

Ghost of a Chance

Shiloh Walker

Chapter One

He'd walked this road before. Countless times, on countless days. Sunny days, rainy days, snowy days, humid. You name it, he'd walked through it.

Coming to the gate, he wrapped his hands around the cool iron posts, stared through them at the grand house that had fallen into disrepair. The paint was chipped and peeling, the grass waist high, the gardens overrun. But when Luke looked at it, he could see the way it looked in its glory days, windows sparkling in the sun, a fresh gleaming coat of paint on the walls. White paint, only white. The house would look weird any other color.

There was somebody new moving in soon. He'd heard the small landscaping company in town was going to be very busy for the next few months. Somebody had been hired to come in and paint, do the necessary repairs. The repairs were cosmetic for the most part. The house had only fallen into neglect in the past few years. Hopefully, vermin hadn't taken up residence.

Luke wondered about the new owner. Would he last? The most recent owner had been a college professor, and he'd died more than a decade ago. He'd hung around nearly twenty years, much longer than any of the other owners. Of course, from what Luke could tell, the man hadn't much of a soul, little heart, little feeling. It would take quite a bit to run somebody like him off.

Hadn't there been a child? A young girl... With a frown, he tried to remember. But there had been so many people, so many memories. And the faces all faded and blurred, running together.

With a sigh, he tucked his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and turned away. He was aching with exhaustion and cold. God, he was always cold. He wore jeans and sweaters year-round, something unheard of in the humid heat of a Kentucky summer.

Even though it was well into spring now, and the temp hovered in the seventies and low eighties, he was freezing.

That, he couldn't do anything about.

But he could get some rest.

He heard the powerful engine of a car approaching as he took the small, well-worn path. Right before the trees closed up behind him, he glanced back, saw a sleek, shiny red car come flying around the corner.

"Careful. You're gonna hurt somebody," he murmured before walking on.

The house was oppressive.

Leaning against the hood of the silly red Mustang she still couldn't believe she had bought, CJ folded her arms in front of her, cupping her elbows, hugging herself for warmth.

Or maybe for comfort.

She didn't like this house.

She had never liked it.

But that hadn't stopped her estranged father from leaving it to her. She had spent, what, three months here one summer before being shipped off to boarding school? The worst three months of her life, the summer after her mother had died.

The old bastard had put her in a room on the opposite side of the house from his, and when she had whispered the next morning, "I was scared last night," he had laughed at her.

But not for long.

Because the nights only got scarier, the noises he said she imagined only got louder. Some mornings he would have a tight strained look about him, like he had heard it, too. But she learned pretty quickly not to mention it anymore.

He hadn't laughed the second time she had told him, or the third. On the fourth morning, he had asked her what scared her the most. She had timidly pointed to the library, the room just under hers, hoping maybe he could scare the ghosts away, like Mama would have.

Instead, he took her hand, jerked her out of her seat and forced her into the room. He had locked the door behind her, saying, "You have to learn that there is nothing to be afraid of."

For three long hours, CJ had sat there, throat locked tight with terror, tears running down her face. Three hours. The air in the room seemed to weigh down on her, and a strong coppery scent lingered in the air, a scent she was too young to recognize as blood.

And after he let her out, she never once commented on being afraid.

Reaching up, CJ rubbed her eyes and asked herself, "What are you doing here?"

With a weary sigh, she moved around the car to unpack her clothes. She knew the answer to that. She really hadn't had any place else to go. She'd walked away from her job, her home, her friends.

This grand old mansion in eastern Kentucky was the logical place to come to.

Mouth compressed into a thin, grim line, she stalked up the stairs, noting that the cleaning crew had cleared the debris as asked. And when she let herself inside, the foyer was clean, smelling faintly of lemon polish. Not a speck of dust was anywhere to be seen and she mentally made a note to thank the cleaning crew for their good work.

Dr. Chelsea Jane Stivers lived her life by a certain set of rules.

When you did a good job, you were praised.

When you did a bad job, stay the hell out of her way.

If you had something useful to say, then say it. Otherwise, shut the hell up.

Oh, yeah.

And there were no such things as ghosts.

Later the night, music playing softly from the stereo, she set her computer up in the ladies' parlor. Much of the original decor had been painstakingly redone by her father. And he'd done a damn fine job. Nobody could say that he wasn't a damn fine historian and antiquarian.

Just a bad father.

The pale ivory walls were covered with tiny pink roses, all hand-painted. No wallpaper. Not for Dr. John Stivers, professor of history. He'd insisted the flowers be applied by hand, the way they had been more than a hundred years earlier. The small delicate couch, CJ had no absolutely no idea what it was called, sat just to the side of the window, where the lady of the house could stare out at her husband's land and be grateful he was such a good provider.

The couch would have to go. It wasn't that she didn't like antiques. She did, when they were useful. This tiny, uncomfortable couch was not useful.

But the rest would probably stay.

She wasn't a flowers and lace female, but there was something soothing about the room. A restful, welcoming scent, soothing to her, something almost...motherly about the room.

And she needed all the soothing she could get, after the last few months.

"Don't think about it," she told herself.

But she couldn't stop it.

How could she have trusted him?

David Armstrong had come into her life just a year ago, and swept her off her feet. A fellow Literature professor at Hanover College, they had seemed to fit together so well, so perfectly.

Of course, David had gone out of his way to make it seem like that.

And then he had stolen her work right out from under her.

And after she had gone to the dean, the dean had looked appalled that she would accuse such a fine, upstanding man of such a crime. Of course, she had gotten her revenge.

She had stormed into his offices, determined to rip him to pieces. She had already tried logic, and it had failed.

He had never gotten the spare key back from her, so she breezed through the door. Walking in, she had heard the noises right away. The kind of noises that you couldn't mistake for anything else. Eyes narrowed, she spied the camera lying on the floor, next to the chic leather jacket and a book bag.

CJ didn't know why she picked it up, didn't know what compelled her to do such a thing.

But she did it.

And she stood in the doorway, snapped off a good fifteen pictures before the film ran out. It was a student, all right. A very popular photography student that CJ had in her class just the previous semester.

Her name was Jody Morgan, and this would explain why she had been walking around looking like the

cat with the proverbial cream.

Her legs were wrapped around David's hips, and he was holding her naked ass in his hands. Mutual moans of ecstasy filled the room while they fucked each other's brains out. CJ was almost loath to interrupt.

She cleared her throat.

Not loud enough, for just then, Jody screamed softly and started crying out his name as she started to come.

Later, CJ might be humiliated. Maybe. But for now, she was too angry to be concerned with that. Reaching out, she took a book from atop the filing cabinet and dropped it.

The resulting loud slam silenced the room.

She met David's disbelieving eyes while she removed the film from the camera. "Did I ever tell you I minored in photography?" she asked conversationally.

They broke apart, his eyes narrowing in rage while the student burned red with embarrassment. Jody was in shock but David was furious, his rampant cock wet, ruddy, still thrusting upward.

Jody was holding one arm across her breasts, as she reached for her shirt, lying across David's desk.

Before he open his mouth, CJ said, "Darling, I'm going to make you a deal. I'll hide this film up, good and tight, once you turn over all my papers that you took. And I mean all. And if I ever see anything I wrote with your name on it, this film is going to be developed, with a copy sent to every good Lit program in the country."

"You wouldn't."

Arching a golden brown eyebrow, she dared him, "You wanna bet?"

With a smile for Jody, she dug a crumpled five from her pocket and tossed it on the desk. "That will cover your film, sweetie. Hopefully, you are as smart as you seem. If you are, you'd be wise to say the hell away from sharks like him. If you aren't, well..."

CJ shrugged, pocketed the film and walked away.

Thinking back to that little episode, nearly three months earlier, made CJ smile.

It had been the beginning of the end.

She had gotten her papers back, turned in her notice that she would leave at the end of the semester. And she had landed here.

CJ was going to forget all about teaching, all about David Armstrong, all about her life, if she had anything to do with it. CJ was going to forget about how good it had felt to sleep in bed with a warm male body next to hers and she was going to forget the belief in happily ever after had to end with a man.

