her until she forgot her fear. He hated seeing that ashen color on her freckle-lined face.

"You did?" Peter leaned closer to Serena. Seth frowned and took the opportunity to slide into the seat next to her, his thigh brushing hers. He felt just the slightest tremble pass through her body at the contact, enjoying her reaction. Seth kept his leg firmly against hers; her muscled calf brushed his shin, sending a shockwave of lust through his body.

"I-I saw her last night." Serena's hand trembled as she tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. "That's why I got so...startled...when you showed up," she eyed Seth.

"I must be losing my touch," he muttered, trying to pull his eyes away from her breasts. Her labored breathing caused them to rise and fall in jerky movements, pushing against her form-fitting blouse.

Seth glanced at her waist, her shirt nipping in, outlining the slender curve. He wanted to span his hands around her slim waist again, let them trail down her hips to...

"She was standing on the stairs, a bouquet of white roses in her hands."

"That's her!" Clarice cried. She grabbed hold of Serena's hands, giving them a shake.

"Serena, why didn't you tell me you saw her?"

"Because this was the first time, although—"

"What?" Seth frowned, noticing her pale cheeks once more.

She swallowed. "Although," she whispered. "I've heard her. She calls to me every night."

Seth slashed a hand through the air. "That's bullsh—I mean, nonsense." He glanced at Clarice. "You must have been hearing things. I'm sure it was just the house settling or...something."

Serena aimed her chin in his direction. “Someone calling my name is not a house settling, Mr. Masters.”

Oh, so now he was ‘Mister Masters’, was he?

“Were you frightened?” Cullen asked. “I mean, to see a ghost that way, it had to be terrifying.”

“Yes. It was.”

“So much so that she attacked me with a saucepan.”

All eyes turned towards Seth.

“I beg your pardon?” Cullen pushed his glasses up on his nose.

Serena gave Seth a sour look. “How was I supposed to know it was you?”

“Do you always attack first then kiss—”

Serena stepped down on Seth’s foot, which was next to hers under the table.

He flinched as pain sliced through the top of his foot, determined to make Serena pay. She wouldn’t be able to sit for a week when he got through with her! Then he’d kiss that lush, full mouth and make wild, sweet love to her until...

He forced his attention back to the conversation as Serena told Peter about the events of the night before, but Seth noticed she left out a few details.

Like him.

When Serena ended her story, Cullen reached for her hand. Seth clenched his teeth, his jaw tightening as he watched Serena entwine her hand with Cullen’s.

"An eyewitness story like yours makes for great copy," Cullen said. "Coupled with the photos, our readers are going to be thrilled." He didn’t release Serena’s hand, but continued to stare at her, a dreamy look in his eyes.

What an asshole.

Serena bestowed a sweet smile on Peter as she rose from her chair. “If you’re ready, I’ll be glad to show you around.”

Over my dead body!

“Sorry, but Serena won’t be able to show you around today.” Seth leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, enjoying the angry spark in Serena’s big green eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Serena knitted her silky, auburn brows together.

“You remember, don’t you, *darling*? You promised to help me today.”

Serena smiled sweetly, but her voice held a steely note. “Yes, I... did.” Under her breath, Seth heard her mutter. “I’ll gladly help you straight to hell.”

“Oh,” Cullen’s face fell. “I’m sorry to hear that. But if you’re busy, I’ll just find my own way around.”

“Looks like you’ll have to,” Seth replied smugly, feeling like he could dance a jig right there.

Peter grabbed his camera. “In that case, I’m off to explore on my own.”

“If you need anything, just ask,” Clarice called out. She glanced at Serena, then Seth.

“Well, I think I’ll head to my studio and do some painting.”

As soon as Clarice left the room, Serena turned furious eyes on Seth. “What was that all that nonsense about, *darling*?”

He leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on the table. “I just thought we should set up some ground rules. I can’t have my aunt’s ‘companion’ kissing me one minute then offering to go off with a total stranger to, what was it? ‘Show him around’? I’m just wondering what you’re going to ‘show him’. What you showed me last night?” He grinned.

“How dare you?” She let her hand fly, only to find it encased in Seth’s steely grip.

“Temper, temper.” He grabbed her other hand and pulled her into his lap. She squirmed, in an attempt to free herself from his hold.

“I told you last night, that wasn’t a good idea.”

“Let me up!”

His body burned with need as her bottom slid across his groin. “You know what you need?”

“Don’t you dare to presume to know what I need, Mr. Masters.” Her voice trembled with fury.

She twisted on his lap, but Seth caught her around the waist, pulling her across his thighs. His eyes nearly crossed when Serena’s hip brushed his erect member.

“One more pass like that, sweetheart, and I’m going to give you what you deserve,” he said through clenched teeth as a wave of lust took hold of his body. He trembled, realizing that no woman had ever had this effect on him. Just the slightest touch from her set his loins on fire, made his body shake with need.

She managed to break free of Seth's hold and swung her hand, palm out, but Seth caught it again, imprisoning her wrist in a gentle, but firm grip. Then he caught her other hand and held her fast, stopping her movements. She wanted a tussle? He'd gladly accommodate her.

"*This* is what you need," he said huskily, as his lips swooped down on hers then trailed a path along her jaw and behind her ear.

Seth swore his lips burned with each pass across her fragrant, heated skin. He felt her shudder of pleasure, ached with his own suppressed need. When the tip of her tongue touched his, his body leapt into flames. His mouth closed over hers as he deepened the kiss, pulling her closer, cradling her head full of fiery hair against the crook of his shoulder. The bright strands drifted across his arm, trailing down to the floor.

He reached for her breast, cupping it in his palm, teasing the sensitive bud of her nipple until it peaked in his hand. As his lips fused with hers, his tongue sought hers again, this time, he thrust and parried with hers, imitating what he really wanted to do.

He let go of her hands, ready for her assault, but she placed them against his chest and curled her fingers into his t-shirt. She clung to him as she kissed him back, her mouth a hot brand of silken flame as she nipped his lower lip with her teeth.

Seth reached down, cupping her between her legs, teasing her clit with the pad of his thumb. Serena moaned into his mouth, shifting on his lap, her bottom brushing against his groin.

She was like a drug, her lush body an addiction Seth didn't need, but wanted more than anything else. His body—and his emotions—spiraled out of control.

But he couldn't afford to feel anything like this, not now or...ever.

He broke the sweet contact of his mouth from hers and gazed down into her face. Serena's breath came in short, shallow pants, her hair a mass of auburn flames as it curled around her flushed face.

He bounded up from the chair causing Serena to slide from his lap, groaning as her sweet bottom caressed his cock. Seth caught her just before she hit the floor, wondering how in hell he could have let things go so far, wishing he could jump headlong into that spinning vortex of sensual need that Serena created.

"Why did you do that?" Her silky auburn brows knitted into a frown, her mouth set into mulish lines.

"I..." He ran a hand through his hair, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to do.

Well, yeah, he did know what he wanted to do, but the problem was he couldn't listen to his dick. He had to listen to his head.

Shit.

"I'm sorry." Sorry? No, he wasn't sorry for what he'd done, only sorry that she had made him feel.

Seth glanced at her crestfallen face, her big green eyes. Eyes that now looked sad and wanting. Christ almighty, he couldn't afford to read anything more into this. The thought that she had enjoyed it too was just too much to bear.

"You're sorry," her voice drifted by his ears, the sound flat.

"No, I'm, I'm—"

I'm a jackass.

