



**Tree
of
Buried Secrets**

Cassie Exline

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by Cassie Exline

Chapter 1

We were to meet by the apple tree at dusk. I wanted to arrive early, I couldn't wait to be in his arms. Tonight Alexander and I were going to elope. As I got closer to the tree I saw his silhouette. He had arrived ahead of me.

"Alex!" I called out and ran to him.

His long strides closed the distance between us. Strong arms wrapped around me, gathering me close and lifting me off my feet.

"I love you, Julia Osborne, soon to be Julia Harris," he said against my parted lips.

"I love you so much, Alexander Harris." We kissed and he set me down.

He gazed into my eyes and said, "Let's make love one more time?"

Taken aback, I asked, "Now? Shouldn't we just go? What if Papa catches us?"

Alex knelt on one knee in front of me, taking my hands in his. Kissing each one in turn, he asked, "Don't you think it would be fitting to make love at the place where our relationship began? I mean, it is to be our last time as single people."

I smiled, unsure what to say. I wanted him, but I wanted to be as far from my home as possible.

"Come, my love. Let's become united as one on this blanket of apple blossoms." He gestured to the white petals covering the ground, and tugged on my hands. I dropped to my knees. We gazed into each other's eyes. In a soft voice, he said, "This very spot is where I stole my first kiss from your ruby red lips." His thumb rubbed across my lower lip. "Right here is where I realized how much I loved you. It's also the site where I proposed to you." He kissed my hands and touched the ground. "You surrendered your virginity to me beneath this very tree."

There were times I felt speechless and overwhelmed by his presence. This moment was one of those, so I remained silent.

"I can't wait to touch your most private parts... to suck your nipples," he whispered.

My face flushed with embarrassment at the mention of our lovemaking.

He must have noticed because he said, “We’ll have the rest of our lives to be proper, my darling bride-to-be. Let’s be carefree one more time. Let’s make passionate love right here, right now.”

“What if my father returns? Shouldn’t we be on our way?”

“Your father and your brothers will be at the banquet for hours. We have plenty of time. Please, just once more?”

I couldn’t say no to the man I loved with all my heart. Nodding, I agreed. “Make love to me.” My voice was barely audible, but he heard it.

Not wasting a second, Alex unbuttoned my midnight blue silk blouse, tugging the sleeves free. As the blouse dropped to cover the white petals serving as our bed, his lips caressed my bare shoulders. Next, the satin camisole was eased over my head, allowing my long, golden curls to stroke my shoulders. His lips moved beneath them before slipping down to my freed breasts, grazing each nipple. He bit down and sucked hard on them, sending shivers throughout my body. Stopping for a moment, he captured my lips and our kiss deepened as we melted together.

Alex whispered, “Stand up.”

I did as he requested. Alex unbuttoned my skirt, pulled down the zipper, gave it a tug and let go. It pooled at my feet. I stepped out of the skirt and he tossed it on top of my other garments. I trembled and kicked off my shoes.

With his hands on my waist, he pulled me close to him, kissing my middle. His mouth moved down the flat of my stomach. His breath almost seared my skin, through the garter belt and panties I wore. He kissed the bare skin between the garters and carefully unhooked each fastener on my nylons. When he was done, he rolled down the stockings, kissing my bared legs as he went, before tugging them off of my feet. His hands massaged both of my legs from the ankles up to my hips. Hooking his thumbs into the waistband of my panties, he pulled down, taking the garter belt with them. I stood naked before him.

His thick, calloused fingers parted my silky passage and his tongue entered. His thumb rubbed my clit and I opened my legs wide, silently begging him to enter deep while his tongue made love to me.

My body was on fire. In seconds I felt an orgasm build, ready to crash over me like waves pounding on rocks. When it hit, I clutched the shoulders of his shirt for support. He lapped

up my nectar.

The sensations he created drove me wild. My legs quivered. Moans echoed at the back of my throat. Without skipping a stroke, his fingers replaced his tongue. Soon I was gasping for air, another orgasm hit hard, taking my breath away.

When I let go of him, he leaned back on his heels and looked up at me. His chin glistened with my juices. I bent over to lick them off just as Alex had taught me to do. We kissed and our tongues danced in our mouths.

Alex pulled me down onto the ground with him and kissed my lips while his rough hands rubbed over my body. He paused long enough to remove his trousers, briefs, socks and shoes. He unbuttoned his shirt, but as always left it on while making love with me. I found his habit strange, but endearing. He positioned himself between my legs and stroked his manhood. It had taken me some time to gain enough courage to watch him, now I watched unabashed. Under Alex's patient tutelage, I'd managed to find pleasure in explicit naughtiness, both the deeds themselves and the words describing them.

Our gaze met and locked. I felt his dick rub against my mound, my cunt lips before he entered me. In one quick thrust, he was inside me.

"I love you, Julia."

"And I love you, Alex." I had learned a few tricks during our months together. Coquettishly, I licked my index finger and made a moist trail from my chin to my breasts. I circled each mound before tweaking my nipples while he pumped rhythmically into me.

He loved watching me play with my breasts, just as I loved watching his manhood slide in and out of me covered with both our juices. I heard him moan and soon he was pounding into me, rocking me back and forth. Beneath me the crushed apple blossoms of our wedding bed released their aroma.

"Oh God! Oh! God!" Alex moaned and slammed into me, not stopping until he'd given me all of his seed.

Chapter 2

“Mother? Mother!”

The sudden voice startled me. I blinked and the night of my elopement disappeared. I turned from the window to face my son. “Yes? Have my grandsons arrived early?”

“No, Mother, there’s plenty of time before the boys get here. Do you want to lie down and rest?”

I wanted to be alone to remember. “I need to go upstairs.”

Edward nodded and escorted me to the stairs. “I suppose it’s a waste of breath to ask you to ride the chair lift?”

“You would suppose right.” So I wasn’t eighteen years old any longer and preparing to run off with my true love, but at seventy-one, I still wasn’t helpless. “As long as I can manage under my own steam, I prefer to walk on the two feet God gave me.”

