



THE CURSE OF THE MIDNIGHT STAR

Book Two

INTRIGUE

by

Esther Mitchell

Triskelion Publishing

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Dear Reader

Mid-Summer, lazy sultry days and sensual nights. What delectable treats does Triskelion Publishing have for you this month? Well grab a refreshing drink, sit back, and relax.

From popular, talented Alicia Sparks comes a unique paranormal tale set in the Bayous of Louisiana. Justin Thibodeaux never knew a night out on the Bayou would bring about events that would have him changing with the moon. Or that Jean Marie LaFleur would be back in his life. Voodoo curses, lost treasure and second chances of love, all play their part to make this one very sweltering tale for our Amethyst Inferno line, **Bayou Gold**.

For Moonlight Mystique, Rachel Carrington brings us her sequel to Indigo Spell with Falcon's story **Timeless Spell**. Falcon having left Mystique has found a place on earth and with it a woman that calls to him. Danni is a vulnerable, beautiful woman, yet strong and independent. When her life is in jeopardy Falcon knows that he will do anything to save her. But Danni does not know who and what Falcon really is or why someone is trying to kill her. After her husband's death Danni didn't want to get involved but she's finding Falcon hard to resist.

On to our two continuity series.

First up is the second part of **The Curse of the Midnight Star**. Esther Mitchell brings us **Intrigue**. Remy Terreau owner of the Scarlet Oak Manor cursed the day that the FBI arrived investigating a series of graves opened by the landscapers. Now he's hearing things himself and on top of that he still needs a chef. One problem solved he hires Gillian Martin. But when Gillian is attacked and with a series of incidents that put back his grand opening Remy knows that The Curse of the Midnight Star is still very much an issue. Remy's desire for Gillian grows but can they overcome many obstacles before they can be truly happy.

Vijaya Schartz brings us the continuing and exciting saga of **Operation Pleiades: Relics**. Book two features, Celene Depres one of the Seven Sisters of Pleiades. Unknown to Celene her life was forever marked when she was kidnapped as a child; she's a walking weapon of destruction. After she witnesses the murder of her father, the relics he found taken by Orion, she's on the run. A mysterious man saves her more than once but who is Kin Raidon and what are his intentions is he friend or foe?

Mid August brings us **Poseidon's Heart** by Diane Taylor for our Amethyst Flashburn line. Jamie Tamist swears she will never dive again. After suffering horrendous injuries from a shark attack Jamie is left permanently scared not just the visual scars on her body, but in mind. But when a request comes her way from a representative of Trident Shipping, she's intrigued. When she meets Vasilios Okeanos he's arrogant and rude. But when he finally tells her what he wants her to do and that is find Poseidon's Reignments she thinks he's been conned and someone is having a joke on him after all Poseidon is a god of myth and legend his Trident and Crown are part of that myth they don't exist. Or do they?

I hope you enjoy our thrilling and exciting tales this month and come back for more.



Gail Northman  
Editor Triskelion Publishing

## PROLOGUE

*“Remy... Help me.” The voice was soft and pleading, emanating from the suffocating darkness. Fear shot along his nerves, and his skin pricked with an unearthly chill. She was closing on him, and he was powerless to flee her.*

*Turning, he saw her as she floated toward him, her bare feet not quite touching the ground. Through the haze and dark, her pale hands were outstretched imploringly. Her white gown billowed, and her long, auburn hair twisted against her shoulders, outlining an aristocratic face with soft, feminine features. However, her eyes were what captivated him in his fear. Those eyes were mirrors of his own; ice-blue pools that overflowed with terror.*

*She stopped before him, and one slim, pale hand reached toward his arm. “Please help me.” And, as her fingertips brushed his sleeve, the world flashed away.*

Remy Terreau bolted upright and awake, his lungs clamoring for air and his body drenched in cold sweat. Shuddering, he sucked in warm, humid air before leaning back against the headboard with a weary groan. He wouldn't be getting any more sleep tonight; he never slept after *that* dream.

Closing his eyes, Remy breathed a heartfelt oath, cursing the day the FBI had arrived at Scarlet Oak Manor to investigate a series of graves the landscaping crew had unearthed. Ever since, Remy had felt edgy and out of place in his own skin. Not that he'd shown that feeling to anyone, but it plagued him. And, since they'd uncovered those bodies out near the cemetery, and Lynsee Frost had claimed she'd seen the ghost of Lyle Forrester, Remy hadn't had a full night's sleep. He kept dreaming about *her*.

“Susannah,” he murmured to the darkness as bleak fear rushed through his veins. Susannah Forrester had been dead for nearly two hundred years – the victim of her deranged husband, Lyle, to hear Remy's mother tell it. However, there were other stories he'd heard as well, about a cursed necklace Lyle had stolen from his dead mistress, and then again, from his wife's corpse. These were the stories he'd been raised on, and probably the genesis of his nightmares, Remy acknowledged in disgust.

Monica Wilmington Terreau made it her business to know every grotesque detail of her family's history; she had a dramatic fascination with tragedy of any kind. The horrible fate Monica claimed to have befallen young Susannah Wilmington when she married Lyle Forrester was a favorite subject of his mother's. Not that Remy had ever paid much attention, until the day he'd been idiot enough to think he could turn Scarlet Oak Manor into a prosperous hotel.

Remy rubbed one hand over his face and heaved a weary sigh. No matter what family history resided here, he no longer cared. All he wanted was to sleep at night. But sleep continued to elude him, and his nightmares were getting more frequent and bizarre.

At first, Susannah had been little more than a specter in the night of his mind, constantly drifting toward him from a distance. Only her tormented eyes had haunted him long after he'd awakened. At least he'd slept, then. Until she'd started speaking to him, and her words had sent him reeling, stealing sleep from his grasp completely. Susannah claimed to be her husband's prisoner, even in death. To a man who had never really accepted the spirit world, before, the possibility of spiritual enslavement was terrifying.

Lately, his dreams had begun gaining a power of their own, over *him*. Susannah begged him to release her from her captivity; as if he knew anything about ghosts or spiritual control. Remy snorted a dark laugh. He was a businessman, not a Ghostbuster. Why hadn't Susannah called to his cousin, who

was versed in these things? Garner would be ecstatic over the opportunity to mess around with his pet theories on the supernatural; Remy had never even considered whether the spirit world existed, before!

Tossing aside the sheets that twisted around his muscular body, Remy rose from the bed and threw on his robe. Then, with a heavy sigh of frustration, he speared his long, tapered fingers through dark, wavy hair that was the Terreau family legacy. Much like his ice-blue eyes came from the Wilmingtons.

*Those eyes.*

Remy dragged his attention from the memory of Susannah's pale blue, pleading eyes. His own gaze swept over the interior of his bedroom, taking comfort from the familiar furniture and objects. Decorated in dark colors ranging from forest green to burgundy, this space was a perfect reflection of his maudlin mood, lately. Perhaps that explained his dark dreams.

Yet, Remy couldn't see himself redecorating in bright colors or pastels. The very idea made him laugh. No, the room didn't make the difference. He just needed to get this hotel open, and move on to a new project. He needed to be busy, again; too busy to think about two-hundred-year-old curses.

## CHAPTER ONE

*September 2*

Remy straightened his shoulders and attempted to look unbothered by what Pamela LaRouete, the housekeeper, had found in the upstairs study.

"They're all over the place," she was saying in her usual rapid-fire way, gesturing broadly. "I've been trying to sweep them up for days. Even sprayed the place with RAID. There's always more!"

Carpenter ants. Just great. Another delay to opening the hotel. He couldn't open a hotel full of insects. Remy drew a breath, telling himself to remain calm. The staff had become used to his normal laid-back façade. They didn't need to see the stress he was really under.

"I'll call an exterminator, Pamela," he assured the woman tightly. "Just try to keep them confined to the study, okay?"

"What am I, pest control?" She grumbled as she stalked away.

Remy clenched his jaw and counted to ten, to keep from saying something he'd regret to her departing back. He couldn't loose his frustrations on his employees. It really wasn't their faults that he'd had nothing but delay after delay getting Scarlet Oak Manor ready for opening. Besides, they were already tip-toeing around him since Julian Sabuert, the chef he'd hand-picked from his father's chateau in France, had quit in a huff last week, and now flatly refused to work in Louisiana, or for a Terreau. Moreover, Remy hadn't had much luck finding a replacement. He was down to less than a handful of options.

"You look frazzled, boss."

Remy glanced at the man standing sedately behind the check-in desk, going through reservation paperwork. At thirty-two, with dark hair and eyes that hinted at his Creole descent, Etienne Fabron had the easy charm and complacent bearing of a man who knew how to get things done and keep everyone's feathers smooth at the same time. That Etienne always caused a prickle of unnamable apprehension in him was something Remy hadn't let bother him long. He'd hired Etienne as concierge, anyway, and hadn't had cause to regret it. Etienne had made himself indispensable to Scarlet Oak's operation.

"It's been a long month, Etienne," Remy allowed now, with a tired smile.

"I'll say! With Burrell on the loose, killing people, and those other bodies turning up, and now the hotel opening having to be pushed back so many times—"

"And stirring up the dead," Remy murmured absently to himself as he recalled the haunting image of pleading ice-blue eyes and shuddered.

"Did you say 'stirring up the dead'?" Etienne's startled voice drew his attention back to the present, only to find the other man blinking at him. "You mean the bodies, right?"

"No. The spirits," Remy replied wearily, rubbing the bridge of his nose; he hadn't realized he'd said that out loud. God, his head was pounding.

"Spirits?"

"I've been having these strange dreams, and—" He blinked suddenly, straightening as he realized what he was saying, and to whom. "Never mind."

Turning abruptly, he walked away before he could make any more blunders like that one; but not before he caught the strange glint in Etienne's eyes. Great. Just what he needed, right now; to have his employees thinking he'd run stark raving mad.

Etienne watched Remy Terreau's retreating back through narrowed eyes, before a sinister smile twisted on his lips. Terreau was a fool. He trusted blindly, expecting that the absurd wages he paid his employees would buy their loyalty, as well. Perhaps, in some cases, it did. That cow, Pam LaRouete, had certainly been bought. She gushed constantly about Terreau's generosity, and she'd foiled Etienne's

plans more than once with her bumbling stupidity. She thought she could snare Terreau with her false veneer, and Etienne planned to use that.

Let idiots like Pam be bought. Etienne Fabron was not for sale. He'd nearly laughed at the wages Terreau paid him, more than once. He wondered if the man had yet realized that he was paying handsomely for his own demise. Etienne's lips twisted again, into a grotesque smirk. Remy Terreau was a Forrester by proxy, and he'd bought Scarlet Oak Manor, curse and all. Etienne intended to see to it that the curse, at least, came terrifyingly true for Remy Terreau.

"Spirits, huh?" He murmured to himself, grinning. He hadn't pegged Terreau as sensitive to the spirit world, but then, he was a Wilmington, and he likely shared Susannah's sensitivity to *genus loci*. That sensitivity had driven Susannah mad. A dark chuckle escaped him as he imagined all the ways he could torture Remy Terreau before he killed the man. But first, he needed to make sure the hotel never opened. He still had to find the Midnight Star sapphire.

*Camille.* Camille Jamori was the key. She'd betrayed her kin by consorting with a Forrester, and she'd been foolish enough to let him betray her while wearing the Midnight Star. However, her sister's daughter's son had all the powers of the Jamori blood, and none of the weakness that had led to Camille's death. Etienne would recover the sapphire, and see to it that the Jamori family had its revenge; even if he had to use Camille to do it.

The sound of a door slamming shut drew Etienne back from his pleasant musings just in time to see Terreau striding across the drive toward his sports car. A glance at the appointment log verified that the hotel's owner was planning to be gone all day; first to meet the new chef he was expecting from Baltimore, and then to see to other business. Etienne smirked. Terreau hadn't a clue that his nightmares were only *just* beginning.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Remy Terreau! It's been ages, man; damn, it's good to see you!" The greeting met Remy as he stepped through the doors of *Duex Regali*, one of New Orleans' top ten restaurants, causing a grin to slide across his face. Guy Millard was the exuberant kind of man who charmed ladies in spite of their better judgment and put men at ease.

"How's business, *mon ami*?" Remy shook hands with the lanky black man who'd been his childhood friend. *Duex Regali* was Guy's brainchild, and the manifestation of the six years of backbreaking work Guy and Remy had put into the restoration of a once-dilapidated building in the French Quarter. That Guy had turned it into a cash cow and one of the city's premiere restaurants since, rivaling even the celebrity *Delmonico*, was a testament to how dedicated Guy was to his dream.

"Can't complain," Guy quipped with a negligent shrug. "The food's great, the wine's exquisite, and the women are to die for!"

Remy chuckled. "You always were a hound."

"And you," Guy returned with a teasing glint in his eye, "aren't here to find out how business is, my friend. You've got something else up your sleeve, man."

Remy raised one brow. "I don't know what you mean."

"I know you, man. You plunk your money and brains into a project, get it going, and then you disappear into the next project without a backward glance."

A grin slid over Remy's face, to hear his old friend describe him the same way his business competitors did. "Guess I'm busted, then. Actually, I'm here to meet someone."

Guy's brow rose, and a knowing smirk settled on his face as he gestured for Remy to follow him. As they moved through the nearly empty dining room, Guy shot him a glance. "So. Is it uncouth to ask which celebrity babe *du jour* I should be on the lookout for?"

Remy grimaced at that, his good humor fleeing. Sure, he enjoyed women; he found all women fascinating and beautiful, for a while. But that didn't make him a womanizer. Guy, at least, should know that; he knew how overrated Remy's reputation was. They'd grown up together, he and Guy, and his friend knew Remy's family, and how insane his mother and aunts drove him. Remy wouldn't let a woman close enough to do that, now. However, that narrow existence had always bothered Remy, and Guy knew it. They'd been best friends through school, and even gone to Princeton together for a while, before Guy decided business law didn't hold the same kind of appeal as restaurants and kitchens.

While Guy had partied hard in college, making full use of his newfound freedom from his straight-laced aunt and uncle, Remy had cracked the books enough for both of them, determined to be the best, and to get as far from his mortuary-minded mother and her strange sisters as he could. To prove they hadn't affected him, Remy had put on the appearance of the lackadaisical playboy the media had craved for their front pages, and played the part to the hilt. Only to his best friend had he confided his dissatisfaction with the role he played.

Unfortunately, his carefully cultivated image had followed him home to New Orleans, where it built itself to legend. Now, men envied him for his free lifestyle, and women thronged to him in search of some souvenir. He could have had his pick of any of a dozen paramours to this day. However, at thirty, he'd begun to tire of the game. He craved peace, instead.

"No woman," he answered Guy with a tired smile. "I don't have the energy for celebrities anymore, either. I'm meeting Anthony Micheline."

Guy's eyes widened, and his whistled beneath his breath. "No time for celebrities, huh? Micheline is only TV's own celebrity pasta chef!"

"Yeah. That's the one. He's supposed to have flown in from Baltimore yesterday, and he's going to meet me here."

"What for? Doesn't Julian do pasta?" Guy cocked a curious brow at him as he showed Remy to a booth near the kitchen's swinging doors.



Remy bit back a grimace. “Julian isn’t coming to Scarlet Oak, after all. According to my father, he’s grown tired of ‘tyrannical Terreaus’.”

Guy winced. “Sounds like your dad’s got at him about his drinking, again. Subtle, your old man isn’t.”

Remy snorted. Guy certainly didn’t have to tell him that. Remy had barely managed to retain his inheritance after Louis Terreau had learned of his only son’s defection from both the family business and international politics, to American business law.

“So, now you’re settling for a pasta chef?” Guy asked incredulously. “Man, to hear you talk, I thought Julian was *God* in the kitchen.”

A dark cloud descended over Remy at that reminder. Even at his most sodden drunk, Julian Sabuert was a genius in the kitchen. “He is. But I’m pretty much out of options here, Guy. I need a good chef – hell, I need a miracle worker – to handle things in the kitchen at Scarlet Oak. Someone who’ll make everyone forget about that damned curse business.”

Guy whistled. “Tall order for a mere mortal.”

“Yeah,” Remy acknowledged grimly. “It is.”

Guy grinned, then. “Well, as long as you’re not here for *my* chef! Good luck, man.”

Remy laughed, his dark mood dissipating as he recalled the cantankerous but gold-hearted old Frenchman who’d been Guy’s right hand since *Duex Regali* opened.

“Henri wouldn’t take my offer if I made it, Millard, and you know it!”

“I’m not talking about Henri,” Guy said, his expression suddenly sober. “Henri’s in the hospital, right now.”

Those words hit Remy like a freight train between the eyes. Henri Mattheisse had owned a little restaurant in the French Quarter for most of Remy’s life, until a heart attack had forced the old man to choose between his business and his true love – cooking. For two boys who’d had too much time and not enough simple, tough love, Henri had been a guardian angel, determined to see they stayed out of trouble on his watch. Now, staring at his friend in dread, Remy asked, “What happened?”

“He had another heart attack. Stubborn old coot; he wouldn’t slow down,” Guy muttered, covering the fear Remy could see in his eyes with anger. “If it wasn’t for my *sous* chef, Gillian Martin, the old man would be dead. He had an attack right here, Remy. In my kitchen! Dammit.”

Remy laid a commiserating hand on the shorter man’s shoulder. To Guy, Henri had been the father he’d never known. It was clear Guy was taking this most recent attack hard; he looked scared for the first time Remy could remember since they’d been six years old. “Sorry, *mon ami*. I hope he gets well soon.” He cocked a curious glance at his friend. “Who’s covering, right now?”

“Temporarily, Gillian – my *sous* chef – is.” Guy’s face lit, then. “She’s amazing, man. She’s got all sorts of new ideas, and I’ve never seen the woman get mad. The staff loves her.”

Remy chuckled. “After Henri’s Kitchen Commando tactics, she sounds like an angel. Be careful they don’t get too used to her before he comes back.”

Guy grinned broadly. “Well, I better go keep an eye out for your new chef, before you steal mine!”

After Guy left, Remy sat watching the swift coming and going of waiting staff through the kitchen doors, and had to admit that he was impressed. Not only was the food arriving promptly at its tables, but the staff served with genuine smiles. Remy’d spent enough of his youth hanging out with Guy – to whom the interaction of kitchen and waiters was a life-long obsession – to know that the temperament of a chef was often the key factor in the atmosphere of a restaurant. If the chef was cranky or overly demanding, the kitchen crew and waiting staff were invariably stiff-necked and miserable. That was the recipe for a totally artificial and uncomfortable dining experience.

Remy shuddered. If a cranky chef was bad, a prima donna chef was the worst, and most frequent, kind of disaster a higher-class restaurant could suffer. Savvy owners avoided prima donnas like the plague; unfortunately, some of the world's best chefs fell into that category.

But not *Duex Regali's*. Henri might have been gruff and exacting, but the staff had clearly respected him from the beginning. And now... Remy grinned to himself. The staff was at ease and smiling, and the atmosphere of congeniality could have only one genesis; Gillian Martin. Remy's curiosity was piqued.

A young woman in the glittering vest and dark green shirt and slacks that were *Duex Regali's* dress code approached his table with a smile, and a velvet-covered menu in hand.

"Hi. My name's Ashley; welcome to *Duex Regali*. Can I get you something to drink while you decide?"

Remy accepted the menu with a smile as he looked up at the girl, who was probably at least a decade his junior. "What's good around here, this time of day?"

She laughed. "Well, my favorite's good all day long. Gillian makes an amazing Black Forest pie. It's absolutely decadent."

"Ah. So you've got a sweet tooth," he observed with a grin.

She dimpled, her blonde head bobbing, before she blushed. "Does it show? Gillian's dessert experiments tend to be bad for my diet."

Remy smiled, but refrained from commenting. In his opinion – which women like Ashley, who fixated on their figures, were never interested in – women spent far too much time starving themselves for an industry standard of beauty, and not enough time enjoying life. Maybe, he mused silently as he gave Ashley's slim figure an once-over, that was why he'd grown so tired of the social scene in recent months. He wanted a woman who appreciated life, and her own body.

"Tell you what, Ashley," he said with a charming grin that was just this side of flirtatious. "Why don't you bring me some of that pie, then, and a cup of coffee. Cream only."

Her smile widened as she met his gaze, and Remy cringed inwardly at the open invitation in her eyes. This girl was far too young for him, even if he had wanted her.

"You won't regret it. I promise." And, with a flirty smile, she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Man, you score no matter where you go, don't you?" Guy slid into the seat opposite Remy, causing his gaze to fly there in surprise. It was simply proof of how exhausted he was, Remy decided, that he'd never even noticed Guy's approach.

"Like you should talk, you hound!" Remy quipped. "They line up to get at you."

Guy cocked one brow. "And that wasn't a blatant come-on I saw on Ashley Caldwell's face, just now?"

"Only if I felt like messing with my kid sister," Remy replied with a grimace. "She's too young."

"And you, my friend, don't *have* a sister," Guy pointed out. "When are you going to quite pretending to be the original player and just settle down?"

"When I find the right woman. Now, what's brought you back here?" Remy asked with a cocky grin. "Don't you have a restaurant to run?"

Guy laughed. "Yeah. However, an Etienne Fabron just called, up front. He said to tell you that Michelin called the hotel to say he isn't coming. He got a better offer from some casino in Vegas." Guy's expression was somber. "You've just lost your pasta chef, Remy."

Remy swore under his breath. "Damn it. That makes two!"

"Problems?"

Remy snorted. "Yeah. My hotel's scheduled to open the middle of next month, and I can't find a chef, no matter what incentive I offer."

Guy smiled wryly, but his dark eyes remained troubled. "No one wants to work in the haunted mansion, huh?"

