

The Visitor

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Chapter One

Light burned blood red through Rebecca Tierney's eyelids, as though a thousand-watt, bare bulb had been switched on inches in front of her face. Jolted awake, she forgot for a moment where she was. Forgot that she was in the Upper Michigan house built on a bluff overlooking the great Lake Superior, cloistered away from the main road by towering white pine. There were no street lights here to shine into her windows, and only one car at a time could thread its way up the drive on the far side of the house.

In that first stark second, she'd also forgotten she should have been alone. There *shouldn't be* someone else in the house turning on lights.

Rebecca sat up and blinked into the brightness blazing through her open bedroom door and across the foot of her bed. As a child lost in the foster care system, she'd learned an open door in the night invited terrors worse than any fear of the dark. Now twenty-eight, she slept with the bedroom door left open for a husband who could never return.

She pushed her snarled curls off her face and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Air cooled by the fathomless Lake Superior sliced through the house, up her bare legs, and under the bottom hem of the over-sized tee she'd slipped over her underwear to sleep in. Eric's t-shirt. Its thin fabric clung to her sweat dampened spine, as did her memories of him to her soul.

Memory was all she had left of him now. The reality tore at her soul and squeezed the life from her heart.

She fled the room where they'd slept and loved. Fled into the hall where that blinding light allowed no shadows, and exposed a memory sharper even than those haunting the bedroom. She and Eric had made ravenous love on the top landing of the stairs, a pair of honeymooners too hungry to travel the final half dozen steps to their bedroom.

Memories too painful for a fragile soul to survive.

Yet, she had survived. She'd come back to the old Victorian house Eric's great-grandfather had built—where Eric had grown up. The same house where he'd brought her when they'd first married so he could teach her about his past.

The house to which she'd returned when there was no more future.

No future. That's what an urn full of ashes reminded her of every time she looked at it. Maybe that's why she'd avoided the front parlor since bringing the urn there a week ago.

Maybe that's why she didn't hide from the light. Why she didn't fear that someone might be turning on lights in an old house that should be empty, save for her shell of a soul.

Rebecca slid her foot over the hallowed patch of ancient carpeting onto the stairway. One step at a time, she sank into the brightness blazing up the stairwell, blinding her. She sank into an illumination brighter than any lamp or fixture in an old house could've produced. The scent of sulfur pinched at her nostrils. Fire?

But there was no heat, no crackling of burning timber, nor licking flames.

Then, just as Rebecca's foot touched down on the hardwood floor of the first-floor hall, the light flickered and went out.

She stood a moment, one foot on the hall floor, one yet on the bottom step, the banister post cool and smooth beneath her fingers. She listened for any sound beyond the tick of the hall grandfather clock, the howl of the wind buffeting the house, and the dull thud of her pulse in her ears. She listened as she stared into the blackness of the entry hall, waiting as her eyes adjusted.

The entrance to the parlor across from the base of the stairs came into focus, a yawning black rectangle. That's where the light had vanished into, whispered some remnant of memory burned onto her corneas. The parlor...where her husband's ashes waited for her to find the courage to let him go.

She pushed off from the banister and caught herself against the parlor doorframe. Her fingers scrabbled across the bumpy layers of wallpaper for the light switch that would feed electricity into the parlor's electrical outlets. No overhead lights for this old house...except for the dining room chandelier. As Eric had explained, his grandmother had grown tired of candle wax dripping onto her prized mahogany table. The concession led to a full conversion of gas lamps to electrical. Otherwise, the woman had wanted everything to remain as it had been when the house had been built.

Rebecca flicked the light switch, and a single table lamp popped on. It couldn't have sported more than a sixty-watt bulb, so soft, so low was its illumination.

But it lit the man standing between the camelback couch and the cold fireplace hearth, the soft yellow-gold glow of incandescent light shading his skin a deep, warm hue. He was splendid in his naked glory.