“As you wish, Mother.” Edward cupped my right elbow as my left hand rode the banister. We proceeded at a slow but steady pace. The four story Queen Anne Victorian mansion had been my home all of my life, just as it had been Edward’s. That night, so long ago, hadn’t gone as Alex and I had planned. We never eloped.

As Edward and I ascended, my thoughts drifted to this house, which had been built by my great-grandfather William Smythe back in 1895. My family had taken great care of it over the years. In fact, it still contained most of the original furnishings my great-grandfather had bought.

The house was aptly named Apple Blossom Vision. In the spring, every window offered a view of the apple blossoms from the orchard surrounding it. The mansion had two large projecting bay windows, a tower, a turret, porches on three stories, many stained glass windows, numerous wall carvings, tons of decorative trim, elaborate brackets, banisters and spindles.

Great-grandfather had spared no expense and the house lived up to his vision. Guests were usually impressed at the first glimpse of the huge house and wraparound, gingerbread-trimmed porches, but when they entered the cathedral-like foyer with the overhead stained glass dome, they were left speechless.

The first floor had ten foot ceilings, several chandeliers, three fireplaces, a large gourmet kitchen with a breakfast room, a large dining room, an informal parlor with a stamped tin ceiling,

and several smaller rooms. Later, bathrooms had been added to every floor. My father would have thought it frivolous; I considered it a necessity.

“Let’s rest a moment.” I tried not to gasp as I caught my breath.

My son guessed where we were going. “My God! You’re not thinking of tramping the whole way up to the widow’s walk, are you?”

I nodded.

He shook his head. “Mother, why do you insist on going up there? One of these days, you’re going to get light-headed and fall.”

He was such a wonderful man but he worried too much about me. “Edward, I’ve climbed these stairs for close to seventy years. I love the view from up there.”

“If you fall, I hope you’ll love the view from the window of your hospital room.” We continued our ascent.

Chapter 3

My son, Edward Harris, is a great businessman, but much too uptight as a person. He rarely laughed and had quite a dry sense of humor. I would be the first to admit he was always loving and caring toward me. When it came to me, he bordered on being overprotective. He could have rivaled my father in that area.

“Son, I’ll be fine. I want to sit in the sun until my grandsons arrive.” The twins were on their first furlough from the Army and heading home. The bus would be dropping them off in front of our house.

Such service came from being as old as dirt and related to the man who owned the bus line franchise. One phone call to the supervisor and I’d arranged to have Alexander and William delivered to my house.

From the widow’s walk, I’d be able to see the bus before anyone else. “I want to enjoy a few moments of peace and quiet before the surprise party gets underway.” We had finally arrived. I unlocked the door to the stairs that led to the very top of the mansion.

Edward grunted. “I don’t like you going up here, Mother.” He kept close to me as we ascended the narrow steps. “It’s not safe for you to be alone on top of the house. Anything could happen.”

It was dirty pool, but I knew one way to make him stop fussing. I sighed dramatically, sniffed and said, “You’re probably right, but I need to feel the sun’s warmth on my face while I remember your father. It’s important for me to do this today.”

I smiled when I heard his sharp intake of breath. I felt bad doing that to him, but it was necessary. Today was a special day. I paused once more to get my breath. It seemed just yesterday I could have dashed up these steps in mere seconds. In reality, it was probably close to twenty years.

As much as Edward hated the widow’s walk, he made sure the steps were safe and the handrail sturdy. It was under his orders the walk was always well-cared for.

From behind us a familiar voice asked, “What are you two doing?”

“Fiona! You’re here.” I turned and looked down the steps at my daughter. She looked more like her namesake, my mother, every day, except my daughter was prettier.

“What do you think we’re doing?” Edward snapped. “We’re seeing which one of us will drop from a heart attack first. Want to play, little sister?”

“Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy.” Fiona giggled. “Mother, as much as I hate to agree with Edward, don’t you think it’s time...”

“No!” I cringed, my response sounded like I had screamed, which I hadn’t. My voice seemed loud since we were in the enclosed stairwell. “Pardon me. I didn’t mean to shout. Today’s important for several reasons. I must reach the walk and sit in the sun.”

“Why today?” Fiona asked.

“Mother wants to reflect about father and old memories,” Edward spoke up.

“Oh. Then she should. I’ll get the shawl and lap throw.” Fiona scurried away.

“She’s never on my side. Why did I get a sister instead of a brother?”

His face had such a serious expression I burst out laughing. “You don’t mean that.”
He snorted.

We continued up the stairs. When I opened the door leading out onto the widow’s walk, the fresh, spring air felt cool and brisk. The scent of apple blossoms embraced me and I breathed deeply.

“Smell that sweet air, son? Breathe deep.”

Edward breathed in and started coughing.

To keep from laughing, I walked over to the railing of the widow’s walk and looked out at the land before me. On a clear day, I could see to the next estate from my high perch.

Traditionally widow’s walks were small, railed observation platforms situated on top of houses and were used to scout for ships. These walks were usually square, with elaborately-worked wrought iron or wood bordering each side.

Ours wasn’t built to scout for ships, but to look out over hundreds of apple trees. That’s how my great-grandfather made his fortune. There was no sea or ocean at our back door. The closest water was the nearby creek, and next to that was our apple tree. The very one where I made lots of lasting memories. I might not remember what happened yesterday or the day before, but I could recall in vivid detail everything about my time with Alexander. Today I had to remember and relive it. For him.

“Mother? What are you doing?” Edward came up behind me.

I hadn’t realized I was leaning over the railing or that I was gripping the wood so tight

my knuckles had turned white while I stared in the direction of the apple tree. I straightened and promptly changed the subject, totally disregarding Edward's condescending tone of voice. "Son, I need my binoculars."

Edward nodded and left to retrieve them.

"Here's your shawl, Mother." Fiona joined me and wrapped it around my shoulders. "It's a tad chilly up here."

I nodded and patted her hand. "I'll be fine. I need time with my memories."

"You do realize Edward won't leave you alone up here?" she said softly.

"He will."