"It's *not* haunted," Remy bit out, glancing around. There was no way he was letting anyone know about his troubling dreams. Not even his oldest friend. "That's all just a lot of local legend. Come on, Guy, you know how this city thrives on that paranormal crap. No one from outside Louisiana is going to know, or care, about the damned Forresters!"

Guy chuckled, shaking his dark head in disbelief. "You still don't get it, do you? People actually *read* those rags you ignore in the store, amigo. Bad news spreads fast, and even faster when attached to the Terreaus or Wilmingtons. The story's been all over the tabloids, and even the regular news, since the FBI found those bodies, Remy."

Remy sighed heavily. Guy was right, of course; when the Terreau name was involved, it was instant news. And once the press got wind of Scarlet Oak's history... "Damn."

Ashley returned just then, forestalling Guy's reply as she poured them both cups of the dark, chicory-laced coffee favored in Louisiana and set a crystal pitcher of fresh cream between them. Then she slid a plate in front of Remy, and he stared in surprise at the most sinful looking concoction he'd ever beheld.

He heard Guy chuckle as his eyes slid over the seductively arranged mound of chocolate mousse, pecans, whipped cream, and cherries, drizzled with whimsical swirls of chocolate and caramel syrups and crowned with a flirtatious curl of dark chocolate. It was, by far, the most decadent and sensual presentation Remy had ever seen made with food, and it left him even more curious about its creator. What kind of woman flirted with complete strangers through food?

"I see Ashley's introduced you to Gillian's original creation." Guy's voice drew Remy back from his musings.

"She did claim that this was your chef's masterpiece," he said with a wry grin. "I can see why."

Guy laughed. "You should see what the woman does with Shrimp Creole. I swear I've yet to hand her a dish she can't turn into something amazing."

Remy cocked one eyebrow at his friend, his curiosity growing further. So far, Gillian Martin sounded like just the thing Scarlet Oak Manor needed to breathe new life into it. "How long's she been working for you?"

"As *sous* chef? Six months, next week. She's been a godsend with Henri; she softens the old coot right up, and his blood pressure stays more normal when she's around."

"And before she came to work here?"

Guy eyed him suspiciously. "You wouldn't be trying to steal her away, would you?"

Remy couldn't help but grin. "I'm tempted."

"I knew it." Guy rolled his eyes, and sighed in resignation. "And I can't make her an offer to beat yours. Okay, I know I'm going to regret this, but here's what I know: Gillian's a bit of a gypsy. She doesn't stay in any one place, or at any one restaurant, for very long. She's been head chef at several smaller places across the country, and *sous* chef at some pretty ritzy places. She studied at Scottsdale and Le Cordon Bleu, and spent a year in Paris, following her graduation."

Remy frowned. Normally, chefs didn't move around too often. It took years to get head chef in any high-end restaurant, and no one studied as highly as Gillian had without ambition. "Was she ever fired?"

"Nope." Guy shook his head and shrugged. "What can I say? All of her former employers, except one, had nothing but praise for her."

"And the one who didn't?"

Guy snorted. "Sounded like a real ass to me, amigo."

Remy's eyes narrowed. Guy was a pretty good judge of character. "Why do you say that?"

"Let's just say, I got the impression that his reasons were personal, not professional."

Remy nodded absently as he lifted a forkful of the decadent dessert to his mouth. As the smooth blend of sweet and bitter tastes rolled over his tongue, Remy decided that Gillian Martin had long ago learned the fine art of seduction through food. Taste and presentation both screamed a love of life and adventure, while seeming neither cheap nor tawdry. Remy grinned; oh, yeah, he was sold.

“I’d like to meet this miracle worker of yours, Guy.”

Guy returned the grin with a friendly roll of his eyes. “I knew it was a mistake to open my big mouth.” He gestured toward the kitchen as he rose to his feet. “It’s quiet, right now. Let me introduce you before lunch rush hits.”

As he followed Guy into the brightly-lit kitchen, the first things Remy noticed were the hum of soft rock music from a portable radio, and the throb of husky, rich feminine laughter, more potent than the decadent dessert he’d just tasted. That full, throaty laugh could only belong to one person – the as-yet mysterious Gillian Martin. It slid over Remy in a seductive curl, and he suddenly felt like an anxious teenager again. He blinked in disbelief as he realized he was actually *sweating*, and it had nothing to do with the warmth of the kitchen.

Stepping further into the kitchen, he saw her, cheerfully topping the last of a dish of what looked like Florentine clams as she joked with the girl working beside her. His eyes raked over her, and he rocked back on his heels at the sensation that jolted through him.

Gillian Martin wasn’t what most men labeled sexy. But then, most men were idiots, always in search of that skinny sex goddess who’d make the perfect arm ornament. Gillian was more like an Earth goddess, with voluptuous curves beneath her chef’s uniform, and honest-to-god hips that begged to be touched. He swallowed hard against the sudden, and entirely inappropriate, image of his hands on all that bare flesh. God, what was wrong with him?

Her hair was a mystery to him, tucked up beneath a tie-dyed bandana that hid both its color and length, but her lashes and brows were a sandy color that hinted at tawny silkiness. The bandana’s bright hues suited her, bringing out the soft curves of her smiling face and the lush fullness of her lips. Those lips were tinted with a soft, dark shade that reminded him vividly of the dessert she’d created, and he found himself wondering if she’d taste as decadent as her creation did. His reaction to her surprised Remy; he hadn’t responded to a woman like this in far too long.

One of the kitchen crew – a gangly young man with too many limbs for his coordination – suddenly stumbled and dropped the plates he’d been juggling, spilling the contents, and shards of china, across the kitchen floor. In itself, this wasn’t an unheard of crisis in a kitchen, but each chef handled such mishaps differently. Remy watched Gillian, wondering how she’d respond; most chefs of his acquaintance would have grown impatient with the delays caused by the accident. Gillian, however, didn’t appear the least bit perturbed. Instead, she handed what she was doing to the girl beside her, and crouched down to begin calmly collecting the broken china, saying something in a pleasant murmur that made the young line cook beam, and nod.

As the kid disappeared, Gillian continued her calm gathering, and when he returned with a broom, smiling and relaxed, Remy had to admit he was impressed. Instead of stopping production to rant about the crisis and delay, Gillian had nonchalantly dealt with the problem as the minor mishap it was, while the rest of the crew continued working around the mess, as if nothing had happened.

“Hey, Gillian,” Guy called as she rose to her feet again. “C’mon over here, girl! There’s someone who wants to see you.”

She froze for just a second, a barely noticeable tension stiffening her back and shoulders, before she turned slowly toward them. As her deep blue – almost violet, he realized with a start – eyes collided with his, he read fear, and then surprise and a wash of relief, tinged with wariness, causing Remy to wonder who she’d been expecting. Yet, as he stared into those eyes, watching them warm and soften, Remy felt the tension of the past few weeks evaporate, and a peace he hadn’t felt in far too long settled over him. He barely resisted the urge to sigh his relief; but he knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that

Gillian Martin was the one he wanted in the kitchens of Scarlet Oak Manor. Now, all he had to do was give her reason enough to work for him.

### CHAPTER THREE

Gillian swallowed back nervous fear as she crossed the kitchen toward the two men. Guy was her friend; how could he do this to her? She'd done her best to avoid any reminders of her disastrous former life; the kitchen seemed the best place, as long as she never let herself get too entrenched in any one place. As long as she kept moving, she could outrun the past.

Her eyes locked on the man standing beside Guy, and her heart thumped in dread. She recognized him, and could only pray that he couldn't say the same for her.

"Gillian Martin, this is my best friend, Remy Terreau," Guy introduced him congenially, as if half the planet didn't know the heir to the Terreau jewel dynasty, when Gillian was close enough. "Remy, this is my miracle worker, Gillian."

She managed a polite nod. "Mr. Terreau."

He flashed her the same drop-dead gorgeous grin that had graced magazine covers for years. If only she could say she was immune to that grin... Her eyes shifted quickly back to her boss and friend as she strove for the nonchalant humor that had helped her survive these past few years. "Giving tours of the kitchen now, Guy?"

His answering grin was infinitely more comfortable for her. She was aware that Guy came from wealth – though not nearly as much as the Terreau name carried – but Guy managed to stay mostly out of the social circles that garnered press attention.

"Only to special guests," he quipped back. "And this one wouldn't take no for an answer."

Surprise shot through her. Surely, he hadn't recognized her name... "I can't imagine why!"

Remy Terreau's lips curved into that devastating grin again, setting her heart racing in an entirely inappropriate manner. "You've got a unique way of getting a man's attention, Ms. Martin."

"Gillian," she corrected hurriedly, afraid that he'd put her face together with her barely-disguised last name, and make the connection his eyes told her he hadn't yet made. "Not to be rude, but I'm kind of busy, and it's going to start getting nuts in here, soon. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Terreau," she held out her hand congenially.

"It's Remy," he said easily, his eyes sparking in a way she couldn't decipher as he took her hand, lifting it smoothly to his lips in European fashion. Ah, yes, he was still the same lady-killer; with all the same moves she'd studied so intently. She wasn't going to fall for them, she told herself sternly, even as his thumb brushed over her wrist and his silky voice murmured, "And it's more than nice to meet you, Gillian."

Long after the two men had exited her kitchen, Gillian stood staring at her hand and remembering the look and feel of it engulfed in Remy Terreau's larger, utterly beautiful hand. Her pulse tripped, and she wondered if she wasn't already in deep trouble.

Remy found himself grinning for no particular reason, throughout the course of what should have been a frustrating day. All it took to wipe away his weariness and frustration was the memory of a summer-warm laugh, or the flashing image of violet eyes.

He'd left *Duex Regali* shortly after meeting Gillian. Business didn't halt, even for the kinds of crises that were popping up with great regularity at Scarlet Oak Manor. Nor was the manor his only project under renovation. Sitting behind his wide mahogany desk in *Terreau Investments and Renovations*, he studied the cost estimates given to him by the contractor working on a section of old buildings he'd recently purchased for renovation in the French Quarter. Apparently, construction was right on schedule for the row of storefronts and high-end apartments he planned to put into the restored old buildings. At least *one* project was running on schedule and under budget.

Studying the blueprints drafting had included for approval, Remy found his thoughts drifting back to Gillian once again. The bold lines and whimsical, mysterious designs of the French Quarter

project made him think of her eyes; the combination of warmth and reserve that mingled in those violet depths. His brow furrowed as he fought a sense of déjà vu; but he could swear he'd seen her somewhere before.

Remy shook his head wryly. Apparently, growing up in New Orleans imbued one with more belief in the supernatural than was healthy for a sane mind, because ever since he'd met Gillian's eyes, he'd had the vivid impression he'd looked into those eyes before.

The thought of supernatural powers, however, brought an entirely different sensation over him, and his skin crawled with remembered nightmares. He had no idea what to do about Susannah. He seriously considered calling his cousin, Garner Reboulet. However, Remy wasn't comfortable with admitting he was facing a supernatural phenomenon, and Garner had always struck him as a little bit too intensely interested in such things. Not to mention that Remy was even *less* comfortable admitting that he'd actually come up against something he couldn't handle himself. From birth, his father had drilled in into him that there was no problem too large for a Terreau to handle. But then, Louis Terreau had never, to Remy's knowledge, come up against a ghost before.

Feeling restless and irritated, Remy shoved away from his desk and glanced at his watch as he rose. It was nearly five in the evening; almost shift-change for the kitchen staff at *Duex Regali*. Maybe he'd get lucky enough to catch Gillian as she was leaving. It was time to pitch her the offer he'd been toying with all day.

## CHAPTER FOUR

He wondered if this was how stalkers felt. Possibly, but he was betting they felt more comfortable with this silent staring than he did. Remy shifted in the driver's seat of his Jaguar as he watched the alley doors into *Duex Regali's* kitchens through the heavy rain that pounded down on the hood and roof. Glancing around at the assortment of vehicles parked along the busy street, he wondered which one was Gillian's. The sporty, sleek '74 Camero? Or, maybe, the practical but generally boxy Plymouth sedan? Neither quite seemed to fit the woman whose face danced in his memory. Then, his eyes lit on a car in his rearview mirror that made him smile. *That one.*

It was a whimsical little Volkswagen Beetle that looked old enough to have been through the '60s. It sported a bright, eye-hurting fuchsia paint-job that couldn't help but draw smiles. Just like Gillian, it left its viewers with a warm feeling.

Light spilled from the opening kitchen door, before someone opened a clear umbrella into the pouring Louisiana rain. Then Gillian stepped out, grinning over her shoulder at someone inside the building, and Remy felt an odd twist in his gut. He frowned in confusion. What was it about this woman that affected him so easily?

She started toward the street, and Remy watched her, expecting her to dash for the wild-colored Bug. When she turned up the street, heading away from the Bug, and him, surprise jolted through Remy. She wasn't actually planning to *walk* in this downpour, was she?

Starting his car, he followed her slowly down Dauphine Street until it became apparent that walking was exactly what she planned. Remy scowled and swore beneath his breath. She was going to get sick walking around in the cold rain!

Pulling up to the curb, he hit the button to roll down the power window on the passenger side, leaning across the seat to call, "Gillian!"

She turned at the sound of her name, and again he saw a flash of fear, followed swiftly by surprise, and then distrust.

"Let me give you a ride."

She shook her head, though her attempt at a cheery smile didn't quite reach her intriguing eyes. "No, thanks! I enjoy walking."

He rolled his eyes. "No one enjoys walking in this weather; not even ducks." He smiled disarmingly. "I don't bite, Gillian."

"I'm sure you don't," she returned with the flicker of a real smile that made him want to seriously rethink that promise. He'd sure love to nibble on that full lower lip... Remy shook himself, dislodging the lustful haze in time to hear Gillian say, "I prefer walking."

"In the pouring rain?" He couldn't quite hide the skepticism in his voice.

She sighed, stepping up to the side of the car to bend near the window. The motion brought her face within inches of his, causing Remy's breath to stick in his throat briefly.

"Look, not to be rude, but I'm not interested in riding around with a complete stranger; especially not one the press loves to follow around."

He grinned in spite of himself. Another point for her. "So you *did* recognize me. I wondered about that."

It was Gillian's turn to roll her eyes. "You're only one of the ten most photographed faces in the *world*," she said wryly. "Who *wouldn't* recognize you?"

He broadened his grin. "Which means I'm not exactly a complete stranger, am I?"

"I'm not so sure about that." She quirked him an assessing glance. "I think there's a lot more to you than meets the eye, Remy Terreau."



There was nothing like total frankness, Remy decided with a shrug and a small grin. Rather than being off-putting, Gillian's candor intrigued him. She was blunt, but not tactless, and she had a refined manner to her that was at total odds with her laid-back, hippie appearance. His grin widening, he said, "I'll take that as a compliment. Now, c'mon," he popped the door open. "Get in. There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"My, what an original pick-up line," she upped the octave of her voice a shade and, batting her thick lashes playfully, mimicked his French-laced Southern drawl as she purred, "I don't know that I'd be safe with such a smooth operator."

He snorted a brief laugh. Oh, yeah, she was charming the hell out of him. "I don't think you're the one who needs to worry, Ms. Martin. No man could possibly hope to pull one over on you."

Another of those heart-twisting smiles flickered at her lips as she reached for the door handle, even as she struggled one-handedly to close her umbrella. Finally managing to get the plastic bubble closed, she slid into the passenger seat as Remy moved back to his side. Propping the folded up, dripping umbrella against her jean-clad knees, she turned to smile at him. "Thanks for the lift. What did you want to talk about?"

"Seatbelt," he said as he rested his right hand on the gearshift, trying to ignore the warmth of her thigh, resting only inches away.

She dimpled mischievously. "What a fascinating subject of discussion!"

He cast her a long-suffering look, followed by a brief grin. Oh, was he ever in trouble! She was a pistol; in fact, he was pretty sure the word had been invented just to describe Gillian. "Put it on, Gillian."

"Why?" She asked, even as she reached back for the strap.

"Because I never do business in a car," he explained as he watched her buckle in. His response clearly surprised her, causing her eyebrows to shoot up almost to the bandana he itched to remove. He wanted to see what her hair looked like.

"What kind of business?" Her words brought him back to himself.

"Not now." He pulled into traffic again and, for a moment, only the steady sound of the windshield wipers broke the silence.

Then, shifting as if restless, Gillian shot him a sideward glance. "Where are we going?"

"The Old Absinthe House." He kept his gaze on the road. He didn't want to see the wariness his words had probably put into her violet eyes.

That didn't keep the incredulity out of her voice as she said, "A *bar*? You're kidding, right?"

He sighed and shook his head. "Never more serious in my life. Hope you don't mind."

"I don't drink."

It was his turn to be surprised. Most chefs of his association had at least a passing acquaintance with alcohol. "Not at all?"

"Not in years," she clarified shortly, leaving him curious when she volunteered no further information.

"Will it bother you to be in a bar?"

She shook her head. "No."

Remy kept his eyes on traffic, when what he wanted was to study Gillian. It would be dangerous to look at her, because she was possibly the most fascinating woman he'd ever met, and he doubted he'd be able to look away. She was so open and free-spirited, and yet there was an air of mystery and sophistication to her that told him she was carrying around some pretty intense secrets.

Gillian remained silent as they pulled into a parking spot along Bourbon Street. She accepted his help out of the low-slung sports car as gracefully as if she'd spent her life climbing in and out of fancy cars. Yet, she was so different from the world he'd grown up surrounded by.

The women he'd grown accustomed to wouldn't be caught dead in a kitchen; that's what servants were for, after all. Those same women picked at their food and put on airs to cover their attempts to deprive themselves in the name of beauty and vanity. Gillian wasn't like them at all. She was a chef by trade, and though she probably carried an extra twenty or thirty pounds on that lush frame, she had an ease of self that radiated more beauty and poise than the thinnest model he'd ever met.

"What?" She asked pointedly as Remy absently went through the motions of settling her at one of the club's tables, his mind on entirely inappropriate fantasies. "You never see a real woman before, or something?"

Remy was glad of the room's dim lighting, which masked his chagrined flush. Settling into his own seat, he offered her an easy grin at odds with the thrumming tension radiating through his body. God, he wanted this woman! "Never one as charming or beautiful as you. You are truly unique, Gillian."

She shifted uncomfortably, her eyes growing wary. "Okay. Subject change, please, before you totally weird me out, here."

Remy's brow furrowed at her unexpected reaction to his words. Rather than putting her at ease, his compliment appeared to have made her even more tense and uncomfortable. That was unusual, to say the least; most women liked a man telling them they were attractive, and in Gillian's case, her beauty was far more than skin-deep. However, since she didn't seem comfortable with the idea that he found her attractive, he offered her an apologetic smile. He'd stick to business, for now, and give her time to trust the truth in his words. Leaning his arms against the table between them, he enquired, "How did you first become interested in cooking?"

She laughed, the rich sound pouring through Remy with the smoothness of fine wine, but the punch of neat whiskey. "I learned to love food as a girl, at my Nana's knee, pretty much. It was a natural extension to continue into school." She grinned, revealing a delectable-looking dimple in her left cheek. "I guess you could say that I've got an addiction to kitchens."

Their server arrived just then, forestalling Remy's response as he ordered a glass of Bordeaux for himself and a sweet tea for Gillian. Then, as the server disappeared, he turned his smile on Gillian and presented the first step in his deal.

"Guy says you've been working as his *sous* chef for six months. Are you happy with that arrangement?"

She gave him a confused look. "Of course! Guy's my friend, and I adore working with Henri!"

"But?" He barely suppressed his grin of triumph at the hesitation he detected in her voice.

She sighed in exasperation. "All right, all right. As much as I love *Duex Regali*, it's not exactly getting me anywhere."

He cocked a curious brow at her. She hadn't struck him as the type to have an egotistical ambition. "Where do you want to go? TV?"

She shuddered visibly. "God, no. But I have dreams of my own."

He leaned forward, oblivious to the waiter's return as he focused intently on the fascinating woman seated across from him. "Like what?"

She took her time answering him, fiddling with her drink to fill the space. She stirred the ice cubes around with one finger, and then sucked it absently, clearly unaware that her action raised Remy's body temperature to near boiling. Then, with a small sigh, she shrugged.

"I want to be in charge of my own kitchen, someday. Somewhere where I can create my own menus and dishes, without having to constantly get someone else's approval." Her violet eyes sparkled as she talked, clearly caught up in her dreams. "Someplace where I can create more than fabulous dinner recipes someone else wrote. I want to create party themes, and show people how fun food can really be. Everyone's so afraid of food, nowadays; they treat eating as just a function of survival, and then wonder why they're always hungry. What they don't realize is that one fun dish, full of flavor and

style, is worth ten bland fast-food meals that come with no creativity. Fun dishes satisfy more than our stomachs, and leave us feeling full and sated. I want to reintroduce the adventure in food.”

Remy stared at her, ensnared by the vivacious energy radiating from her as she warmed to what was clearly her favorite subject. Gillian was so innately sensual when she immersed herself in a passionate subject, and her vitality took his breath away. He hadn’t touched a single drop of his wine, and yet he felt a warm buzz settling over him. Startled, he realized he was getting drunk on *her*.

Watching Gillian’s full, supple lips move, he lost the thread of their conversation completely. All that mattered was his need to taste those lips, and find out if his fantasies did her justice.

Before he fully registered what he was doing, he moved around the small table, bending to capture her supple lips mid-spate. He barely got a hint of her taste – warm, sultry, and sweetened by her tea – before she pulled away with a shocked gasp.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Her voice sounded strained and frightened.

“Kissing you,” he returned huskily, leaning for another taste to slake the hunger their first brushing kiss had ignited.