And she was going to write a book.

Chapter Two

CJ's first trip to town involved a stop at the small grocery. The post office came first, where she filled out the needed forms for a post office box. She smiled vaguely and politely, sidestepping as many of the locals as she could, brushing off a few, and dealing with those she couldn't.

"So you're Professor Stivers' daughter," a small woman with cardinal-red hair said, smiling a wide welcoming smile that did little to cover the avid curiosity in her eyes. "We didn't see much of you back when your father died."

"I'm afraid I was too busy with his death to deal with being social," CJ replied, tucking her hand into her pockets.

"Why, of course, you were. I just meant that we never seen you around until then."

Arching one brow, CJ gave her best professor look, like the nosy bitch in front of her had been caught cheating on a final exam. Coolly, she stated, "My father and I were not close, Mrs. Fields."

With a nod, CJ made her goodbyes and walked away, leaving Mrs. Marcella Fields standing in the dust.

Biting back a sigh of frustration, CJ dipped her hands into her pockets as Cordelia Simmonds waylaid her again as she walked into the small grocery store. "I remember you, Chelsea Jane. You were here just for a little while a long time back. Loved the library."

The library, Mrs. Graham. At the mention of that, a real smile came out, and she held her hand to Cordelia. "I loved that library," she said. She didn't ask about Mrs. Graham. The woman had been ancient when CJ had been here twenty years before. There was no way she could still be around. And CJ wasn't quite ready to hear what she knew had to be true.

"I think I remember you, too. You ran the church bazaar that summer," she said, squinting one eye slightly as she tried to remember back. "You came out to the house every week, until Father agreed to make a donation."

Baldly, in the way only a very old person could get away with it, Cordelia said, "Your father wasn't a very generous man, was he, Chelsea Jane?"

A sad little smile tugged at her mouth and she said, "No. No, he wasn't."

"He didn't deserve a daughter like you, either," Cordelia mused, remembering the sad-eyed little girl who had been so eager to please. And never able to do it.

Chelsea didn't know what to say to that and she stood there, the awkward silence starting to settle. Before it got too bad, Cordelia patted her shoulder and said, "I'll be out in a few weeks for donations for the bazaar. Maybe we can have lunch when I come. You are looking well, Chelsea. Well, indeed."

CJ's cheeks were flushed as she took a cart from the corral, looking around the small store. She hadn't realized how pathetic she must have appeared to these people, motherless, her only parent a cold, uncaring man who didn't know the meaning of charity. Of course, not everybody remembered her. She'd only been seven when her mother had died, and she'd only spent a few months here.

Since John Stivers wasn't a social creature, the only time she saw others was when the housekeeper's daughter, Chrissie, had taken CJ into town to visit the library, and rare trips to the store.

With a sigh, she set about the task of trying to find her way through an unfamiliar store that didn't carry any of what she was used to.

And CJ asked herself, yet again, what in God's name she was doing back in Warren, Kentucky.

Settling into her bed, CJ gritted her teeth against the urge to take some sleeping pills. Last night, the night before, none had been pleasant. Bloody, disturbing dreams that she couldn't remember... She didn't want another one. But *damn* it, she was going to live here. She would. She could make this house her home, and she could and she would. Without the help of drugs.

The whisper of a sigh, a breath that smelled of roses, whispered through the room as she lowered herself to her pillow, but CJ barely noticed as she snuggled down under the covers and closed her eyes.

It wasn't long before she was dreaming again.

But it wasn't an unpleasant one... far from it...

Big warm hands, strong and calloused from hard work, stroked over her torso, up the curves of her breasts, pushing them together as he plumped the mounds together before taking one hard pebbled nipple in his mouth and suckling, each slow draw of his mouth echoing deep in her aching pussy.

CJ was aching and wet... One of his hands slid down to cup her and a rumble of male approval echoed through the room, racing along her skin. His thumb circled around her clit and she whimpered, rocking her hips against him, inviting him inside. Deep male laughter whispered through the room just before a soft voice asked, "Are you hungry, darlin'?" as he pushed one long finger deep inside.

"Please—" she keened sharply, digging her nails into his shoulders and sobbing as he started to pump his finger in and out of her dripping sheath.

"Oh, I'll please. I promise."

Forcing her lids to open, she stared up at him, seeing soft gray eyes, smoky and hot with hunger, set in an angelically beautiful face, tumbled curls falling around the bones that were cut just shy of being almost too beautiful for a man's face. His mouth, wide, sensual, was curved in a warm, hungry smile as he lowered his mouth down to hers, whispering, "I've been waiting, years and years, for you to come back."

"Luke, I'm sorry it took so long... Make love to me, please," she whimpered.

His body, long and strong, came down on hers, and his cock, thick and hard, probed at the entrance to her core before he started to take long, slow possession of her body. "Sweet, sweet woman," he murmured against her mouth. "Mine, mine... You'll never be taken away again."

"Never," she whispered as he started to thrust deep, his cock burying completely inside her, the rounded blunt head stroking so deep inside her, she could feel it in her heart, in her soul.

He shafted her slowly, pulling out, pushing back inside her pussy with slow, delicious thrusts as he nibbled and suckled on her breasts, shifting his weight to circle his thumb around her clit in just the right way. He brought his hand up and licked the cream from his thumb with a hungry groan before starting to ride her harder, pumping into her with stronger thrusts, until the heavy, wet sounds of him fucking her filled the room, mingled with the ragged sounds of her moaning his name, and his long, deep growl as he buried his face against her neck.

"Mine..." he muttered, driving deep.

“Mine...”

Digging his fingers into the soft curves of her ass, he rose up onto his knees and held her open, filling her with short, hard digs of his cock, staring into her eyes, while she stared up at him, into the beautiful, familiar face as she started to come, squeezing down around him and shuddering throughout her entire body.

His head fell back, the veins in his neck standing out, his lean, muscled chest gleaming under a fine coat of sweat as he pushed his thick, wetly gleam cock back inside one last time, rotating his hip in a slow, clockwise motion and stroking over the bundled nerve endings there as she screamed out his name as he came inside her, flooding her with his come.

“Lucas!”

“Lucas...”

“Lucas...”

She woke up murmuring his name, her body sated with the sweet, replete ache of sex, aching between her thighs as though she had just been taken in the sweetest way.

But CJ was alone in the bed.

And she didn't know a Lucas.

“What in the hell...” she muttered shakily. Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, she stood up, staring into the mirror at her reflection. She didn't look any different, but she sure as hell felt different. Emptier, like she had just realized she had lost something.

Lucas.

Who was he?

With a sigh, she shoved him out of her head as she showered and dressed. CJ had way too much to get done to be worrying about somebody from a dream. On the way out the door, she grabbed her notebook and pen from the dresser, determined to actually get some work done today.

Rounding the corner, her gold-streaked hair caught in a ponytail, CJ came to a halt as she spied the narrow door at the end of the hallway.

She had seen it before, just the previous night, but had been too busy to investigate.

Now, tucking the pen in her breast pocket, she stuck the notebook in her back pocket and crossed the hall. The doorknob was tiny, and the door seemed stuck at first.

Finally she wrestled it open, mentally making a note to have it fixed.

A long narrow set of stairs was revealed. Reaching out, she turned on the light, pleased when it revealed a whitewashed stairwell. Climbing the stairs, she kept her hand on the polished wood of the banister, grinning as she finally cleared the last step and found herself standing a huge, open space.

It didn't look like the kind of attic she would have expected. It was painted, bright and cheery, with light pouring through the dormer windows. Boxes and trunks were neatly arranged along the walls.

Some had her father's familiar handwriting on them.

Turning away from them, she went to investigate the older-looking trunks along the eastern corner. Hours later, surrounded by journals, books written back in the eighteen hundreds, cigar boxes, pipes, CJ was leaning up against an emptied trunk, dust streaking her face, her hair falling free from its ponytail.