The stairs creaking told us he was returning. "Here you go, Mother." Edward handed me the binoculars. "I'll wait for you over by the door. Take your time."

"The boys won't be home for close to four hours. I want to be here until I see the bus rounding the bend."

"I'm not leaving you up here alone."

As always Fiona left. She refused to be caught in the middle of one of our arguments.

I put the binoculars to my eyes and found the tree. It stood tall and full of blossoms. I looked at the ground beneath it and was pleased to see it was carpeted with petals. "Son, take these and look at that tree down there." I pointed in the direction.

"You're talking about the one you love to sit under?"

"Yes, that one."

Edward did as I requested. "It's very beautiful. It always blooms but doesn't produce fruit. I've always thought that was so odd." He returned the field glasses.

"That's the tree where you were conceived."

He gasped. "Mother!"

"It's true. Your father and I made love under that very tree and I got pregnant with you. That was the night we planned to elope."

"Don't repeat that story in front of the boys."

I sighed. "Oh Edward, I'm sure they know about the birds and the bees."

"Just don't repeat that little tidbit, Mother."

"I want you to know I loved your father with all of my heart. I never stopped loving him."

Edward shifted from one foot to the other.

“On this day many, many years ago, you were conceived.”

He stiffened. “Don’t Mother.”

“Son, I know your father is looking down from heaven and I want to be up here to be closer to him. Please understand why I need to do this.” I studied his face.

He breathed in and out a few times before he nodded. “Okay, but you sit down on that bench and don’t parade yourself all over this roof. I won’t have it.”

I opened my mouth to argue but he held up his hand. “If you don’t promise to sit down and reflect about father, then I won’t leave. It’s as simple as that. Do we have a deal?”

Humph. Outwitted by the stuffed shirt. “Whatever it takes, I have to be up here, and I want to be alone with my thoughts.”

“Then find a comfortable spot and sit down.”

“I’m not senile, you know.” I hated being treated like a doddering old fool.

“I want to make sure you’re safe, and so far, you’re still alive. Let’s keep it this way, shall we, Mother?”

My son had a mean streak in him, or perhaps bossy is a better word. Whichever it was, he had apparently inherited a bit more of my father than I realized.

“Keep the binoculars.” Edward handed them back. “If I return and find you leaning over the railing, you will leave here immediately.”

That angered me. “Let’s not forget who the parent is.”

“Let’s say right at this moment my father is looking down at us. Then it’s my guess he’d hold me responsible and be terribly disappointed in me if I were to allow you to fall over the railing. Since I don’t want that to happen, you’ll be sitting down.”

“Fine! I’ll sit down.” I believe my son had just gotten the better of me, and he did it with my own weapons.

He grinned and got me settled.

Chapter 4

The moment the door shut and I heard the creaking stairs signaling he was leaving, I jumped up to stroll across the deck. The view was breathtaking. Spring was the most beautiful time of the year. I stared straight ahead at the orchard full of beautiful white apple blossoms. Nearly five hundred apple trees were in full bloom.

I knew the number because that's all we had kept. It was a dark day for me when Edward said we had to remove the others. Another argument Fiona had stayed out of. Some wretched disease had gotten hold of the trees. Although I believed they could be saved, Edward said it would cost more than the trees were worth. Our family's wealth originated in those trees. Four long days we had argued, but I lost. When the so-called tree experts burned them, I watched and cried until I had no tears left. It had been so long since I'd cried so much.

To my left, I could see Highway 20. Coming down the mountain, the bus would be visible through the leaves of the trees. Right now the boys' mother, Edward's wife Gloria, was putting the finishing touches on the surprise party.

I breathed in the sweet smelling air and marveled at how quiet it was up so high. Surveying the land from my perch, I felt like I was Mistress of the Universe. It was so still outside I could even hear the water trickling in the creek.

I turned my attention to my right and sat down. From the chair placed next to the railing, I could almost see the apple tree with my naked eye. That was the tree where I first met Alex and the same one where he later carved our initials. It's where I fell in love, lost my innocence and conceived a child. It was a tree that guarded many secrets.

Further past the tree, I could see, with the aid of the binoculars, the orchard formerly known as Porter-Harris, Alex's family orchard. His mother was the daughter of Reginald and Helena Porter. His father, Edward Harris, had married into established orchard barons and after Mr. Porter's death, Edward added Harris to the estate name. Much like my own father had done.

My maiden name is Julia Anne Smythe Osborne. I'm the fourth child of Fiona Smythe and Harold Osborne. I have three older brothers, Harold Jr., Benjamin and Abraham. My brothers and I grew up in this mansion, which came from my mother's family. She was the only child of Clara and Roger Smythe.

After my grandparents died in an unfortunate accident, my mother inherited the Smythe Family Apple Orchards. With it came seven hundred and fifty acres of prime land. My father raised thoroughbred horses. He bred them, showed them and raced them. When he married Mother, Papa added his name to her holdings and it became Smythe-Osborne Estates, rivals of Porter-Harris. Both places marketed apples and did their best to outdo the other in sales and growth.

Our fortune might have started from Mother's side of the family, but my father increased it tenfold. Not only was he smart, but he was a hard worker. He stood six feet six inches tall in his stocking feet. He had fiery red hair and brilliant green eyes. Not one thing was done on our place my father didn't approve.

In looks, Papa was quite a contrast to Mother. She was very petite at only five feet three inches. Her eyes were sparkling blue, just like the sky above. Mother always wore her long blond hair up in a bun. My brothers took after Papa in appearance and I after Mother.

I met Alexander, the love of my life, the summer before I turned thirteen. Mother had gotten sick over the winter and was bedridden. Papa was by her side every moment he could spare. The day I met Alex was one of Papa's busy days. My brothers were to keep an eye on me by pitching a ball back and forth with me. The moment their girlfriends arrived, I didn't exist. Benny kicked the ball and it went rolling across the lawn, down over an embankment and out of sight.

My oldest brother told me to get the ball but to take my time. I knew what that meant: Get lost. The ball gathered momentum and rolled toward the water. When I arrived, Alex was holding it and standing on the Porter side of the creek.