Splendid and...alive.

Alive!

"Eric!" She cried out, bolting across the room and throwing herself at him. She wrapped her body around his and covered his mouth with hers.

But no lips parted to the urging of hers. No strong arms came up to catch her, support her—hold her. Not one muscle on the man flinched.

Her legs slid from his hips, the cold, hard floor once again a reality beneath her bare feet. A materialization of a desperate imagination, that's all this bronze-hued form before her could be.

Because Eric was dead.

And she wasn't.

Rebecca crumpled to her knees, her shoulders shaking with her dry sobs. She was still in her living hell.

* * *

Rebecca woke to daylight with her cheek pressed into the threadbare oriental area rug that covered the center of the parlor floor. Her mouth felt like cotton, her eyes itched, and her hair was plastered to her cheek. She'd been crying again.

Or was it still?

People who called themselves friends would've told her to stop. As if commanding it was all it took to end grief and quell pain.

Then there was that bizarre dream she'd had during the night. Eric back from the dead and...

The sensation of his hard body against hers, of his lack of response telegraphed itself across her nerve endings. She winced. Another rejection. Damn. She couldn't even find solace in sleep.

Rebecca lifted her head a few inches off the floor and groaned with the promise of a stiff neck. Not good, falling asleep in a heap, face down on the floor.

She elbowed herself up onto her hip, and finger-combed her unruly curls back from her face. She sat between the couch and coffee table where she had seen the naked incarnation of Eric last night.

The threadbare cords of the carpet scratched at her bare legs. This was reality. An old carpet and the ashes of a dead husband. Eric in the flesh, nothing more than another dream.

Yet this one had been more real than any other. She swore she'd felt the solidness of his flesh. And if he'd been real, what would she have done?

She'd have locked the doors against the world and clung to him. She'd have never again let him out of her sight.

Provided he didn't reject her as the figment of her imagination had done last night. It had been a cruel nightmare.

Or payback.

She had clung to him in life. Depended on him more than a wife should have. They had fought about that very thing the last time she'd seen him. *The very last time.*

She closed her eyes against the guilt...and the truth. Her love had been smothering.

Wearily, she climbed to her feet, swayed, and sagged down onto the arm of the couch. Too little sleep. Too little food.

Too much grief.

The reason for it littered the table at the end of the couch. Ashes from Eric's urn...which lay on its side...as she'd left it the last time she'd tried to will her husband back from the dead, as if he were a Phoenix that could rise from its own ashes.

She pressed her hand into the powdery ash, letting it squeeze between her fingers and fill her pores. It was all she had left of him. This ash...which Eric's grandmother had commanded her to deliver to the place Eric had most loved, deigning to allow her—*the wife*—this one last farewell.

That's why she'd returned to The Bluffs, as the house built high on a bluff overlooking the largest of The Great Lakes, Superior, was called by the locals...the place where they'd been the happiest, her and Eric. She'd returned to The Bluffs not just to dispose of his ashes, but as Eric always had when he needed to lick his wounds.

She curled her fingers into the grit and dust. A bone fragment cut into her palm, but she wouldn't let go. Eric had once told her the house spoke to him. Now she waited for the house to tell her how to deal with the pain of losing the only love she had ever known.

Movement whispered from somewhere in the house. The wind? The settling of ancient timbers?

The answer she awaited?

She listened above the measured beat of the grandfather clock in the entry hall. The clock ticked away the seconds, a solid, measured beat. *Tick, tock, tick, tock, didn't you lock the door last night?*

What good did it do to lock a door against a nightmare?

The man in the parlor last night had been an illusion, hadn't he?

She rose to her feet and strode out into the hall. The front door stood wide open, the tile floor littered with torn leaves and puddles of rainwater...and one oddity. It had rained last night...stormed. Lightning could account for the bright light that had burned through her eyelids. But no storm, wind, nor rainfall could explain the dried footprints marking the entry hall floor, prints from a bare, man-sized foot.