She took a step towards him. Then another. He couldn't move, couldn't think. All he felt in that moment was a burning, aching desire to reach out and snatch her back into his arms.

Fool.

Serena angled her head, her glorious red hair spilling over her shoulders, her beautiful, wide mouth begging him to kiss her, but her body shook and her lips trembled.

He had to get out of there...now. Now, before the situation spun out of control.

Before he spun out of control.

He turned on his heel and sauntered out of the kitchen, his casual stride masking what he really wanted to do—run.

Seth made the mistake of looking back at Serena's lush, kiss-swollen lips, knowing that vision would be burned into his mind forever.

* * * *

Serena watched Seth's broad back as he ambled out of the kitchen, his steps slow and casual...like he didn't have a care in the world...

For her.

She leaned against the counter, her hand curling around a coffee mug, her fingers tightening around the rim, picking it up so that she could hurl it at Seth's arrogant head. Her hand shook as she lifted the mug, anger and hurt swirling together inside her, forming one giant knot of pain.

Hot tears scalded her eyes. She blinked them back, placing the mug back down on the counter.

Seth Masters had swept her up into a swirling tornado of sensual need then tossed her out like yesterday's trash. With each pass of his silken lips against hers, with every touch of his magic hands, he whisked her away into a world of pleasure and need, leaving her wanting more.

More than he wanted to give.

She blew out a shaky breath and squared her shoulders.

Serena would be damned if she let any man do that to her. If Seth wanted to play games, then so would she.

She quickly washed and dried the few dishes in the sink, including the coffee mug she still wanted to hurl at Seth's head.

Then she left the kitchen in search of Peter, determined to make Seth pay.

Chapter Four

Spring brought warmer weather to Long Island's North Shore, replacing the cold winds of winter with balmy breezes and longer days filled with sunshine. Serena wanted to bask in the beauty of springtime with the other Long Island residents, but found herself constantly preoccupied by her growing attraction to Seth. The situation left her feeling...unsettled. Gazing out at the rocky coast, she vowed to get outside on her next day off and get some fresh air...and some fresh insight into her wayward emotions when it came to Seth Masters.

It wasn't just Seth's dark, dangerous looks that drew her in; it was the way he treated Clarice—his tenderness, his patience. Serena's eyes misted every time she saw him with her elderly charge. He was a constant help—doing whatever Clarice asked. As infuriating as he could be, Serena knew deep in her heart that he cared deeply for his aunt. At times, she envied their close relationship and longed to be a part of them...of him.

Maybe a dose of fresh spring air would clear her mind of hazy sexual thoughts of Seth...or not. She was beginning to fear that the only way to ease her longing would be to engage in a bout of hot, passionate lovemaking. She gazed out at the rocky shore, towards the caverns that lined the coastline, desire welling inside her. How she longed to be free—of her responsibilities...of her mounting debt...of this longing for Seth.

If Seth knew why she really stayed with Clarice, he'd probably boot her right out on her butt. She shuddered at the thought, knowing that she'd miss Clarice...and Seth.

Serena shoved her arms into her jacket and took a walk outside, but no matter how many times she gazed out at the ocean or the sky, her mind remained filled with hazy, erotic thoughts of Seth. Her much needed alone time made her restless and wanting; frustrated and knowing that what she wanted couldn't—and shouldn't—happen. She owed Clarice her loyalty, not lustful thoughts featuring her nephew.

Serena made her way back to the house, wondering why she always fell for men who didn't want her, determined to exorcise thoughts of Seth. She glanced at her watch, realizing she

had to make Clarice's lunch and finish the chores she started that morning. As her feet dug into the soft, sandy terrain surrounding Bride's Inn, she wondered how she should tell Seth about Clarice's health...

"Oh, damn that man!" She shook her head and shouted, her voice carrying on the wind.

Why did her thoughts always revert to him?

She shoved her hands in her pockets and trudged along, vowing to immerse her mind...and her body...in good solid work...

Determined to avoid Seth Masters at all costs.

* * * *

That afternoon, Serena ascended the steps of the wide staircase to bring clean bed linens to Seth. Well, okay, so that's the excuse she used to see him. It had been difficult to calm the excited patter of her heart and racing pulse when Clarice asked her to change the linens on Seth's bed.

Serena's mouth went dry as she imagined making long, slow, lazy love to him in that bed.

Idiot!

He was a rogue, a handsome devil, an arrogant jackass.

He was a man who dropped in and dropped out of his aunt's life—just like he'd do to Serena if she gave him half a chance. She sighed, knowing she shouldn't encourage any sort of relationship with Clarice's handsome nephew, but her body was much slower to see reason than her mind.

Why did she always give in to the ramblings of her heart? It got her into trouble all the time...that's why she had wound up staying with Clarice, because she had given her heart to a man once before, and he had stomped all over it.

She wouldn't make that mistake again.

But her body betrayed her good sense when she thought about Seth touching her. She imagined his long fingers delving into the folds of flesh covering her heated center, a delicious, throbbing ache blossoming in there as she thought of the magic his fingers held.

Oh, yeah, she had it bad.

She pushed thoughts of Seth aside and replaced them with Peter Cullen. He was a fun, knowledgeable man, and he wanted to take her dinner...

“No strings attached,” he’d told her, pushing his glasses up onto his nose in a gesture that Serena found... annoying. “Just a friendly dinner,” he’d said. “After all, you and Clarice are helping me out with my article. It’s the least I can do,” he smiled, his eyes dreamy. He had nice, pale blue eyes. Nice blonde hair. A nice, friendly face.

And it would be a nice, friendly dinner.

Okay, so, he didn’t possess the same dangerous aura as Seth, but he was...safe.

Seth Masters was as far from safe as a woman could get.

She climbed the stairs, feeling cold air swirl around her legs. Strange, she thought, looking out a tall window that gave her a clear view of the cliffs and ocean beyond. She hadn’t seen the ‘Lady in White’ in quite some time. Maybe she had been a figment of Serena’s over-active imagination after all.

Or maybe, she had just *wanted* to see something—anything that would explain that eerie voice she heard in the dead of night.

Reaching Seth’s room, she knocked loudly, but received no answer.

She opened the door, heard water running in the bathroom. Serena walked to Seth’s wide bed, placing the clean linens on a nearby chair. She pulled back the bedspread and grabbed one of his pillows, burying her nose in the linen, inhaling his masculine scent. She placed the pillow on the chair next to the bed, leaning over the mattress to grab the other one, her movements swift, lest he come out and see that she enjoyed being in his room way too much.

His scent filled her nose and her mind, making her blood heat. She pulled the fitted sheet off the bed and reached into the pile to grab another one, but realized she didn’t have a clean one to replace it.

She walked over to the large bureau on the other side of the room, hoping to find another fitted sheet. Opening the top drawer, her eyes widened at the sight of the gun buried in the pile of clothing. Serena felt the blood drain from her face as she stared at the pistol nestled between the shirts in the drawer...

Seth’s shirts.

Anger filled her. Serena’s breath caught in her throat when she thought about him bringing a gun into his aunt’s home. Was he a fugitive from the law? A criminal?

She shut the drawer, determined to speak to him, but not until she had a chance to gather her fragmented thoughts.

She turned to leave and nearly ran face first into a bare, bronzed chest. Her eyes traveled up from wide, tanned pecs to broad shoulders, her gaze settling on a jagged scar.

She blew out a breath to steady her nerves and her raging hormones. Her half-naked rogue stood before her, his bronzed shoulders gleaming in the late afternoon light from the windows behind him. Her eyes traveled over every well-muscled inch of his upper body, finally settling on the jagged scar near his right shoulder.