Chapter 5

“That’s mine,” I said.

“Here it is. Come and get it,” he challenged while rotating the ball around and around. He was tall with dark, wavy hair and grey eyes.

Papa had told us many times to stay on our side of the creek, but I wanted my ball.

“Afraid?”

With a flip of my long hair, I said, “No, I’m not.” I sat down to pull off my patent leather shoes and white ruffled socks. Mother insisted I always dressed like a young lady. I stood, gathered my petticoats and gasped as I waded into the creek. The water was cold.

Halfway across, I slipped on a rock, stumbled and almost fell. The hem of my dress got soaked.

He waded out to me. “I’m sorry. I don’t want you to fall and ruin your pretty dress.”

I dimpled and looked down. Because of my shyness, it would take me months to be able to look him in the eye.

“My name is Alexander Harris. Everyone calls me Alex,” he said and took my arm to escort me back to my side. “I know your name is Julia.”

“That’s right, how did you know?” I stepped on a sharp rock and fell against him.

He gathered me in his arms and carried me across. Once my feet were on dry ground, he answered my question. “Even though I travel a lot, I make it my business to know who the beautiful girls are living close to me, and your father keeps you too close to home or we’d have met sooner... much sooner.”

I smiled and looked at the ground.

Alex handed me my ball. “Let me help you with your shoes.” He helped me to sit down, then tugged his shirttail out of his trousers and used it to dry my feet.

I couldn’t believe how tender he was with me. Gently, he caressed my arch, my instep, my heel and each and every toe with the soft fabric of his shirtfront. The touch made me shiver in a way I never had before.

The rest of the summer we met every day under the tree. We would lie close together, gazing up at the sky to watch the clouds pass by. We talked and talked.

Chapter 6

“Edward! Come back here!”

“Fiona, go back inside the house!”

“For once you will listen to what I have to say!”

The high-pitched voices brought me out of my reverie. I cautiously peeked over the railing to see my son and daughter arguing.

“Mind your own business,” Edward snapped.

“Don’t get all pompous with me,” Fiona said and hurried to catch up to him “Leave Mother alone.”

“I will if she’s not walking around on top of the God damned house!”

“Edward, what are you afraid of?” Fiona asked.

Her question stopped him and he turned to face his sister. “I’m not afraid of anything except losing my mother.”

“Besides the obvious reason, why does that scare you?”

When Edward glanced toward the house, I backed away enough he couldn’t see me but not so far I couldn’t hear.

“Answer me,” Fiona said. “You know as well as I do Mother has a secret, one that haunts her to this day. Are you afraid of what it is?”

I gasped and covered my mouth. My children were very perceptive.

“You know as well as I do, things don’t add up,” Edward said. “All those blood tests did was prove we are brother and sister, they didn’t answer a damn thing.”

Why those brats! They thought they weren’t siblings? I was surprised and impressed they’d noticed my hedging when asked questions about the past. I’d always thought Edward hadn’t noticed.

“I know what you’re thinking, but it’s not true.”

“How do you know for sure?” Edward asked.

Now I was confused. What did they think?

“It wasn’t incest. Our grandfather wasn’t our father.”

Boy was I glad I wasn’t leaning over the railing, I would have fallen.

“How do you know for sure?” Edward asked.

“For such a smart man, there are times you’re so dumb!” Fiona declared. “Edward, you look like your father, our father. Grandfather Harold had red hair. Neither of us do. I look like Mother. You’re our proof we are part of the Harris family.”

My poor children, all this time they thought they were born out of incest. I wasn't sure whether to feel bad for them or give them a lecture on how ludicrous they were. I had planned on taking my horrible secret to my grave, but now I couldn't. I reached for the binoculars. I had to see the tree that guarded my secrets.

I watched the breeze blow petals from the tree and remembered the first time Alex kissed me.

Chapter 7

The doctor walked out of the room and announced Mother had just died. My father collapsed and my brothers rushed to his side. I ran out of the room and headed to the apple tree, praying Alex would be there. He was, and I ran straight into his arms. As I sobbed, he rubbed my back and whispered soft words into my ear to calm me down.

After I blubbered to him what had happened, he held me close to his chest. “Julia, from this day on you will never be alone. I’ll always be with you. I’ll protect you.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes. When I looked away, he cupped my chin, lifted it up and kissed my tear-streaked face. He paused, then covered my lips with his mouth. The kiss was soft and gentle. It was the first of many kisses.

I was fifteen years old when Mother died, and it became my responsibility to run the house. We always had servants, a cook, two maids and a manservant for Papa and the boys. It was my job to make sure things ran smoothly, just like when Mother was alive. She had trained me well; the transition went smoothly.

Papa became more involved in the farm and never noticed where I was or what I was doing. As long as meals appeared on the table at the proper time and he had clean clothes, he ignored my existence. I knew it wasn’t his fault. I looked too much like Mother and it hurt him whenever he saw me, reminding him of his loss.

Alex became the center of my world. Even though he was only a year older than me, he was so well traveled he seemed much older. We talked about all sorts of things. He told me about walking along the Seine in Paris, exploring the Coliseum in Rome, watching a bullfight in Madrid, and riding in a gondola in Venice. Enthralled, I listened to every word he said. We made plans to visit every place he talked about after we’d grown up.

My father and brothers were gone most evenings. Once I summoned the nerve to sneak out of the house, I never stopped. Usually we would cuddle under the stars. Alex would point out the constellations and tell me stories about the gods of long ago. His voice was deep and rich; I couldn’t get enough of it.

I was sixteen when I gave Alex my virginity. One night as we held each other under the twinkling lights of the black velvet sky, Alex rubbed and squeezed my breasts. Usually I would

push his hand away, but not that night. Instead I pulled him closer. Growing bold, he reached down to pull up my skirt to rub my bare leg and thigh. He cupped my bottom and squeezed.