Gillian shot to her feet as his words slid over her, bringing panicked memory surging to the surface. Grabbing up her shoulder bag and umbrella, she sidled around the table’s other side, already heading for the door. She had to get out of here...

A warm, strong hand closed gently but firmly around her wrist as she passed Remy, halting her in her tracks.

“Where are you going?”

Gillian summoned every ounce of the courage she’d spent the past six years building, and turned to face him challengingly. “Home.”

He blinked, and released her. “Why?”

Gillian barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes in exasperation. Really, how thick could the man get? For a supposed business genius, Remy Terreau didn’t appear to grasp the obvious very well. “Because I don’t like being—”

“I’m sorry,” he broke in, his ice-blue eyes full of a contrition that surprised her. “Please don’t go running off. I really did have a reason for bringing you here.”

She sighed, his pleading blue eyes softening her resolution to leave, apology or not. “What would that be?”

“I have a proposition for you. A *business* proposition,” he hastily amended as she took another step toward the door.

She turned back with another sigh. So she was a sucker for charmers with blue eyes. What did that say about her? Probably too much.

“Look, Mr. Terreau,” she said, setting her shoulder bag into her empty seat as she faced him resolutely. “This is all very flattering, but why don’t we just skip the schmoozing, and you tell me what you want.”

A warm smile slid across his face, nearly reducing her knees to puddles of water. Damn, but the man had a killer smile. “And if I said it was your company?”

She laughed in spite of herself, shaking her head. “I’d have to ask what drugs you’ve been taking.”

He blinked, and she saw irritation slip through his gaze briefly. “Why?”

“Oh, come on!” She glanced around, and shook her head. “There’re at least a dozen better candidates sitting right here in this bar, and they’d all be more than happy to keep a man like you company, Mr. Terreau—”

“Remy.”

“Whatever.”

He cocked his head to one side, his eyes darkly intense. “Say it.”

“What?”

“My name.”

She gave in to the urge to roll her eyes, this time. “I really don’t see how—“

“Just say it. Please.”

She looked up, surprised by the husky quality of his pleading voice, and found herself drowning in crystal-blue depths. She felt lightheaded and breathless, as if the room was swaying beneath her feet. She couldn’t stop the wavery quality of her voice as his name slipped out on a murmur. “Remy.”

Heat slid through those ice-blue eyes, melting them into a deep, clear turquoise. His hand lifted toward her face, as if he was the one held in trance, not her. And then, with a muttered oath, he yanked his gaze away, his hand dropping back to his side.

Gillian licked her lips nervously, aware that she was in big trouble. Clearing her throat, she asked, “Why me?”

He didn’t play dumb, and she liked that. In fact, she was finding it hard to find anything she *didn’t* like about Remy. He met her gaze levelly, and smiled as he shrugged. “You’re unique.”

Her heart nearly stopped at that honest compliment. Okay, so the man was yummy *and* smooth. Like *crème brûlée*. Only, she’d sworn off *crème brûlée* six years ago, when Darrell had turned on her for “not trying hard enough.”

Gillian frowned. So she hadn’t seen any point in starving herself toward that perfect size two he’d wanted her to fit in; she’d already known it wasn’t going to happen no matter how hard she tried. That hardly made her a pariah, either. She was a curvy fourteen, and she was happy there. She got plenty of exercise, and it wasn’t like she ate a lot of grease-laden junk food. Skinny people like Darrell just didn’t get it.

Now, looking into Remy Terreau’s sexy blue eyes, she sighed and said, “Look, I’m tired, and not into head games, so if you’re not going to level with me...”

“All right.” He straightened his shoulders, and his dark hair glistened in the soft lighting, making her hands itch to discover if it was as thick and silky as it looked.

*Down girl.*

“Here’s the deal,” he was saying in his sexy Louisiana drawl. “I saw the food coming out of *Duex Regali*’s kitchen this morning, and I’ve seen how you handle the kitchen.” He smiled at her. “And I have to say, I liked what I saw, Ms. Martin. I’d like to offer you a job.”

She smiled wryly. “I have a job.”

“I know. But I’m offering you a shot at your dreams, Gillian. You’re only head chef at *Duex Regali* until Henri Mattheisse recovers enough to come back to work.”

She shouldn’t have been surprised that he knew; but she was. “How did you—?”

“I have my sources.” His smile widened again. “I’m offering you the job of head chef at Scarlet Oak Manor. You’ll get to build the menus, run the kitchen on a daily basis, and plan the themes for our social events. You’ll have full benefits, generous wages, and I’ll even set you up in one of the cottages reserved for staff, so you won’t have to keep paying the highway robbery most New Orleans landlords charge.”

Gillian licked her lips, considering his offer for a moment. As *sous* chef at *Duex Regali*, she rarely had the opportunity to make menus, and she’d always wanted to plan parties. Remy’s offer was tempting, but... “No, thanks, Mr. Terreau. I like where I’m at. Guy’s been good to me, and I won’t stiff him like that.” She picked up her bag. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be going. I have an early day tomorrow.”

With a nod of farewell, she slung her bag over her shoulder and left, before she had a chance to change her mind, and get herself into trouble again.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Remy stared after Gillian, blinking in stunned disbelief. What in God's name had just happened? He'd thought he was making headway. Okay, so it'd been a dumb move to let his hormones do his talking, before. He was supposed to be closing a business deal, not setting a liaison. Damned if Gillian hadn't turned him on and made him forget that; and then she'd actually walked away!

Her leaving was what he was having the most trouble believing, Remy decided ruefully. Not that he was an egotist, but he'd never had to worry about rejection like that, before. Usually, the women came onto him, and he'd never had trouble getting a woman if he really wanted her. The same went for business deals, as well. He'd gained a reputation for being a shark in the business world, as much as he had for being a playboy. Once he scented blood, he always got his kill. Until now, that was.

In one short conversation, Gillian Martin had turned the tables on him completely. She'd turned down his offer, and him, in a gracious but blunt manner that left him feeling empty and intrigued at the same time. A slow grin spread over his face as he considered his options now; giving up wasn't one of them.

Little did Gillian know, but Remy Terreau wasn't that easy to brush off. He thrived on a challenge; and he hadn't encountered one like Gillian in far too long. Already, he could feel his pulse thrumming in anticipation. He wanted Gillian running Scarlet Oak's kitchens, and he wasn't going to take no for an answer. So, he'd just have to find a way to win her over.

Reaching into his suit coat pocket, Remy drew out his cell phone and punched in familiar digits as he made his way to his car.

"*Duex Regali*. How can I help you?"

"Hey, Guy. I need a phone number and address."

"Good evening to you, too," Guy said wryly. "You sound pretty excited, amigo. Who is she?"

Remy felt a wide grin spreading over his face as the memory of Gillian's flashing violet eyes crossed his mind. "Gillian Martin. I need her address and phone number."

Silence greeted his declaration. Remy frowned as it dragged on.

"Guy?"

"Remy, what the hell are you trying to do?" Guy's voice was dangerously quiet.

"Trying to steal away your *sous* chef," Remy returned flippantly, wondering what was bugging Guy. "Is that a problem?"

"I don't give a damn who she works for," Guy snapped, the low menace in his voice evident even over the cell phone's crackle. "But if you hurt her, Remy Terreau, you'll answer to me. Friend or not, I'll personally kick your ass."

Remy, just reaching to start the Jag, sat back, stunned by Guy's threat. Never, in the nearly twenty-five years they'd been friends, had Guy Millard ever threatened him. "Is there something going on between the two of you that I should know about, Guy?"

"No," Guy said, his voice pitched normally again. "But Gillian's my friend, and I don't want to see her get hurt."

*Again.* The unspoken word came through loud and clear, and Remy's brow furrowed in concern. Just how had Gillian been hurt before, and by whom? A niggling memory prickled at the back of his mind, but it eluded him.

"Don't worry," he assured his friend quietly. "I'm looking for a chef, not cheap thrills, Guy. You know me better than that."

There was silence from the other end, and then a sigh. “Yeah. Just don’t make me regret this.” A rustling sound crackled over the phone line. “Gillian’s at the Imperial Arms. Call the switchboard, and they’ll connect you to her suite.”

“Thanks,” Remy muttered. “I owe you one.”

“Just take care of her, and we’re square, amigo. But remember, you hurt her...”

“You’ll kick my ass,” he couldn’t quite keep the dark humor from his voice. Guy had one hell of a dramatic flare, when he wanted to. “Got it.”

As he hung up and tossed his phone onto the passenger seat, Remy stared moodily out at the rain-slicked streets. Just what secrets was Gillian Martin hiding, and why did they suddenly matter so much?

With a grim smile, Remy turned the key in the ignition, fastened his seatbelt, and put the sports car into gear. Plan A had failed miserably. Time to go to plan B.

Gillian groaned in rapture, resting her towel-wrapped head against the edge of the Jacuzzi as the warm water swirled over her frozen, aching muscles.

Okay, so it’d been dumb to run out on Remy like that, leaving her no choice but to walk the whole way home in the freezing September rain. It’d been even dumber to decide to walk to work this morning, in the first place. Well, she was paying for it now.

Stretching, she groaned again, feeling the muscles pull and loosen from her shoulders to her toes. Sighing, she closed her eyes and drifted in a languorous haze. This was heaven. All she needed now was a glass of forbidden wine, and even more forbidden company.

A smile flitted at her lips. Since this was her fantasy, she wasn’t going to let such restrictions get to her. Eyes still closed, she let her imagination go where it willed, seeing herself lounging in the warm, swirling water, a long-stemmed glass of pale, smooth Chardonnay in her hand. Warm, strong hands moved on her damp skin, slipping along the slick surface of her body until she moaned. *Ah, yes.* She pictured his face, all strong planes and angles, his dark, wavy hair damp with steam and his ice-blue eyes full of a heat that was only half fantasy. Her skin tingled and warmed, and restlessness built in places she’d thought dead for too long as her nipples tightened and—

A loud pounding on her door jolted Gillian from her fantasy, and she flushed as she scrambled out of the water and wrapped herself snugly in her long terrycloth robe, calling out, “Coming!”

Blushing anew at the inference of that phrase, considering her fantasy, she belted the robe tightly as she dashed from the bathroom. She was breathless by the time she reached the suite’s front door, and only part of that was from her mad dash. Checking to make sure she’d remembered to throw the security chain when she’d come home, she eased the door open, and stopped dead, her heart thumping to a halt.

“Remy!” His name escaped her in a mortified gasp as vivid images from her fantasy crashed over her. Then, as the realization that he was standing at her door, with her in nothing but a robe, dawned, her defenses raised. “What are you doing here?”

“You left before we could begin negotiations, Gillian,” he chided, but his tone was faintly amused, and his eyes sparkled with contained humor. “Not very professional.”

She stiffened involuntarily, a lifetime of admonitions sending defensive hurt ricocheting through her. “I don’t know what you mean.”

His eyes scolded her. “May I come in?”

“No.”

He folded his arms over his broad chest, and a wry smile tugged at his lips, making her heart do a violent series of flips. “I’m not going to go away, Gillian.”

She narrowed her eyes, resisting the charm that radiated from him. She wouldn’t smile back, or give him the satisfaction of knowing that he affected her at all. “Oh, you’ll eventually get tired of standing there. Good night.”

She went to close the door, and swore as she discovered that he'd maneuvered one of his Gucci-clad feet neatly into the opening. One dark brow rose over laughter-lit blue eyes at her oath. "Such language from a lady."

She froze. Oh, God. He didn't... he *couldn't*... "I'm not a lady."

He chuckled then, his eyes burning over what he could see of her through the slit in the door. "I assure you, *ma cherie*," he murmured huskily, "you are one hundred percent lady."

Gillian closed her eyes against the heat that washed through her at his perusal. She wasn't going to respond; it didn't matter that her body was a traitor, her nipples already tightening under his whiskey-smooth voice. She gritted her teeth and opened her eyes to glare at him. "Move."

He shook his head, his eyes sparkling with devilment. "You can't out-stubborn me, *cherie*. I didn't get this far in life by backing down from a challenge." He met her eyes levelly, then, and the flicker of flame in his blue eyes made her pulse trip and her nipples tighten all over again. "What I want, I'll move heaven and earth to get. Remember that."

With that, he removed his foot from the door, allowing her to close it. Leaning against the cool wood, Gillian resisted the urge to shudder with the heat that raced through her blood. Reminding herself of all the reasons she couldn't have someone like Remy Terreau didn't cool her blood, either. Oh, yeah, she had a bad case of abstainer's itch.

With a disgusted grunt, she made her way back to the bathroom and shut off the Jacuzzi. She wouldn't be getting any more relaxation from that, tonight. Not with the memory of Remy's heated gaze still sliding through her veins.

A sudden spike of pain, accompanied by a flash of sparks through her vision, had Gillian clutching the rim of the bathroom sink tightly as a low groan ripped from her throat. Her muscles tightened to the point of pain, and she clenched her teeth against the urge to vomit. Shuddering chills raced through her, blocking out all other sensation except for the growing agony in her head. She moaned in pain. Damn; not another one.

Ever since she'd taken that four-story dive six years ago, she'd suffered these immobilizing attacks and blinding headaches. But she'd never complained. She knew she'd received a blessing; she should be dead. She'd been poked and prodded by the best doctors and specialists money could buy, and they'd all been amazed, and stumped. She shouldn't have lived, they'd said, and they couldn't determine a physical cause of the attacks. So, instead of a cure, the doctors handed enough painkillers to fill a pharmacy. Those pills were supposed to stave off the attacks, but most of them made her so sick they weren't worth the relief they offered. Finally, when she'd no longer been able to stand the prodding and fawning, she'd disappeared. Since then, she'd been running in one form or another.

She swallowed hard as another wave of chills washed through her. She'd had periods of increased attacks before -- especially when she was dumb enough to drink alcohol. However, since she'd come to New Orleans six months ago, she'd had a constant, building pressure in her head, and more frequent attacks.

Finally prying her hand loose from the rim of the sink, Gillian fumbled open the medicine cabinet and found a bottle of Percocet. She hated drugs, but these were the only way to stave off the worst of the effects, and, so far, Percocet was the only drug that came without nasty side effects for her. Shaking one of the pills into her quaking hand, she gulped it down and scrunched her eyes closed against the whirling sensation in her head, groaning lowly.

As she stumbled from the bathroom, she tripped over the edge of the phone stand, sending the lightweight stand and its contents crashing to the floor. The loud pounding at her suite's door that resulted from that misstep caused Gillian to wince and groan for entirely different reasons. Apparently, Remy Terreau had meant it literally when he'd said he wasn't going away.

It would have been flattering that he was so impressed by her work, if she'd hadn't been so close to total collapse and wishing desperately for nothing but her bed.

"Gillian! Damn it, open up! Are you all right?"

Groaning, Gillian clutched her robe closer together and padded to the door, where she undid the security chain and opened the door wide, leaning against the edge to remain upright as the feeling in her legs faded and returned. "Come in, say your piece, and then please leave. I need to get to bed."

Wrong words, wrong man, and *really* wrong time. She winced as heat flashed in Remy's eyes; then he took in her pallor, and the heat disappeared, replaced by concern as he frowned. "Are you okay?"

She managed a nod she hoped looked brisk, and stifled a groan as fresh pain sliced through her head, nearly knocking her flat. She just wanted him to leave, so she could crawl into bed and die.

His gaze remained doubtful. "Maybe you should sit down."

"Remy..."

He sighed. "Fine. My offer's already on the table: I want you to run the kitchen at Scarlet Oak Manor. You tell me what it's going to take to make that a reality."

Gillian met his ice-blue gaze, and swallowed hard at the open plea she found there. She wanted, in that instant, to tell him yes; she wanted to say that she'd gladly work for him. But Gillian knew the trap of that kind of thinking far too well. She might not bear the physical marks anymore, but her heart still bore the scars of a handsome charmer who'd laid waste to everything she held dear. She knew heartbreak when she saw it, and Remy Terreau had heartbreak written all over him.

Shaking her head slowly, she met his gaze again and murmured, "I'm sorry. I can't."

Remy looked into Gillian's violet eyes, and the pain and sadness there punched a hole in his gut that he didn't understand. How could a woman who possessed such vital beauty and zest for life ever look so miserable?

When she'd first opened the door, and he'd realized she was clad in a bathrobe, her skin still damp and wet tendrils of hair that looked brown in the hall light clinging to her neck, Remy had never wanted a woman so intensely. He wondered if she'd been in the bath, or just stepped from the shower, and his temperature had shot up as his imagination painted scenarios. Those images had kept him standing at her door, at a loss for the first time in his life, even after she'd shut the door in his face. Until she'd opened it the second time, and he'd seen her as pale as a ghost, and shaking. And then all he'd wanted to do was gather her close and take care of her. Protect her. It was an unsettling feeling for a man who'd never felt the need to protect anyone or anything before.

Gillian still didn't look very steady, in fact. But she met his eyes firmly, and he saw her resolve to not give in to his pressure, no matter how subtle or overt. She really wasn't going to negotiate with him; and that realization stung. He wondered why she refused to work for him. Still...

"You'll change your mind," he predicted quietly.

She shook her head tightly, determination glittering in her violet eyes. "Not in this lifetime."

From some source he couldn't quite identify, Remy felt a confident smile tug at his lips.

"We'll see," he said, turning toward the door. "Get some sleep, *cherie*. You look as if you could use it."

With that, he left, pulling the door shut behind him. He stopped in the hallway, drawing deep, steadying breaths. He hoped his prediction came true, because whatever her qualms to the contrary, he had the gnawing feeling that Gillian needed Scarlet Oak Manor almost as much as it needed her.



## CHAPTER SIX

Remy was still mulling over his bizarre conversation with Gillian when he arrived back at the Manor that night. From his conversation with Guy, to the wary regret in Gillian's eyes that last time she'd turned him down, Remy got the feeling that there was a whole story he was missing behind Gillian's carefree persona. And why couldn't he shake this nagging feeling that he'd seen her somewhere before?

Entering the silent foyer, Remy considered his next step. Part of him said he should just give up the idea of Gillian running the kitchen of Scarlet Oak, but he ignored it. Remy Terreau wasn't a quitter, and he'd already set his mind to hiring Gillian. That being said, he was kind of limited on options. He supposed he could march right back over to Gillian's apartment and refuse to leave until she agreed. Remy winced. Besides technically being stalking, that plan smacked of uncouth juvenility, and wasn't likely to accomplish anything except gaining him a night in a jail cell, a front-page picture in the tabloids, and a raging hard-on. And Remy wasn't into torture.

He rolled his shoulders wearily. Well, he wasn't going to solve this problem tonight, and what he really needed right now was sleep, before he did something stupid. Remy yawned, and headed for his suite; he could only hope Susannah took pity on him, and left him in peace for tonight.

Etienne watched the light bloom in the darkness he knew was Terreau's suite, and a sinister smile twisted on his lips. So, it would begin tonight. Terreau had blundered, in showing his weakness to Etienne. Remy Terreau was a trusting fool, but it was still blind fortune that he'd revealed his troubled state. That he dreamed of the spirits of Scarlet Oak Manor had been an unwitting admittance, and a clear sign of what Etienne had to do in order to reclaim the Midnight Star.

Susannah Forrester's descendant was as weak as she, if not in quite the same way. All Etienne must do was manipulate the power birth had given him, and find Remy Terreau's Achilles heel. Once he knew that, he could bring Terreau to his knees, and deliver him into the hands of death. It was the perfect plan.

It was the perfect plan. Remy rested his head against his folded arms and stared at his bedroom ceiling as a slow, confident grin spread across his face.

As tired as he was, he'd been unable to sleep ever since he'd lain down; and only part of that had been due to fear, this time. His grin widened. No, his restlessness had another source, tonight; a source with bright violet eyes that swam with equal parts exuberance and reserve. *Gillian*.

That she was wary of him was a fact not lost on Remy. She maintained as much physical distance as she possibly could, and to the businessman in him, she was an open book. He'd long ago learned to read body language, and Gillian's gave her away; he was almost certain she wanted him as much as he did her, but was determined to keep him at arm's length for a reason he couldn't fathom.

Remy closed his eyes, grinning like a fool. He hadn't spent this many years in successful business without learning how to overcome obstacles like that. And, whether she'd meant to or not, Gillian had provided him with just the bargaining chip he needed. First thing in the morning, he'd implement his new plan and, by this time next week, Gillian would be working for him. Scarlet Oak Manor would be well on its way to opening its doors.

Remy closed his eyes, still grinning, and felt sleep flow over him in a peaceful wave. Maybe his luck was finally changing, with Scarlet Oak.

Half an hour away, Gillian tossed in fitful sleep, haunting images she didn't understand slipping in and out amidst the most erotic dreams she'd ever had in her life. Finally, the sound of her phone ringing punctured her sleep, and she fumbled for the cellular unit, mumbling, "H'lo."

"Hey, sleepyhead. I was hoping I'd catch you awake."

Gillian propped herself up on one elbow at the sound of her sister's voice, fear pouring through her. "Grace! What's wrong?"

Grace Talbot's melodious laughter sang through the line, causing a momentary and completely unwarranted shaft of envy to prick Gillian. Grace had always been the perfect one; yet, there wasn't an unkind bone in her older sister's body.

"Why do you always assume there's something wrong?" Grace asked easily, laughter still tingeing her sugar-sweet voice. "Honestly, Gilly, you're becoming such a pessimist!"

Gillian grinned in spite of herself. "I'm trying. So, what's up, then? What's your husband say to these late-night calls?"

Grace laughed again. "Dillon's upstairs, snoring his heart out."

Gillian grinned wryly. Dillon Talbot had snared Grace's attention in a very unconventional way – he'd taken her hostage while working an undercover bust in the Norfolk convention center where Grace worked. Theirs was the kind of romance Gillian had spent her youth wishing for – until she'd met Darrell Anders. Gillian shivered. "And you couldn't sleep, so you decided to call me? Gee, thanks."