“That must have hurt,” she whispered, reaching out to gently trace the rough line of the scar.

“You should see the other guy,” he replied in a flippant tone. His hair was damp from the shower; his dark eyes seemed to slowly take her measure as her fingers caressed the ugly, dark line of the scar.

She dropped her hand. “I brought you fresh linens. I put them in your bureau.”

He turned and opened the top drawer of the chest of drawers then looked back at her. “I suppose you’re curious.”

She raised a brow. “About what?”

“The gun.”

Serena shrugged. “It’s none of my business, but then again, maybe it should be. Maybe you’d like to tell me just why you need to carry a gun.”

He scowled. “I have a license for it, and that’s all you need to know.”

“That makes me *very* happy,” she replied sarcastically. “Let’s see,” she tapped her chin, appearing thoughtful. “I could make a list. We could call it, ‘Seth’s Gun, and what he might do with it’. On one side of the paper, I could list all the things a gun can do like...kill someone.”

He knit his brows together into a fierce frown, towering over her. “Knock it off, Serena.”

“And on the other side of the paper,” she continued, unfazed by his show of temper. “We could list all the great things about ‘Seth’s Gun,’ like the fact that he has a license for it.”

He laughed derisively, folding his arms across his chest. “You’re a regular comedian, aren’t you?”

Serena noticed a line of pale skin on his wrist, where he obviously wore a watch. The sight of that pale swatch of skin made her realize just how much time he spent outdoors...

What *did* he do for a living, anyway?

Probably nothing...and Clarice probably forked over thousands to support his aimless existence. Anger pulsed through her as she thought about Seth lying sprawled on a beach on some Caribbean island, soaking up the sun; a drink in his hand, while she worked like a dog, keeping an eye on Clarice for the last six months. If nothing else, she would speak to him about staying put this time, for Clarice's sake...

Or for hers? Lately, things were so mixed up in her head. She didn't want to admit how unfair her judgments of Seth were, or how badly she wanted him to stay.

And he had to stay. Clarice's health was at stake, and Serena was determined to tell him about it.

He pulled a t-shirt over his head. "How goes it with our ghost hunter?"

"Who?" She angled her head and frowned.

"Cullen."

She sighed. "He's a freelance writer and photographer, not a ghost hunter."

"You know a lot about him." His voice was hard.

"You would too, if you paid attention."

He gave her a hot, penetrating look. "I do, honey, believe me."

Ignoring him, but not the wash of heat that poured over her body, she replied, "Clarice likes him." She walked towards the bed where a ceiling fan spun its blades, grateful for the cool, moving air it generated.

"Do you?" he asked.

For just an instant, Serena thought she saw a look of uncertainty cross his smug countenance.

"Cullen's probably one more in a line-up of sorry characters my aunt's taken in over the years," he said.

She stuck her nose in the air. "Cullen's not a sorry character. He's very nice."

Seth scowled. "Stay away from him."

"I will not!"

He slammed the bureau drawer closed. "I told you, you're not traipsing around here with him like some sort of—"

"What?"

"Never mind. Just stay away from him."

She narrowed her eyes. “You know, since you arrived, you’ve done nothing but order me around. And you know damn well that if I tell Clarice about your behavior, she’ll fluff it off.”

“That’s right,” he grinned, “I’m her ‘darling boy’.”

Her body trembled with fury at his high-handedness. “You think you can just waltz in here and take over, don’t you?”

Seth cast a dark, blazing look in her direction. Serena backed up and tumbled backwards onto the bed. He followed her down, where he pinned her with his body.

“I really like you this way.” His voice held a wicked note. “This is how we should talk all the time. You on the bottom...me on top.”

She pushed at him but he grabbed her chin in his fingers, thwarting her attempts to get free. “Listen to me, you flame-haired virago.” He gave her chin a little shake. “Clarice took me in after my parents died when I was seven. She’s shown me nothing but kindness since the day I was dumped on her. She wasn’t prepared to take in a child, didn’t have kids of her own, but she cared for me like I was her own. For that, I’m eternally grateful.”

Serena sucked in a breath at the force of emotion that leaped from Seth. She now understood their close relationship, their bond, their...

“I don’t know what *your* game is, but I’d watch my step if I were you.”

And here she’d felt sorry for him. Stupid, stupid!

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” She shoved at his chest again, digging her nails in the taut, firm muscles underneath. He flinched, but gave no quarter. “Playing a game?”

He raised a brow. “Aren’t you?”

“Your aunt is the kindest person I know.” She felt the start of tears, thinking of the precarious circumstances that brought her to Clarice.

“We’ve established that, honey. What I’d like to know is what *you’re* doing here, besides showing Peter Cullen the sights.”

“I’m a licensed health care worker. Would you like to see *my* credentials?”

He grinned. “From what I can see, and feel,” he kneaded her breast, a shot of lust tearing through her, “your ‘credentials’ are just fine for what I have in mind.”

Serena squirmed under him, her little pleasure bud pulsing despite her anger at Seth’s words. Fear took hold, too, when she thought about her real reason for being in Clarice’s home.

She needed to tell Seth about Clarice's medical condition, about why Clarice needed her. If she didn't, she ran the risk of Seth discovering the real reason Clarice had taken her in.

That thought filled her with pain, knowing she'd never lay eyes on him again.

"Your aunt needs someone to help her. She's not well."

Seth went still, his dark eyes wide. "What do you mean?"

"She's got diabetes."

"Diabetes? Is it serious?"

"Serious enough."

"I didn't know," he said softly, his voice filled with regret. "I should have come back sooner." He sat up, and ran a hand over his face, turning pale beneath his tan, his dark eyes somber...serious...

Concerned.

Serena was sorry she said anything when she saw the look on his face, but he needed to know the truth, for his sake as well as hers. "She'd never tell you, but you can't waltz in and out of her life. She needs constant care now."

His dark brows knitted together, and then he shrugged. "I've been...busy."

"Well, try sticking around this time," she huffed, annoyed at his offhand attitude.

He smiled wickedly as he leaned down to kiss her. "I like what I'm sticking to right now."

So much for his concerned attitude! She had to be crazy to think he cared...about Clarice...about anything.

He should go back to his Caribbean island and soak up the sun.

The lazy bastard.

She turned her head, avoiding the sweet contact of his magic mouth. "Is everything a joke to you?"

"No honey, not everything," he replied, his voice deep as his lips claimed hers in a scorching kiss. Seth's tongue tickled her bottom lip, begging entrance into her mouth. She let him in, reveling in the wet slide of his tongue against hers as he wreaked havoc on her senses. He gently cupped her breast, his thumb gliding across the crest.

"Seth," she moaned, stirring restlessly beneath him. Her body vibrated with need as he began to lead her down that sensual path, toward that great, swirling vortex of desire.

She pushed away from him, as anger took hold once more.

“Your aunt is ill, and this is how you react?”

His hand stilled against her breast, his dark eyes turning serious once more. “You think I don’t care, but I do.” He wrapped an arm around her and buried his nose in her hair, inhaling deeply. “I care, Serena. More than you could know. And I’m going to make you a promise.”

Her heart began to race. The last man who made a promise to her broke it.

“I won’t leave her, I won’t...”

“What?” she whispered.

“Just know that I’m going to stay.” He kissed her temple, his lips lingering against her skin.

She turned, meeting his dark gaze, wishing she could believe him.