It felt like his palm would scorch my tender skin right through my undies. I allowed his fingers to slip inside my silken panties. My breath caught when his fingertips touched my pubic hair. I'm not sure what came over me, but I rolled onto my back, opened my legs and encouraged him to go where he wanted. He rubbed my nether lips until they opened like the blossoms of a rose and then he eased a finger inside my sex. Slowly but steadily his digits pumped the slickness of my inner folds while his thumb circled my clitoris. I never asked how he knew what to do, I just enjoyed that he did it.

That evening he brought me to my first orgasm. When the wave hit me, I grabbed him and cried out. He muffled my cries of passion with his mouth. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my hips bounced off the ground as I rode it out. If I hadn't been in love with him before that, I would have been afterwards.

"Let me make love to you," he whispered.

My mouth was dry and my heart pounded furiously in my chest. "I... I... want..."

"I'll be gentle. We can stop anytime you want." He kissed me. "Okay?"

I nodded and Alex helped me undress before removing his clothes. In an instant his boots, socks, trousers and underwear were off. He stood before me, his proud manhood jutting between the front sections of his shirt. I remembered the time he'd dried my feet, that cloth caressing me and the connection made me want his penis all the more. "Here, let me help," I said and started to unbutton his shirt.

"No." Shaking his head, he pulled away. "The shirt stays on."

I blinked and felt my cheeks burn. Tears stung my eyes.

"It's okay, my love. You did nothing wrong." He held me close and kissed me. "I love you." Starting at my mouth, Alex kissed across my jaw, on to my neck, down to my breasts, to my stomach and then my sex. He licked it a few times but that was all. I wouldn't learn about oral joy for a few more weeks.

Alex took his manhood, rubbed it against my nether lips and slowly pushed it inside of me. When he touched my maidenhead, he paused. He smiled at me while he rubbed my pubic hair, his thumb stroked my clit.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed what he was doing to me. Of their own accord my hips

began to gyrate. On one of my upward moves he pumped down into me, breaking through. I gasped, momentarily frozen due to the pain and discomfort. He continued to pump while murmuring sweet words to soothe me. Taking his time, Alex was so gentle, allowing me to adjust to his invasion of my private parts.

Whether it was my juices or the blood, the movement of his manhood began to feel good. Soon I was caught up in the new feelings he created. I reached up and rubbed my fingernails over his chest. I tweaked his nipples, because I loved it when he did that to me.

His breathing grew raspy. His momentum picked up and soon he was pounding into me. When I felt him shudder, I knew his semen was flowing into me and I shuddered, too. Afterward, while we cuddled, we made plans for our future.

Chapter 8

“Edward! How dare you!”

My daughter’s loud voice disturbed my thoughts again. I smiled. At least that special moment between Alex and me remained intact. I’m glad it was such a good memory.

“Fiona, leave me alone,” Edward said.

“How could you say such a horrid thing?”

Now what are those two talking about? I fought against the urge to peek. Instead I strained to hear them.

“Because I think it’s true!” Edward exclaimed.

“Mother did not go up there to kill herself!” Fiona shouted.

Oh my God! Edward was taking my behavior way out of. I was going to have to tell him my secret.

“Then sister dear, you explain to me why our mother is hell-bent on sitting on the roof?”

“She wants to remember our father.”

“If that’s really what she wanted to do, then why not visit his grave? When was the last time she did that? I’ll tell you. Never!”

Now I was getting concerned. Edward rarely raised his voice and he never shouted at his sister.

Fiona didn’t say a word. Sometimes silence could be so irritating. I couldn’t tell what was going on. Then I heard a door open and slam shut.

“Will you two knock it off!” Gloria yelled. “My sons will be home soon. I will not have this bickering marring their homecoming.”

“Forgive me, my dear,” Edward said. “Consider it stopped.”

“You heard us?” Fiona asked.

“Clear as a bell,” Gloria said. “And I’m sure anyone else in the vicinity did as well.”

“Busted, caught you,” as my grandchildren would say. I peered over the railing to find Edward and Fiona looking up at me. “Edward! Please come up and get me.”

“I’m coming!” he shouted. “Mother, get back from the railing!”

“Okay!” I yelled and sat back down. A breeze blew across me and I imagined I felt a kiss.

Tender. Sweet. Perhaps my precious Alex was still by my side as he had promised he would be. “Alex, I have to tell our son the truth.”

It wasn't long before I heard Edward's footsteps on the stairs and his ragged breathing. He was a good boy to rush so. The door flew open and Edward almost fell onto the walk.

“Son, it's okay.”

“I'm sorry, Mother,” he gasped in between breaths. “I'm sorry.”

“Sit down for a moment.” I patted the bench and he sat beside me. “There's something you need to know. Things I need to explain..”

He nodded.

I saw beads of sweat on his upper lip and noticed his hand trembling when he brushed back a lock of his hair. My chest tightened. “You remind me so much of your father.”

“Did you love him, Mother?”

“More than my own life,” I said without hesitation.

Edward exhaled loudly.

That was when I realized how worried he'd been. “When you're ready, we need to talk.”

“I'm ready.”

“We can't talk in the house. This has to be done by my tree.”

I saw his jaw tighten before he nodded.

Edward stood and helped me to my feet. We proceeded slowly down all five flights of stairs. I was glad we had over two hours before the boys were to arrive. I might need all that time to reach my tree. Fortunately, it didn't take long before we were strolling across the lawn. Whatever Fiona thought about things, she apparently planned to keep out of sight.

At first, seeing the tree made me feel warm inside. Too soon bad memories crowded out the good ones.

I looked around, gauged where I needed to be and stood on that spot. “Son, please help me sit down?”

“Mother, let me return to the house for a blanket or a chair.”

“No, Edward. I want to sit on the petals.”

“Of course, Mother.”

Once we were seated, I began my story, “I met your father when I was twelve years old, right by this tree. My ball had rolled into the creek and he rescued it. After our first meeting, we

were never apart. He was such a smart man. Even though he was only a year older than me, he knew so many things. We made such plans for after we were married.” I looked at my son. “We were going to see Madrid, ride in a gondola in Venice, run with the bulls in Pamplona and bask in the atmosphere of the Coliseum in Rome.”