Setting aside the journal, she got to her knees, moved closer to another trunk and tried to open it. This one didn't want to open. She fiddled with the lock, sat back on her heels when it didn't budge and muttered under her breath. Frustrated, she reached out, slammed the top of the trunk with her fist, preparing to clean up her mess.

She'd get a screwdriver and come back up later.

The trunks were full of all sorts of treasures. Journals, books, a trunk full of clothes so old she was afraid to touch them. Kneeling, she carefully stacked up the books and journals, setting one aside to take downstairs.

She rose a good half hour later, stretched her stiff body and turned to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

And the lid of the last trunk, the one that wouldn't open, was up.

Chills raced down her arms but she quickly banished the jitters, moving across the room, hugging the journal to her chest. Photographs. It was full of old photographs. Beneath those lay more leather bound books, journals most likely.

Leaning over, she started to grasp the top when a piercing pair of eyes caught her attention. She stilled, a gasp dying in her throat as she stared at the sepia-toned photograph on top. It was of a man, a stern-faced man with cold, almost cruel eyes. He didn't look like somebody CJ would want to know, that was certain.

She knew that the style of that time was not to smile at the camera, which resulted in some rather dull-looking portraits, but this man wasn't dull.

And she would bet her entire life savings that he was every bit as intimidating in life as he was on paper.

Which was sad.

Because he was one of the most gorgeous creatures she had ever seen in her life.

He had a lean, sculpted face, high cheekbones, a mouth she ached just looking at. Though his hair was slicked back, with pomade probably, the style couldn't quite hide the waves. She guessed the color was the sunny blond she had once tried to imitate. She couldn't discern anything about his eyes, but they were set in a strong-looking face with high cheekbones and an unsmiling mouth. The suit that stretched across his broad shoulders couldn't quite hide the fact that he was built.

All in all, he was one damn fine-looking man, especially considering he was dead.

The thought filled her with an odd sort of melancholy and she quickly lowered the trunk's lid, covering the unsmiling, handsome face.

The journal belonged to a Katherine Greene, the daughter of a local pastor back in 1843. She had been

sixteen when she had started this one, and CJ was completely enchanted.

Had they all been so guileless back then?

Turning the page, CJ read about the man Katherine was supposed to marry.

He is so handsome. Mama teases me how I blush every time he looks at me. My heart beats so fast, and I felt faint today when he took my hand to help me from the carriage.

We went for a ride today. It was a new carriage, riding so smooth and quiet. Not like Papa's wagon. And we went by ourselves. Mama and Papa trust him.

Of course, we've been engaged since I was just a baby. Our grandpapas fought in the war together, and our papas came to Kentucky together.

I hope Collin Lucas truly does care for me. Collin Lucas, everybody calls him Collin Lucas. But he's Lucas, my Lucas. He's always quiet, always very polite. He is just so sophisticated. And I feel like such a silly child around him. He's been to London and New York and Paris. Just last year, he brought me a parasol from Paris. I'm almost afraid to use it, it's so pretty.

He kisses me, in ways I know he isn't supposed to. I do not tell Mama. He has touched me before, on my breast, my hips, and then he stops and pulls away, laughing and telling me that I drive him to distraction.

That beautiful perfect man, and I can drive him to distraction.

Fancy that!

A year later there was another entry, on her eighteenth birthday.

Lucas made love to me today.

Oh...it was the sweetest thing. We went to the stream, our place. He laid me down under the oak tree. We went for a picnic, our own party. The ball is tomorrow. Today was ours.

He undressed me, so carefully, so gently—

CJ didn't even realize she had started to daydream...

The sound of running water filled her ears, sun shining down on her body as a man with sunny hair and loving eyes stripped away the layers of clothes from her body. "It is not fair for you, is it?" he murmured against her ear. "Your birthday, and I am the one opening the present?"

Her petticoats and corset fell away under skilled hands and he lifted her head in his hands, kissing her gently, lovingly, whispering one last time, "Are you certain?" as he wedged his thighs between hers. His mouth, hot and wet, closed over the hard, pebbled crown of her nipple.

Oh, she was certain. They had taken their playing further, but not this far. "Please, Lucas, please," she pleaded, reaching for him, digging her fingers into the hard, mounded muscles at his shoulders, along

his arms as he slid his thick, heavy sex along the wet folds between her thighs.

“Hold still, Katie,” he murmured as he surged forward, driving deep, breaking through her maidenhead, plunging his cock to the core of her womanhood as she screamed, sharp and hard. “Shhh. It will be fine. I know it hurts. But it will pass. You are wet and tight and soooo soft, so sweet.” Stroking his thumb against her clit, he asked, “Does that feel good?”

That gentle touch sent a lightning bolt streaking through her belly, and radiating out through the rest of her body, making the muscles in her cleft tighten down around the thick heavy shaft invading her in a sweet, delicious way as she arched into his touch. “Yes. Oh, please, Lucas, I want... I need...”

With a wicked smile, he asked, “What do you want?”

Thrashing her head, she said, “You, damn it. I want you to do something.” She slid her hands around to clutch at his side, opening her eyes and looking up at him. “Please.” Wriggling her hips, she tried to move around him, but it did little good.

Lucas lowered his head and whispered, “Would you like me to fuck you?”

Her eyes widened. “Ummm, what does that mean?”

He grinned, a flash of white teeth in his tanned face as he pulled out and surged back in. “Darlin’, it is a very, very naughty word for this.” And he repeated it, surging back in, again and again, until she was lifting her hips hungrily to his and panting, her face gleaming and her eyes wide with wonder.

And then he pressed his hips down against hers, stilling her frantic movements. “So, my love, my one true love, would you like me to fuck you?”

Katie glared up at him and pouted, “Damn it, why did you stop?”

Sulkily, he said, “Well, you haven’t told me that is what you want me to do.”

With a hoarse yell, she said, “Fuck me, please!”

With a rough laugh, he plunged into her, sinking his cock deep inside, lowering his mouth to her breast, sucking first one nipple deep, then the other, as Katie arched her hips up and took his cock deep, deep within the wet, aching well of her pussy, the burning fire of impending orgasm building inside her body, even though she didn’t recognize it.

With a sobbing cry, she threw her head back and came, clenching down around his cock and coming in slow rhythmic waves as Lucas started to pulse deep inside her, spilling hot washes of seed inside her pussy.

CJ came out the reverie, feeling strangely replete. Like the dream... Opening her eyes, she looked down at the journal. She hadn’t gotten past the page that mentioned Lucas making love to Katherine.

Slowly, she turned the fragile pages.

And there, two pages after, was a small paragraph, where he had teasingly told her about fucking, and how he had done it, and how he had teased her into using that naughty word.

CJ’s vision started to blur.

How had she known?

Oh, man.

She had read ahead without realizing it. That was all.

Simple.

But she wasn't convinced.

And she also didn't understand why she was falling for a man who was dead. Or why she was jealous of his lover.

He'd been dead over a century. Both of them.

Ridiculous, especially for a logical, mature woman.

Eyebrows rose when CJ drove her flashy little car into Warren. It was still a small town, once a fairly prosperous one thanks to the coal mining and the tobacco farms. Of course, the tobacco farms were suffering, and coal mining was reliable, easy money. It had turned into an antiques town, and several bed-and-breakfasts were thriving. Tourism was their main income now, and the townfolk were friendly.

They were also incredibly nosy, even for small-townners.

"That's her," Willa Monroe said, nodding to the long, slim woman with honey blonde hair. "She came into town a few months back and spoke with Dusty about painting that old house. Didn't so much as blink when he quoted a price."

"No wonder, look at the car." The stern-faced woman didn't so much as express a trace of envy, even though she would have cheerfully shaved her head bald to drive that car, just once. "She was here last week and was just as stuck up as you please."

The third lady laughed. Clair said, "She got cornered by Marcella Fields practically the minute she got out of the car. What kind of mood would that have left you in?"

"Not a nice one." Willa's graying blonde brows rose and she said softly, "I wonder how much she knows about that house."

Next to nothing, but CJ was ready to remedy that. After being stopped numerous times by the locals with greetings and subtle hints about her life and lifestyle, and some not so subtle, she finally found her way to the library.