Wishing he would stay for her, too.

Serena shifted her body, brushing against him, more pleased than she should be as his member swelled in response. Her nether lips pulsed as Seth pushed his rock-hard shaft against the juncture between her thighs.

“Easy,” he whispered as Serena moaned, her body vibrating with need, pushing all conscious thought from her mind.

He opened her blouse, his fingers trailing a path across her super-sensitive skin. Releasing the front catch of her bra, he bent his dark head and leisurely laved her nipple with his tongue. Serena grabbed fistfuls of his hair as he continued his gentle assault. He reached down and lifted the hem of her skirt, trailing his fingers up her thigh, where they finally settled between her legs. Working his fingers underneath the band by the leg of her panties, he caressed her pulsing folds of flesh. As he stroked and fondled her, Serena grabbed fistfuls of the bedspread, her panties growing wet with her essence.

Her hips jutted upwards, her body writhing, her labia slick with moisture. As the tip of his finger slid up, then down her sensitive flesh, he increased the pressure, ever so slightly, his strokes becoming faster.

“Seth,” she moaned, as his mouth covered hers. “Seeeth...”

“Serena,” Seth rolled on his back, taking her limp body with him, cuddling her close. “You’ve got me tied up in knots.”

She didn't speak—couldn't. What she wanted to do was purr. He raised a brow, gazing at her face. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, smiling

Seth brushed a wayward curl away from her face as he kissed her nose. “You look like a contented cat.”

It was all she had been able to think about for days—being in Seth's arms. And reality was better than anything she could have imagined. His mouth and hands continued to work their tender magic on her mouth and body. She felt his lips brush her temple.

“I want more, Serena,” he whispered. “I want all of you.” He tightened his arms around her, the tip of his penis pushing between her thighs.

She wanted more, too. Oh, how she wanted more, but...

“Clarice, if she finds out, she'll—”

He shook his head, his dark eyes intense. “This has nothing to do with Clarice. This is about you and me and nothing else. Right now, the only thing I want to think about, the only thing that will stop this wanting, this craziness, is being inside you.”

Serena swallowed against a rising tide of longing that tore through her body.

“Let me in, Serena,” he said in her hear, his breath warm, his voice languid. “Let me in.”

She paused, undecided, afraid that if she let him in, she'd never let him go. But when he pushed her blouse aside and started a tender assault on her breasts, teasing and taunting her nipples with the pads of his thumbs, she let go of that fear and let desire take hold once more.

He slid down the length of her body, his hands skimming her waist, his fingers working to release the buttons on the waistband of her skirt. As he slid the zipper down, she heard the metal catch scrape against the teeth of the zipper, the sound sending shivers down her spine. She wiggled her hips, forcing the skirt down past her thighs and calves, kicking it away in her haste to bare all to him.

He chuckled low in his throat. “Anxious, are we?” His black eyes were filled with heat, and she hoped, a longing to match her own.

“Oh, shut up,” she countered, fitting her thumbs into the waistband of her panties, shoving them down her legs. “And help me.”

Seth threw back his head and laughed. “Oh Serena, you are an absolute delight.”

She stopped, the panties midway down her thighs. Men had said they loved her, but no man had ever said she was a delight. She wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not, but her thoughts fled as Seth continued his sensual assault.

His large hands were gentle as he took over the job of sliding her panties down the rest of the way, easing them over her feet and toes. He grasped hold of her silky underwear, placing it near his nose and inhaled, shutting his eyes as he breathed deep. Then he opened his eyes, revealing the large, dark pupils, dilated with passion. He smiled wickedly as he gazed at her, his eyes traveling the length of her body, from the tips of her toes to the nest of curls between her legs.

“So, you're a true redhead, aren't you?”

Serena tried to nod her head, but she couldn't move, her body pulsing with every look he gave her.

He grinned again. “That was a rhetorical question, sweetheart.” Seth slid his long body next to hers. Grasping her silk panties in one hand, he brushed them up the inside of her thighs.

Serena's body went up in flames, her legs opening wide when he slid the silky material against her labia. The only thing she found necessary in that moment was that he should keep doing what he was doing...and a whole lot more.

“You like that,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her.

She moaned into his mouth and twined her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

He continued his ministrations, sliding the soft, silky panties against her until Serena became mindless with need. Soon, his fingers replaced the silk material, as he stroked and played in her nest of curls, teasing and taunting her little pearl of flesh. His fingers came away wet, their tips glistening with her essence. He placed his index finger in his mouth, shutting his eyes as he tasted her.

“Delicious,” he murmured, his voice husky, opening his eyes to reveal their dark, smoky depths.

She reached over, running a hand over his bare chest, enjoying his sharp intake of breath when she placed the tip of her tongue on the jagged scar on his shoulder. Her tongue traveled down to his pecs, to his hard, copper penny nipples. She loved the feel of them, loved the feel of the silky, dark hair that lined his chest. Reaching down, she released the button on the waistband

of his jeans, slid the zipper down, and reached in to massage and knead his large sac, reveling in the feel of him.

Seth reached around and tugged her close, pulling her flush against his body, his movements anxious and restless as he struggled out of his jeans and underwear. Serena helped, but her hands shook as she pushed the clothing down over his hips and buttocks. When he lay naked before her, she sucked in a breath at the size of his penis, reaching out to grasp it in one hand, running her thumb across the tip where a drop of his semen shone. Serena rotated the pad of her thumb on his swollen member, massaging his glistening essence into the tip.

He moaned in response, placing his hand over hers. "I'll come right here," his voice sounded ragged, almost pained.

Seth removed her hand, bringing to his lips where he kissed each finger. Then he removed her blouse and bra, his movements swift and urgent. For just a second, apprehension crept in.

It had been a long time since she'd been with a man. If Seth found her wanting...she didn't know what she would do, or how she would feel.

"It's okay," he said, somehow sensing her distress as he nudged his cock at her entrance.

He wanted her. She could hear it in his voice, his ragged breath.

Serena felt him shift, watching as he reached over and opened the drawer on the night table. From the corner of her eye, she saw him slit open a small, foil-covered packet. She looked away and swallowed, her throat constricting as her pulse beat in the base of her neck. Then he rolled over, his body covering hers, and kissed her full on the mouth.

Seth pressed the tip of his penis against her little pearl, reaching down to grasp his shaft, directing the slick, wet tip of his penis up then down, repeating the action until Serena's clit pulsed and her heart raced, and she was swept up into that sensual tornado of pleasure that he created within her.

He let go of his cock, covering her body with his, pushing inside her until he stretched and filled her completely.

He started to move, rotating his hips so that he slid against her clit with each delicious stroke. Heat washed over her as she wrapped her legs around his waist, digging her nails into his back. Her body met his, thrust for thrust, her hips following his sensual rhythm as a white wall of pleasure engulfed her, and pure, sensual ecstasy filled her body.

“Seth!” She clutched his shoulders, her nails digging into his firm muscles as his shaft pulsed inside her.

When the maelstrom of sensual fury calmed, so did she. Seth didn’t pull out of her body, but remained fused with her, grasping hold of her bottom as he took her in his arms and rolled to his back. She lay on top of him, one leg draped over his, her arm splayed across his chest.

He kissed her long, hard and deep, his lips saying without words what she felt inside.

“I love you,” she blurted, caught up in the moment and unable to censor her words.

His lips stilled.

She rose up to meet his gaze and instantly regretted her words. The look on Seth’s face said it all.

He released her and rose from the bed. “I must say, Serena...that certainly was fun.”