“Why didn’t you?” Edward asked. “Please, don’t blame it on the orchards or Fiona and me.”

I caressed his cheek and he kissed the palm of my hand, such a tender moment between a mother and son. “I want to make this clear, Edward. If I had known you were so worried about me, I would have told you a long time ago. I had planned on taking this secret to my grave.”

“Mother, what can possibly have eaten at you all these years? Ever since Dad died ten years ago, you get more and more melancholy.” He kissed my hand again. “I miss him, too. You’re not alone in that regard.”

“I told you earlier you were conceived right here under this tree.”

He cleared his throat.

I swallowed. “If this tree could talk, the secrets it could repeat... Your father was the first boy I ever kissed. I fell in love with him under this tree. I lost my virginity under this tree.”

“Mother, please.” Edward squirmed and his neck turned red.

“The reason I get so upset on this particular date is because the day you were conceived is the day your father died. He was murdered right on this spot where I’m sitting now.”

Edward gasped. “Mother, you’re talking nonsense. I think you’ve had a stroke or something. I’m going to get some help. I grew up with my father. He died years ago.”

“Hear me out, son.” I grabbed his arm and took a deep breath. “It’s true Andrew died ten years ago. But *your* father died before you were born.”

Edward’s eyes narrowed. “What did you say?”

“Alexander Harris was your father, not Andrew Harris.”

His mouth opened and closed a few times before he sputtered, “I... never, uh, I... Who?”

“Your father had an identical twin brother. His name was Andrew.”

“That can’t be.” Edward shook his head. “No, you’re wrong. I would have known... would have heard.”

“Families bury secrets just like they do bodies.”

His brows furrowed together. “My biological father is buried here?”

I nodded. “Yes, right where I’m sitting.”

“Tell me what happened and please spare the intimate details.”

“Of course. The night we were to elope, your father insisted we make love one more time under our tree. There were white petals everywhere on the ground, just like today. It made us a nice soft bed to lie on.” I watched my son’s mouth become pinched. “Edward, it’s a beautiful memory for me. It might be embarrassing for you to hear, but at least you know you were conceived in love.”

“Go on.”

“The moment we were finished making love, your father stood up to pull on his pants. A shot rang out. He dropped right on top of me.”

Edward’s eyes widened.

“Blood was everywhere. I started screaming and became hysterical. After that, everything was a blur. It was agreed upon, amongst your uncles, Andrew and me that your father’s murder would be covered up. He was buried right here. When I realized I was pregnant with you, Andrew offered to marry me.”

“Who killed him?”

I stared into those grey eyes. A breeze blew across my cheek. I had said enough. “It happened so fast, Edward. We didn’t know there was someone around.”

“Grandfather Osborne killed him, didn’t he?”

“Alcohol and a broken heart destroyed your grandfather. Per his Will, I was left the house and one hundred acres of land. My brothers each got two hundred. The fifty remaining acres were set aside for his first grandchild. That was you.”

“So Dad, I mean, Andrew and you concocted this cover-up? For what reason, to protect the orchards?” Edward glared at me. “That was it, wasn’t it? The almighty dollar won.”

“Things were different back then. Times were hard. The country had just survived the Depression and there was a war going on. Here in the valley, we settled the matter the best way we knew how. If our name had been associated with a murder, we would have gone under. I had a child to feed. I didn’t know what the future held for me—for any of us. Son, I was afraid.” A couple tears rolled down my cheeks. Edward handed me a handkerchief. I took a couple deep breaths and continued. “After I married Andrew, Smythe-Osborne and Porter-Harris joined forces and became Smythe-Harris Orchards. We became the top apple producers in this nation.

Later, Andrew introduced Twinberry Winery, the combination of the two put us on the map and secured our future.”

“So, my father’s murder is swept under the proverbial rug—,or in this case the apple tree —,and forgotten? Mother, how could you be part of that?” Edward was on his feet pacing back and forth. “How could you ignore a murder?”

“Let’s not forget I lost the man I loved that night. He was killed in front of my eyes. I was sitting on the ground stark naked and Alex fell on top of me. I was in shock.” I knew I was rambling but I couldn’t stand my son staring at me like I had grown two heads. “I loved him with all of my heart.”

Edward continued to pace for what felt like an eternity before he knelt beside me. “It’s clear you loved him. You have explained a lot of things that have bothered me over the years. I knew there was something going on. I have no right to judge your actions over something that happened fifty years ago.” He sighed. His eyes never wavered from my face. “At least the man I knew as my father was a fair and honorable man. I still love and respect him as my father.”

I smiled. “Good, that’s what I want. He loved you as his son, always as his son.”

“I know. I’m just glad there wasn’t incest.”

“Really, Edward! Your grandfather would never have touched me like that. How you could have ever thought such a horrid thing is beyond me. Papa loved me and protected me. My brothers also treated me as a lady.”

“I’m glad.”

Gloria’s voice could be heard calling for Edward.

“I better go and see what she needs.”

“Go on, I need to be here a little longer,” I said.

He hesitated and said, “I’ll return as soon as I can.”

“That’s fine, son. Today is a big day for you two as well. Go on.”

With a brisk nod, Edward hurried up the embankment and on his way to the house.

Chapter 9

I picked up a few of the petals and inhaled. It was the same aroma as long ago. The memories washed over me. If I closed my eyes and thought back, I knew I'd see that night as if it were just happening. I'd hear all those sounds. The whippoorwill, the owl and our bodies coming together as Alex filled me with his seed. My eyes closed and I recalled his moans of passion.

"Oh God! Oh! God!" Alex groaned and slammed into me, not stopping until his body had gone still. He leaned down to kiss me. "I love you, Mrs. Harris."

"I love you, Mr. Harris," I replied. "And it's too soon to use Mrs. Harris."

"Of course, my dear."

"I expect to hear that phrase being used a lot after we're married."

He chuckled. "You're so adorable when you're bossy." He stood and slipped on his briefs.

I leaned back on my elbows and watched him. He was so handsome.