Nightmares didn't leave footprints.

Unless she was still asleep...and dreaming.

Still in her nightmare.

She lifted her hand, the one that clutched the tiny bone fragment. She unfolded her fingers from the sharp shard that lay in her palm beside a dot of blood. Her blood. Real blood. She wasn't dreaming.

The footprints came into focus beyond her hand. The breath gasped out of Rebecca as though she'd been plunged into Lake Superior's frigid waters. She *hadn't* imagined the naked man in the parlor last night—hadn't dreamed him.

Shoosh came the whisper of a sound from behind her. Reflexively, protectively, her fingers curled around the bone fragment as she spun toward the grand staircase, at the top of which she and Eric had made love that first night of their honeymoon. But the sound hadn't come from upstairs. It came from the end of the hall beneath the stairs, from beyond the partially open door there. It had come from Eric's grandfather's library.

Had she valued life, she'd have turned and run. Instead, she moved toward the door at the end of the hall. She barely noticed the chill of the wood plank floor beneath her bare feet, so fixated she was on that slightly ajar door...and on the sound coming from beyond it.

Whish, thump.

Why did it draw her?

Thump, ump, ump.

Why couldn't she turn and run?

Whiiish, snap.

What about that whispering scrape compelled her to seek it out?

She pressed the fist holding the fragment of her husband to her breastbone and flattened her free hand against the raised panel of the library door. The door opened a few more inches, exposing the shelves on the far wall of the room—revealing a hand cradling a book.

Whish, snap, thump, ump. The pages of the book flipped front to back beneath the command of long, blunt-tipped fingers. A man's fingers with knuckles lightly furred attached to a square, sturdy hand. She knew that hand.

She pushed the door wide.

He stood on the far side of the narrow room in front of the shelf-lined wall of books, as naked as he'd been in her nightmare. Eric.

Profiled before her with his tight stomach and muscled thigh, she wanted to run to him and scrub her hands across the hard flesh of the man she had loved...still loved. She wanted to throw herself at his feet and hug her cheek to the muscles bunching in his runner's legs. She wanted the sprigs of hair covering that strong thigh to tickle her nostrils as she inhaled his musky scent mingled with the talcum powder he always used.

She wanted to beg his forgiveness for the fight they'd had the night he'd died—for being the kind of wife whose suffocating love had chased him away.

But, last night, when she'd touched Eric, he'd rejected her...as he had the night he'd walked away from her and never returned...until now.

But how? His private plane had gone down. He'd been the pilot. The flight plan said so. The witnesses who'd seen him fly away that day had said so.

The DNA had said so.

DNA taken from a body charred beyond recognition. A mistake could've been made. Her fingers flexed around the bone fragment.

"Eric?" She spoke his name barely louder than a whisper.

He didn't so much as flick an eyelash in her direction.

Maybe this was all in her imagination, the footprints, him standing just beyond her reach...naked. Why would he have come back to her naked? That didn't make sense.

Unless he'd returned in spirit form to punish her.

But punishing had never been Eric's way...at least not when he was alive.

Rebecca staggered into the room and caught herself against the edge of the massive, wooden desk that dominated the room...if she didn't count the naked replica of a dead man. Dead? Or alive?

Eric. Figment of her imagination or ghost?

She reached out with trembling fingers and touched him.

Solid flesh. Cool, but not cold.

And just as unresponsive to her touch as he'd been to her speaking his name.

Just as unresponsive as he'd been last night in her embrace.

Eric...alive...here.

But, she'd thought that last night, too. Maybe he was nothing more than wild hope.

He flipped the last of the pages, closed the book, and slid it back into its slot on the shelf. Hooking the spine of the next volume with a long, thick index finger, he tipped it forward, its cloth cover scraping out from between those on either side of it. An old book, a musty odor stirred from it.