"Actually," suddenly, Grace grew hesitant, and Gillian braced for bad news. "I'm calling about Mom and Dad's thirtieth anniversary. It's on the eighth of—"

"No," Gillian cut in firmly. "Forget it, Grace."

"Gilly, it's their anniversary! They haven't seen you in almost six years. Surely you can—"

"What?" Gillian demanded, angrily jackknifing from the bed. "Show up and pretend I'm not the imperfect, abnormal creature they had the misfortune to receive instead of a child? Grace, I'm happy the way I am, and it's taken me a long time to reach this point. I can't go back to that other girl. Not for anyone."

Grace sighed. "And I don't want you to."

"But they do."

"Gillian, you don't know that," Grace protested quietly.

"When I left for Paris, Dad disinherited me. That was a pretty good indication, sis."

"And you should see the regret he's been living with ever since your accident. God, Gill, he's aged a hundred years." Grace sounded perilously close to tears.

Gillian rubbed her still-aching head wearily at Grace's reminder of her fall. That it had been no accident was something her family had never come to grips with. "Grace, I really can't deal with this right now."

There was the sound of a sharply indrawn breath. "Oh, Gilly! Are you still having those horrible headaches?"

"Yeah," she admitted weakly. "And horrible isn't the word for them."

"You should come to Norfolk. Dillon has a friend who's a neurological genius. He—"

"No," Gillian repeated, drawing herself up. "No more doctors. No more tests. I'm not coming home, Grace; ever. I can't go through that again."

Grace sighed. "I know. But I had hoped... I really can't change your mind about seeing Mom and Dad again?"

"No."

"All right." Grace sighed again. "You take care of yourself, little sister. And, if you ever change your mind—"

"I won't."

"If you change your mind," Grace repeated dauntlessly, "you know you're always welcome here."

“I know,” Gillian murmured, her eyes closed against tears that burned the backs of her eyes.  
“Good-bye, Grace.”

“Good-night, Gilly.” And then Grace hung up, leaving Gillian feeling more alone than she had since she’d left home for Paris seven years ago. And, as she huddled beneath her blankets and prayed for dawn to rescue her, she was left wondering why, when she thought of safety, the face of Remy Terreau came to mind.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Remy lounged on the sofa in his suite, tapping a pen lightly against the legal pad perched on his thigh as he waited for Guy to answer his phone. Finally, when he was about to give up and concede that Guy wasn't home, the line picked up and Guy yawned into the phone. "You keep ungodly hours, Terreau."

Remy laughed. "Late night, huh? And when did you get Caller ID, anyway?"

There was a disgruntled snort. "And cheery at six AM, to boot. God, Remy, you're enough to make a teetotaler hit the sauce!" Guy grumbled. "And, for your information, I don't have Caller ID; you're just the only person I know who doesn't give up after the sixth ring. What do you want?"

"Your help." A lazy grin spread over Remy's face. He knew his friend better than anyone did, and there was a reason he only called this early when he had a favor to ask. At six AM, Guy didn't have any coffee in his bloodstream. Before coffee, Guy Millard might be a bear, but he wasn't quite the sharpest tack in the box, either. That made early morning the best time for this kind of deal.

Guy groaned. "And it couldn't wait?"

"I want to borrow your *sous* chef," Remy continued, undaunted.

"Whoa." Guy sounded perplexed. "What do you mean 'borrow'? Have you talked to Gillian about this?"

"Yeah." Remy drew a series of whorls over the page, and nearly grinned as he realized he was doodling. "She turned me down cold."

"I meant about working at Scarlet Oak."

Remy straightened, his good humor vanishing at Guy's wry tone. "So was I."

There was silence, and then a low whistle of disbelief. "Wow. I can't believe she said no!"

"Well, she did." Remy swung his feet to the floor, unaccountably irritated. "Look, Guy, I need your help, here. I need Gillian to get my kitchen up and running, but I think she's afraid of what happens if she doesn't like working here. I need you to keep a slot open, and assure her that it's hers if she wants it back, just for a little over a month. Just give her a chance to see whether or not she likes it here at Scarlet Oak."

Guy chuckled. "Man, you do *not* know that woman at all, do you?"

"What do you mean? You're not going to do it?" Remy felt his good spirits fading.

"Oh, I'll hold her slot until the Second Coming, amigo. But there's one thing about Gillian Martin I think you should know."

Remy tensed as Guy paused. Scowling at his friend's dramatic flair, he demanded, "Well, what is it?"

"When she says something, Remy, Gillian *means* it. You don't need my okay in this deal; you need hers."

Remy grinned to himself, remembering the flare of heat that had passed between him and Gillian the night before. "Don't worry about that. She's next on my list of people to call."

Guy yawned, and chuckled again. "Good luck. Oh, and a little advice... If you want her cooperation, I'd suggest waiting at least another hour before you call her."

"You got it," Remy assured him, chuckling.

After Guy hung up, Remy rose to his feet and paced toward the window of his bedroom. From there, he could see over the terrace and part of the grounds. As his eyes drifted toward the darkened area where the woodshed sat, Remy felt a tingle of apprehension crawl along his spine. Something wasn't right; but he couldn't identify the source of his uneasiness, so he chose to shrug it off as the product of stress.

Glancing at the lit numbers on his digital alarm clock, Remy grinned to himself. He wondered what Gillian sounded like first thing in the morning. Closing his eyes, he imagined those sultry tones of hers, husky with sleep, and felt his body stir. If he was even half right, she'd have the voice of a temptress.

He was probably wrong, Remy reasoned in an effort to get his body to subside. Her voice probably wasn't anywhere near as sexy as his imagination made it. However, that didn't stop him from scooping up the portable phone as he crossed the suite again. Glancing over the legal pad he'd set aside during his conversation with Guy, Remy punched in a number he had scrawled on the top of the page.

The line rang twice, before a bored, nasal voice answered, "Imperial Arms. May I help you?"

"Suite 323, please."

"One moment."

The mellow strains of canned hold music filtered through Remy's head, and his pulse accelerated as he wondered how Gillian would answer the phone. Would she be still half-asleep, her voice softened by the last tendrils of her dreams? Or was she the early riser, who'd answer the phone with a cheery, upbeat greeting? He shook his head wryly as he realized his breathing was swift and shallow and his palms were actually sweating. He'd never reacted to a woman this way, before.

"Hello?" The sleepy whisper of Gillian's voice, like a soft wind through a summer forest, kick-started Remy's heart from standstill to overdrive instantly, lodging it somewhere in the vicinity of his throat. God, he'd never heard a more sensual sound in his life. It left him breathless and tongue-tied, which was a real first for him.

"Hello?" Gillian's voice suddenly came sharply awake, and the thread of angry fear in it dispersed the haze in Remy's mind instantly. "If you think you can still scare me, you sick bastard—"

"Good morning, Gillian."

There was a swiftly indrawn breath from her end, telling him that she hadn't expected any response to her threat, except maybe the click of disconnection. "Remy! Oh, my God..."

His eyes narrowed. She'd sounded angry and afraid a moment ago, and now she sounded mortified, as if she'd caught him poking through her personal effects. "Were you expecting another call?"

"Oh! Uh... no," she rushed ahead, her voice overly cheery. "This is such a surprise!"

He wanted to ask who the sick bastard was, and why she was afraid of him, but knew better than to press. Instead, he let a grin slide slowly over his face. "I told you I'm not that easy to get rid of."

She cleared her throat anxiously. "What can I do for you?"

Now that was a loaded question! He nearly groaned as he realized where his mind was drifting. A harsh, private reminder of his rule about not forming personal relationships with his employees took care of his unruly imagination, even if his body had other ideas. Closing his eyes, he made himself a silent promise even as he drew a fortifying breath: If he could get Gillian to agree to work at Scarlet Oak, he'd keep his hands, and his thoughts, off of her. This was a professional relationship.

"You can agree to work for me."

She sighed. "I already told you—"

"I talked to Guy. He'll hold your position open at *Duex Regali* for a month. You come work for me for that long – just to get things up and running – and if you decide at the end of the month that you don't like working for me, you can go back to *Duex*, no harm, no foul."

She laughed quietly. "You really *don't* give up, do you?"

"Nope." He grinned to himself. "C'mon. Give it a chance."

"One month?"

"One month," he assured her, feeling triumph rising. He was making headway, now. "Unless you decide you want to stay. Call it a trial run. You get to try your hand at running everything in the

kitchen; I'll give you free reign of all kitchen matters, as long as you keep things going. If you decide you like it, the job's yours, and if you don't, you can back out gracefully at the end of the month, no questions asked."

She fell silent, and Remy held his breath, uncertain what he hoped for more – that she'd accept his offer, or turn him down. He already knew that if she turned him down professionally, that gave him an opening to pursue this attraction between them.

Then, Gillian chuckled softly. "Okay. You've got a deal; one month. When would you like me to start?"

Triumph rushed through Remy, and a grin tugged at his lips. "How about Monday? That's the fifth of September, and gives you the entire weekend to do your packing."

"Monday it is, then. Noon good?"

"That sounds fine."

"Great. See you then!" There was an edge of excitement in her voice, now, and Remy knew he'd be seeing her soon. If only a large part of him wasn't wishing this meeting could be something more than professional.

Etienne replaced the phone into the receiver, a scowl darkening his face. Terreau was planning on winning over this new chef he'd found. Etienne would just have to make sure that didn't happen. He'd been so careful orchestrating everything so that Scarlet Oak Manor never opened. He'd made sure that every other chef Terreau approached found a reason to avoid Scarlet Oak. Without a chef, Terreau wouldn't dare open the hotel to the public, and that gave Etienne the time he needed to find his birthright. It gave him time to plan Terreau's fall – first into madness, and then into death. A sinister smile curved on Etienne's face. Sweet revenge would soon be his; he could already taste it.

His smile disappeared as he considered this new kink in his plans. This Gillian that Terreau had charmed into coming out here was an unexpected, and very unwelcome, problem. It didn't matter if she was the world's worst chef – which he doubted she was. Her cooking wasn't what made her a threat.

No, there was something else about this Gillian that disturbed him. Even at a distance, listening to her voice, he'd sensed it. A lightness, a thread of innate confidence and strength, that made her dangerous to his plans.

So far, he'd kept Terreau on edge, planting delays in his path to make him tense, and his attention sloppy. But Gillian would change that. Her core of strength and goodness would bolster Terreau. Already, Etienne heard the peace in Terreau's voice when he'd spoken with Gillian. He had no doubt that, once she infused her presence into this place, she would be able to keep Terreau calm and focused, and balance out his innate sensitivities.

Etienne slammed the guest log shut and yanked savagely at his tie as he stalked toward the rear of the main house. Remy Terreau thought getting sleep was difficult now? He hadn't seen anything yet; Etienne was about to bring all his nightmares to life. And if Gillian got in the way, she'd pay for it with her life.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was Monday; the moment of truth, and still, he wasn't sure he was being totally honest with himself. He wasn't sure he could handle working with Gillian without wanting something more.

Besides, she could still back out. Remy paced the entryway of Scarlet Oak Manor anxiously, as that thought settled. Gillian had agreed to be here at noon today; but she'd had two days since then to regret that arrangement, and change her mind. A part of him hoped she would.

Remy glanced at his watch, even as the grandfather clock in the foyer chimed noon. His gut clenched. She wasn't going to show.

He was just getting ready to admit defeat when an ear-throbbing roar rattled the windows. Spinning on his heel, Remy marched to the front door, and stopped dead as he opened it, staring in disbelief at the new arrival. A huge black and orange Harley Davidson was idling at the foot of the steps. The lush set of curves on the rider, encased in bottle green leather and olive-drab jeans, belonged to only one person he could think of. His pulse sped up as he watched her shut off the motorcycle, and a mixture of relief and disappointment that he didn't want to examine too deeply slid over him. She was here!

A wry smile tugged at his lips as the surprise wore off, and he realized why she'd chosen to walk home in that downpour Friday evening. Why was he even surprised? Gillian Martin had struck him as unique from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. She wasn't a woman who bowed to convention, and his heart tripped as he recalled the taste of her luscious lips... and that was dangerous ground. Mentally backpedaling, Remy told himself that he was only interested in what her eccentric style could bring to Scarlet Oak Manor.

Then she removed her helmet, letting a wealth of glorious honey-brown hair tumble free over her shoulders, and his body went on full alert, calling him a liar. He wanted Gillian; wanted her in ways that made him question his own sanity. However, he was an adult, not a randy boy, and he was determined to control the impulses she stirred within him.

He watched her as, helmet tucked casually under one arm, she strode boldly up the steps, and a warm grin spread over her mocha-tinted lips as she saw him. God, he was going to go insane, if she kept smiling at him like that.

"Hey," she greeted him warmly, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Sorry I'm late. Guy called me this morning and begged me to come smooth Henri's feathers before the poor old guy had another coronary. It ended up taking longer than I thought."

Remy couldn't respond, frozen in his elemental reaction to the warm light dancing in her eyes. Watching her lips move, he could remember nothing but the taste of them, and craved what he already knew he couldn't have. Resisting the urge to groan, Remy fought down his unruly body. This wasn't going to work, if he couldn't keep his mind off of her.

Focusing on what she'd said in an attempt to do just that, he asked, "When did Henri get out of the hospital?"

"Last night. Can you believe it? The man had a massive heart attack; but there he was, right back in the kitchen, at six this morning!" She shook her head with a wry, fond grin. "Never say die; that's Henri."

Remy nodded, glad for the neutral topic as he settled back into normalcy, save for the fine thread of attraction still humming beneath the surface.

"If you're ready, I'll introduce you to the rest of the staff and give you a brief tour." He glanced out at the Harley, frowning. "Did you, um, bring anything with you?"

She flashed him a wide grin. "Wondering where I stashed the baby grand?"

He blinked at her, uncertain of how to respond. Finally, he settled on a curious, "You play the piano?"

She laughed, that throaty, sensual sound that made all the blood in his body flow south, fast. "Not me! I can't carry a tune if you give it to me in a bucket, and I suddenly have way too many fingers when I sit down at a piano." She cocked him a curious look of her own. "You?"

He shook his head. “My father insists that the piano is too pedestrian. I did, however, have eight years of violin lessons that I hated passionately.”

She grinned. “Rich kids.”

He wondered at the undertone of her voice, the thread of sadness behind those words. But he found himself grinning back at her, totally charmed by her mischievous wit. “Seriously, do you have anything coming?”

“Nope.” She patted the leather backpack slung over her shoulders. “I learned to travel light a long time ago. I haven’t had much of a chance to collect a lot of stuff.”

Remy frowned as concern sliced through him. She’d been in New Orleans for six months; that was usually long enough for most people to acquire enough stuff to need a small moving van. And she’d lived in enough places to collect a lifetime’s worth of things. Yet, she claimed her entire life fit into that one small backpack. Why?

As they stopped before the front desk, Remy gestured to the dark-haired man behind the oak expanse and introduced her. “Gillian, this is our concierge, Etienne Fabron. Etienne, this is Gillian Martin; she’s our new head chef.”

“On a trial basis only,” Gillian clarified hastily, extending her hand to Etienne with a small smile. As the other man shook her hand, Remy noticed the uneasy light that slipped through Gillian’s violet eyes. Nor could he help but notice the way she wiped her hand on her pants leg after Etienne released it. Apprehension wound through Remy, and he wondered why her actions struck him as ominous. What was he letting himself in for, now?

\* \* \*

A flame burst in the darkness, flickered, and then took root on the candle’s wick, spilling a small circle of light into the gloom. As candle after candle blossomed in the dark, they cast faltering patterns of shadow and light on the dank, moist walls of the vault – one of the few and final vaults buried beneath the soft earth of bayou country.

Symbols, painted in bold white and red strokes, covered the walls and floors here, a testament to centuries of use by Jamori descendants, and any who knew the old powers of the slaves. White men had feared that power, and rightly, forbidding its use.

The man’s dark eyes glimmered in the candlelight as he traced his fingers over one set of symbols in particular – a crude pictograph of a bat with its wings folded around a closed casket. Some dedicated soul over the centuries had drawn it to represent Baron Samedi, guardian of the grave, but it appealed to him on a much deeper level.

He walked back to the center of the room and placed the candle he held on the altar with the rest, and then moved to stand facing the *poteau-mitan*, a blunt-ended pole where the spirits would come to him when he had finished.

He stretched, feeling the power uncurling within him, and grinned. He’d eaten a large meal before coming here; it wasn’t the traditional ceremonial feast, but it would do. Now he was ready to begin.

Taking a design-decorated cloth bag from the altar, he dipped his fingers inside and felt the cornmeal there sift between his fingers. Very soon, he would bring Camille back into the realm of the living to exact her revenge. It was time for the nightmare to begin.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Okay, Brian, go a little more to the right...”



Remy came to a dead stop in the kitchen doorway, his eyes wide in disbelief. Why he was so surprised, he wasn't sure, except that Gillian was turning out to be a constant shock to his old-fashioned values on gender roles; like now, for instance.

She was dressed in a faded old pair of jeans that did amazing things for her generous curves, and a t-shirt that looked nearly ready for a ragbag, her hair hidden away under another of her ever-present bandanas. She and an equally grungy-clothed Brian Parker – the young line chef he'd hired three days ago at Gillian's insistence that she and Elsa couldn't do it alone – were hauling appliances around a kitchen that had been transformed into a war zone. The relative ease with which she was hefting her end of a large stand-alone grill was proof of more strength than he'd expected.

Gillian presented herself with such decorum and grace that he often forgot she was the same woman who'd walked a mile in the driving September rain and rode and maintained a Harley. She was a fascinating blend of gentile warmth and earthy exuberance that was getting more and more difficult to resist.

She'd been here barely a week, and yet she'd made fast friends with most of the staff – particularly his sixty-five-year-old Swiss *sous* chef, Elsa Oberich. Remy grinned to himself; that was a feat in itself, as Elsa's gruff manner tended to intimidate most of the rest of the staff. But then, Gillian had also managed to make stiff-necked Jared Winters, his maitre d', blush like a besotted schoolboy. Remy was learning to not underestimate her.

"What on earth are you doing?" He inquired now, striding forward to relieve her of the heavy industrial grill.

She deftly avoided his attempt, her ample hip brushing against his thigh in a way that nearly short-circuited his brain.

"You can't honestly expect us to accomplish anything with that set-up you had in here." She jerked her head toward the array of equipment and cabinetry she'd already pulled away from the walls, into the center of the room.

He raised one eyebrow in wry contemplation. She definitely did nothing halfway. "I'll have you know, Ms. Martin, that my contractors consulted with some of the finest chefs in the world, before they designed this kitchen."

"Which explains its inefficiency for our purposes," she returned pertly, following her comment with a small grunt of effort as she and Brian shifted the grill up against the far wall, under one of the long exhaust hoods. She cast the young man a wink and a grin, causing his grin to widen, and Remy to feel unaccountably cross.

"What do you mean?" He demanded.

She turned to face him, drawing one hand over her sweaty face. He was certain she didn't intend the motion to be erotic, but it slammed into Remy's gut for reasons he couldn't explain, tightening his body.

"The world's best chefs would take one look at your kitchen staff here, and laugh at you," she said simply, her smile softening the sting of her criticism. "They're used to having dozens of assistants and prep cooks underfoot. We have a staff of less than half a dozen trying to work in a kitchen designed for at least a dozen. We can't possibly get everything done when it's spread out like this."

He gaped at her, stunned. Then, with a shake of his head, he laughed. God, she was nothing if not blunt! She'd just told him off, and yet she'd made him like it.

"Do us both a favor, Gillian," he said, still chuckling. "Next time you see a problem like this, come see me *before* you start rearranging the place. I'll get someone better equipped to do the dirty work."

Still grinning, Remy turned and left the kitchen. Yeah, Gillian was proving to be quite the surprise, and maybe just the distraction he needed from his increasingly dreadful feeling that Scarlet Oak Manor was getting ready to take his sanity away.

Gillian stood looking at the door Remy had just disappeared through, her heart still fluttering. Electric awareness and confusion prickled along her every nerve, leaving her unsettled for the first time in years. Remy Terreau was probably the most confusing man she'd ever encountered. Rumored to be one of the most debauched playboys on the planet, a lot of gossip columnists listed Remy as one of the world's most eligible bachelors; she'd thought he'd be a letch of the nth degree. Yet he wasn't. He had old-fashioned values, and she'd seen no sign of debauchery at all. In fact, she'd yet to see a woman of his supposed caliber since she'd arrived last Monday. Not that she'd know if he had women in late at night, she acknowledged. She lived in one of the cottages just off of the main road, and he lived here in the main house. Still, she'd seen no women near him who weren't employees in a week, and she couldn't help but wonder why.

"It is a pity that the young do not recognize what is before their faces, *ja*?" The sharp, German-accented voice jarred Gillian from her musing. Turning, she looked at the tiny, thin whipcord of a woman who rested her hip against one cabinet, her shrewd grey eyes studying Gillian from beneath lifted snow-white brows.

"I don't know what you mean, Elsa," Gillian said airily, pasting a smile on her face. She wasn't going to admit she was attracted to her boss; she already knew where that would lead, and Gillian had seen enough heartbreak to last a lifetime.

"I know who you are, *Liebling*. If *Herr* Terreau knew what I know, you would not be working here."

Gillian's smile fled. Over the past week, she'd formed a bond with the gruff but good-hearted Elsa, and found in her the mother she'd once wished to have. But she hadn't confided her secret to anyone; not even Elsa.

"How...?"

Elsa snorted. "You *kinder*; all alike. Think your secrets are not easily read. You think, perhaps, that I do not have eyes? That one as old as I could not possibly remember, or see that not everything is truth?"