“Fun?”

She soared to passion's greatest height and he called it...FUN?

“Fun, sweetie. You and I have chemistry. It’s nice.”

Her eyes burned as tears of humiliation threatened to escape. How stupid could she have been to say what she did?

She pulled on her blouse and buttoned it with shaking fingers. Fool, she chided herself. IDIOT!

Seth pulled on his underwear and pants then reached for her. “Serena...listen...I—”

“There’s nothing to say, Mr. Masters.”

He angled his head. “That’s funny. I was ‘Seth’ when you were having an orgasm.”

This time, Seth didn’t stop her hand from making a resounding crack across his face.

Chapter Five

Seth wandered along the cliffs near Bride's Inn, something he had done countless times in his youth and the only thing he could think of now to clear thoughts of Serena from his mind. But even though several days had passed since that fateful afternoon in his room, nothing would remove the image of her face, the look of utter devastation that his hurtful, stupid words had caused. Serena now avoided him like the plague, choosing to spend her time with Clarice and...Cullen.

'I love you...'

The words rang in his head like the peal of bell, a death toll. Until he had come back to Bride's Inn and Serena had nearly scrambled his brains with a saucepan, he had felt dead inside. Life had dealt him some very unpleasant cards up until now, hardened him to the pain emotion and attachments could bring. It scared him to think that someone had awakened feelings within him again...

His shoulder ached, a twinge of pain shooting through the scar that lined his shoulder, reminding him of how precious life was...and of the unfortunate circumstances that had brought him back to Bride's Inn.

As he walked, the sun reflected off the ocean water in the distance, causing murky memories to bob to the surface of his mind. Sunlight glistened on the dark blue water, reminding him of the sun glinting off the chrome fender of his parents' car, the day they had all gone for a drive out to Long Island's east end all those years ago...

He relived the horrific car crash that ensued, shutting his eyes against the rising wave of panic that grew inside him every time he thought of that day, thought of the fear that had raced through him as he'd felt the car spin out of control.

He never forgave himself—or God—for his own survival when both his parents had died. Seth's small body had been hurled out the back window, which had been open at the time, just before their car flipped over and embankment and hurdled into a deep ravine. Seth landed in a

pile of decaying leaves and debris, cushioning his fall and preventing any life-threatening injuries.

His parents hadn't been so lucky. When the police found the wreckage, two mangled, barely recognizable bodies represented all that was left of his parents.

He turned his face towards the sky, letting the sun warm his body, but nothing could warm his heart as thoughts of his parents faded, only to be replaced by Serena...and the hurt look on her face.

She had gotten inside him, curled around his heart, but he'd fought it, choosing to wound her lest she do the same to him. After all, what did he have to offer a beautiful woman like Serena? What did he have to offer any woman? A life of pain and heartache, a life filled with uncertainty.

He wouldn't—couldn't—drag her into the mess he called his life.

“Sseeeth...”

The sun disappeared, hiding behind billowy white clouds that lined the afternoon sky. The wind kicked up, ruffling his hair, tickling his ears as he heard his name again.

“Sseeeth...”

He stopped, thinking that Serena called his name, but the only sound he heard was...
Silence.

The wind blew again, snaking around his upper body, traveling down his legs.

“Sseeeth...”

He turned, gazing at Bride's Inn, shielding his eyes from the bright spring sun that suddenly burned through the clouds. He saw a woman, dressed in white, standing at one of the windows on the third floor.

“Sseeeth...”

His name whispered across the wind as the woman lifted her arm, pointing beyond the cliffs.

Seth turned and gazed towards the beach. He saw a head full of long, red curls, a pair of bare feet as they skimmed along the sand. The woman on the beach turned her head, lifting her freckled face to the sun, smiling as the rays shone down on her. He'd know that face anywhere...

Serena!

He looked back towards Bride's Inn, but the woman in the window had disappeared.

Seth hurried towards the steps leading down to the beach, intent on making things right.

His pulse quickened as he raced down the stone steps, anticipation and fear coursing through him.

He saw Serena near a mass of rough, uneven rocks that jutted out into the ocean, her lips curved into a smile as she watched the seagulls circle and fly overhead. She turned, removing her jeans, her rounded bottom wiggling as she pushed her pants down her thighs and legs. His member sprang to life at the sight of her long, slender white legs and the black thong outlining her hips. The thin swatch of material perfectly lined the cleft between her sweetly rounded cheeks and made his mouth water. She removed her shirt, flinging that into the wind. It landed on top of her jeans, nestled in the sand.

Serena lifted her mass of red hair, letting it fall down her back as she raised her face towards the sun...

His fiery goddess.

Seth looked at her face. It looked relaxed...peaceful...

Serene.

Serena. *His* Serena.

He ran a hand through his hair; sweat beading on his forehead. When in hell had she become his?

“Seth...”

The wind carried his name across the beach. He moved closer, choosing to stand behind a copse of tall trees near the rocky shore, watching Serena as she dipped her toes in the water. A smile lit her face, her green eyes dancing with delight as the water lapped around her feet.

“Seth...”

He frowned in concentration, wondering who called to him. It was a woman’s voice, but it wasn’t Serena’s.

Strange.

When he gazed at the water, he didn’t see her.

He saw Cullen.

Seth moved from his hiding spot, intent on thwarting any plans Peter Cullen might have to join Serena.

He wanted her all to himself.

He quickly made his way onto the warm stretch of sand, scooped up Serena's clothes, and hid them behind a rock. When Cullen approached, Seth stretched out in the sand, appearing relaxed.

He was anything but.

His heart raced as he thought about Serena's almost-naked form. He didn't care if she fought with him, he just wanted her to talk to him again...love him again.

He couldn't bear her stony silence, the hurt he saw reflected in her big, green eyes.

"Hello, Cullen." He said smoothly, never taking his eyes off the reporter.

"Well, hello there. It's a beautiful day."

Seth grinned. "Beautiful."

Cullen frowned, scratching his head. "I thought I saw Serena walking along the beach. She stopped here...at least...I thought she did."

Seth bounded up from the sand, brushing some from his jeans. "You're right, you did."

Cullen's face lit up.

Asshole.

"She went back to the house," he said. "It was too windy for her." He glanced at the watch strapped to his wrist. "Besides, it's—" He scowled, his face tightening when he realized the time. "Almost four. The tide usually washes up here right about now, so there's not much room for walking."

He kept his voice smooth and steady even as his guts twisted.

Four p.m.

High tide.

He glanced towards the water, thinking of the times he had explored the caverns dotting the beach, and how each time Clarice had offered the same words of warning:

"Get out of the caverns before the tide comes up and the water rises above your head..."

"Seth..."

The mournful wail caressed his ears.

Serena.

He had to find Serena.

"You can catch Serena at the house, Cullen. Then again, she might have gone into town. It's her day off."

“Well, thanks, I’ll head back to Bride’s Inn. Maybe Serena will want to catch a movie.”

He walked away, leaving Seth alone on the beach.

The instant Cullen moved out of sight, Seth raced towards the water, his feet churning up sand, his heart pounding.

He had to find Serena, before the tide did.

Chapter Six

The water grew warmer as Serena swam toward a small cavern near the beach. She felt free...freer than she had in a long time as she moved her arms, her strokes slow and leisurely.

Entering the small, rocky enclosure, she settled her bottom on a rock, enjoying the feel of the water as it flowed over her shoulders. She lifted her arms, letting the warm water sluice down.

“Sereeeeeeeeeeeena...”