She would never have expected a hallucination to bear such detail. But then, she'd *felt* the unforgiving flesh of that mirage last night, felt it within the loop of her arms and against her bare legs.

Forgive me, she wanted to cry out.

He cradled the book in one hand and knuckled it open with the other. *Whish, snap, thump, ump* went the rhythm of pages flipping under strumming fingers, fingers that had once played unerringly across her flesh.

Forgive me, she silently wept, swaying there against the edge of the desk, suddenly unable to catch her breath. She drew a deep, shuddering breath, followed by another and another. She couldn't seem to get enough air into her lungs, couldn't seem to be quiet about it.

Still, he didn't look up from the pages flicking at measured intervals before his eyes. He must be deaf not to hear someone nearly hyperventilating within arm's reach of him.

And she must be insane to expect a naked, dead man to notice a tormented woman.

A dead man.

A ghost.

"Eric?" she ventured yet again. "Please. Speak to me. Look at me. Anything. Just let me know you're real."

He didn't respond. Not to his name. Not to her pleas.

Of course he wouldn't. Eric was dead. This man was an illusion of shadow.

Wasn't he?

Rebecca flung herself at the room's single window. She tore open the drapes. Sunlight poured over her, stirring through the dust shaken loose from the heavy brocade fabric and circling *Eric's legs, Eric's torso, Eric's head.*

Eric is dead, screamed reality through Rebecca's mind while illogical hope thundered in her chest from the fist holding a piece of his bone.

He looked directly into the light, an index finger holding his place in the book. His Icelandic hued eyes were striking against Eric's dark skin, piercing from the frame of Eric's jet-black hair, and cold...dangerously, dispassionately cold.

She exhaled through her parched lips. "You are Eric, aren't you?"

He didn't answer. He simply returned his attention to the book in his hand. Focused, like Eric could be when a task demanded his attention.

Like he'd been when they'd made love.

But he wasn't loving her now. He wasn't even seeing her.

Rebecca edged around the perimeter of the room. The tender flesh at the backs of her knees bumped the corner of the chair behind the desk. She sank onto its seat and dropped the bone fragment onto the desktop. For a solid hour, she didn't look away from the man she wanted to believe was the husband she'd thought she'd never see again. For an hour, she feasted on his physical presence and fancied their brief past.

Her chin braced between her palms, she watched her husband's strong fingers slide away *Moby Dick* and pull out Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* from the shelves laddering up the wall. Book by book and row by row, he examined the collection. Whether Lucille's old decorating books, or Eric's grandfather Joe's anatomy tomes and volumes of Great Lakes' shipwrecks, he applied the same methodical, page by page pattern of examination as he did the fictional classics. Not fast enough to be scanning for something hidden among the pages, too fast to be reading.

Unless he *was* able to capture full pages of text like a camera. He did briefly focus on each page before turning to the next.

Beneath the absent sway of Rebecca's hips, the wooden swivel desk chair creaked. The seat was too deep for her, making her feet dangle inches off the floor. The first time she'd sat in it, she'd felt like a little girl and said so. Eric had laughed and shown her right then and there that she was no "little" girl. God, but he'd had the deepest, fullest, sexiest laugh she'd ever heard. She'd give anything to hear it once more.

But something told her she'd never hear that laughter again. Insane of her to wish it.

She was insane, wasn't she? Unable to accept Eric's death, her mind had simply conjured up this likeness of him right down to the illusion of wet footprints in the entry hall. Right?

A few frames of Jimmy Stewart talking to his imaginary *Harvey* rolled through Rebecca's head. She felt a lopsided grin tug across her lips.

Her make-believe friend was no invisible rabbit, though. The only thing comical about this apparition was her discovery that insanity wasn't pleasant. She'd expected it to be. Escape *should* be.

Another of her myriad flaws—an inability to execute a good insanity, to imagine a ghost that was happy to have been conjured. This one wasn't even friendly.