Brian was glancing silently between the two women, his blond brows furrowed. Then, with a roll of his eyes, he asked, "Are we going to finish this today, Gill? I've got to get going."

Gillian straightened her shoulders. "Then I suppose we'd better get busy. I want to have the kitchen all set up before tomorrow."

Giving Elsa a glance that said they'd talk later, Gillian went back to shifting appliances and cabinetry. Unlike the girl she'd once been, Gillian Martin didn't back down from a challenge.

Three hours later, Gillian unscrewed the cap of her water bottle, nearly moaning with pleasure as she felt the cool liquid trickle down her parched throat.

"You should not work so hard, *Liebling*," Elsa Oberich set her teacup firmly on the break room table between them, her expression stern. "You wish for an early grave?"

Gillian shrugged, and winced as her overworked muscles protested. "I'd rather go out working honestly than laying around having people pity me, Elsa. Besides, a little hard work never killed anyone."

Elsa frowned. "You do not know that. You refuse to see a doctor—"

"You're damned right I do," Gillian said grimly. "You said you know who I am. Fine. Then you also know I've seen the best there are, and they couldn't help me. No more."

"But your headaches get worse every day, *ja*?"

Gillian glanced away. She'd had three episodes since she'd arrived at Scarlet Oak. Three, in one week. That terrified her. "You know they are."

"So, why do nothing?"

"Because there's nothing anyone *can* do."

"There is one thing you can do," Elsa said, her voice suddenly softer and more hesitant than Gillian had imagined it could get. "You must leave Scarlet Oak, Gillian."

She blinked, staring at Elsa. "*What?*"

The older woman looked up, her grey eyes somber and muted. "You have been here a week. You have heard the stories of this place..."

Gillian laughed. "You expect me to believe a bunch of old ghost stories? This place isn't cursed, Elsa; it's just a little rundown."

Elsa didn't so much as smile. "There is a curse here, *Liebling*; a very old and deadly curse. Four *fräuleins* have already paid for that curse in blood. Do you wish so much to join them?"

Gillian shuddered. "Elsa—"

The thin Swiss woman placed one capable hand over Gillian's. "Just be careful, *Liebling*. Be very careful."

As Elsa's sad eyes turned back to her tea, Gillian felt a chill that had nothing to do with approaching winter shiver through her. Firming her resolve, she straightened her shoulders. She wasn't about to let a bunch of ghost stories drive her away. She'd promised Remy a month to help get his kitchen in order; maybe she could use some of her spare time to unravel the mystery of this place, before its charming, but haunted-looking owner started unraveling *her*.

## CHAPTER TEN

This was never going to work! Gillian shook her head in amused exasperation as she studied Remy's working menu. No wonder he was having trouble finding a decent head chef. Sighing, she set down her teacup and hooked one foot around the leg of a rolling barstool, dragging it over to the kitchen counter where she was working without breaking concentration.

Remy wanted to serve a predominantly continental menu to people who took one look at the manor and saw old-fashioned Southern sophistication. The guests would be expecting Southern cuisine, like crayfish and catfish, and Creole dishes like gumbo and dirty rice -- everything that made New Orleans and its environs unique. Crepes and eggs Lorraine were fine, but they'd never stand a chance against traditional New Orleans fare like beignets and hearty southern grits.

Grinning to herself, Gillian began scribbling notes on a pad, shaking her head. Filet Mignon? Not hardly. Shrimp Creole or blackened catfish was more likely to draw attention. People paid for atmosphere, not—

Gillian's head jerked up as she heard a sound. It was twelve-thirty at night. No one but Remy and herself should be left in the main house; yet, she could swear she'd heard a voice.

Listening intently, Gillian held her breath, but could hear only the pounding of her own blood in her ears. Not a peep of noise.

Gillian released her breath on a shaky laugh. It was probably just the settling sound of an old building. She was letting Elsa's warning about curses get to her. Ever since the older woman had let those words slip out three days ago, Gillian had found herself looking over her shoulder, again. She sighed heavily; so much for getting over her past.

She turned back to her work with a disgusted shake of her head. She needed to get her head together, and— She sucked in a sharp breath as she heard the distinct sound of a human voice in the hallway leading to the Grand hall; or, rather, the sound of someone crying, and of feet shuffling along the carpeted hallway. There *was* someone out there!

Gillian's breath stuck in her lungs, burning, as old memories rushed over her of a child crying in the dark and invisible hands knocking on walls. And always, that hideously grinning face plaguing her dreams.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Gillian tried to block out the images. Likely, this was something simple. It had to be, she told herself sternly. Those other events were past, even if they still haunted her dreams. Probably, the noise she'd just heard was caused by one of the chambermaids who'd stayed late; maybe, whoever she was, she was having personal problems. Rochelle Cabot, according to Elsa, was flirting with disaster by continuing to see that boy she was living with. Maybe disaster had finally struck, and Rochelle didn't want to go home.

That thought brought back memories of her own miserable life with Darrell and, as the sobbing continued, Gillian couldn't stand it any longer. If Rochelle was in trouble, she couldn't stand by and do nothing; the day she left the hospital, she'd promised herself that she'd never let another woman suffer the way she had. Rising from her seat, she marched determinedly for the hallway door.

Pushing through the swinging door, Gillian stopped dead, new dread shooting through her. The short hallway was deserted. Light blazed from the hallway sconces, illuminating the short length between the kitchen and the darkened doorway of the Grand hall. The area seemed draped in utter stillness, only her frightened breathing marring the silence.

Then, there was a sound; like footsteps shuffling over bare wood. The Grand Hall's door swayed slowly open, and then closed, and the lights flickered as a soft, feminine sob echoed in the still passageway before a quiet, disembodied voice murmured, "My babies..."

Turning on her heel, Gillian fled into the kitchen, her heart hammering hard and her entire body quaking in fear. Oh God. It *was* happening again!

She yanked her leather jacket from over the back of a chair, shoving her arms into the sleeves even as she dashed for the main entrance by way of the dining room. She had to get out of here!

Gillian was still shaking five minutes later as she stumbled into her cottage and twisted the door locks. God, she couldn't believe it! She'd been so careful...

The sudden ring of her phone nearly made her jump out of her skin. Trembling, she lifted the handset and managed a breathless, "Yeah?"

"Are you all right?" Even that terse demand, in the deep, slightly accented tone, sent relief pouring through her overcharged nerves, steadying her.

"Remy." She closed her eyes, picturing his face, and felt warmth replacing the chill that had engulfed her the moment she'd realized she wasn't alone in that corridor. "What do you need?"

"To hear you say you're okay, first," he growled, a rawness in his tone that both confused and soothed her.

"I'm fine. Why?"

He released an audible breath. "I was passing through the kitchen on security check and found the lights on, your work scattered all over the counter, and a cup of nearly-cold tea, but you nowhere to be found. What the hell happened?"

Gillian shut her eyes, swallowing hard. She couldn't tell Remy what she'd heard, and seen. She'd learned five years ago to not tell anyone about the strange events that happened to her, anymore. If she told Remy, he'd think she was crazy, just like her parents had. Just like everyone did. "I... I wasn't feeling well, so I came home. I guess I must have forgotten..."

"Are you sure you're okay?" There was genuine concern in his voice, and it clutched in Gillian's chest, making her feel weak and teary. No one had ever shown simple concern for her welfare, before. They were always too busy trying to fix problems that never could be.

"Yes," she managed, unable to keep the huskiness from her voice. "I'll be all right."

She heard the relief in his sigh. Then, after a long moment of silence, he cleared his throat and said, "I saw your notes. Do you really think I'm aiming the wrong way?"

Gillian smiled, easing onto the sofa as the last of her icy fear melted away, warmed by the sound of his voice. "Are you planning on attracting a social set of high society?"

"No."

The conviction of that one word piqued her curiosity. "Why not? I'd think that would be the kind of people you'd want around."

There was a long pause, and she had the distinct impression she'd wounded him somehow. Then, quietly, "Is that what you really think of me, Gillian?"

She winced. She'd really put her foot in it, this time; but still, she couldn't lie to him. "At first, maybe. It's hard not to, knowing who you are."

"Gillian," she heard the raw censure in his voice, the disappointment. "I'm a man. Nothing more, nothing less."

It was her turn to sigh. "You *are* more, Remy. Maybe you didn't choose it, but your family, your history, and your position are a part of who you are."

"So you think I'm an elitist snob?" There was definite hurt in his voice, now.

"No," she answered softly. "Not anymore."

Again, silence filled the line, but at least it was no longer heavy with pain. "So, what do you think I should do with the menu? I see some notations here..."

She smiled, hearing the good humor returning to his voice. “Bring out all the things New Orleans, and Louisiana, are.”

“And what is that?” She heard the thread of laughter in his voice.

She grinned. “Adventurous. Mysterious. Congenial. Everything that makes New Orleans unique.”

“And you.” There was a definite huskiness to that statement, causing Gillian to blink in surprise.

“Excuse me?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m impressed, Gillian. I’ve been beating my head against the wall for months, trying to come up with a unique and impressive menu. I got nowhere. Yet, in little more than a week, you’ve managed to roll all of the mystique of New Orleans into one amazing menu. You truly are a miracle worker.”

Gillian felt his praise warm her from the inside, and wasn’t sure why it mattered so much. She’d quit caring about approval years ago; why was it suddenly so important that this man approved of her?

“Well, good night,” she murmured into the phone, hoping to end this dangerous conversation before it got out of hand.

“Good night, *ma cherie*.” His whispered words caressed her through the line, sending a humming through her body that reminded her of what it was like to feel a man’s touch. Her treacherous body, which taunted her that Remy was only yards away. “Pleasant dreams.”

And, for the first time since she’d heard those awful, shuffling footsteps, Gillian believed they would be; pleasant dreams of a tall man with dark hair and eyes like blue crystal.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I'm telling you, it's the curse," Trisha Pasquale, Scarlet Oak's only waitress continued arguing with Eric Peterson – one of the waiters – when Gillian arrived the next morning, full of new trepidation about her job. An uneasy night didn't make for a very professional appearance; she could only be glad she worked in the kitchen, instead of having Etienne Fabron's job at the front desk.

Etienne. Gillian barely resisted the urge to shudder as a chill went through her. She didn't trust that man. It wasn't anything she could put a finger on, either. He just gave her the creeps. Oh, he was always charming and the perfect gentleman, but there was a gleam in his eyes that made her shudder; which was even sillier than her little fright in the hall last night.

After a long night, spent tossing and turning with old nightmares, she'd managed to convince herself that she'd just imagined the whole incident last night. Almost. Then she'd walked into the midst of this argument, and promptly wished she could run home and bury her head under the pillows. She wanted to pretend she'd never heard of Scarlet Oak Manor; she was convinced this place was alive with unseen dangers. But Gillian had never been a coward. So, instead of hiding, she pasted a cheery smile on her face and asked, "What's cursed?"

Eric smirked at Trisha as if to say *See? I told you*, and answered, "Trisha thinks she saw someone out by the old woodshed when she went out on the back terrace a little while ago. She thinks it was Lyle's ghost."

Gillian blinked hard, feeling panic squeezing around her heart. She'd heard a *woman's* voice, last night, not a man's. Surely there wasn't more than one ghost in this place... "Lyle?"

"Lyle Forrester," Trisha clarified, shooting Eric a dark glare. "They say he's the one who started the curse by stealing the Midnight Star, and that part of his curse is to forever wander Scarlet Oak Manor."

Gillian glanced between the two younger people in confusion. "What's the Midnight Star?"

Eric laughed. "Only the largest set sapphire in recorded history!"

"According to legend," Trisha clarified again. "The story goes that it was stolen from a murdered Vodun mambo by Lyle Forrester, and that he gave it to his wife as appeasement for having had an affair."

"Yeah, and it supposedly drove her completely insane," Eric added, waggling his eyebrows in a mock scary look. "I heard someone say she murdered her kids—"

"And I heard that Lyle killed them all and stole the Star back for himself," Trisha shot back, clearly irritated. "He's said to have hidden it somewhere in the manor, but it's never been found."

*Murdered.* Gillian's heart kicked into high gear, and she only barely resisted the urge to shiver as a chill lunged through her. God; it'd happened this way the last time, too!

Fear gnawed at her as she recalled the haunting sobs from last night, Gillian hastily excused herself and fled. She didn't stop until she was outside, clinging to the veranda's rail and sucking in deep breaths of cool September air as she talked herself calm. This wasn't going to be like last time. She'd been too trusting, before; she'd believed that the people around her would believe her. Not this time. She knew what to do, now; she'd talk to no one about her experience, and give no hint of her fears.

She closed her eyes against the urge to scream in frustration. When would it go away? When would she finally feel normal again, and feel safe enough to stop running? She felt like a wild animal, fleeing the hunters.

"I didn't expect to find you out here." The silky voice spoke from close behind her, and ice lunged down Gillian's spine, even before she felt the pressure of his hand on her shoulder. "You're a very beautiful woman, Gillian."

His brand of flattery was lost on her, Gillian mused in dark humor. Turning her head, she avoided Etienne's gaze as she attempted a smile that fell miserably flat. "Thanks."

"You don't believe me." His hand slid over her shoulder, and Gillian felt panic rising. She wanted to yank away, but knew it would be a mistake, with this man. Whatever she did, she couldn't let Etienne Fabron see her fear.

"Etienne, I—"

"Come play with me, little Gillian," he murmured next to her ear, his hands sliding to the hem of her t-shirt. New dread lanced through Gillian.

"No."

He ignored her protest, his dark eyes glinting with sinister intent. He didn't want her; he wanted her fear. He was after the means to own her, and she would have nothing to do with that. She'd left that girl behind six years ago.

Gillian tensed, preparing to use the self-defense skills she'd learned four years ago. She never got the chance. In a move that shocked her into numbness, Etienne suddenly shoved her up against the veranda rail, his mouth suffocating hers in a harsh kiss that made Gillian want to gag. Bringing her hands against his chest, she thrust him away with all of her strength, fighting the urge to vomit as she rasped, "I said no, dammit!"

"What's going on, here?" A new voice broke in harshly, and Gillian's horrified gaze snapped up to find Remy standing at the veranda door, glaring at her. Oh, God.

"Etienne was just leaving, weren't you?" She asked with exaggerated sweetness as she turned a commanding stare on her attacker.

He smirked, casting a sly glance toward Remy, and Gillian nearly sucked in a gasp. Had Etienne known Remy was standing there, all along? "Whatever you say, baby."

Gillian bristled at the endearment, glaring at Etienne. Then, as he swaggered off, she turned her attention to the seething rage now clearly visible in Remy Terreau's cutting blue eyes.

"Ms. Martin," he grated out in a stern voice that made Gillian wince internally. "If you'd be so kind as to accompany me to my office, I'd like to discuss this matter with you."

Gillian frowned in consternation. Was this really the same man who'd filled her dreams? Or had that huskiness in his voice last night been only the product of her imagination? That tenderness had certainly deserted him this morning. He was acting so formal, and... well, *weird*. Determined to not let him see her confusion, she plastered on her most dignified expression. "There's nothing to discuss."

"I think there is. Come with me."

Gillian bristled at the proprietary tone of his voice. How dare he! What was it with men, that they seemed to think they could own her? The girl she had once been might have allowed it, but Gillian Martin was a different woman, and she was not to be had. "And if I choose not to?"

"I don't remember giving you a choice." Dark humor edged his voice and glinted in his ice-blue eyes.

There was nothing funny about this, Gillian fumed, narrowing her eyes. "And I don't recall ever agreeing to be anyone's doormat, or slave!"

He blinked, and his blue eyes darkened with emotions she couldn't read. "Damn it, Gillian, you were *kissing* him! Right here in full view of the world! If you want to play courtesan, then do it away from Scarlet Oak Manor from now on. I'm running a dignified hotel, not a cheap Quarter brothel!"

"A broth—? How dare you!" She glared up at him, incensed that he'd even think that of her. It angered her that, for the first time in five years, someone actually irritated her enough to enflame her passions. That was almost funny; Gillian bit out a sharp bark of laughter. "Take a good look at me, Remy Terreau, and tell me who in his right mind would ever spend time with a woman like me. I'm hardly brothel material!"

He jerked back as if she'd slapped him, his blue eyes wide. "That's—"



She ignored him, too furious to care what he had to say. “I don’t know what you *think* you saw, but I wasn’t kissing Etienne; he was assaulting me! Now, if *you* don’t mind, I have work to do. Excuse me.”

Without pausing even long enough to glimpse Remy’s expression – too afraid of what she might find there – Gillian straightened her shoulders and marched proudly back into the manor. She refused to give in to her urge to scream with rage and frustration. God help her, this place, and that man, were going to drive her crazy!

Remy stared after Gillian, for once too shocked by her words to notice the sway of her curvy rear. She didn’t honestly believe that men wouldn’t fall all over themselves for the chance to see that sensual nature of hers burst free, did she? Who had filled her head with that rubbish? Fantasies of her had kept him awake, and rock hard, for days; which probably explained his short fuse.

Still, his reaction to seeing Gillian in a clinch with Etienne surprised him. Remy wasn’t, by nature, the possessive type. Women, like every other commodity in his life, were temporary diversions from tedium. That lack of permanence made it easy for him to walk away, and to shrug it off when a woman actually decided to end the affair herself. There were plenty of fish in the sea, had always been his philosophy. Until now.

None of his past experiences explained why he acted like a territorial animal around Gillian. They weren’t having an affair; they didn’t even have a *relationship*, beyond that of employer and employee. Yet, the mere idea of her in another man’s arms – not to mention the reality of what he thought he’d seen earlier – caused red spots of rage to dance before his eyes, and possessive heat to close around his chest.

Remorse washed through him as he replayed the anger in Gillian’s violet eyes. She’d obviously been enraged and hurt by his insinuations; and she had a right to be, he acknowledged with a wince. The smooth charm that he’d always possessed around women seemed to have deserted him completely in Gillian’s presence. At very least, he owed her an apology for his invasion of her privacy.

Sighing, Remy headed through the breakfast room doors and into the short corridor leading to the kitchen. How was he ever going to apologize for something he wasn’t even sure he completely understood, himself? He—

“Remy.”

He stopped, glancing around, as the feminine voice reached him, whispering from the shadows of the stairway.

“Gillian?” He started toward the stairs, an eerie sensation crawling along his spine as a cold breeze swept over him.

“No sin goes unpunished,” the same voice whispered, right next to his ear. “I know who you are; I know what you did.”

Remy whipped about, but found no one there, as disembodied laughter echoed around him and the electric lights flickered and dimmed.

“The sins of the past are coming due, Forrester heir.”

Then the lights returned to normal, and the chill disappeared. Only the distant sounds of people moving around through the network of corridors and rooms filled the hallway.

Remy swallowed hard as he closed his eyes and resisted the urge to groan in fear. Bad enough that his nightmares plagued him in sleep; now they’d found a way to drive him mad, even awake. However, the most disturbing part of it all was that the voice he’d just heard didn’t belong to Susannah. He knew of only one woman who would ever wish harm on the Forresters; and that thought was enough to chill his blood. It appeared that Susannah’s problems were about to become his. Camille Jamori had come back from the grave.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Remy stopped just inside the kitchen door, relief sighing through him as his eyes came to rest on Gillian. Very little provided him peace, anymore, but since he'd met her, Gillian kept his nightmares at bay, with nothing more than her simple presence in his life.

She glanced up, and he winced at the tight smile on her face, knowing that he deserved that distrustful expression for his earlier accusations. Still...

"Got a minute?" He moved to stand beside where she was working on the new menu.

"That all depends on you," she returned with a flicker of her old smile, though wariness still haunted her eyes.

He dropped his gaze, awkward with this new hurdle in his relationship with Gillian. He hadn't been this tongue-tied since he'd been twelve and his maternal grandmother – a very loving but proper Louisiana lady – had caught him with one of his father's dirty magazines.

"I'm..." He sighed, looked up, and promptly felt every word he'd been about to say vanish from his head as he saw the soft, forgiving light already beginning to bloom in Gillian's eyes. All thought of blame or apology, or anything beyond the sudden need to kiss her, swept aside. Without further thought, he pulled her gently around on the swiveling barstool and bent his head to claim her lips in the sweetest kiss he'd ever shared.

Gillian's eyes widened in surprise, and then slid closed on a sigh as the warm, smooth texture of Remy's kiss invaded her senses. Nothing had ever felt as right – or as dangerous – as the gentle possession of Remy's lips on hers. As the thought settled, she brought her hands up to rest on his chest, gently easing away from him.

The gleam of hungry light in Remy's dazed eyes was a far cry from the evil glint she'd seen in Etienne's, and her heart tripped as Remy's heat poured over her. He leaned toward her again, his intent clear, and it took everything she possessed to gently push him away with a whispered, "No."

He stopped, his face less than an inch from hers, and his warm breath, scented with a hint of peppermint, brushed over her cheek. The look in his eyes – that mingling of hunger and wariness – brought a smile to her face.

"You were going to apologize," she reminded him softly, and watched him blink in surprise.

"How did you know that?"

She chuckled. "Probably the look on your face when you came in. I've seen that look way too many times in my life to not recognize it. The only question is what, exactly, you want to apologize for."

He swallowed hard, and shifted uncomfortably, before an endearingly sheepish grin spread over his face, making her heart thump harder. "I guess I have even more to apologize for now, huh?"

She offered him a small, reassuring smile. "Not in my book. Now, quit stalling."

He puffed out a short, nervous laugh, his eyes twinkling. "All right. I had no right to say what I did, outside. It was rude and insensitive, and an invasion of your privacy." His jaw clenched, and the words grew suddenly harder for him to speak as he rasped, "You have the right to date anyone you choose; as your employer, it's none of my business, as long as it doesn't interfere with your job performance."