She stiffened as a chill breeze blew through the cavern. She ducked her shoulders beneath the water when a shiver snaked down her spine.

“Sereeeeeeeeeeeena...”

She swallowed against her rising panic and watched as water began to pour into the small cave. Her eyes widened when she looked towards the opening, saw the water blocking almost all the available space.

The space she needed to exit the cavern!

She cried out as the water rushed in, pulling at her body. Fighting the churning tide, she swam towards the opening, ignoring the pain of her rapidly tiring muscles.

All too soon, she couldn't fight anymore.

The tide swirled around her, pulling her below the surface. Water churned over her head, as the light receded and her world went black.

* * * *

“Sereeeeeth...”

He heard Serena call his name, her voice muffled in the wind. He ran to the water's edge, pulling his boots and socks from his feet, tossing them aside. He unbuckled his belt, shoving his pants down his legs, kicking them aside. Then he ripped the shirt from his body and dove into the water, swimming with long, powerful strokes towards the cavern.

“I'm coming,” he whispered. “I'm coming, Serena.”

He picked up his pace, the muscles in his arms rippling as he swam. When he neared the mouth of the small, rocky enclosure his eyes widened and his guts burned.

Water poured into the opening.

Ducking his head beneath the water, he swam into the cavern. He lifted his head, barely clearing the top of the small cave.

There was no sign of Serena.

His eyes darted into the corners of the rocky enclosure, his heart pounding. Then he saw the top of her head full of flame-colored hair as it bobbed up from the water.

Seth swam towards her, pulling Serena up against his body.

She didn't move.

Panic tore through him, flooding him like the water flooding the small rocky space.

He tucked her against his side and swam out of the cave, his muscles screaming in pain as he fought the rising tide and its fierce current.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he made it outside, watching as the entrance to the cavern closed, the water swirling up and over the rocks.

Seth swam with one arm tucked around Serena. When he got to shallower water, he rose to his feet with Serena in his arms, and carried her to the shore.

He collapsed in the sand, but he never let go of her.

She didn't move. Didn't make a sound. Her eyes remained closed.

Seth laid her in the sand and tipped back her head, his mouth closing over hers as he breathed life into her lungs.

She coughed once, water spewing from her mouth. He turned her on her side as more water trickled from her lips.

Serena rolled back then looked up into his face.

"Seth," she whispered brokenly. "Seth..."

"Shhhhh. Don't talk."

He lifted her, cradling her shivering body in his lap, turning to block the wind. Seth wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tight against his chest.

"The whole time I w-was in th-there I kept thinking about you." Serena's teeth chattered. Christ, he had to get her warm.

He rose to his feet, his toes digging into the sand as he strode towards the shelter of some rocks. As he walked with Serena nestled in his arms, the sun came out in full force.

Seth laid Serena in the warm sand, his hands roaming over every inch of her.

“Are you hurt?” He whispered as he gazed into her pale face.

She shook her head, no, but she trembled uncontrollably.

He eased his body on top of hers, allowing his warmth to seep into her. “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

“Don’t leave me, Seth” She wound her arms around his neck, holding on to him like a lifeline. “In that cave I—I was so scared—I thought—” She buried her face into the crook of his neck.

He needed to be inside her.

But not here.

“Can you stand?” he asked. He glanced towards the shoreline, where he saw her pile of clothing. If she could walk, he could get her shirt on her at least, he could...

She trembled in his arms again.

“We’re going to get some clothes on you, Serena, you’re turning blue.” He cuddled her closer.

She nodded in understanding, but Seth thought her eyes seemed glassy. He didn’t have a minute to lose. To hell with trekking to the shore for her clothes.

He rose to his feet, taking her with him, steadying her as Serena’s toes dug into the sand. Seth shoved her arms into his shirt, which felt warm from the sun. He pulled it across her chest, then grabbed his pants and pulled them up over his feet and legs. Reaching down, he hooked one arm under her knees while drawing his other arm across her back, lifting her high against his chest, holding her tight.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath as the wind changed direction, blowing into them. The short trek back to the house seemed like hours as Seth trudged through the sand. A few grains blew into his eyes as the wind howled around them, but he continued on, knowing that he held the most precious thing in the world.

* * * *

“Serena!” Clarice cried out, her blue eyes wide as Seth came barreling into the house with Serena. She laid a hand on Serena’s damp cheek. “What happened? Seth, she’s freezing.”

“I know. She went swimming in the caverns and didn’t know the tide was coming in.” He glanced down at his aunt. “I have to get her into a warm bath into...”

“Go!” Clarice cried out, making shooing motions with her hands. “I’ll make a pot of hot tea for you both.” She narrowed her eyes. “You both look worse for wear.”

He strode down the hall and up the long staircase. When he got to Serena’s room on the second floor, he strode through the doorway, heading toward the bathroom. Once inside, he set his precious burden down on the edge of the bathtub. Her shivering increased.

There was no time to fill up the tub while Serena shook with cold. He opened the shower curtain and flipped the hot water handle, then the cold, until he got a warm, but not too hot stream of water flowing into the tub. Then he opened the shower jet full force, filling the small bathroom with steam. He stripped out of his pants and underwear, then removed Serena’s shirt. Lifting her over the edge of the tub, he helped her stand under the running stream of water, shutting the shower curtain behind them.

He stood behind her, steadying her trembling body by tucking her firmly against his. She swayed once, but he caught her, pulling her back against him. “You’re okay, sweetheart, you’re okay...” The endearment slipped easily from his lips. “You’ll be warm soon.”

The words no sooner left his mouth when he felt her shaking stop. He also felt something else—a deep longing, the desire to meld his body with hers returned in full force. He needed to affirm that his goddess was all right, he needed to affirm...life.

She moved, her bottom brushing his groin. “God, Serena, you’re killing me.” He gritted his teeth against the feel of her bottom cheeks as they slid across her swelling cock. He had to fight the nearly overwhelming urge to pounce. But as fiercely as his body cried out, ‘Take her!’ he didn’t want to scare her or overtax her in her current fragile state.

She had enough of a fright this afternoon without having to deal with his lust. Besides, Aunt Clarice was downstairs...

That didn’t stop you before.

He glanced at Serena’s pale face, her cheeks pinkening as the warm water sluiced down onto them. The rosy blush continued down her neck, spreading across her chest, traveling down her breasts. He reached around and unhooked the front clasp of her bra, watching as her teardrop shaped breasts spilled out of their lacy confines. Then his eyes zeroed in on the beautiful brown buds of her nipples.

He removed her bra then reached around to cup one of her breasts in his hands, kneading the firm flesh, rubbing the pad of his thumb across her nipple. She moaned once and swayed. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her back against him again. "Please," she whispered. "Please make love to me."

Christ almighty, he didn't have a condom...and he didn't have the guts. If he made love to her now, he'd be sunk. He didn't want to feel this way. He didn't want to care. If he cared too much then she'd be ripped away from him...

Like his parents.

"Seth, please." Serena leaned her head back against his shoulder. Turning in his arms, she reached up and stroked the scar on his chest. The stream of water they stood under may have been warm, but still he shuddered in response to Serena's touch.

When her nest of curls at the apex of her thighs tickled his balls, he almost came. She reached down and ran the pad of her thumb across the vein that protruded against the taut skin on the back of his penis, in the same way he had caressed her nipple with the pad of his thumb.

"Sweet Jesus," he muttered thickly. "Serena, I don't have anything, I don't have..."