The small woman who sat at the desk, thumbing through a well-worn book, looked up the moment CJ entered. Laying the book down, a beaming smile on her face, she said, "Chelsea Jane. How wonderful to see you again. My, what a lovely woman you've become."

It couldn't possibly be. Not after twenty years. But there she sat, her white hair piled into its simple bun, her glasses perched on her nose and her eyes twinkling like faded blue diamonds.

"Mrs. Graham," CJ whispered, delighted. She didn't so much as hesitate when the old woman came around the desk with her arms held open wide.

She still smelled of cinnamon and cookies, CJ thought. But she seemed so tiny. Her head didn't even

reach CJ's shoulder. She hadn't thought to see her here. Rosa Graham had been old even twenty years ago.

Guiding CJ through the library, she proudly pointed out the additions, as if she had done each one herself. She displayed the children's area and the area devoted to local writers and artists. Two writers, three different artists, a singer, a painter, and an old craftsman.

"Maybe we can add you someday," Mrs. Graham said, pointedly referring to the dream CJ had hesitantly revealed, when she had just been seven years old.

CJ hadn't told a soul why she was here. But it bubbled up out of her now, as if she could no longer keep it to herself. "I want to write a book. Books, lots of them. That's why I'm here."

"Nothing like a haunted house to get the imagination going," Rosa mused, linking her arm through CJ's and guiding her through the small sitting area.

Biting her lip, CJ asked, "Is... I mean, why have people always thought it haunted?"

"Because, Chelsea, honey, it is. It's a sad house. Sad things happened there a long time ago, awful things. And it's still waiting, for justice, for completion. Why, I'm not even sure we have anything about it, other than hearsay. The library wasn't even built until 1923. And my mother and father were in charge then."

"Yes, I remember. You used to sit in here reading as a child," CJ said, pausing to study a painting. It was of a tiny, delicate creature with yards of inky black hair and laughing eyes the color of violets. She wore a hoopskirt and one small hand held a fan. "Who is she?"

"One of my ancestors, Katherine Greene."

Katherine. Katherine Greene... "I've heard that name before."

White brows arched and rose. "Really? The Greene family is very prominent around here, and has always been, even back when that house was first built. In fact, Katherine was once engaged to the man who owned your house. They were so very in love. I believe she even lived there for a time."

"Did she marry him?"

"No, no, I don't believe she did," Rosa said softly before she turned away.

CJ's eyebrows rose and the little old lady changed the subject without blinking an eye. "There's a church picnic coming up in just two weeks. Why don't you come with me?"

"I'd like that," CJ said, glancing back to the painting before following Rosa back to the desk.

Once engaged to the man, but didn't marry him. Yet she lived there?

Later that night she went through all the journals, finding every one that belonged to Katie Greene. Eleven in all, from the time she was seven up until shortly after she turned eighteen. She wanted to read that last one, but started with the earliest one, written in 1834.

Those first few were those of any young child, pouting when she punished, daydreaming about what a grand lady she would become. About a puppy a young Collin Lucas Frost had given her. Collin Lucas.

Lucas...the name brought back that memory of her dream, days earlier, of a man with sunny blond hair and pale gray eyes.

Collin Lucas Frost.

Coincidence, CJ told herself, swallowing.

Collin's mama remarried today. I do not like her new husband. He shan't make her happy. Or Collin Lucas. He has very cold eyes, and I heard him be harsh to Collin Lucas while the boys were playing. A boy his age should not be running about like a hewligan. I do not know how to spell that, or what a hewligan is. But I do not think it is a nice thing.

His name is Peter Davenport and he is from Georgia. He has funny whiskers that cover his whole face and I think his face would break should he ever smile.

How can such a man make Collin Lucas and his mama happy?

Is that what happened? CJ wondered as she set the journal aside. It was written in 1836, when Katie had been nine. She imagined Collin Lucas would have been probably twelve. Still young, still a child. But obviously he wasn't allowed to remain a child long after.

Hardly aware her eyes were closing, she drifted into sleep, one hand resting limply on her belly, the other curling by her cheek.

A sound like a sob filled the room and the cover of the journal opened, while CJ lay sleeping. Her head thrashed back and forth on the pillow as the pages of the book started to turn, slowly at first, and then faster.

CJ's breathing became shallow and harsh as a murmur fell from her lips. The energy in the room became angry, oppressive, and the book flew off the nightstand and crashed against the wall across the room.

CJ yelped and sat straight, all vestiges of sleep leaving her.

She stared in shock across the room as the book fell to the floor. Her eyes widened, a cold hand seemed to grip her around her heart as an unseen presence started to turn the pages.

White-faced, her eyes huge, CJ whispered, "What's going on?"

All she wanted to do was run screaming from the house, but to get downstairs, she'd have to get out of bed and walk by the book that continued to have its pages turned.

Her breath catching in her throat, she said, "Who's there?" Her voice sounded pathetic, even to her own ears, pathetic and scared. Memories of a small child locked in the library surfaced and she tumbled free of the bed, rising to her feet, hands clenched at her sides.

"I don't know who you are, but GO AWAY!" she said, her voice louder, stronger this time.

The air became so thick, CJ could hardly even gasp a breath into her lungs. And then she became aware of a second presence, a gentler one. A sound like a laugh filled the air.

And slowly the heavy presence started to fade, leaving CJ standing in the room, hands clenched into fists,

and the scent of rose water filling the air. A soft, gentle sensation seemed to stroke her hair and a soft wordless murmur filled the air.

And then that presence abated, leaving her alone to wonder if she had lost her mind.

Chapter Three

With gargantuan effort, CJ rose from bed after a sleepless night, after convincing herself she had just had a nightmare. Dreams could seem so real, and that's all this had been.

Of course, the torn pages and loose binding of the journal had her hands shaking as she scooped it off the floor.

She had thrown it in her sleep. That's all there was to it.

But after she dressed, she took her car keys and drove into town.

Less than an hour after rising, she sat across from Rosa Graham at the Tea Kettle, a small cafe just across the common from the library and asked, "Why did you say my house was haunted?"

"Darling, you told me yourself you thought there was a very unhappy ghost there," Rosa said, sipping delicately at her tea.

"Nobody seems to want to talk about this," she whispered, shaking her head. "People love to talk about haunted houses, especially when the owner is a single young woman. What happened in that house?"

Sighing, Rosa set her cup down, dabbed at her pale pink-tinted mouth before saying, "It was built by a Collin Jacob Frost in 1800. A fine house, still standing, still beautiful after two hundred years. He died about five years later from cholera, I believe. He had just one child, a son, Collin Jacob Frost, Junior. The younger Frost married the daughter of a general, Lucas Miller. Her name was Alice and word has it, she was as beautiful as one of God's own angels. That was in, oh, 1818, I believe. Collin had fought in the war of 1812 with a childhood friend, John Greene. John became a pastor after the war, and Collin Jacob became a very well-to-do business man. His father had come from old money and the younger man was just as good at earning it as spending it. He dabbled in the coal mines, in tobacco, you name it. They farmed that land, and somehow they made a profit when not too many others around here could. Of course, his father had kept slaves, but in 1820, right before his wife became pregnant, he freed them. Slavery just didn't sit right with him.

"His freed slaves stayed with him, for the most part. And they worked even harder as free men than they had as slaves. From what I can tell, he was a fine man."

Rosa paused, sipping at her tea. "They had a son, Alice and Collin Jacob, named him Collin Lucas, after their fathers. They thrived, became one of the wealthiest families in Kentucky. Of course, word has it that Collin Jacob liked to gamble, liked his games a little risky. He could have gotten some of that money by rather questionable means.

"He died in 1830, when Collin was seven. He'd caught pneumonia and just couldn't kick it. Now, Paston Green and Collin Jacob had this idea in their heads, and not a thing would make them change their minds. So they did what they felt they must, in order to get what they wanted. They made their wills, leaving it so that things would be as they wished them or the families got nothing. They wanted their families joined, and they intended to see that it happened. Collin Jacob left Collin Lucas the entirety of his holdings, leaving his mother as his benefactor and caretaker until he reached eighteen. The co-caretaker

was Pastor Greene. Collin knew it was likely his wife would eventually remarry and he wanted his legacy left intact for his son, which is why they did it that way.