She rolled her eyes against the urge to laugh, or hit him. She wasn't sure which held more appeal. "You were doing really good, right up until that last part."

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” He spread his hands in defeat, his eyes openly appealing. “I screwed up; I can’t even say why.” He faced her squarely, and his right hand extended toward her. “What do you say? Friends?”

She looked between his hand and his earnest expression, and felt a grin spreading over her face as she grasped his hand firmly. “Why not? Friends.”

She saw a flicker of what she swore was disappointment, before he relaxed, leaning one hip casually against the counter where she was working. “So, how’s the menu coming along?”

“Slowly but surely,” she replied with an off-hand shrug. Then, with a swift glance, she changed the subject on him. “I’ve heard that this place is supposed to be haunted. That true?”

He straightened abruptly, his expression closing off. “No.”

Remembering her own experience in the hallway, she lifted a disbelieving brow and nonchalantly countered, “You sure? A lot of these old plantations are supposed to be haunted by spirits of unavenged slaves. And they say that New Orleans holds the national record for cursed homes, as well.”

His eyes had gone cold and hard as she spoke – an odd reaction from someone who claimed not to believe in ghosts – and his jaw clenched so tightly she swore she heard his teeth grinding together.

“I assure you, there are absolutely no ghosts, or any other so-called supernatural phenomena, at Scarlet Oak Manor,” he rasped. “Now, if everything’s settled, I need to get back to work.”

And, as he turned toward the main part of the building, Gillian shook her head in confusion. She knew what she’d heard, and what she’d seen. This place was haunted; and Remy Terreau, whatever he tried to convince himself and everyone else, knew it better than anyone.

Standing at the door leading from the kitchen to the Keep, now used for storage, Etienne Fabron watched Terreau stalk away through narrowed eyes. He’d heard, and seen, every moment of that highly informative conversation between Terreau and Gillian. So, not only was Terreau mooning over that lying cow, but he was clearly worried about the spirits loose on the manor. And little Ms. *Martin* was scared out of her mind by the rumors.

A slow, malicious grin spread over Etienne’s face. Things couldn’t be more perfect if he’d planned them this way. If he could succeed in scaring Gillian Martin away from the manor, it wouldn’t take long until everyone else was gone, too. And then there’d be no one to stop him from his search, or his revenge.

“You’ve got us started, *Tante Camille*. I’ll take care of the rest.” It would be an event no one would ever forget. The day New Orleans’ favored son paid the debt his line owed; in blood.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gillian sighed in relief, satisfaction thrumming within her as she sat down at the counter and looked over the clipboard in her hands. It had taken five hours to go through everything from the freezers to the cupboards in the butler's pantry, but she finally had a complete inventory of everything they'd need to open the kitchen and dining room on schedule. That ought to make Remy happy, at least.

It was eleven-thirty at night, and she still had a few recipes she wanted to try her hand at before she called it a night. She'd been studying the recipe notes she'd found stashed in a drawer in an old cabinet she and Brian had moved into the Keep, and she was intrigued by the simple ingredients involved in the sophisticated-sounding meals. If they worked even half as well as they sounded, they'd be the perfect additions to her menu and create a unique flavor of Scarlet Oak Manor.

She was just pulling out ingredients when a loud crash startled her. Turning, she frowned toward the door leading into the old Keep. There was nothing in there except storage stuff. Someone must have stacked something unevenly. Sighing in exasperation, she set down the jar of oil she was holding and headed toward the Keep. Someone had to clean up the mess, after all, and she was the only one around.

Entering the Keep, she glanced around, and froze as her eyes stopped on a scrawl of bloody letters as an involuntary scream ripped from her lungs.

Remy frowned to himself as he entered the brightly lit kitchen to find it empty. Adrenaline rushed through him as he recalled the last time he'd found it like this. This time, however, it looked as if Gillian had been preparing to cook something when she'd disappeared. Only, Gillian wasn't the type to leave ingredients scattered all over the counter, no matter what happened. So why had she left? And where had she— A scream fit to chill even the warmest heart had Remy's head whipping toward the Keep as fear rushed through him. That was Gillian!

Mobilized by the fear in her cry, Remy dashed for the Keep, flinging the door open as he burst into the room. His gaze landed on a trembling, but apparently unharmed, Gillian and relief flooded Remy, leaving him with the desperate urge to hold her tight.

"Gillian? Are you all right?"

As his hand touched her arm, he felt her jump, and followed her riveted gaze. His breath froze in his lungs as he saw the words scrawled in blood on the wall, and ice poured through him as he read them.

*He who holds the Star unjustly holds only death.*

It was the curse! For as long as he could remember, his mother had parroted that line as a moral lesson, never let greed overcome human decency. She used it to remind anyone who crossed her path of what had happened to Susannah Wilmington because of Lyle Forrester's greed. Looking into Gillian's horrified eyes, Remy knew he couldn't resist comforting her any longer. Reaching out, he drew her gently against him, feeling the shudder that wracked her through his own skin. She tried to jerk away, but he closed his arms more firmly, his hands stroking over her back soothingly.

"Hush, *cherie*," he murmured against her ear, surprised at the huskiness of his own voice as he soothed her. "You're safe."

She wilted against him, trembling. But there were no tears; not from his courageous Gillian. She was strong in ways that humbled him. As her warm, soft curves settled against his body, Remy felt himself stir. It couldn't be helped; the mere chance to hold her was turning him on.

Gillian raised wide, violet eyes to his, and he watched a matching hunger flare in their depths as her lips parted on a small sigh that shivered along his every nerve. The adrenaline that fear had poured through him at her scream shifted gears at that sigh, arrowing south of his belt in a rush of sensation he could neither halt nor deny. Hunger burned low in his belly, and his arms tightened around her, drawing her lush curves closer as he bent his head to capture her mouth in a needy, possessive kiss.

The warm softness of her lips, and the spicy scent of her arousal, sent a shaft of hunger through Remy that was so deep he thought he'd die from the need. Dipping into the warm recesses of her mouth, he tasted passion as he took her greedy moan into his own mouth.

Desperate to feel the warmth of her, his hands worked her t-shirt loose from her body-hugging jeans and slipped beneath, to find hot, soft flesh that made his need spike higher. He wanted her naked, and he wanted it now.

Liquid heat shuddered through Gillian as she felt Remy's hands skimming over her bare flesh. Her terror evaporated in his burning kiss, leaving her weak with wanting. For a man she couldn't have.

That realization poured ice water on her libido, bringing Gillian out of her passionate haze with a jolt. Pressing her palms flat against Remy's broad, muscular chest, she eased away from his kiss.

"Remy, no..."

His blue eyes, turquoise with desire, nearly undid her resolve, until she remembered that he was a charmer with a reputation for short affairs, and a desire to have things his way. She'd been down that road once before, and the memory jaundiced.

"We can't do this," she said firmly, resisting the urge to shiver with heat as his hands caressed the bare flesh of her back.

"Gillian..." There was a plea in his voice that she'd never heard before, and didn't want to contemplate too deeply. That would only get her hurt, again.

"I'm not what you really want," she tried to reason with him. If she could convince him that there was no future for them, that there was no good in continuing...

He chuckled wryly, pulling her against his body until she couldn't help but feel his state of arousal. "Ever since I met you, Gillian, you're *all* I seem to want," he admitted huskily. "I want to kiss you, and touch you. I want to—"

"Stop!" She pulled away completely, fighting the seduction of his words, the softness of his tone.

He met her eyes, and the desire in his gaze nearly caused her knees to buckle. A small, knowing smile tugged at his lips as he stared into her eyes. "You want me, too."

"No."

"Yes," he countered softly, stroking a finger down her cheek, causing her to tremble with her need. "You do."

She couldn't deny the gentle conviction of his statement, or the relief in his eyes, but nor could she give him the answer he was looking for. She couldn't give him that kind of power. She knew the kind of trouble that led to, and she'd already paid prices she couldn't bear for that weakness, once. So, casting her gaze around, she latched onto the first thing she could find to change the subject – the scrawled, bloody words on the wall. Those words were the perfect distraction for them both; whoever had written that chilling statement was dangerously unbalanced, and clearly loose on the manor. It was time for a shift in priorities. "What's the deal with this sapphire, anyway?"

A frustrated scowl marred his features. "What's it matter? It's just a legend."

"Not to someone," she pointed out, gesturing toward the message. "You mean you don't know anything about this curse that's supposedly attached to it?"

His scowl deepened. "Local superstition. Louisiana is full of curses and hauntings."

She blinked, nonplussed. She'd taken Remy as a man of tradition; and tradition often included superstition. "You don't believe in curses?"

He snorted a laugh that sounded forced, even as he paced away from her. When he turned back, she nearly gasped at the coldness in his eyes.

"Curses are for fools who don't have the brains to seek out the true cause of a catastrophe. They called the Bubonic Plague a curse, you know. Retribution from God. But science today tells us that the Plague was caused by parasites, and the European habit of exterminating the cats that could have disposed of the rat problem. Where's the curse?" He shook his head. "It's easier to blame some awesome, vengeful power for our misfortunes than to admit that we've made bad choices."

"Oh, Remy." She shook her head sadly. "Don't you get it? Superstition allows us to feel connected to a cosmic justice; it makes people feel more significant in the grand scheme. A curse can be broken; Divine vengeance can be assuaged. Nature, however, can't be thwarted. People like to believe they can do something to alter events."

He smirked. "Personal power?"

She ignored his snide question. "And a curse has power, as long as just one person believes in it. This Midnight Star, whatever it is, has power because someone *believes* it does. I intend to find out everything I can about Scarlet Oak Manor and the curse. That should tell us who's doing this."

As her words washed over him, the icy sting of fear followed, and Remy found drawing his next breath to be almost impossible. She was talking about digging into the past – a past that was slowly driving him mad. His eyes on the scrawled words on the wall, he felt new fear washing through him. If she was right, there was a lunatic out there, determined to kill anyone who got in his or her way. If Gillian went digging, she was liable to learn just enough to make herself a target. And even if she was wrong, she'd be in danger. Recalling the voice that had taunted him in the hallway, Remy barely suppressed a shudder. He couldn't let Gillian become a victim to his terror, as well!

"No."

She blinked up at him. "What?"

"I don't want you researching Scarlet Oak, Gillian," he said gruffly, grasping her arms. "Leave the past alone. Whoever's doing this is crazy enough to do anything."

Her eyes narrowed and her expression hardened. "I'm going to do this."

"Gillian, please—"

Before his eyes, she drew herself up like a soldier preparing for combat. "I don't know about you, but I'm not spending another day in a place that, curse or not, could get me killed. Not without an idea of why I'm in danger, and from where!"

She was right, of course; she had a right to know if she was in danger. Only, he didn't want her hurt, and he didn't want her frightened away by what he already knew she'd learn. Finally, though, he sighed in resignation.

"Fine. I have some genealogy files in my suite. We can start with those, first thing tomorrow."

"We?" She looked startled, before protest slid through her amazing eyes. "You don't have to--"

"I know."

"I want to do this on my own."

A tight smile tugged at his lips. "'Fraid not, *cherie*."

A mutinous expression slid across her face as she folded her arms over that voluptuous chest of hers. "Remy Terreau, you are the most infuriatingly stubborn man on the planet!"

He laughed then, surprising himself. They were arguing, and still, she enchanted him. That had never happened before.

“Ah, Gillian,” he murmured, stepping forward to cup her cheek again, the velvety feel of her skin shooting sparks of desire through his system that her openly hungry gaze fanned into flame. “You are the loveliest woman I’ve ever met, and the most amazing. Which is why I can’t let you do this alone.”

She sighed, her eyes softening briefly, before the toughness that was Gillian’s fighting spirit rallied again. “Fine. You can help; but I’m starting tonight.”

He frowned. “Gillian—“

“I doubt I’ll be able to sleep, anyway,” she continued on quickly, her face and voice wreathed in a cheeriness her eyes didn’t mirror. “It’s better if I get started while it’s all fresh in my mind, and—“

“Gillian.” He squeezed her shoulder gently, halting her rambling. He resisted the urge to smile as her wide, confused eyes lifted to his. “Let me go get the files. Go back to the kitchen and stay there, please. That’s safest.” *For both of us.* Because the idea of having Gillian in his private space was fuelling fantasies of having her, period. And, right now, he didn’t have time for fantasies. He was going to need all his wits about him, to keep this amazing woman alive, and sane.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gillian stretched, yawning, and rubbed her face with one hand as she blinked awake to find herself laying sprawled on the sofa in her cottage. God, what a night! She sighed, closing her eyes as a small smile touched her face. She'd been up most of the night, with a gorgeous man who made her body tingle. Her grin turned wry as she acknowledged that they'd both been fully clothed, and that she, at least, had been thoroughly engrossed in something that hadn't a thing to do with sex.

Gillian laughed to herself, to think that she'd been alone long enough that ghost stories could distract her from even Remy Terreau. Of course, with all the ghosts and curses – not to mention being in close quarters with a darkly handsome, brooding man – she was beginning to feel like the heroine of a gothic novel. The whole thing reminded her of *Jane Eyre*; which would have been funny, if the implications hadn't been so dangerous. Fortunately, she knew for a fact that Remy Terreau didn't have any mad wives tucked away in the attic; unfortunately, however, that made their danger all that much more ominous. They had no idea who was responsible.

Sighing, Gillian rose from the sofa and padded into the bathroom to repair whatever damage her choice of sleeping locations had done to her appearance. She might not be able to solve the riddle of Scarlet Oak Manor, yet, but she could at least show up for work not looking like a bum.

Thirty minutes later, she showered, dressed, and heading toward the main house with a small grin in place. She might not have discovered the identity of their sick graffiti artist, but she'd gleaned enough information and enthusiasm to have ideas how to make the local legends work for them.

As she neared the front of the house, Gillian came to an abrupt halt, her brow furrowing and her heart lodging in her throat as dread washed over her. There was a TV van, marked with a familiar stylized eye, parked brazenly in front of the main doors. What they wanted, she had no idea, but she wasn't about to give them another story, if she could help it. Drawing a sharp breath, she changed direction, heading for the veranda at the rear of the building. There was no way she was walking through the main doors in full sight of the media; *they*, unfortunately, hadn't yet forgotten her face, or who she'd once been.

He wasn't waiting for her; he was merely keeping an eye on the Keep entrance, to catch last night's industrious visitor.

Remy snorted to himself as he leaned against the kitchen doorway, his back to the room in question, and called himself a liar. He'd been standing here, his eyes glued on the main kitchen doors, for half an hour, now. Brian Parker had been shooting him confused looks for the past fifteen minutes, and Elsa had been chuckling ever since he'd first arrived, a knowing gleam in her wizened grey eyes.

He sighed. All right, so he *was* waiting for Gillian, like a besotted schoolboy. His eyes darkened in frustration. He couldn't help himself; she was the brightest, most vivid part of his life right now, and he only felt half-connected to the world until he got a glimpse of her. That was all he needed, he assured himself. Just a glimpse...

"Looking for someone?" Gillian's voice, from behind him, startled Remy, and he turned to see her, her arms folded loosely over her chest and one hip resting against the counter just a step away from where he stood.

He blinked hard in surprise. Where on earth had she come from? She couldn't have snuck past him! Calling on every ounce of his early training, he managed to look nonchalant as he raised one brow and enquired, "Pick a different route this morning?"

She grinned nervously. "Yeah." Her grin collapsed. "Remy, why is there a TV crew here?"

He shrugged. "They're from CBS. *Sixty Minutes*, I believe."

"So I saw." She didn't appear placated by his response. Hell, he didn't want to tell her why they were here; he didn't want to tell her about the recent problems at Scarlet Oak. For some reason, Gillian was camera-shy, and the publicity around Scarlet Oak Manor lately could send her running faster than any curse.

He cleared his throat, glancing away as he debated what to tell her. Then, he sighed heavily. Gillian was a highly intelligent woman; anything he told her that wasn't the complete truth would come back to bite him in the ass, sooner or later. Facing her squarely, he resigned himself to nothing less than the complete truth. "A couple of months ago, the FBI was tracking some missing girls, and found all but one of them buried here at Scarlet Oak. My landscaping crew's finally cleaned up the last of the FBI's mess, and now the media's decided to make a new one, snooping around down here for stories."

She relaxed a little bit, though he still detected a hint of anxiety in her violet eyes. "I see."

He wanted to touch her. Remy clenched his hands against the need to feel her soft, warm skin. Forcing a friendly smile he didn't feel to his face, he leaned against the doorframe and, in a quiet voice, asked, "How'd the rest of your reading go?"

An impish grin spread over her face, short-circuiting his brain, and her sparkling eyes met his. "Great! In fact, if you've got a couple of minutes, once I'm done getting everything up and going here, I'd like to discuss some ideas with you."

He managed a nod, wondering what kind of ideas she was referring to. Probably not the same kind his mind was painting pictures of, thanks to his body's arousal. Reasserting control over his unruly thoughts, he said, "Stop by my office whenever you're ready."

Then, before he could seriously embarrass himself, Remy headed for the door, and the pile of paperwork he hoped would eventually erase that mischievous grin on her face from his mind.

It was nearly one-thirty in the afternoon before Gillian managed to get away from the kitchen long enough to make her way to Remy's office. Knocking lightly on the door, she poked her head in, and grinned as she saw him facing the window, clearly a million miles away. "That's a different way to conduct business. Is it effective?"

He jerked around at her quip, and she swore she caught a flush of color in his face before it was swept away by his grin. Remy Terreau, blushing? She didn't believe it.

"C'mon in," he said, turning back toward her.

She slipped into the room and pushed the door closed. "I wasn't sure if you'd still be here, but I took a chance."

"I'm glad." He gestured toward one of the plushly upholstered Queen Anne chairs that faced his desk, and glanced curiously at the thin notebook in her hands. "You said you have some ideas. Ideas for what?"

She perched nervously on the edge of one chair, not quite sure what she was so worried about. Well, that wasn't completely true. She really wanted Remy to like the ideas she mapped out last night, and after the way he'd reacted to the curse theory, she wasn't so sure he would.

Drawing a shallow breath, she reminded herself that Remy trusted her judgment enough that he'd asked her to come to Scarlet Oak; she hadn't applied for this job. She didn't need to impress him to keep her job. And, since she'd arrived, she'd come to realize that he wasn't Darrell, either...

"Gillian?" His soft query broke through her thoughts, pulling her back to the present.

She looked across the expanse of the desk, and all her worry and doubts fell away as she looked into his concerned blue eyes. Smiling, she settled comfortably back into her seat.

"There's some interesting reading out there on the *Midnight Star*." She idly tapped the notebook against her thigh. "It's amazing what's on the Internet, alone."

He cocked one brow at her in amusement. "Oh?"

“Yeah.”

He smirked, shaking his head. “It’s amazing the kinds of things people find fascinating.”

Her brows raised in surprise. “You mean, the Midnight Star doesn’t even hold the slightest interest to you?”

Remy met her gaze levelly. “Should it?”

Meeting his somber eyes, Gillian felt laughter bubble up inside of her, spilling into her voice as she said, “Remy, you’re heir to one of the largest gemstone and jewelry fortunes in the world! I thought that kind of stuff ran in your blood.”

He sat back, shrugging. “Not me. My cousin, Terese, will inherit the family business when grand-mère finally gives up the reins. Believe me, it was a matter of no small contention in my family.” He leaned forward then, his gaze suddenly intense. “Why? Does your family’s history run in your blood? What do they do?”

A cold blanket settled over Gillian’s heart, sending ice rushing through her veins. She couldn’t tell him; he still had no idea who she was, and he’d even seen her without her hair covered. That he’d passed that test had been the only reason she’d stayed, that first day. Finally, she met his eyes and, in a voice barely above a cool whisper, she murmured, “I don’t have a family.”

He sat back, as if she’d physically struck him, his eyes wide in disbelief. “None?”

She shrugged awkwardly. “I have a sister in Norfolk. She’s married to a cop, and runs public relations for a local museum.”

“Your parents?”

She turned her attention back to her notebook, determined to get Remy to let go of his inquisition before she spilled the awful truth pressing at her lips. “Did you know that the Midnight Star originally belonged to the Maharaja Ravana, according to legend?”

“Gillian...” She heard the censure in his tone.

“Let it go, Remy. Whether or not I have parents anymore is my business, and no one else’s.”

She met his gaze, let him read the conviction in her eyes, and then turned her attention back to her notes. “Supposedly, Ravana gifted the stone to a mistress of his, who took the gem and returned to her home in Sri Lanka.”

Remy was studying her carefully, when she lifted her eyes to him again. Then, with a small, exasperated sigh, he capitulated to her subject change. “So, who’s this Maharaja?”

She grinned. “A magician. Indian legend claims he placed magic on the stone -- both a blessing and a curse. It could only be given in love; should it ever be stolen, it would bring terrible suffering to whoever took it, and all their line until the curse is lifted by true love.”

He smirked. “True love? Sounds like a fairy tale, to me.”

Those words stabbed Gillian through the heart. All her life, she’d believed in the power of love; she’d believed enough in love to suffer banishment by her family. And even after that love had turned out to be as false as fool’s gold, she hadn’t given up on the dream that somewhere, true love awaited her. That Remy saw it as a pointless venture pained her for reasons she wasn’t sure she wanted to examine, ever. Struggling to keep her expression and voice light, she continued, “Anyway, Ravana’s mistress passed the stone on to her son, who ran a trade route over the sea between Sri Lanka and Madagascar. In Africa, he met a woman and fell in love—“

“And passed on the stone,” Remy finished, nodding. “I see the trend, here. So where does the curse come into play?”