Alex picked up his trousers, inserted one leg at a time and pulled them up. "You keep looking as sexy as you are right now, I'm going to ravish you all over again."

"If that's supposed to scare me, it doesn't." I squeezed my breasts together and pinched my nipples between my thumbs and forefingers and pulled.

He groaned and licked his lips.

A loud crack rang out. I squealed and noticed a strange expression cross Alex's face. His mouth formed a perfect *O* as our eyes met.

I watched in horror as Alex's hands reached toward me and his knees buckled. From that moment on, things seemed to move in slow motion. His body swayed, ever so slightly, and blood seeped between the fingers of the hand he pressed against the wound in his stomach. I could see the crimson as it trickled down the back of his hand. Then he pitched forward and fell on top of me. My screams seemed to echo in the air as I held him. In seconds, everything had been turned upside down.

"Guuunnn," Alex muttered.

My mind was numb. It hadn't registered we were being robbed. I knew Alex kept a pistol in his boots. He had shown me how to use it, although I never thought I would have to pull the

trigger. I reached toward his boot.

Chapter 10

“Mother? What’s wrong?”

“Edward!” I gasped and drew back my hand. “I didn’t know you had returned.”

“What do you need? I saw you reaching for something.”

“I did? Help me to my feet,” I said and held out my hands. As I stood, our eyes met.

Edward looked confused. “Son, is something wrong?”

He stared at me. “What were you reaching for?”

There was no way I could tell my son the entire truth about what had happened that night. Instead of answering him, I asked, “Why did Gloria call for you?”

Edward frowned and then blinked. “Oh. Yes. Your cousin phoned and said the bus had a flat tire and the boys’ arrival would be delayed an hour.”

“How thoughtful of Walter to call and tell us.”

“Are you ready to go back?”

I shook my head and asked, “Could you do a couple favors for me?”

Edward stiffened.

It was obvious he was reluctant to agree to anything after what he’d learned the last few minutes. Maybe he was afraid I’d reveal more dark secrets. But there were a couple issues that had to be addressed. “Could you make sure this tree is never destroyed and this parcel of land kept in the family?”

He smiled and nodded. “Of course, Mother. No one will ever disturb his resting place. At least now I understand why you wanted one of my sons named Alexander instead of Andrew. I never understood why you had insisted on it.”

“I just thought it wouldn’t be right to forget about my Alex. Besides, I knew Fiona wanted to name one of her sons after her father.” I watched Edward digest my explanation. “One more favor.”

“Go ahead.”

“Please, don’t tell Fiona about this. I don’t want her to ever think she wasn’t conceived out of love. Please, Edward.”

“Is that why you never told us about him?”

I swallowed. I was almost home free. “I knew it would only cause more questions than I wanted to discuss. There were times that it hurt Andrew knowing he wasn’t first in my heart. I couldn’t have that touch you children. I never wanted either of you to doubt our love for you. Andrew loved both of you equally.”

“I know that, Mother. I also know he loved you.” Edward looked toward the creek. “Did you love him at all?”

“A woman’s heart can hold so many secrets.”

“Mother, I never realized how well you sidestepped questions.”

“They were identical twins, how could I not love him?” I said.

He arched his eyebrows. “That’s not an answer, either.”

I took a deep breath and said, “It took time. But, yes, I fell in love with Andrew. My regret is I never told him how much. He was a good husband, and he was a good father.”

Edward seemed pleased with my response. “Can I ask you a question, Mother?”

“Of course.” My pulse quickened.

“How did Dad get those marks on his back?”

I almost breathed a sigh of relief. “Their grandfather Porter whipped them. They were seven years old at the time. He was left in charge of the two boys. He had a problem with alcohol and was drinking when Andrew refused to get in the water.”

A puzzled look crossed Edward’s face. “Dad was afraid of the water? He taught me to swim, right here in the creek.”

“He was afraid but he overcame it after he’d grown up. The night Alex was killed and I was screaming, Andrew fought against his fear and crossed the creek to rescue us. It took him a few years, but he conquered his distaste of the water.”

“I’d have never guessed.” Edward shook his head while he digested the piece of information. “Wait a minute. You said their grandfather whipped ‘them.’ Did Alex get beaten as well?”

“Alex got the brunt of the beating. He was in the water when he heard Andrew’s shrieks of pain. He shoved Andrew out of the way and took the rest of the beating. Alex’s bare, wet back was torn to shreds.”

“Good God! The man was a lunatic!”

I nodded. “That’s why Andrew and I decided to drop Porter from the business name.”

“Why did you drop Osborne?”

“Well, son, my great-grandfather Smythe started the orchard. It seemed only fair his name remained. My father’s expertise was in horses.”

Edward nodded. “I always thought it was a darker reason.”

“Go to Gloria. I want to stay here a little longer.”

Edward turned to leave, paused and looked back. “You’ll be all right here alone?”

“Yes.” I watched until he disappeared. “Alex, my love, I had to tell him. I couldn’t help it, his mind was coming up with all kinds of crazy things. I had to tell him something.”

I breathed in the scent of the apple blossoms. I closed my eyes. I needed to relive those final moments of Alex’s life.

Chapter 11

I relived again the report of the rifle and Alex's stunned gray eyes holding mine as he reminded me of the gun he kept in his boot. I reached into his boot and had just wrapped my hand around the grip when I heard the sound of someone cocking a gun. It came from behind me and I froze.

"Shoooot," Alex gasped.

Instinct must have taken over. I released the safety on the gun, turned and fired at the dark silhouette standing behind us. When the attacker dropped to the ground, I saw his face for the first time. Once I started screaming, I couldn't stop.

Andrew appeared out of nowhere. He grabbed the gun from my hand and put it in the waistband of his trousers. He moved Alex away from me and helped me to my feet. I was covered in blood. With extraordinary tenderness, Andrew carried me to the creek and washed away the blood. The cold water must have shocked my system because I stopped screaming. Andrew had to help me dress since I was still in a daze. He never said a word even though his heart had to be breaking by the loss of his twin.