"I want you," she whispered as the water poured over them. Steam rose above their bodies, floated over the shower curtain rod. "I want you," she repeated, her voice hoarse. "I need you."

Her abdomen slid across his, their bodies molding together in perfect unison. Seth's resistance ebbed away as he eased Serena back into the corner of the shower then pushed her thong down her hips and thighs, sliding it down her calves, helping her to step out of the thin wisp of material. He tossed it aside and rose to his full height, reaching around to cup her bottom with both hands, lifting her against him. She twined her arms around his neck, tucking her legs and feet around his back.

Seth held her in place, resting his forehead against hers for a few seconds then he hoisted her up higher, until she fit snugly against him. He reached down and inserted his shaft inside her, swallowing her cry as he clamped his mouth over hers, reveling in the hot, moist feel of not only her beautiful mouth but her heated channel. He moved inside her, sliding his cock in then out in quick rhythm, making sure each stroke caressed her clit.

He wanted her to feel alive as much as she made him feel alive.

She cried out, her tight vaginal walls squeezing his penis. He wanted to spill himself inside her, needed to, but pulled out just before he came.

His cock pulsed several times; he didn't think it would stop.

All he heard was the sound of the running water and their mingled breathing.

He reached for her hand, kissing her fingers, feeling light and warmth pour into him. Life.

When her mouth curved into a tiny smile, his heart soared.

* * * *

Seth shoved a steaming mug full of tea in front of Serena while they sat at the kitchen in Bride's Inn.

"Drink it," he told her. Softening his tone, he said, "It's got sugar in it. You need it. You've had a bad shock."

She stared down at the mug. He lifted it to her lips, but she turned her head.

He sighed. "Don't be so stubborn."

She rose from the table, her hair damp, a white robe wrapped around her body. "I have to go and get ready. I have a date with Peter."

Seth's face turned hard. "I thought I told you to stay away from him." He snagged her hand, giving it a shake. "Besides, you should rest. You're still pale—"

"You have very little to say about what I do, Mr. Masters." She grabbed a sponge from the sink and wiped the top of the table, her hand making wide, jerky movements. She had to do something to block the memory of what happened in the shower, of her brazen behavior and the sweet lovemaking they had shared. Once again, she had given her heart to a rogue, and he stomped all over it.

"I guess you're still mad."

She wanted to hurl the sponge at his smug face.

"Why do you say that?" She kept her voice level.

"You keep calling me 'Mr. Masters'."

"That's your name, isn't it?" She walked back to the sink, keeping her back towards him as she gazed out at the water.

"Serena, look at me."

She didn't turn around. She remained perfectly still, felt as though her heart would pound clear through her chest.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said about it being...well... 'fun'."

She turned and lifted her chin. "But that's what it was. Fun. Particularly this afternoon in the shower." Serena hoped God wouldn't strike her dead for the lie she just told. "It was just like you said. We have chemistry."

"Yeah," he murmured, "I guess."

"If you'll excuse me," she started to walk by him.

He grabbed her arm in a gentle, inexorable grip. "You and I have some things to work out."

"We have nothing," Serena replied tightly. "I have a lot to get done before my date tonight."

She hadn't gone two steps, when Seth came up behind her. He turned her, grabbing her shoulders, his fingers digging into them. "Stay away from him, Serena."

"Jealous?" She raised a brow.

He released her, dropping his hands to his sides. "Of course not."

"Well then, that's that," she said brightly, and marched out of the kitchen.

She turned once to see Seth's angry face and told herself she didn't care.

It was the second lie she told that afternoon.

Chapter Seven

The next day Seth went into town to run errands for Clarice, and to do some serious thinking about Serena.

As he neared his car, his cell phone rang. He listened intently to what the caller said, gripping the phone as his friend spoke. “You sure about that, Bill?”

“Positive, Seth. He’s wanted for robbery and murder in Westlake.” Seth’s knuckles turned white as he gripped the phone.

“That picture you faxed me is definitely him. He’s using this current name, Peter Cullen, which is one of his many aliases.”

Sweat trickled down Seth’s back as he thought about what his friend said:

Robbery. Murder.

“Don’t do anything alone, Seth. Contact the local police first. I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

Seth ended the call. All he knew was he had to get back to Clarice...and Serena. She was the balm for what ailed him, the flame of his desire. The only woman he wanted, the only woman he loved.

My Serena.

His stomach roiled. Hot pain seared his gut, sweat lined his palms when he wrenched open his car door, his conversation with Bill looping endlessly through his mind. He slid into the driver’s seat quickly, jabbing the key into the ignition, turning it so that the engine roared to life. As Seth pulled his car into the oncoming traffic, he had only one thought on his mind...

He needed to stop Peter Cullen, the hell with contacting the police first.

* * * *

“Go get a sweater, Serena, it’s chilly,” Peter told her later that evening.

“Thanks. I’ll be right down.”

Serena climbed the wide steps. When she reached the top, she froze. The 'Lady in White' stood there, her mouth moving in an attempt to speak.

"What is it?" Serena whispered. "What do you want?"

The woman's face twisted, lines of frustration bracketing her pale, white lips as she pointed down the stairs. Serena felt ice-cold air swirl up her spine as the ghostly figure of 'The Lady in White' vanished.

Serena hurried back downstairs to find Peter waiting for her.

"I just saw her again!"

"How nice," he replied silkily then turned, the ugly, metallic nose of a gun pointed directly at Serena.

* * * *

Seth bounded into the house. "Aunt Clarice!" he shouted.

No answer.

"Serena!"

Silence.

He entered the kitchen to see Clarice sitting on a chair, bound and gagged. Serena stood nearby, trapped in Cullen's hold. Seth's blood ran cold, turning to ice when he heard the ominous click of a revolver.

"You do anything stupid, and she's dead." Cullen said coolly, his gun pointed at Serena's temple.

Seth's gut twisted, but he played it cool.

"You got a gun?" he asked Seth.

Seth nodded affirmatively.

"Put it on the floor, nice and easy."

Seth did as he was told. His heart skipped a beat when he heard Clarice whimper.

"Now, tell me where the money is hidden." Cullen demanded.

Money?

Seth thought quickly, desperate to stall Cullen. "It's in a secret compartment in my aunt's art studio."

Cullen's eyes lit up. "Let's go."

He started up the stairs with Serena in tow. As they neared the third floor, Seth shivered. An icy gust blew around his feet. He glanced at Serena, his heart sinking at the sight of her large green eyes filled with fear. Somehow, he had to get Serena away from Cullen.

His thoughts were cut short by a cry of terror.

Cullen pointed his revolver at a figure dressed in white at the top of the stairs. The woman began a slow descent, her face shrouded by a veil, a bouquet of white roses in her hands.

Cullen fired one shot, the bullet entering and quickly exiting the woman's body. His hand shook and his eyes widened as the woman approached, her tattered white gown trailing behind her on the steps.

Seth took advantage of Cullen's distraction to shove Serena aside. He wrenched the gun from Cullen, hitting him square in the jaw, knocking him down the stairs. He landed at the bottom in a heap.

"My leg's broken!" Cullen screamed.

Seth picked up the revolver and bounded down the steps.

"I should break every bone in your body," he growled. He yanked Cullen's hands behind his back, slapping a pair of cuffs on his wrists. "You're under arrest!"

Cullen's mouth hung open, resembling a gaping fish as he struggled to compose himself. "Arrest?" he demanded. "What are you, a cop?"

Seth didn't answer. He shoved Cullen on the floor and pointing the gun at his head. He got out his cell phone and called 911, then looked at Serena's pale face.