“There was only one stipulation. When Katherine Greene, John’s daughter, reached eighteen, she and Collin Lucas would marry. They so badly wanted their families united.”

CJ listened raptly, ignoring the looks coming their way as Rosa continued, “Sometime in the 1830s, Alice did remarry. To a complete and total bastard, pardon my French. Peter Davenport liked to beat his slaves, word has it, and was infuriated that the workers on the Frost land were freemen, paid freemen at that. But he couldn’t change a thing without the consent from Pastor Greene.

“I’m not quite sure why Alice married him. Maybe she was just lonely and he courted her the right way. Nevertheless, my grandmother told me that he beat her terribly, right up until Collin Lucas was old enough to stop him. Collin Lucas came across Davenport beating her, and he beat Davenport something awful and damn near killed him, in the library of your house. Davenport left after that, but a few months later he up and comes back, likely to find Collin Lucas, but I don’t rightly know, and ends up dying there somehow, in that library.”

CJ gasped, one hand going to her mouth.

Nodding her gray head slowly, Rosa said, “I imagine it’s his presence you feel in there. I do know Davenport didn’t die a happy man, and he didn’t die easily. Young Collin beat the living daylights out of him and left him for dead while he took his mama for medical attention. It turns out she was with child. Davenport wanted the plantation for his child and Alice couldn’t get him to understand that the plantation was already legally and rightfully Collin’s.

“He beat the child out of her. She almost died.”

In hushed tones, CJ related what happened the previous night, what she had convinced herself was little more than a dream.

“Davenport didn’t like the Greens. Tried to scare little Katie out of marrying Collin, told her how cruel he was, and that he liked to run around. He wasn’t cruel, and as for the running, well, he wasn’t married at the time and he was a healthy young man. Of course, Katie didn’t believe Davenport,” Rosa said, absently stirring her now cold tea.

“Alice died in that house, in the ladies’ parlor, sometime in 1845 or 1846. From what I’ve been told, I’d say she was a kind, gracious lady. I’d imagine she was the other presence you felt.”

Carefully, Rosa eased her old body out of the booth. “I don’t doubt it scared you something awful, Chelsea Jane. But you have nothing to fear from that house. Davenport can’t hurt you. Scare you, yes, if you let him. But you aren’t in any danger.”

While CJ was absorbing this, Rosa laid her money on the table and walked away, mighty fast for a woman of her advanced years. She was already to the door when CJ jerked out of her reverie and called out, “Wait! Whatever happened to Collin Lucas?”

But the old woman pretended not to hear.

“Damn it, that is *it!*”

Slamming money down on the table, she hopped up and took off after the old woman, running down Main Street, dodging the car that was crossing the road and catching up with Mrs. Graham just before she unlocked her car. “I want to know what happened in my house. And you know. Don’t tell me you

don't."

Mrs. Graham smiled. "Why do you want to know so bad?"

With a frustrated groan, she said, "I have to. I have dreams, when I sleep, when I'm awake. Of a man...his name is Lucas. But I've never met him before in my life. I don't understand it, but I think you do. Damn it. *Tell me.*"

There was an odd gleam in her eyes. But Mrs. Graham nodded slowly and said, "Young Katie Green loved Collin Lucas Frost with all of her heart. And he loved her. Completely, intently. They were to wed the fall after she turned eighteen. She turned eighteen in May. The wedding was set for fall, so it wouldn't be so dreadful hot." Her eyes turned inward, thinking as she started to walk. "She was my great-grandmother's baby sister. As sweet and lovable as they come. Everybody adored her, I'm told. And so many men wanted her. But she was always for Collin."

Something sick started to grow inside CJ's belly as they walked.

Rosa smiled softly. "I always loved that portrait of her—the one you saw in the library. I used to think she was an angel, when I was young. I had met or heard so much about my other aunts and uncles. But never about her. I badgered my mama something fierce until she finally told me the story, sometime...oh, I think I was probably twenty or so, before she thought I could hear such a terrible tale." Tears welled in those faded blue eyes and she whispered, "Sometimes, I do wish that I had never heard it. Such a heartbreaking story."

That sick, sour feeling in CJ's belly grew, locking her throat, swarming in her mind. Did she *really* have to know this?

Then she thought of the happiness she had read in Katie's journals, and she knew. *Yes.* She had to know.

"A few weeks after turned eighteen, Katie had to go live at Frost plantation. There was a terrible outbreak of scarlet fever and her mother and father went to help care for the people in town, as a pastor will do. But he wouldn't risk his youngest daughter. All his other children had married away and left home. And he wouldn't risk Katie—he loved that girl so.

"So he talked it over with Alice, Collin's mama. Collin was in and out on business all the time, and he was building his own place, adjoining on the back piece of land of your land. He wouldn't be living in that place with Davenport, you see. He hated him with a passion. Nobody thought anything ill of Katie staying there, away from town, and the fever for a while.

"But it put her near Davenport. And he started to want her, like all men did. And his wants were violent ones. He hid it, at first."

CJ felt her belly start to roil and she slowed her steps a little, taking a deep breath. Looking around, she realized they had come to a cemetery, and Rosa had led her to the older section and was guiding her even now to someplace in particular.

"But then he started talking to her, whispering to her. Then touching her. She started writing to Collin, but mail in those times was slow and unpredictable. By the time the letters found Collin, it was rather late. He was already making his way home. Katie was afraid to say anything to her parents for fear of causing them shame. So many things, back then, it should have been the man's shame, and it shamed the woman and the family instead."

“Did he rape her?” CJ asked, the words coming from frozen vocal cords.

“No,” Rosa said softly. “Though he would have. Alice intervened that last night, coming into the library where Katie had gone to read, when she heard the struggling, and Katie struggled quite well for a gently reared lady, broke his nose and kicked him rather well in the balls. Alice hit him with a brandy decanter and ran to help Katie.” The old woman spoke the words so baldly that for a moment, CJ smiled. “Davenport was stunned, but only for a moment. Alice didn’t fare so well. He beat her, and badly.

“Collin arrived home to see him standing over his mother’s broken body, the blood from her miscarried child staining her nightgown, and Katie running from the house screaming for help.”

Turning around, Rosa said, “We’re here. I’d like to say that it all ended there.”

She looked down at the gently waving grass, carefully tended, and flowers that always bloomed. “I truly would like to say that. Alice had to confide in somebody, and it was Katie’s mama who came to stay with her for several days, helping her and Katie until Alice was stronger.”

Rosa reached down one hand to stroke the worn old headstone, her voice thick with tears as she said, “Somebody always cares for her grave, and his mother’s. I come once a month. To bring flowers for him. We don’t rightly know who cares for the ladies.”

CJ felt a cold chill run through her as she looked down and saw the dates on the joining graves.

Collin Lucas Frost

July 27, 1823 – July 27, 1844

Katherine Jane Frost

May 5 1826 – July 27, 1844

Denied forever in life. Together forever in death.

Feeling cold, she asked, “What happened?”

“Davenport happened. He came back a few months later, full of fire, fury, madness. And he found them together, making love by the fire in the library. And he told Collin that if he came out of the house, he would leave Katie alone, and not kill her. Collin didn’t believe him, but he thought that if he got Davenport away, he’d have a chance to disarm him, protect his love. It didn’t work. There was a couple of men Davenport had paid—they killed Collin the moment he stepped foot off Frost property and Davenport walked back up there, intent on getting Katie and raping her, taking her.”

CJ was stock stiff with fury, shock, sorrow, and something else... *Memory*, standing in front of the window, seeing a man strut back up to the house, hearing a gunshot, feeling in her heart, in her gut, knowing he was gone...*nooooo...*

“But Alice was there. She had been upstairs sleeping when Davenport came in. She felt it, in her heart, knew he had taken her son. And she lost all fear, all life. She took up the rifle of her husband, her true husband, Collin’s father. And she loaded it before she went downstairs, the way Collin Jacob had shown her.