Rebecca fingered the bone fragment on the desk. She nudged it this way and that. She pushed it forward across the surface of the desk...toward the image of the man it supposedly had come from. She wanted him to notice the bone and recognize it...to notice her.

Never enough for you, is there? sounded a voice inside her head, too painfully reminiscent of Eric's.

Rebecca's hands stiffened against the edge of the desk. The chair rolled back and struck the wall. The muscles across her apparition's back bunched.

One calculating, cool-blue eye peered over one broad shoulder, one quick censuring jut of a razor-sharp jaw and he turned back to his book. *Whish, snap, thump, ump.*

He was aware of her!

Rebecca propelled herself out of the chair and across the room, scattering the dust moats floating lazily upon the beams of sunlight slanting through the panes of leaded glass. She stopped at *his* elbow, stared up into *his* passionless face at *his* motionless mouth. Had those keenly detailed lips spoken that damning phrase? Lips perfectly defined as a marble Adonis'. Lips full and firm. Lips guarding a mouth she could never get enough of.

"Is that why you're here, Eric?" she demanded, the truth like gravel against her heart. "Did you come back somber and silent because I wanted too much?"

The ice-blue eyes shifted from page to page. *Whish, snap, thump, ump.*

Rebecca molded her hands to fit around his arm, but held them a fraction from contact. She felt the heat rising from his flesh. She knew, should she touch him, she'd find him to be of solid matter. He had been last night when she'd thrown her body against his...when he'd spurned her with his lack of reaction.

"Are you punishing me? Or am *I* punishing me?"

Whiiish, snap, thump, ump.

She dropped her hands to her sides and took a step back from him. Rebecca stared at the man she'd prayed to be able to touch one more time, knowing once would never be enough. Knowing she couldn't bear another rejection.

But he couldn't prevent her from watching him. For as long as she succumbed to the insanity and played by her own inane rules, she at least had him to look at and memorize in ways she'd only thought she'd done before. Strange, the irrational way a mad mind choreographed its world. Tragic, the painful course a broken heart traveled toward its death.

If only he would touch her...one last time.

An air horn blared from the lake at the bottom of the bluff on which the house sat. The steely jaw lifted ever so slightly. She saw his interest even though the translucent-blue gaze never left the pages before them, even though the rhythm of turning pages never faltered. She saw the fractional movement. He'd cocked his ear in the direction of that noise.

The air horn blasted a second time, closer.

Whi-ish, scrape. The pattern altered even though the eyes did not so much as blink. Rebecca's gaze slid from her apparition's face to the window toward which he'd cocked his ear.

She looked through the wavy glass created in a less technological era, past the deck Eric had contracted to be built around the back of the house with its corner gazebo, and down the steep, rocky ledges of a glacially formed bluff. The steely waters of Lake Superior chopped violently in the wake of the Great Lakes' cruiser jockeying up to the dock below the house.

"It's Ben Jarvey," she informed the husband she knew couldn't really be there. "Must be a slow charter day if he's got the time to come visiting."

Visiting. Rebecca stiffened. She couldn't have Ben Jarvey coming into the house and find...

Find what? A week's worth of picked at food and forgotten clothes strewn, dropped, and abandoned wherever a numb mind opened unfeeling fingers. She hadn't even aired out the house yet. Hadn't wanted to. Eric was here amongst the dust and stale air.

Eric was here!

Seen only by her.

Would Jarvey's presence chase her imagined Eric away?

Rebecca bolted out of the library, through the hall behind the main staircase, and into the kitchen. Snagging a pair of denim cutoffs from the floor, she step-hopped into them.

Shoes.

By the door. She crammed her feet into the tennies and bolted out the back door onto the wrap-around deck.

She jammed the tails of Eric's oversized t-shirt inside her waistband as she hurried across the back deck, through the attached gazebo, and down the zigzagging steps of rain-soaked timbers linking house to dock. Her feet thumped down onto the dock just as Ben Jarvey straightened from tying up his boat.