“Patience.” She grinned at him. “Two years later, the merchant prince’s lady-love had an affair with a pirate, Bartolomero—“

“So much for true love,” Remy quipped.

She shot him a withering look. “Bartolomero’s mistress gave him the stone, and it passed in turn to his mistress in the Barbary Coast. She passed it to her daughter, who brought it with her to the New World. A hundred years later, the curse was begun when Lyle Forrester murdered his mistress and stole the sapphire...”

He sucked in a harsh breath, his face going stark. “And passed it as appeasement, not a token of affection, to his wife.”

She blinked. “How’d you—?”

His expression grew granite-hard. “So, what does this story have to do with your idea?”

She sat back, confused. What did the history of Lyle and Susannah Forrester – or Scarlet Oak Manor – have to do with Remy Terreau? She sensed a story there, but refrained from asking. She’d demanded to keep her secret; she had to let him keep his.

“Well, it’s rumored that this area of the bayou was once used by pirates, during the height of the privateer. So I was thinking... Maybe we can theme a party or something around the pirate motif, and treasure. You know, to take everyone’s attention off of the curse business.”

He studied her for a long moment, completely silent. Then, just as she was nervously preparing to backtrack, a slow grin spread over his face. “Not only a miracle worker, but a genius as well.”

She laughed, her heart lightening for the first time in years, warmed by the approval in a pair of ice-blue eyes.

“I’m telling you, it’s the scoop of a lifetime, if we can put the right spin on this,” the dark-haired woman was jabbering a mile a minute on her cell phone, three steps away from the front desk. Etienne listened curiously, wondering what she could have found at Scarlet Oak worth that much excitement. Rage shot through him at her next words. “Imagine! The heir to the Terreau jewel dynasty and the son of an internationally recognized politician tied to the biggest treasure find in the Free World! Well, I don’t *know* it’s here, but why else would someone like Remy Terreau buy a place as out of the way as this crumbling old mansion? He can search it for the treasure, while pretending to ‘restore’ the place. And, get this – one of the treasures supposedly buried here is the Midnight Star! Yeah, that’s right, the Midnight Star...”

She moved out the front door toward the van, and out of earshot. Etienne’s scowl stalked her all the way. Stupid bitch; she was going to ruin this, with her wild little take of treasure. In no time, that news would spread, and then he’d have to give up his search of the manor. It would get too dangerous to continue, as long as there were people about. He would have to lay low, for a while; just until he could find a way around this new difficulty. But he wasn’t about to give up; vengeance, and the Midnight Star, were both his right. He would have them, even if he had to hold the entire manor hostage to get what he wanted.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Remy threw the newspaper onto his desk in disgust, hearing it smack against the rest of the pile. Twelve papers – four national, three local, one international, and four bloody tabloids – and all of them had the same damned cover story.

A quiet whistle from behind the *New York Times* propped up across the desk from him drew Remy's attention, before Gillian folded the paper down to meet his gaze, her violet eyes sympathetic. "That's a pretty wild tale."

His lips curled in a sarcastic smile as he lifted the *USA Today's* business section again and read, "*Jewel Dynasty Heir Digging for Legendary Sapphire*. Any ideas where they got that particular wild tale from?"

She met his accusing glared boldly, shaking her head as she grinned wryly, "Don't look at me. Believe me, if I was talking to the press, there'd be a very different headline there. I don't talk to them."

He snorted a laugh. That was the understatement of the year! Gillian avoided anything that even looked like a camera, as if she had a phobia about them. Her words bothered him, and he was left to wonder why she thought talking to the press was dangerous. "Yeah. But who else, besides me, did you tell about your research?"

She shook her head, "No one. There wasn't anyone else who needed to know, yet." She cast him a long look. "They could have found it on their own, you know; maybe even the same way I did. And, without talking to you, I can see how they'd jump to this conclusion." She smiled apologetically at him, making Remy's heart thump harder. "And you have to admit, it's a pretty juicy story, even if it's not true."

A knock at the door interrupted just then, and Etienne Fabron stuck his scowling face in. "We have a problem."

Remy barely contained his urge to groan. Over the past several months, he'd come to both expect and dread hearing that phrase in connection to Scarlet Oak. "What sort of problem?"

Etienne glanced between Remy and Gillian, and Remy swore the other man's gaze went ice-cold as it rested on Gillian. "You'd better have a look for yourself, boss."

Sighing in resignation, Remy cast Gillian an apologetic look as he rose from his seat and moved toward the door. Gratitude shot through him as she rose as well, her gaze steady on his, telling him that she'd help in any way she could. It was nice to have someone he knew he could depend on; it was *beyond* nice, to have Gillian beside him.

Together, they followed a disgruntled Etienne to the foyer, where Remy heard Gillian loose a small gasp, even as he stopped dead in shock. People milled around in the foyer, luggage stacked around them.

"Why are they all here?" Gillian asked quietly. "The Manor isn't even open for business, yet."

"The papers," Remy reminded her. "And, open or not, we're going to have to find places to put as many of these people as we can." He turned to Etienne. "Start signing them in, until we're full to capacity. I doubt that most of them will stay more than a day, once they realize that those stories aren't true."

Etienne glared, but nodded sharply, before marching grimly toward the front desk. Remy watched him through narrowed eyes, assessing his concierge in a new light. Etienne had always seemed

so congenial and charming. Why the sudden personality reversal? He'd have to have a talk with the other man, as soon as this crisis was over.

"You can put someone in my cottage," Gillian offered quietly. "For a few days, anyway. There're foldout cots in the Keep. I can use one of them."

The idea of Gillian sleeping in the Keep, after what she'd found there, clenched a knot of dread in Remy's gut. There was no way in hell... "I have a better idea. Have Brian and Jared bring one of the cots to my suite. We'll set it up in the sitting room."

Her eyes went wide, and she swallowed visibly. "I don't think—"

"I'll make it simple, Gillian. I'm not letting you sleep in that Keep until we're sure we've got the idiot responsible for that writing you found."

Gillian's eyes filled with dismay, and Remy wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh, or gather her into his arms and comfort her. Clearly, regardless of her research, Gillian had managed to push the danger from her mind. Strange that he hadn't; not when it came to her safety.

"Oh, no!" She exhaled the words in dismay.

"Yeah. I thought you'd see the logic once—"

"No." She turned her wide eyes toward him, and he saw the concern written there clearly.

"Remy, what about these people?"

He blinked, confused. Her mind was clearly working in areas he didn't comprehend. "What about them?"

"We have an intruder who hasn't been caught. What if he attacks someone?"

Amazing. Remy stared at her in disbelief. He'd just pointed out a grave threat to her life, and Gillian was worried about people she didn't even know! He'd never met a more selfless person in his entire life. Watching the concern wrinkling her brow, he felt himself falling a little more. It was a frightening, exhilarating feeling.

"Don't worry," he assured her in a gentle murmur, resting his hands comfortably on her shoulders. "I'm sure our friend's not into the crowd scene. My bet is, he'll lay low until the crowd clears out."

As he'd hoped, that dissolved the tension in her expression, and an assessing light came on in her eyes. "So, then why is it necessary for me to sleep in your suite?"

Her words shot like fire through his system; he could think of a dozen reasons for her to be in his suite, and all of them involved her in his bed, as well. Gillian, fortunately, seemed completely oblivious to his lascivious thoughts, her eyes scanning the foyer again. "What do you think they're all here for?"

Remy snorted a laugh at that. Surely, she wasn't that innocent; the reason was pretty damned obvious to him. "Good old-fashioned greed, most likely."

Confusion wrinkled her brow again, and her lips turned down in one of her rare frowns, making him want to wipe away that look with his mouth.

"What do you mean – oh!" Her gaze whipped toward him in surprise. "You mean these people really *believe* all those newspaper stories?"

"Not just the papers," Brian Parker's voice came from behind them, causing Remy and Gillian to turn in unison. "Scarlet Oak's 'pirate treasure' has already been the focus of several TV programs."

Remy groaned in disbelief. "Explaining the droves of people arriving the same day that the paper press runs the story."

"What are we going to do?" Gillian asked anxiously.

"Wait out the storm, and make sure everyone understands that there's no treasure here, before they start digging up the grounds," Remy quipped wearily.

Gillian glanced toward the front doors, paled, and muttered, "I need to go get the kitchen set up."

And, before Remy could even ask if she was okay, she'd disappeared, leaving him to glance around the foyer in confusion, until he saw the TV camera hauled in. Confusion and concern shot

through him, and he frowned. Once again, the media had arrived, and Gillian had fled at first sight. Remy couldn't help but wonder why.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two days. It'd been two long, torturous days, and he wasn't sure how much more he could take. Remy leaned back in his chair with a groan, rubbing his eyes wearily. It wasn't the wall-to-wall people, or even the ever-present media that was steadily killing him; them, he was used to. Gillian was who was driving him mad. He'd shared living space with women before, but nothing had ever affected him the way finding Gillian's cosmetics and personal effects neatly arranged on his bathroom counter, or the scent of her shampoo lingering in the air, did. The thought of her sleeping only a handful of steps away from his bed was enough to drive any man insane; he thanked God daily that she didn't wear anything slinky or silky to bed, choosing instead to sleep in shapeless sweats. He wondered if that was purely in deference to her current sleeping arrangements, and his presence.

He knew he wasn't the only one deprived of sleep, either. From the constant shuffling and sighing in his suite's sitting room after he went to bed each night, Remy knew that Gillian wasn't sleeping well. He was pretty sure, however, that her insomnia had less to do with his presence, and more to do with the media. Ever since one of the tabloid reporters got turned around and ended up in the kitchen, the press had been finding every excuse possible to get a glimpse of Gillian. A few had even been bold enough to approach her directly. And, like he'd come to expect, Gillian had promptly disappeared. Remy witnessed the fear in her eyes. Left confused by how quickly the media dropped Scarlet Oak once they laid eyes on his chef, Remy didn't know what to make of the situation.

Last night had been the worst, yet. The soft sobs he'd heard coming from the sitting room nearly ripped his heart to shreds, and left it bleeding with the wish that he could comfort her, as if he had the right to hold her. But he didn't, and so he'd done the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do; he'd stayed put, listening to her heartbreaking sobs long into the night, until she finally cried herself into a restless sleep. He'd been awake the rest of the night with the uneasy feeling that something about his relationship with Gillian Martin had undergone a sudden evolvment. He hadn't been able to think of her in purely business terms ever since he'd met her; but now, he couldn't think of her in terms of friendship, or even desire, anymore. More than anything, he wanted to know what it would take to make her truly happy, and whole, again. He sat bolt upright as he realized one thing he *could* do. The media frightened her. Remy rose resolutely to his feet. The media was leaving, now.

As he stepped out of his office, he found a large group of reporters gathered near a furious Elsa, who was roundly berating them as heartless vultures who would prick even a hurt animal to get enough blood for a story. The sight, and the colorful epithets flying from Elsa's mouth, brought a brief grin to Remy's face, about the same time one of the beleaguered reporters caught sight of him.

"Mr. Terreau!" She surged forward, a spunky little bundle of energy that he imagined probably appealed to a lot of men – once upon a time, Remy might have found her attractive, himself. Now, however, she just looked tiny, breakable, and far too childlike. She didn't have enough curves to be called a woman.

"Mr. Terreau," she barked determinedly, like a pugnacious little terrier. "Shannon Raymond, MSNBC. What can you tell us about the pirates' treasure? Is it true that your chef discovered it first?"

Remy's eyes narrowed at even that veiled inquiry about Gillian. He waited until the rest of the media had shifted their focus to him, and then, waving their questions silent, he stared them each down. "I'm only going to say this once: there is no treasure, pirate or otherwise, at Scarlet Oak Manor. I would ask you all to refrain from approaching or harassing my staff, as well. Anyone who refuses to abide by this simple request will be escorted off of the property immediately and forbidden to ever return."

Silence fell sharply over the group, and they stared at him in morose shock. Then, one of the tabloid reporters – a balding, paunchy man in an ill-fitting suit – grumbled, "So much for freedom of the press. Damned French. Guess we should just go home."



With grumbling and glares, the group dispersed, and Remy watched them gather up bags and gear, satisfaction pouring through him. There was one benefit to being a Terreau. Thanks to his father's famous stance as a man who stuck to every policy he ever publicly endorsed, the media was well aware that when a Terreau made a request, it was to be followed. He wouldn't hesitate to enforce his words, and they all knew it.

"You have done well," Elsa said from beside him, her approval clear. "I am only wondering why it has taken you two days to halt this."

He shot her a surprised glance. "What do you mean?"

"Gillian's past is no one's business except her own."

Remy felt his heart trip. What did Elsa know about Gillian that he didn't? He cleared his throat. "Elsa, do you know—?"

"No one's business," she reiterated firmly. "Not unless she chooses to tell you."

Remy watched Elsa walk away, a frown tugging at his lips. What did she know about Gillian's past, and why wouldn't she tell him? Why had Gillian confided in Elsa, but not him? They were questions he knew would haunt him, under laid by the sound of Gillian's sobbing, until he had the answers.

"They are gone."

Gillian glanced up from the *roux* she was making at Elsa's satisfied tone. "Who's gone, Elsa?"

"Those propagandists." Elsa waved one hand with a derisive snort. "*Herr* Terreau, he told them to mind their own business and stay away from you."

Gillian's heart caught. Remy had told the media off, for *her*? "But... *why*?"

Elsa blinked, unfazed by Gillian's confusion. "Because he sees what this... this *unordnung*, does to you. He sees you do not sleep."

Gillian turned back to the *roux*, her cheeks flushing at the realization that Elsa thought she and Remy were sleeping together. "He couldn't possibly..."

"I can see it, *Liebling*, and I do not share a suite with you."

Gillian's blush deepened. She hadn't been aware that anyone else had known where she was actually staying. "It's not what it looks like—"

"Of course not," Elsa broke in gruffly. "If it were, you would neither one look as if you were at the end of your patience." She eyed Gillian shrewdly. "That is not to say that it should remain so."

Gillian gasped. "Elsa!"

The older woman shrugged unapologetically. "I see what I see, *Liebling*. Still, what matters is that the vultures are gone."

Gillian nodded, letting Elsa's initial comment slide; she didn't want to face that particular demon, yet. Letting the knowledge that the media was gone seep through her, she allowed her shoulders to loosen in relief as she worked. After a moment, a slow smile bloomed, and she hummed a little tune from her childhood. Remy had threatened the press, for her. The warmth of that thought was one she was sure would remain with her throughout the day.

Etienne watched Remy turn on his heel and march back into his office as the last of the press straggled out the door under a load of camera bags. It appeared Terreau was useful for one thing – getting rid of reporters. A scowl slid over his face as he glared toward the front door. Damned reporters. With all their poking around, he'd been afraid to continue his search. Of course, he doubted they'd all stay away for long. That chef Terreau had hired was like dangling fresh meat in front of a starving wolf. They wanted her story, and the more creative – and driven – of them were likely to take Terreau's warning as a challenge, rather than the threat it was.

Icy humor slid through Etienne's eyes. Maybe he could use that challenge to his advantage. He needed a distraction, to keep everyone's attention off of what he was doing here. He knew that Gillian was staying in Terreau's suite, even if she wasn't sharing his bed, yet. And it didn't take a genius to see that Terreau was besotted with the woman, either. Etienne could use that. He'd done it once, and thrown Terreau off balance. He could do it again, and turn the entire world's attention away from himself and his family heirloom with the resulting blow-up. It was the perfect distraction.

Gillian sighed to herself as she descended the foyer steps, heading for the front door. She felt like a new woman, knowing that she'd survived the media storm without seeing her unflattering past splashed on any front pages. By keeping her hair covered and her eyes downcast whenever the media was around, none of them could be sure it really was her, and they were already taking risks airing the pirate treasure story without confirmation. Without solid proof of her identity...

"Hey, baby, where're you off to in such a hurry?"

Gillian froze at those words, and the weight of Etienne Fabron's hand that fell on her back.

"Don't call me 'baby'," she warned in a tight voice, fighting the urge to give him a well-deserved knee in the groin. Etienne was such a pain in the ass...

"'C'mon. Don't be so coy, baby," he slid the words over her face from behind, even as one arm moved around to jerk her backward.

Gillian yanked away, reaching to grasp his offending hand in a twisting motion. "Keep your hands off me, Fabron. I mean it."

His eyes glinted evilly as he looked past her, and then suddenly yanked her into his arms and smothered her mouth under a calculated kiss.

As she fought to rip away, Gillian felt her surroundings becoming piercingly clear. Everything played in slow motion, one horrible instant after another. The exclamation of surprise in a familiar voice, the slip of her bandana being pulled loose, and the sudden pop of a flashbulb, followed by a triumphant laugh she didn't recognize, and a sharp oath in a voice she finally registered as Remy's, before a door slammed shut somewhere in the background.

Then Etienne simply released her with a smug grin, and Gillian was suddenly alone in the foyer, staring at the closed door of Remy's office, aware that, once again, she was facing explaining an event she hadn't instigated to a man who was clearly pissed at her.

Remy paced his office restlessly, telling himself that he didn't care. It didn't matter that Gillian and Etienne were clearly more than coworkers. He was their boss, not their keeper.

Remy crashed his fist into the solid oak paneling as red rage danced before his eyes. Damn it, he didn't want Gillian dating; he didn't want to have to think of her as some other man's property. And he definitely didn't want to see her in another man's arms.

A timid knock dragged his attention back to his surroundings. No matter how tangled his feelings were right now, he still had a hotel to get up and running, and he couldn't afford to let his staff see his frustration and pain.

Striding to the door, he yanked it open, and froze as all of his jangled impulses flooded back. Gillian stood there, her hands wringing that ridiculous scrap of bandana and her beautiful honey-brown hair spilling over her shoulders. The familiar scent of her shampoo washed over him as she shifted, and his body clenched with a desire he didn't want to feel; not with her betrayal hanging in front of his face. Her violet eyes were downcast, and a sudden wave of déjà vu washed over him; he'd seen her, standing just like this, before. He was sure of it. Only, he didn't know where he could have seen her before.

The mortified expression on her face clutched desperately at Remy's chest, but he quickly banished the thought of what that meant, even if he couldn't completely banish the feeling.

"What do you want?" His voice was raspy with pain, and he resented that he couldn't control it, or any of his other responses to her.

“Remy, I...” She closed her eyes, as if fighting for composure. Remy blinked in surprise. Was she actually fighting *tears*? His Gillian? It seemed impossible, but the proof was right there in the bright sheen filming her eyes.

“Gillian.” With that husky murmur he couldn’t halt, Remy reached out and covered her hands, stilling their frantic motion. “Come in. Please.”

She attempted to pull herself together, bringing a sad smile to Remy’s lips. She was so brave, and tried so very hard to be strong. Only, he was beginning to see what a marshmallow she really was. Soft and sweet, she was a sucker for little kids, sad songs, and animals. It didn’t take a psychic, he thought wryly, to see those things in Gillian Martin. There was a soft patience, a lightness and gentle refined manner, which radiated from her. A personality totally at odds with the tough biker chick she projected, and yet, both remained irrevocably entwined within her personality. Such a unique combination.

As Gillian stepped warily into his office, Remy closed the door, turned, and drew her wordlessly into his comforting embrace. Instinctively, he knew she was faltering emotionally. Having the press underfoot for so long had rattled her composure badly, and that photographer he’d glimpsed snapping a picture of her in Etienne’s grasp had probably left her shaken. It might be wrong, but if the only times he could hold her were in these moments when she needed comfort, he’d take what he was given.

He felt her arms around his waist, her hands clutching in the shirt at his back as she burrowed into his embrace.

“I’m sorry, Remy,” she mumbled against his chest, her soft words clenching in his midsection. “What you saw...”

“Shh.” He pulled her closer, shutting his eyes against the green-eyed monster that prowled his soul. He didn’t want to think about what he’d seen; he just wanted to hold Gillian, and absorb her soft warmth, while he could. “It doesn’t matter.”

She pulled back sharply, her violet eyes cutting and her expression set grimly. “Yes, it does.”

The pain and anger rushed back at her words. She wanted to clear the air? She wanted to argue? Fine; he had enough pain stored up for both of them!

“Clearly, it only matters when you get caught,” he bit out coldly. “You looked quite cozy in Fabron’s arms, posing for the photographers.”

She drew herself up, as if he’d slapped her, but her expression said she was trying to pretend that she hadn’t felt it. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No?” He wanted to stop, God help him, before he said something he’d really have cause to regret. But all the bottled-up frustration and need, and helpless rage, had been unstopped, now, and the words poured out, unchecked. “Every time I turn around, you and Etienne are playing Romeo and Juliet, like the Manor’s your own personal stage! And now you’re putting on your little performances for the press. Admit it, Gillian; you get off on playing games with people’s hearts.”

He never saw the slap coming, which was probably why it stung so badly. One moment, she was glaring at him, and the next, his face was stinging with the impact of her hand.

“Remy Terreau, you are the most stubborn, blind, and deaf man I’ve ever had the misfortune to know! I’m only going to say this one more time, so you’d better listen carefully. I am *not* involved with Etienne Fabron; he gives me the creeps. And everything you’ve seen is some sick performance of *his*, not mine. As for the photographer, you have no idea how that picture he took could ruin my life.” She met his gaze staunchly. “And, one last thing: I’ve never played games with anyone’s emotions, and I never will. I know what it’s like to be the one toyed with.”

With that furious pronouncement, Gillian spun on her heel and disappeared through the door, leaving Remy to stare at it as he struggled between rage and laughter. Once again, Gillian had told him

off over something he'd seen with his own eyes; and, once again, he had the feeling she spoke nothing but the truth.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The last week of September rolled around quickly, with little more than a week left before Scarlet Oak Manor's preview opening, and the end of Gillian's month-long trial. Remy's brow furrowed as that thought occurred to him, not for the first time, as he made his way toward the kitchen. Gillian had said she needed to speak with him when he finished the preview's guest list; his gut clenched as he wondered what about. The bright smile on her face had given him no reason to worry, but he was still concerned; *very* concerned.