“By the time Davenport had gotten back inside, she was downstairs, the rifle hidden in her nightgown. He didn’t even glance her way as he went to get Katie.”

CJ wasn’t even listening anymore. She could see it, feel it, remember it...through the open door seeing Alice, almost like a mother standing there, her face stark white with shared grief, and something else... *I will protect you...*

“It does not matter,” Katie whispered. “Collin is gone.”

“Damn right,” Davenport bragged. “Dead and gone. Your excellent ass is mine now. Get up and let me see what is mine.”

“Get away from her,” Alice rasped, the words sounding cold and alien as she moved slowly into the room, one arm hanging oddly behind her. “You took my son. You won’t have his wife.”

“They never married. She’ll be mine.”

“They were married in soul. Married in the eyes of God, if not man. In their eyes, they were wed and that is good enough for me,” Alice said, her voice shaking with grief, with fury, her eyes glittering and bright. “Get away from her. I’ll not be telling you again.”

“Shut up, you crazy bitch,” Davenport snapped, whirling on her.

That was when she raised the rifle. And shot.

CJ’s eyes opened and she looked at Rosa. “Katie killed herself, didn’t she?”

“We can’t exactly say that,” Rosa said quietly, turning back to the grave. “When they went to get Collin’s body, nobody could find her. She was found by him, curled up around him. And gone, just gone. Not a mark on her, but she was dead. Her sisters think maybe she willed it upon herself. At least that is what my mama told me. Perhaps...you could enlighten me. Someday.” The old woman’s eyes, so faded, sharpened briefly before she walked away.

The graves drew her back. Time after time, day after day. After the fifth visit in a week, she concluded she was obsessed. Unsure why, uncaring, CJ decided she would let it run its course as she straightened the flowers and rose, dusting her knees off. Daisies were the flowers Lucas liked best, so that was what she brought.

And how do you know what flowers he liked? Katie never wrote that, part of her taunted.

CJ wondered if she’d get picked up for an obscene gesture if she flipped herself the bird.

Halfway back, she decided she was in no hurry to get home, so CJ settled on a rock with one of the few journals left, sipping water from her bottle and enjoying the sunshine, the quiet, and the relative peace, for the time being.

“Hello.”

She swallowed a shriek as she shot to her feet and turned around. CJ was incredibly jumpy after the past

few nights.

Meeting the soft gray eyes just a few feet away, she felt a flush staining her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't hear you."

"No. You looked kind of preoccupied."

CJ was preoccupied all right. Staring into those dove gray eyes, she felt as though she were drowning. My, my, my, she thought, her palms just the slightest bit damp.

"I'm Luke," he said, his voice soft and mellow, a soft Southern drawl that seemed to reach out and stroke her.

She held her hand out hesitantly, taking his as she said, "CJ."

"What does the Cee Jay stand for?" he asked, still holding her hand.

"Chelsea Jane." His hand was warm, calloused, and strong. In a blink, she was imagining lying back on the warm grass and feeling those hands stroke over her.

He was still holding her hand as a smile broke out, creases appearing in his cheeks. "I like that. Chelsea. Do you live around here, too? I haven't seen you before."

"I live in the old Royal Oaks house," she said, goose bumps forming on her flesh as he stroked her wrist with his thumb.

"Are you the new owner?" he asked, golden brows rising. He had hair the color of summer wheat, golden blond, shot through with streaks of near white. And those eyes...

Jerking her wandering mind back, CJ said, "Sort of. My father left the house to me after he died a few years ago. I decided recently to come down here."

"Down here?" he asked, squeezing her hand once more before releasing it. "I knew it. You're a Yank."

Laughing, she tucked her tingling hand into her pocket. "I'm only from across the river. Just a little bit of Yank. And actually, I grew up in Louisville."

"Hmm. I guess that's not too bad," Luke said, smiling at her. His mouth, a sculpted thing of near perfection, curved up at one corner and he stated, "You are a very lovely woman, Chelsea Jane."

Her cheeks flushed and her heart started dancing in her chest as she stuttered out a thank you.

"What is it you're reading?" he asked, grinning mischievously at her obvious embarrassment.

"Just some old journals I found up in the attic," she said, glancing down at the book as though she had forgotten she held it.

"Ah. Your father's?" Luke asked, studying her closely, keeping an easy smile on his face, though nothing inside him felt easy as he studied her. He had been watching, and waiting, for a long time.

It was *her*.

So very different.

But *her*.

CJ laughed. When she did, it had her golden brown eyes sparkling. Her skin had a naturally dusky hue to it, and Luke wondered idly if the flesh of her torso was the same sun-kissed tone. Dragging his eyes back up, he had to smile in return as CJ said, “My father keeping journals? Not in this lifetime. You usually keep a journal to write down your innermost thoughts and feelings. And my father had no thoughts or feelings that didn’t pertain to his studies.”

“Sounds like a rather sad man,” Luke noted, wondering what such a father had been like for this girl.

“Yeah. I guess he was.” Her mouth pursed thoughtfully as she studied the journal she held. “Actually, the journals all belong to a girl who lived more than a hundred years ago. My father would probably have me beaten simply for touching them.”

“Things were meant to be enjoyed, not locked in a museum,” Luke said, eyeing the journal with interest. “I imagine your father probably felt otherwise.”

“Yes.” CJ’s head came up and she looked him square in the eye. “Would you like to come up and see the house?”

Yes...

That, he wanted more than anything. But the walls were still there. He could feel them, in his soul, in a way Luke really couldn’t describe. It just wasn’t time yet. It would be though, and soon. And that evil, foul soul that lingered to this day wouldn’t be able to keep him out.

A slow, sweet smile came to his face and he shook his head. “I’d love to, but I’m afraid I’ve got some things to get done.” Holding his hand out, he said, “I enjoyed meeting you, Chelsea Jane.” *More than you can possibly know...*

Moments later, he disappeared down a path that led into the trees, glancing back only once, meeting her eyes. The look in her eyes had heat racing down his spine, striking him square in the groin. Interest, very female interest.

Luke wanted to meet up with Chelsea Jane again, and soon.

Very, very soon.

The flowers were blooming well, cared for and happy.

His mother wasn’t there anymore. She had moved on. And Luke was happy for that.

Katie wasn’t there anymore either. She hadn’t moved on, though.

She had finally, *finally*, come back to him.

Now he just had to convince her of that.

After so many years of waiting for her to get past the pain, the violence, the fear, she was back.

And so much stronger.

Ah, these times though, it seemed they bred stronger women.

Rising, his pants stretching tight across his thighs, Luke looked around. Nobody was out. None ventured

to the cemetery at night. With a smile, he thought, none except a ghost, that is.

CJ dreamed again that night, of Lucas and Katie.

Of CJ and a man with wind-tossed blond hair, gray eyes, a wicked grin, *Lucas...*

Luke.

She jerked awake in the bed with a yelp. "Luke. Lucas."

"I'm going crazy."

You're not Katie. He's not Collin Lucas.

Then why do you still remember his touch on your body, the way the stream looks and you've never even been there? The house he built? I bet you could find it and it will look the same.

"No, it will be falling to ruins, already gone, or made into a subdivision. Or you're even more crazy than you think for talking to yourself, because it won't *be* there. It doesn't exist."

Are you afraid to find out?

So she climbed from bed...early, early. The angry, oppressive presence weighed down, heavier than before the moment she climbed from bed, almost as if it was holding her in her place. A lesser-willed person may have stayed in bed, under the covers. Lifting her eyes, she stared at where it felt the heaviest. "Peter Davenport, go straight to hell. You can't stop me from trying to find him. And if it's him, if I'm not crazy, I'm bringing him here, bringing him *home*."

A cold wind slammed her in the face, knocking her back a step. "Yes, *home*. This is *his* home. And you've always known it. He will come back here."