Ben smiled one of his wide, boyish grins that stretched a face already growing leathery with the effects of working in wind and sun.

"A person could break her neck, galloping down those steps that way."

"Just saving you the climb, Mr. Jarvey," Rebecca panted out.

"I wasn't planning on making any." Ben's sun-bleached eyebrows wedged up beneath the brim of his Milwaukee Brewers baseball cap. "That's why I blew the horn. It's why I always blow it when I clear the point. So, don't you go risking that pretty little neck of yours racing down them steps."

Reflexively, Rebecca touched her fingers to her bare throat and crossed her arms over her braless chest. Ben Jarvey had a knack for noticing everything. It was part of why he made a good caretaker for houses used only seasonally, like the house on the top of the bluff behind her...where her dead husband lurked...she hoped.

"Sorry," she rushed out, afraid if she gave Ben Jarvey the space to offer condolences, reality would chase away her last fragment of insanity and hope. "I should've called ahead and let you know I was coming up to the house. It was kind of a spur of the moment trip. And once here, well, with the house phone disconnected and cell service all but impossible here..." Rebecca let her voice trail off, intimidated by Jarvey's silence.

Ben's grin twitched. "Lucille always was tightfisted with that fortune of hers."

Rebecca's gaze jerked from Jarvey's mouth to his eyes. She'd never quite gotten used to how clearly the people of Copper Ridge saw Eric's grandmother. She'd have liked to be part of the conspiracy of those who could look Lucille in the eye when they talked to her and shrug her off when she raised her nose at them. Eric had been able to shrug her off.

Had been. Rebecca's heart tripped against her ribs. What if he were gone when she returned to the house? Specter or figment of imagination, he wasn't doing as she bid. If he did, he'd have wrapped her in his arms, and never again let go.

Suddenly, she wanted to run up the steps and make sure Eric still lurked in the shadowed rooms of his family home. She wanted that reassurance more than she wanted to keep Ben Jarvey from witnessing her insanity.

"The Mister didn't come with you this trip?" Jarvey asked, stopping Rebecca in mid-pivot.

If Ben was asking about Eric, he didn't know about Eric's accident. And if the Jarveys didn't know, no one in Copper Ridge knew.

Benefit of a town with an economy too depressed to support a local newspaper? Benefit of a family matriarch who never shared anything but disdain for simple folk? Rebecca settled back on her heels.

"Too bad." Ben sniffed, assuming his own answer in her silence...and not sounding the least sorry about Eric's absence as he continued. Ben had his own reasons for wishing Eric away. "Chinook are hitting good now. He'd have liked fishin' them."

"Yes, well." Rebecca forced a smile. "As you can see, everything is fine here. You can get back to your charters."

Ben shook his head. "Trip out here didn't take me away from nothin'. Business slacks off after Labor Day weekend. Was busy through the holiday, though."

An alarm sounded inside Rebecca's head. Ben also had a knack for conversation. And Rebecca didn't. Helplessly, she watched Jarvey fold his arms high across his chest and brace his legs apart like an old sea dog readying himself to ride out a rough sea...or settling in to tell a long tale.

"Families cramming in last minute vacations before the kiddies go back to school. Yup. Big shot Papa givin' his kids *quality* time."

Rebecca jammed the corner of an already gnawed thumbnail between her teeth.

"Drag 'em out in the middle of a big lake where they spend their day barfing over the side of my boat or grouching about the boredom while old dad complains about ungrateful kids who cost him an arm and a leg to hire a fishing charter, then just lie around in the sun. I'm grateful for every minute I have with my little Mandy."

Rebecca flinched at the reminder of Ben and Alice Jarvey's daughter, an automatic response born of insecurity and the knowledge that Ben's beautiful, blond wife Alice had been Eric's first love. Rebecca chewed at her finger, ripping at a hangnail, tasting blood.