No sooner had Andrew slipped my shoes on my feet, I heard my brothers calling for Papa and me. The boys must have heard the gunshots. They arrived with rifles and pointed them at Andrew.

I stood in front of him, although I knew Andrew would never want to be shielded by a woman. It was necessary. "Don't shoot him!" I yelled.

My oldest brother, Harold, shouted at me. "We don't know what is going on, but little sister, move your ass. Now!"

"No!" I refused to budge. The barrels of those three guns looked like cannons aimed right at us. "The man I love was murdered in front of me and I killed the man who did it."

My brothers first stared at me and then glared at Andrew.

"Please, Harold. Listen to me. Alex was shot first. I didn't know who was behind me. I grabbed his gun and shot to protect myself. I was terrified."

"You're telling us you fired the gun and not him?" Harold pointed Andrew.

"Yes Harold. I did it. Andrew didn't arrive until it was over. He helped me wash off the

blood.” My bravado was fading. “Harold, please. Alex and I were eloping tonight. I didn’t know it was Papa standing behind us when I pulled the trigger.”

My brothers exchanged glances. As the oldest, Harold always made the final decision. He stared at me, his eyes narrowed as if he was trying to see deep in my soul.

Tears rolled down my cheeks and I sniffed. “Harold, I’m telling the truth. I shot Papa.”

He nodded. “We’ll take care of things.”

The matter was not discussed again and I remained in seclusion until the day I realized I was pregnant with Alex’s child—Edward.

Once again, Andrew stepped in and we were married. My brothers sold their holdings to Andrew and moved away. It turned out my brothers never wanted to live on the estate. They wished us the best and never returned. I always thought it was my fault they’d sold out, because they couldn’t live with the constant reminder of what I’d done.

Chapter 12

“Mother! Mother!”

I turned to see my son waving as he crossed the lawn hurrying toward me. “What is it, Edward?”

“Fiona spotted the bus from the widow’s walk.”

“Okay, you go back to the house. I need to say good-bye.”

Edward stopped immediately. I could see his pinched mouth. “Mother, stop living in the past. It’s not healthy.”

“Please, son. I’ll be right there.”

He nodded, turned on his heel and walked slowly back to the house.

A breeze blew across my face and whipped my hair around. One of the long, gray strands caught on a branch. For a moment, it was like old times when Alex teased me by pulling on one of my curls. “Our grandsons will be home soon. I must go join the family. I love you, Alex, today and forever.”

I started up the embankment and stopped. There was something else I needed to say. I’d been a coward for too long. If my grandsons were old enough to be going off to war and face unknown horror, then it was time for me to face my known ones. “Papa, I’m not proud of what I did, but you had no right to murder the man I was going to marry. Alex was my heart. He’s the father of my son.” I fought against the tears.

I heard the rumbling of the bus in the distance and Edward calling for me again. It was time to go. “Good-bye, Papa. Bye, Alex, my precious love.”

I hadn’t known it was my father when I pulled the trigger, and I’m not sure it would have made any difference if I had. The men decided to bury both bodies under the tree. After that horrible night, the tree never produced fruit again, but bloomed consistently every year. I sighed. After one more look, I blew a kiss into the air and started back to the house.

The tree, with my love and my love’s murderer buried at its roots in the soft dark earth, would continue to guard our secrets.

About Cassie Exline

Cassie works for a small town newspaper along the east coast of the United States. She is married with grown children. Writing has been her passion. Writing erotic romance, suspense and mysteries have become her joy. Real life inspires much of Cassie's erotic fiction, but she also likes that it allows her to explore all the bedroom and lifestyle options from the safety of her home computer. For Cassie, writing about sexy events is the next best thing to being there.

Her first ebook in the Sheryl Locke Holmes Series, *Amber's Mysterious Death*, can be purchased at Wild Child Publishing. Currently in editing is the second book in the Holmes series, *Ruby's Deadly Secret*. She has several short stories published at Ruthie's Club, The Erotic Woman, Erotic Bookworm, and Justus Roux. Ebook and print book "*Coming Together: With Pride*" published at All Romance. She's a member of Erotica Author's Association, Erotica Readers & Writers Association and Desdmona's FishTank.

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Reviews for Tree of Buried Secrets



5 cup Review from Coffee Time Romance

Ms. Exline has written an action packed tale full of love and secrets kept because of it. The beginning of the story is outstanding because the reader is unaware that it is the recalling of a memory of Julia's. It is an emotional roller coaster from start to finish and grabs the reader from the very first word. The author built a relationship between the readers and the characters that keeps the reader enthralled. The author skillfully told a story using powerful words that consume the reader immediately. Ms. Exline revealed the secret a little bit at a time keeping the audience interested until the very end. The Tree of Buried Secrets is an outstanding and enthralling read written by an obvious master of words.

Delane

Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance



Nymph Rating: 5

Literary Nymph Reviewer: Moon Nymph

Cassie Exline has found a touching way for this mother to reveal a deep, dark secret to

her beloved son. The characters are realistic and loveable, especially Julia. Learning about her secret and why she lived with it for such a long time was so well worth the read. This story has it all- setting, likeable characters, and a plot that will intrigue readers within all genres.



Rites of Romance Reviews:

Exline's tale unfolds easily and is well-paced. She writes seductive love scenes that tantalize, but she does not over use them. All in all, a strong romantic story with a hint of darker elements. I look forward to exploring other works by Exline.



The Long and the Short of It

Review by Amaranth

Cassie Exline did an excellent job of bringing to life the sorrows and joys that Julia experienced all those years ago, and her melancholy over what really happened that night. Ms. Exline spent a little time explaining Julia's and her husband's families and how the family business came to be. At the time of reading, I felt that it was too much information and taking from the story a bit. However, after finishing the book and understanding the secret that Julia had to reveal, I feel that Ms. Exline gave just enough information to help her readers understand the full story; and without that story, it would have all been a bit confusing trying to follow how that night and the following days and years progressed. The writing and editing was clean, and I am happy that I had the opportunity to read and review this book.

Tree of Buried Secrets was named Book of the Week at The Long and The Short of It.