Doors started to slam as she got dressed, and she could feel wind whipping all around her. The calm, soothing presence tried to gather itself around her, as though to calm her, but CJ shook her head. "I'm not afraid of him. He's a dead body in the ground. He can't actually hurt me. I'm here, he isn't. *Lucas* is here as well, and he knows it. That is what really burns his ass."

And she walked out of the house, wearing khaki shorts, a tank top for when it warmed up, a zip-up sweater over it for now. With her backpack slung over her shoulder, she headed away from the house, hopefully for the last time alone. Some of the later journals were inside the backpack, including the one from Katie's birthday. Doors were still banging, but once she got past her car, they stopped.

She just walked, letting her feet and some source of buried memories guide her. Reliving other memories, memories of strong hands on her body, Lucas chasing her through the woods as she squealed with laughter. And he would catch her, pin her against her tree and kiss her breathless, sliding his hands up her skirt, shredding her pantaloons, driving his stiff cock inside her while she screamed out his name.

His soft, husky voice rolling over her as he licked and ate from her pussy, "Soft sweet, creamy thing you are, Katie, I want you. Love you, always mine."

And Katie, kneeling before him, taking his cock in her mouth as he stared down at her with dark, shuttered eyes, his face, that beautiful face locked in a mask of ecstasy that made her scorch and burn as

she started to plunge her fingers into her own dripping core.

Rushing water...in a daze, CJ blinked her eyes and looked around. She was here.

The stream.

And tears filled her eyes. With the back of her hand pressed against her mouth, she stared at the spot under a towering oak. It had just been a sapling then, but it was there, right *there*, where she had lain, as Katie, while Collin Lucas Frost had made love to her for the first time.

More than a hundred years ago.

Damn it, she had been here before.

And yet, she had never seen this place in her life.

Chapter Four

Luke moved through the kitchen, chewing absently on a tasteless sandwich. Tasteless, bland. Everything was tasteless, colorless. Lifeless.

Except for the woman.

CJ.

She had color and life.

It was her, his love, reborn into that body. Yet something was different. Of course, he was different, too.

He had woken in this body—not quite his, different, but not—decades and decades ago, and shambled through nearly thirty years without thinking, not aging, not changing, not remembering. And then he had seen a woman, older, but still vaguely similar to Katie. Megan Graham, her niece. And he started to remember. Once he had remembered, he found the graves. Oh, they were cared for. Basically. Very basically.

He couldn't go home, not to the plantation. It was closed to him. Once Katie was back at his side, he could go home. How he knew that, he wasn't sure, but he knew. And Davenport...*Davenport*... Rage flooded him even now as he thought of him. He knew what had happened. Through the years he had learned, though for the longest time he had thought the worst.

Poor Mama.

And his Katie. Sweet, lovely Katie.

Both of them lost to him.

Davenport, you fucking bastard.

It was one night while he was putting flowers down on Katie's grave that he felt her whisper his name. "Lucas? Collin Lucas?"

But she wasn't *here*...

It was like she was lost.

And searching.

So he just had to wait.

And keep waiting.

For more than a century and a half, he had been waiting, and finally...

Glancing up, he saw her. A flash of gold on her upswept ponytail. She was walking across his land, calmly, slowly, confidently. Looking around like she knew vaguely where she was...like she *remembered*...

Slowly, Luke stood up and moved away from the table, over to the door.

And now he waited again, but just for a few minutes. As she got closer, crossing the acres, he left his house and stood on the porch, leaning one shoulder negligently against a white post as he watched her.

Chelsea Jane moved with the confident easy grace of a modern woman, one who knew where she was going in life, what she wanted from it, and how she would get it. And as she met his eyes, she studied him appraisingly, with masked eyes, and he wasn't sure he liked *that* part. Katie had always been so easy to read. He didn't like knowing that this woman hid thoughts from him. Why she wanted to.

When she came to a stop in front of him, her first words were delivered blandly, casually, as she dusted her hands off. "You're most likely going to think I'm insane. And up until recently, I've been the picture of normalcy in life."

Quirking a brow at her, Luke decided that wasn't exactly what he had been expecting from her. "Well, I've seen quite a few odd things in my life, Chelsea Jane. Why don't you give me a try?"

"Actually that's just what I'm here to do." Then she blushed and she clapped a hand over her mouth as if mortified. "Oh, man. I can't believe I just said that."

Heat shot through his body and his cock stiffened as he straightened, pushing away from the post. Sliding his gaze down the length of her body and back up again, he met her eyes levelly and said gruffly, "I'd be more than happy to oblige. Care to come inside first?"

"Damn it, that's not what I meant to say...at least not first," she said, flustered, blowing her bangs out of her eyes. Her eyes, warm and golden, were glittering in her embarrassment and she shifted from one foot to the other. "I'm trying to...to find some information about somebody. His name was Collin Lucas Frost, and his bride's name was Katherine Greene."

She'd pieced together quite a bit, Luke thought as he moved down the stairs. "I don't go into town much. And I'm no historian. I'm afraid I can't help you much, Chelsea Jane. But why don't you come inside anyway—"

He reached for her arm just as she stepped up to him and whispered against his mouth, "Don't tell me that, *Lucas*. I dream of you at night, before I even saw you. And you know why. I can see it in your eyes."

Any attempt to speak died as she slanted her mouth across his.

The taste of her, after so many years, flooded his senses and Luke was lost. With a savage groan, he grabbed her roughly and pulled her against him, yanking her hair down and burying his hand in the masses of sunlit caramel blonde as he took her down to the sun-warmed grass, struggling out of his shirt and

tossing it down on the grass before jerking the straps of the backpack down her arms and urging her backward, all without breaking contact with her mouth.

Keening hungrily in her throat, her arms locked around his neck. Luke wanted to bellow out with triumph as he slid one hand inside her shorts and found her, wet and waiting for him. Stripping her shorts away, he freed himself and drove inside, pushing relentlessly deeper until he was lodged balls-deep in the sweet, wet well of her pussy, the slick, satiny tissues closing eagerly, tightly around him and hugging him in a snug hold as he tore his mouth from hers to suck air into his starving lungs.

“Lucas, Luke,” she sobbed, pressing her brow against his as her body shuddered under his.

The sweet, silken grasp of her creamy sheath convulsed and Luke groaned, pulling out and sinking back in, shuddering as she caressed each throb of his aching cock. “Shhh...it’s okay. You’re here. That’s all that matters now. My love, my own true love. You’re back, and you’re mine, always.”

“Luke, please.”

With a wicked grin, he teased, “Do you remember what to say?”

“Fuck me,” she moaned, drawing her thighs up and hugging his hips, tightening the muscles in her pussy around his cock and making him shudder. His eyes crossed at the sheer pleasure of it and he groaned. “Baby, don’t do that.”

“Damn it, Luke, please!”

“Oh, I’ll please you,” he purred into her ear, pulling his cock out and sinking back in, shifting his weight so he could stroke his thumb over the tight, swollen bud of her clit, over and over again, the sweet cream coating his thumb, scenting the air and driving him mad. “I’ll please you, I promise.” He plunged in, deep and hard, her scream echoing in the air as she started to come around him in quick, hard waves that stole his breath.

He held back, gritting his teeth and riding her through it, and then he pulled out of her, still stiff, hard and aching. “I’m not done...” he murmured against her ear. Scooping her into his arms, he carried her into the house, up the stairs and into the bed.

CJ stared up at him as he spread her thighs and settled on his belly between them. “I’ve dreamed, for years, and years, of doing this again, Chelsea Jane,” he murmured, pressing his mouth, that firm, sculpted mouth, against her thigh as one hand slid under her thigh, her bottom, cupping the cheek of ass in his hand and holding her. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve needed this.”

The heat in his eyes, the sheer, unadulterated hunger, stole her breath and had her heart hammering against her ribcage as he lowered his mouth to the wet, aching folds between her thighs. One long slow lick, and then he flicked his tongue around the bud of her clit, before stroking up and down her slit again. One stroke of his thumb opened her folds and he pierced her with his tongue, pushing it deep inside and she whimpered, his hands spreading the cheeks of her ass apart, stroking down the dark crevice there as his mouth moved lower and lower.