Jarvey glanced at her hand. Rebecca dropped it and curled her fingers self-consciously into her palm.

"Anyway, the Missus sent me. A registered package come to the post office for you."

"I hadn't expected any mail." Never mind she'd outright forgotten to have her mail forwarded. "I'll be sure and get into town and pick it up."

"No need." Ben pulled a large red, white, and blue envelope from under his arm and fingered a pen out of the breast pocket of his t-shirt.

Rebecca stared at the envelope that was the size of legal papers in Jarvey's callused hands. She read the name on the return receipt requested slip attached to it. Lucille Tierney. Rebecca knew what had to be in the envelope. She knew what her husband's grandmother wanted. She wanted her grandson's widow gone.

"You gotta sign. Right there on that line." Jarvey tapped the point of the pen against the thick blue X at the bottom of the receipt attached to the package.

Numbly, Rebecca accepted the pen from Ben and scribbled her signature on the designated line.

He tore off the signed receipt, crammed it in his shirt-pocket, and shoved the envelope into Rebecca's hands. "There. Nice and legal. Just the way the Missus said it had to be done. Takes her job as post mistress right seriously, my Alice does."

One corner of the envelope dug into Rebecca's palm where the bone fragment had cut her. Hard fact. Like the fact that Alice Jarvey had once, a long time ago, been an intimate part of

Eric's life. Like the fact that the contents of the envelope sent to her by Eric's grandmother would force her out of this place Eric had called home.

Like the reality that Eric was dead.

But not gone. Not as long as his ghost walked the rooms of the Tierney House on top of the bluff.

She couldn't leave this place. Not now. Not as long as Eric was here, whatever his form.

That is, if he were still there, in the house. What if leaving the house—leaving him gave him the opportunity to slip away?

Panic flared through Rebecca. Ben, tossing off the mooring lines from her dock, vaulted onto the deck of his boat, lifted his chin at her, and knuckled the brim of his baseball cap, his usual farewell gesture.

A few more seconds and the man would be gone. Just a minute more and she could be back in the house. Where Eric *had* to be waiting!

Where he must be!

Jarvey's sky-blue eyes glanced up over her shoulder and he nudged the brim of his cap higher on his forehead. Rebecca froze as Ben's eyes scanned from the house to the hasty tuck of her nightshirt into the waistband of her shorts, as his grin turned sheepish and he tugged his hat brim down over his eyes. "You and the Mister make like I was never here."

Rebecca spun on her heel, her chin duplicating the angle Jarvey's had tilted while the rumble of the boat motor behind her counter-scored the dead stillness of her heart. She saw what Ben had seen. Beyond the latticework half wall of the gazebo jutting above the rocks stood her apparition.

Except, he couldn't be a ghost, a figment of her imagination...not if Ben Jarvey had seen him.

Rebecca charged up the steps. The naked man standing in the shelter of the gazebo at the top of the stairs was real. Jarvey had seen him, had even mistaken him for Eric.

But from forty feet away, logic argued as she flung herself past the bench built into the landing at the mid-point for those winded by the steep climb and up the next flight of steps.

She wanted him to be Eric, and she had seen him from afar and close-up, countered hope. *Inside a dim old house*, raged reason.

Rebecca stopped where the zigzagging steps broached the gazebo. The mid-morning sun reflecting up off the lake sliced between the spindled posts supporting the structure's octagonal roof. In the sharp light, not even the minutest of discrepancies would be hidden from her.

He turned toward her, slowly, a measured rotation that didn't reflect the torrent of emotion rolling through Rebecca like a tsunami. The ice-blue gaze shifted from the departing boat to her. She raised her fingers toward the face she knew with wifely intimacy. He caught her by the wrist and held her fingers inches from contact.

"What did you tell him about me?" he asked in a voice that was gravel rough but, without a doubt, Eric's.