"Are you all right?" All he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and kiss the breath from her body.

"I'm o-okay," she managed. She quickly untied Clarice, leaning down to hug her elderly charge.

Sirens blared in the distance. Seth breathed a sigh of relief, but kept a tight hold on Cullen.

From the corner of his eye, he gazed up the stairs.

The 'Lady in White' stood there for just a second and smiled.

Then she vanished.

* * * *

Seth knocked on Serena's bedroom door a few days later. Each day he thought of coming to her, but between explaining the entire Cullen fiasco to the police and filling out the appropriate paperwork, he had been busy. At least for the first two days. Then he delayed his visit because he had a lot to think about regarding his relationship with Serena.

He opened her door, his tentative smile fading as his eyes settled on the two suitcases lying on the bed.

His heart pounded as he bounded down the steps.

"Where's Serena?" he asked his aunt.

"She's leaving."

"What?"

"You heard me, young man!" She jabbed her finger into his chest. Seth backed up, but stopped when he saw the tears in her eyes.

"Talk to her Seth. Please. I'll miss her if she leaves."

Hell, *he'd* miss her! He was not about to let the best thing that ever happened to him walk out of his life.

Seth glanced out the kitchen window where he saw Serena walking along the cliffs.

He narrowed his eyes, his pulse racing. "You're not going *anywhere*, my love."

Clarice's tears dried, her face lit with a smile, as Seth tore out of the house and raced towards the cliffs.

* * * *

"Running away, Serena? I thought you were made of sterner stuff."

Serena turned at the sound of Seth's voice. "Go away," she said brokenly.

"No."

She shook her head and sighed. "You're really a police officer?"

"Detective." He took a step towards her, his hands shoved in his pockets. "I'm here because I'm recuperating from a gunshot wound I got a while back."

"H-how did it happen?"

"A drug bust. The dealer shot me, but luck was on my side. I got hold of my gun and I killed him."

She reached up to touch his shoulder. "I'm glad."

"Yeah, so am I." He settled his dark eyes on her. "Why are you leaving?"

She shrugged, but her big green eyes filled with tears, reminding him of liquid pools of water. “Like you said, I-I’m just one more sorry character in Clarice’s line-up.”

He shook his head. “No, you’re not.”

“You don’t understand, Seth.” She looked away, sighing. “I’m not Clarice’s companion. She took me in as a favor to my grandmother—they’re good friends. I had to pay off my husband’s gambling debts.”

“You’re married?” His eyes widened, his heart raced.

“I *was* married. Until my ex-husband gambled away everything we had. I didn’t realize the extent of his problem. I had to sell my house and my health care company, and even that didn’t cover his debts. Clarice took me in and paid me to look after her just so I could keep my head above water.”

“I’d say we’re two of a kind.” Seth closed the distance between them and took her in his arms, kissing the top of her head. He proceeded to tell her about his childhood, his parents, the accident that claimed their lives, and his lingering guilt.

Serena shivered as the wind whipped around them. He opened his jacket and tucked her against his chest, wrapping her in a warm leather cocoon. Seth could feel the racing beat of her heart as he eased her against his body.

“I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you, too, Serena.”

“I was s-so scared. I had no idea Cullen was a...murderer.” She shuddered.

“I know, honey. I’m a cop and I didn’t know until a buddy of mine tipped me off.” He lifted her chin and kissed her trembling mouth.

“Chemistry...that’s all it is,” she said.

He shook his head and smiled. “It’s much more than that.”

“It is?” The wind whipped through her hair, her fiery curls tickling his nose.

He brushed them aside, kissing the little beauty mark on the side of her mouth. “I love this little mole you have.” Seth felt her tremble. “But I love *you* more.”

She threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tight, her mouth fusing with his.

Even through the heavy denim of his jeans, he could feel her body’s reaction to him as she moved against him, her eyes dilating with passion.

“Seth,” she whispered as he reached inside her shirt to cup one of her breasts, bending his head to trail a path of kisses down her slender throat.

“I guess you’re not mad at me anymore.”

She gasped when he trailed the pad of his thumb across the hardened peak of her nipple, pushing her breast into his palm. Serena frowned, breathing in short shallow pants. “Wh-what do you mean, I’m not mad at you anymore?”

He grinned. “You called me Seth.”

Serena smiled back. “Of course I did. I love you, Seth Masters.”

* * * *

In the distance, a lone figure dressed in white stood at the window of the old inn. She gazed at the couple on the cliffs and smiled as she began a slow descent down the grand staircase, knowing she had helped them find the love she once lost.

The End

About the Author

Catherine Chernow writes sensual, fast-paced, contemporary romance – the kind of books that make your body sizzle and your heart soar.

She was born in Fairbanks, Alaska, an “army brat”, and at the age of three her family and she moved to Long Island, New York, where she still resides.

Check out her website at www.CatherineChernow.com for reviews and excerpts.

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But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren... *assume the position*.

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As the seventh son of a duke, Keran of Bristol never thought to have his own lordship. So when King Edward IV offers him a bride and a castle near the Scottish border, he is ecstatic. However, when he arrives at the country keep, he finds that His Majesty's court is not the only place where intrigue resides.

Syndra of Mardoon knew that after her father's death, her stepmother would never allow her to be anything more than a servant in her own home. Threatened with the death of her friend if she doesn't cooperate, she hides in the shadows while her younger half sister is introduced to the new lord as his intended.

With the scheming ploys put forth by her stepmother already in play, Syndra is reluctant to believe that the handsome new lord can set things right at Mardoon. But one touch of Keran's lips convinces Syndra otherwise, and she finds herself surrendering to him... mind, body and soul.

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The Last Celtic Witch by Lyn Armstrong:

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A painful death... a prophecy foretold.

Pursued by evil forces for her powers, recluse Adela MacAye foresees her own agonizing death. She must seek the chosen one to produce an heir and pass on her Celtic powers. To fail would be the end of good magick, plunging the world into darkness.

Conjuring a fertility spell she is led to a sensual chieftain who is betrothed to the sorceress that hunts her. Time is running out as fate and the future pursue her.

Plagued by enemies and undermined by sabotage, handsome Laird Phillip Roberts must save his clan from bloody feud by making an alliance through marriage... a marriage he does not want. After a night of white-hot sensual delights with the alluring witch, his heart commands he break the pledge of peace. With treachery around every corner, will he be too late to save... The Last Celtic Witch?

\$4.50 e-book, \$12.99 print

Finding Her Place by Midnyte Dupree

The war is over and Cameron Cabot no longer knows who she is. Her life was enveloped and consumed by the fight, but suddenly things have changed. Instead of fighting creatures wanting her planet, Cameron is now fighting the urge to lay claim to two men who believe she is their mate. Has Cameron found her new assignment in the arms of a Noah and Mars?

Yes, if a mischievous little spirit has anything to say about it...

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Male Me by Amarinda Jones

After Delaware Brooks sends a silly email about what she would like the new boss to do to her, she is called into the boss's office. The punishment? Every hot, sexual craving she has ever had, fulfilled. But Templeton McAdam is not the only new man in her life. His best friend, Speed is invited to enjoy Delaware much to her surprise and excitement. Two men. One woman. Their only desire is to please her.

Intense pleasure is one thing, but is it wrong to enjoy both men? What would a good girl do? And should she be falling in love with them so fast? But sudden love is not the only problem Delaware has. Someone is watching her every move and planning on teaching her a lesson.

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