His hand moved between her thighs. Shifting again, he fastened his mouth on her clit and started to suckle, drawing it deep as he started to slowly fuck her with his fingers. And his other hand...it had moved and was gathering cream from her pussy, spreading it lower and lower.

Oh...pushing ever so slowly inside the tightly puckered hole of her anus. So slowly...stretching her

gently, the bite of it arching her up against his mouth as she started to come.

She screamed and arched, bucking against his mouth and riding his fingers, unaware she taking more and more of his finger slowly inside her ass as she rode him. “*Luke!*”

“Shh...” he murmured, pushing slowly in and out, stretching her, working her as she came.

Her lashes fluttered open in time to see him stripping out of the jeans he had tugged back up when he had carried her inside. Coming down on her, he drove inside, catching her thighs wide and surging deep, driving into her hard and fast, covering her mouth with his and swallowing the scream that started to fall from her lips.

His chest, pressed against hers, was hot, burning, his heart, slamming against her, his chest moving raggedly with each breath he took as he drove deeply inside her cleft, riding her roughly, holding her thighs wide and open. CJ could taste herself on his mouth, and underneath it, him, a taste that was so bizarrely familiar and so damn necessary, she didn’t know how she had survived this long without it.

Her heart trembled as she felt herself start to come again.

And he moaned her name against her lips as he started to jet off inside her.

“When did you start to remember?”

Snuggling her cheek against the warm, smooth vault of his chest, she murmured, “About a week after I came back. I started having dreams. Then I was reading one of her journals and I started daydreaming. I knew how it ended before I finished it—exactly how it ended. I thought I was losing my mind.”

Threading his hand through her hair, Luke pressed his lips to her brow. “I’ve been waiting so damn long.” A soft laugh escaped him and he murmured, “I think I’ve lost track of how long I’ve been here.”

“You have to come home, you know that, don’t you?”

With a slow, feral smile, and his eyes gleaming, Luke responded, “I’ve just been waiting for the doors to open to me again.”

Chapter Five

Their hands linked loosely together, Luke and CJ stood at the back gate, the closest he had been to the plantation in more than a century. “He knows who I am,” CJ said softly. Fear, remembered fear, was started to brew in her gut as she stared at the house. Even though the day was bright and it was just past noon, a shadow had seemed to cast itself over the house and the oppressive weight of it was already spreading to her.

“Of course he does, love. But he wasn’t able to scare you away. That must have pissed him off something awful.” Glancing at her, his dove-gray eyes softened as he studied her face. “I’m sorry I didn’t come back sooner, and keep him away from you completely.”

CJ flushed. It wasn’t right, that he apologize for that. What Davenport had done had been Davenport’s wrong. “Don’t. Katherine Greene had other people she could have told, other people she could have spoken to. She could have gone back to her parents’ house, or to stay with family in another county. She

chose to stay at the plantation. It wasn't his...or your fault for her silence."

He laughed. "It was another life ago, wasn't it? Even for me. And we will leave it that way...after I settle an old score."

Through the gate they went, and CJ's grip on his hand tightened and the weight on her shoulders, in her chest, grew with every step. More memories from that last night flashed through her mind—hearing the gunshots from outside, watching Davenport swagger back up to the house through the rain, seeing him staring at her through the thin cotton of her nightrail as she stared at him, horrified, shocked, and grieving.

Lucas was gone...in her heart she knew it, and she had already started to die.

"Shhh..." Luke whispered as they mounted the stairs.

She scrubbed the tears away from her face and sucked in a breath, stilling the gasping sobs that had started to rack her body. CJ wasn't going to let Davenport see her like this. He'd see it as fear, not grief, not pain.

The house was oppressively silent as they went through the door and CJ flinched at the sound of Luke closing the door behind them.

Get out of my house...

The malevolent voice filled the air and Luke's mouth curled in a mean smile as he shook his head. Holding firm to CJ's hand, he said levelly, "Davenport, you bastard, it's my house. It was always mine. You take your dead carcass out and be done with it."

It is mine.

She's mine. I've been torturing the little bitch since she was a child. I'll torture her until she's old and gray, and do the same in her next life.

CJ snorted. "A little girl is much easier to scare than I am. Do your worst."

Oh, I will. And I'll take him away from you again.

The power in the house started to converge in one spot, swirling and tightening and blurring together as the windows rattled and doors began to slam. High-pitched, otherworldly shrieks rent the air and CJ clapped her hands over her ears, but Luke just stood there, hands loose and ready at his sides, as he waited.

Waited for what?

What was going on?

Everything went black inside the house. In full daylight. When the darkness finally lifted, some thick fog obscured everything and CJ could barely see Luke. Reaching for him, she felt his hand meeting hers and he moved her, nudging her back against the grand stairwell. "Stay here, love. Promise? This has to be mine this time," he murmured against her mouth.

"What's going—?"

A laugh filled the hall, low, evil, familiar. And *real*...

As the fog drifted slightly clearer, a man's form was visible as he moved closer. Tall, stocky, with the

long sideburns and slicked-back hairstyle from the 1840s. He wore his long coat open over a half-unbuttoned shirt, and breeches tucked into black knee-high boots that had a shine that became more and more apparent as he sauntered closer.

“Remember me, Katherine?” he drawled in a thick Southern voice. A cruel, cold voice that made her skin shudder and crawl.

Dear God in Heaven, she prayed silently as her knees threatened to give. *Give me strength*.

Yes, she remembered him. Completely. He had terrorized a girl of eighteen whose only experience with men had been with a man who had loved her, who was gentle and considerate and patient. Davenport had pinned her against walls, pinched her roughly, forced her to her knees and shoved her face against his crotch while telling her he'd like to use his slave's crop on her back.

He had paced outside her room for hours on end when she locked herself inside, and once had even busted the door down when Alice hadn't been home. Davenport had totally and completely terrorized her, until she jumped at her own shadow.

The night Collin Lucas returned, Davenport had pinned her down in the library and ripped her clothes off, tying her with strips from her petticoat, holding her down with his boot on her belly. As he fell down atop her, that was when Alice came in the room, her eyes wide with fright, fear, and shock.

CJ thought she could still feel the cold splash of brandy as it struck her face, splattered her arms tied to the legs of a chair, the stinging little bites of glass that flew from the leaded crystal, and Davenport's furious roar.

“She's afraid... I can feel it,” he rumbled, laughing.

With a smile, CJ opened her eyes. “You were kept from me twice, and both times by a woman. What makes you think you can win this time?”

The tinkling sound of a woman's laughter filled the air as Luke smiled at CJ. Davenport hissed at her. “Bitch!”

The men lunged, Davenport for Luke. But Luke went for the old, gleaming sword that hung over the coat tree in the hall, the one Collin's great-grandfather had carried in the Revolutionary War. Whirling on his heel, he stepped forward and plunged the sword hilt deep into Davenport's chest. No heart beat there, but as the sharp tip penetrated, a sickly foul light emerged and Davenport started to shudder and scream.

“I should have cut out your heart the night you laid hands on my women... my bride and my mother.” Luke moved up to the convulsing, shuddering beast that was slowly collapsing in on itself and he whispered softly, “You never had a chance this time around. Not a ghost of a chance.”

Within seconds, Davenport's body and soul were gone. The darkness inside the house completely faded, leaving the sword lying on the floor, gleaming, untouched. As Luke knelt to lift it up, the music of his mother laughing filled the house again, and a warm spring breeze rushed through it.

“Oh, Collin Lucas. My boy... my baby...” a woman murmured, her voice low and husky.

“Mama,” Luke said, his voice thick, rough with tears. He stared into one room, the ladies' sitting room, and started to walk in there, as CJ waited.

“Precious boy. You did well. You did well... thank you for letting me go,” she murmured, folding her presence around him and holding him tight before she, too, started to fade away.

“Wait!”

Laughingly, she asked, “Haven’t we all waited enough?”

Turning, he met CJ’s eyes. “Hell, yeah.”

And then he reached for her.