They'd patched up their differences since their argument over Etienne's little escapade, but there was still a distance in Gillian's manner, and it was enough at odds with her normally effervescent personality that it worried him. He hated that distance; hated even more that his errant accusations had placed that barrier between them. And so, he feared she was making plans to leave, and take the light from his life when she did.

As he entered the kitchen, that light filled the space within Gillian's laughter, echoing in the nearly empty room as she called a farewell to Brian Parker's departing back.

Acting on pure instinct, Remy stepped up behind Gillian as the door shut, and placed his hands on her shoulders. She whirled, faster than he'd known a human being could move, and only his startled backpedal saved him from a sharp knee in the groin.

"Whoa!"

Gillian's eyes widened as they registered who'd been standing behind her, and then closed as she sagged against the counter, shaking. "God, Remy. Don't *ever*—"

"Do that again?" He grinned ruefully. "Don't worry; I don't plan on it. So, why'd you want to see me?"

She held out a spiral-bound notebook to him, smiling. "I have a preview theme and preliminary menu for you."

"What've we got, so far?" He asked curiously, as he studied the handwritten pages, his eyes skimming over the loops and curls of Gillian's penmanship before raising to the woman watching him.

She shrugged easily, offering him the impish smile he hadn't seen in far too long. A knot of need clenched in his gut, and he wanted to drag her into his arms and claim those mischievous lips.

Gillian turned away before he could do anything so stupid, her cheery voice washing over him like a soothing balm. "Maybe it's a little over the top, but I thought we could capitalize on the whole pirate treasure thing."

He glanced back at the list, resisting the urge to groan. "How?"

Gillian's eyes were dancing with excitement when he met them again.

"With all the pirate-crazy people out there, nowadays, and the recent popularity of the theme in the movies, the history of Scarlet Oak Manor makes it perfect; even more so, since you passed on having a formal, sit-down dinner party. A buffet and hors d'oeuvres lend themselves to setting up a pirate-style feast."

"Pirate-style feast?" He smiled at her in bemusement. "You've got pirates on the brain. What's that?"

The mischievous grin was back, sinking that fascinating dimple into her left cheek that made Remy hungry to taste her skin, and her sweet lips. Gillian, he decided as his gaze ravished her, was as much a feast as any man, pirate or not, needed.

“Remy, pay attention!” A stinging sensation against his thigh had him blinking, before he realized that Gillian had just swatted him with the damp towel she used to clean counters.

Realizing that her playful humor had finally returned, a slow grin spread over his face as he let his eyes rove freely over her. “Believe me, *cherie*; you have my undivided attention.”

She rolled her eyes, and laughed, the throaty sound sending a wave of heat through Remy that nearly floored him.

“So,” she said, yanking his attention back, “I was thinking of using shellfish and shiny, colorful foods – like a pirate’s treasure. I have Elsa making marzipan ships, and I’m going to dust some sugar-crusted almonds with gold edible glitter, and make rock candy jewels. Brain’s a pretty good hand at ice sculpting, and I’ll get him to carve a treasure chest for the buffet’s centerpiece. We’ll scatter it with cold steamed shrimp and crayfish, and—”

Remy chuckled, feeling his heart warming at the open enthusiasm on her face. Gillian was really getting into this whole pirate idea, and it added a new dimension to an already- amazing woman. Her boldness, apparently, ranged clear into push-the-envelope daring.

“Why, Ms. Martin, I do believe you have developed pirate fever.” He cocked one eyebrow at her, letting her see the heat in his gaze as he asked, “Have a leather fetish, do you?”

She blushed, the light flush of color enchanting him even as her words plunged straight into his libido as she admitted, “I’m the original pirate groupie. I’ve probably seen every pirate movie ever made.”

He leaned closer, filling himself with her unique scent, like warm vanilla spice, and felt his pulse kick as his body came alive with need. In his mind, he saw Gillian in a leather corset and filmy dress, her curves hugged and outlined by black leather and purple gauze, and nearly groaned at the erotic image. As herself, Gillian was a temptation hard to resist; as a pirate wench, she’d be sin in the flesh.

“Live for dangerous thrills?” The husky timbre of Remy’s murmur, and the feel of his warm breath against her skin, had Gillian sucking in an involuntary breath as her heart fluttered rapidly. He was so close that barely a breath separated them, and his blue eyes were a deep turquoise that flared with sparks of silver and gold, a fire she was afraid to name. She wanted to call it love, she realized with a suppressed moan at her own sappiness. This was Remy; the same man who’d openly scoffed at the idea of love. Just because she entertained fantasies of happily-ever-after didn’t mean she could expect it of this man. That light was probably just lust, like Darrell’s had been.

But, even knowing that didn’t stop the response of her body to that compelling gaze. It was as if he held invisible strings, controlling her from the inside. His gaze brushed over her breasts, and her nipples rose to tight, tingling alert, drawing an involuntary gasp, even as his gaze slid lower. Her mind was hazy with want. She wanted his hands on her, his mouth— What had he asked? Oh, yeah. She shivered pleasantly. Dangerous thrills.

She licked her lips as his eyes moved back to her face, and a new sense of power coursed her veins as she realized that she had as much control of him as he did of her. Her lips curving at the open need in his eyes, she reached to trail one finger down his cheek and throat, hazily wondering how far she could push him, even as she murmured, “That depends entirely on the kind of danger; and the thrill.”

She leaned forward, then, unable to resist, and pressed her lips to the hot flesh of his neck, flicking her tongue out to taste the salty, spicy tang of his skin. A shudder of longing ran through her, even as she felt the vibration of Remy’s growl against her lips. Then his hands were combing roughly through her hair, shoving her bandana away as he fisted one hand in the silky locks and pulled her head back, claiming her mouth in a raw, possessive kiss that made every nerve in her overcharged body come alive. She moaned low in her throat as she pushed closer, her hands fisting in his shirtfront as she gave back everything she got, tasting him as deeply as he did her. Their tongues mated in a steamy dance that left Gillian light-headed and weak in the knees.

She clutched Remy tighter, in an effort to stay upright, and felt his hands suddenly moving possessively over her body, until he reached her rear. Both of his hand stopped there, and pulled her tight against himself, until she could feel the hard heat of his arousal.

"Remy..." She broke their kiss as awareness of their location finally registered through the haze in her mind.

"Ah, *cherie*, I know." His accent was thicker, along with the husky quality of his voice, giving him a foreign mystique quality that sang through her body like sweet wine. Then his lips were at her throat, plundering her willpower. She felt herself slipping under his spell, her resistance shredding. This was insane. They were going at it like a couple of teenagers, in the middle of a hotel kitchen, where anyone could walk in on them...

"Remy!" She gasped, pushing him away, just as the outer door of the kitchen opened, and Pamela LaRouete stopped, staring slack-jawed at them. As the other woman turned on her heel and fled, Gillian saw a frown mar Remy's brow, even as the glaze of desire dropped from his eyes. With a brief, formal nod, he turned away from her.

"I'll see you at the preview. The menu looks fine," he said gruffly, and then beat a hasty retreat, as well. Staring after him, Gillian felt her chest squeeze tightly around her pounding heart. He hadn't once looked her in the eye after that kiss, and she couldn't quite convince herself she didn't care. That was a very bad sign.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

His eyes swept over the Grand Hall, and satisfaction wound through him. It was perfect; everything he'd come to expect of his projects. Only, this time, his planning alone hadn't done it; he'd had a partner.

Remy's gaze slid from the Jolly Roger and sail festooned Hall, over the sea of skimpy, jewel-toned cocktail dresses and evening gowns, and dark tuxedos. His eyes ended their journey on a brightly-scarved head, and a lush body encased in the serving staff's dress of the evening – dark, skintight pants and boots of black leather, and billowing buccaneer shirts. Unique as always, Gillian had added a scarf belt of bright reds and yellows, a headscarf of the same to cover her gorgeous hair, and a dark leather vest that laced, corset-style, over her lush frame.

Remy tugged at the collar of his tux, feeling suddenly constricted and unbelievably warm. God, the woman looked like his darkest fantasy, come to life.

"Some doings, amigo." A hand suddenly slapped his shoulder hard, dislodging the sensual haze in his mind.

Turning, he shot Guy Millard a wry grin. "You're enjoying this far too much, *mon ami*."

Guy grinned wickedly. "Which part would that be? The totally un-Remy Terreau pirate theme, or the fact that my best friend's finally gone head-over-heels, and for a woman he barely knows?"

Remy scowled at his friend, which only brought a round of laughter from Guy.

"Well, *Capitaine*," Guy emphasized the French with a jaunty, two-fingered salute, "I believe I'll go corral me a wench, or three." He wiggled his brows suggestively. "There's a ripe batch to be plundered, here."

"As long as it's not mine." He'd intended the words as a joke; which was why it surprised him as much as it did Guy that his comment emerged as a warning growl, as his eyes fixed on Gillian once again.

Guy was the first to recover, a sly grin sliding over his face as he chuckled. "You got it; but only if you promise to dance."

Remy shot his friend an amused glance. "I didn't know you cared; but you're not my type, Millard."

"Not with me, smart ass," Guy said, suddenly serious as he gestured across the room from the platform. "With *her*."

Remy swallowed hard as he followed Guy's pointing finger toward Gillian. God knew, he wanted to dance with her; he wanted to hold that amazing body against his, and look into her shining eyes until he drowned there. Which was precisely why he *couldn't* dance with her – not tonight. There was an air of mystery, and a sizzle of excitement, already hanging over this place, tonight. He had the feeling that if he got close enough to Gillian to touch her, they'd both spontaneously combust.

"I can't promise that," he murmured, his gaze still glued on Gillian. He never heard Guy's departing comment, or noticed that the other man was gone, until he glanced over to find his friend had disappeared. Remy sighed heavily. Tonight was going to be a long night. A long night of sheer torture.

"Looks like you landed a big one, girl!"

Gillian turned at the jaunty, familiar voice, and grinned broadly at the black man in his Armani tux. Guy always was a clotheshorse.

"Guy! It's great to see you. How's everything going?"

He chuckled indulgently. "Getting better every minute."

She turned, following his amused gaze, and felt the breath halt in her lungs as her gaze clashed with the hungry well of Remy's.



“Something tells me it’s not the buffet he’s eyeing up, Gillian.”

She felt the flush of color rising in her cheeks. “Guy!”

Guy rolled his dark eyes exaggeratedly. “All right, all right. You two both look like starved animals, and I tried to help you out. I think you’re equally matched in the stubborn denial department, so just go on making eyes at one another; I’m gonna go find a loose woman... or two!”

As Guy sauntered off, Gillian shook her head in disbelief. Footloose Guy, playing matchmaker? Had she stepped into an alternate universe or something? Not, of course, that she had any intentions of ending up in Remy Terreau’s arms, tonight. Been there, done that. And it’d been the most intense experience of her life, her body reminded her as it came to tingling awareness beneath the heat of Remy’s gaze. They might have only shared a kiss, but it’d been one hell of a kiss.

Against her will, Gillian’s eyes slid back to Remy, in his black-on-black tuxedo. God, the man looked more dangerous, and handsome, than the most dashing of privateers. Her heart thumped hard, and she knew she was experiencing the warning signs of an all-out fall. But Gillian Martin had learned the hard way what happened when she landed. She wasn’t about to go there, again. But she could watch, and she could dream; and, oh, did she ever intend to have some spicy dreams tonight.

“What did I tell you?” The dark-haired man smiled smugly at the fifty-ish blonde poised, like a quivering bloodhound, at his side.

Her dark eyes flickered avidly between the dark-suited man on the platform and the woman who was clearly one of the staff. “There’re sparks there, sure. But Remy’s known to be very attentive to his paramours during the duration of an affair.”

“And if I told you that they’re not having an affair?”

She snorted. “I doubt that. And he’s hardly the first man to have an affair with an employee.”

“Not just any employee,” he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Look closer. Remove the bandana, and picture her with honey-brown hair instead. And those eyes should be a dead giveaway.”

She squinted through her thick glasses, and then gasped as his meaning registered. “Oh, my God! That’s *her*!”

A chilling smile slid over the man’s face. “Most definitely. Now, don’t you think the world deserves to know she isn’t dead?”

And, as the short, plump gossip columnist teetered her way out of the Hall on her inadvisably spiky heels, Etienne Fabron leaned back against the wall and watched Gillian Martin with a smug grin. She might not be as vulnerable to the spirit world as Terreau was, but little Miss Martin had a very real-world vulnerability that he could exploit. In fact, one well-placed word, and he could bring her nice, safe little life crashing down around her.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Remy sighed to himself as he tossed his tuxedo jacket over the back of his desk chair and loosened the collar and cuffs of his shirt. He was glad the evening was finally over; he hadn't been sure how much longer he could last.

Thankfully, there'd been no crises. The preview had gone off without a hitch, and more than one person had commented on the unique but appropriate theme. He'd thought at one point that he'd burst from pride for Gillian. And, speaking of bursting... Remy groaned lowly as he closed his eyes, seeing her in that sexy pirate wench get-up again. That image was going to be fuelling some very dangerous dreams for a while. Watching her in that leather, all evening, had been a Hell worse than even a sinner like him deserved. He'd spent the evening fluctuating between hoping no one would notice the fact that he was so aroused he could barely walk straight, and trying to come up with an excuse to get Gillian alone. Knowing that the latter would lead someplace he didn't think Gillian was ready to go, he'd suffered instead, avoiding going anywhere near her. He'd known that if he got close enough to touch her, all bets would be off.

With another sigh, Remy unlocked the safe and drew out the gun he kept there. Maybe it was overkill, but he'd decided, from the moment the landscapers had dug up the first of the bodies, that security was going to have to be an issue. However, he didn't want his guests to feel like prisoners, either. So Remy kept a pistol in his safe, and made nightly security rounds of the main house – the cottages had all been equipped with individual security systems.

Tucking the Colt into his pocket, Remy turned back toward his office door. The last of the preview guests were gone; now it was time to do his job.

Remy moved cautiously through the dimly lit corridors of the downstairs, opening doors and checking rooms and niches. As he neared the kitchen, his heart beat a little faster, until he realized that the room was dark. Gillian was probably tucked up in bed, by now, exhausted from her busy night.

He was just letting the door swing shut again when he heard a sound like movement from the direction of the Keep. Freezing in his tracks, he listened intently, until he heard it again – a series of scrapes and soft thumps, and a grunt of exertion.

Drawing his weapon, Remy kept his steps light as he crossed the kitchen floor. With a shallow breath, he eased open the Keep door and slipped inside, following the sounds of movement. Then, he saw the intruder, a darker motion among shadows. He was probably around six feet tall, and covered head-to-toe in black, including his face, Remy realized as a shaft of moonlight through one of the high windows caught the other man. He was wiry, but looked fit, and his choice of clothing clearly marked him as up to no good.

Raising his pistol, Remy trained it on the masked man and disengaged the safety even as he ordered, "Freeze."

The other man paused for only a second before lunging suddenly toward Remy. Remy fired, and watched the masked man jerk as the bullet sheered through the material at his right shoulder, exposing skin and the dark gleam of blood.

What happened next was a blur to Remy. The intruder flew at him, and surprise sent the gun clattering away as the man's arm struck his wrist, numbing it. There was a sharp prick, like a needle, in Remy's arm, and then they were throwing punches, each trying to subdue the other as they crashed around in the confines of the Keep.

As the shorter man's fist connected solidly with Remy's solar plexus, driving the air from his lungs, Remy fell back against the wall, gasping helplessly as the other man scrambled away and disappeared through the open door.

Remy groaned, unsteady on his feet as he stumbled after the fleeing form, chasing him out into the cool night air. But when Remy made a lunge to apprehend the other man, a sudden wave of disorienting weakness caused him to stumble. He watched helplessly as the black-clad figure disappeared into the dark night.

Another wave of weakness slid through Remy, causing his legs to turn to jelly. What the hell was happening? He'd been in fights before, with no aftereffects except a black eye, cut, or the occasional split lip. Grasping blindly, he found the wall of the building and eased himself down onto the cool brick of the veranda as his strength continued to fade. He felt as if he was dying, only with very little real pain. How could that be?

Thought slipped beyond him, then, and blackness closed over him. He'd just rest for a while...

*There was a voice whispering around her, a woman with a pleasant Creole accent. Slowly, through the gloom, she saw a figure approaching, and taking the shape of a woman in a flowing robe that glittered as if studded with the stars themselves.*

*"Flee this place, child. Leave, before you share my fate."*

*"Who are you?"*

*"My name is Camille. You must leave, quickly. Or you will share my fate, and my death."*

*"No."*

*"The Forrester heir is here; he will kill you if you do not flee. Tonight."*

Gillian sat upright in bed, her heart pounding harshly as an unnatural chill spread through her. Who was Camille, and who had she meant by "the Forrester heir"? It couldn't be Etienne, even though he gave her the creeps, and she firmly believed he'd kill her if given half a chance. Etienne was of Creole stock, much like Camille, and the Forrester family had been noted upper class snobs. They'd never have allowed a child of any inappropriate union to claim the family name.

Suddenly, Remy's troubled blue eyes flashed through her memory. She'd seen those eyes, somewhere else. If only she could remember where, or figure out why the thought sent a spike of apprehension through her.

Nervous adrenaline pumping through her, Gillian knew she wouldn't be getting any more sleep tonight. Sighing, she pushed aside the blankets and rose, reaching for her comfortable old jeans and t-shirt. Whenever she couldn't sleep, at home, she'd always headed for the kitchen. Puttering around with pots and pans and recipes had always soothed her jangled nerves and allowed her to work through whatever was bothering her. So, she reasoned, if she headed up to the main house, she could tinker with her menu ideas some more. There was still something missing; maybe it would come to her, tonight. Feeling better already, she pulled on her clothes and snagged her keys to the main house.

She was humming lightly to herself as she crossed the grassy lawn, heading for the veranda. No point in waking everyone by going in the front door, after all, when she could just go in through the breakfast room. Bounding up the veranda steps, she was heading for the door when she first heard it. It was a low sound, barely enough to be heard, but it sounded distressed.

Halting in her tracks, she listened intently for the sound to come again. Just when she was ready to admit she was hearing things, it came again, louder and more distressed than before. A human groan of pain. She sucked in a breath, following the sound toward the far end of the veranda, where she stopped, a small cry of fear and disbelief leaving her.

"Remy!"

He was lying propped up against the wall, his dark shirt torn in several places. His hair was a mess, and his face was swollen and bloody, as if someone had used him as a punching bag. In the moonlight, his tanned skin was nearly grey, and a film of perspiration covered his face. His eyes were closed, and his head lolled back and forth as he muttered unintelligibly and groaned.

Dropping to her knees beside him, Gillian placed one hand against his sweat-soaked cheek, calling, "Remy, wake up. Please wake up."

She couldn't help the choked quaver of her voice. Her good spirits had fled, replaced by gut-tightening terror. Whoever had attacked Remy had done serious damage, and it frightened her that she couldn't see where he was hurt.

"Gillian?" His voice was hoarse and raspy, even as his hand came up, clamping around her wrist. His eyes opened slowly, and she nearly cried at the vacant, pained look there. Then, with another groan, he closed his eyes again, rolled to his side, and threw up.

Her hand on his back, Gillian fought back tears. When Remy finally quieted, she murmured, "What happened?"

"Intruder," was all he managed around gasps for air. Then, leaning back against the wall again, he drew a careful breath and met her eyes, his now alive with determination. "Help me up."

She eyed him dubiously. "Maybe you should just stay put. I'll go call an ambulance..."

"No."

She blinked at the harshness of that command. "No? Remy, we need to let the police know about the intruder, and you need to have a doctor look at you—"

"No," he repeated, grimacing as he tried to stand. "Help me up, Gillian."

"Remy..." she warned, rolling her eyes. She was going to kill him herself, she decided in dark humor. He was infuriatingly stubborn, and she'd about had enough.

He looked up, and captured her eyes, until she gasped at the raw conviction burning there. "Whoever did this is long gone, *cherie*, and there's nothing wrong with me that a cold compress and a good night's sleep won't cure."

"Remy, you're *grey*!"

"I just had the wind knocked out of me," he maintained stubbornly. "Now, help me up."

Sighing in exasperation, Gillian draped one of Remy's arms across her shoulders and wrapped her arm around his waist, levering him steadily up from the veranda floor. She refused to relinquish her grasp on him, however, when he tried to step away. She leveled a stern glare at him. "You're coming with me, mister."

He blinked at her for a moment, before a lazy grin spread over his face as his hand brushed the skin of her neck. "And where are we going?"

"The kitchen."

"How romantic, Gillian."

She shot him another glare. "I have a first-aid kit there."

He chuckled warmly, and the heat of his breath danced along her neck and cheek, sending shivers of need straight to her womb. She nearly gasped as he suddenly nuzzled her neck. "Sexy and prepared; what more could a man ask for?"

She snorted, trying to shrug off the effects of his words, and his caress.

"Control?" She quipped in return. "And if you think I'm sexy, Remy Terreau, you definitely took one too many blows to the head."

His mouth opened, and then snapped shut, and she felt a sudden distance in his bearing as he lifted more of his weight from her shoulders. His brooding silence continued into the kitchen, and she sighed with relief as she finally eased him onto the barstool she used around the kitchen. Going to the cabinet near the wide sinks, she retrieved her first-aid kit – Gillian was convinced that no kitchen should be without one – and returned to Remy.

Acutely aware of his silent gaze following her as she moved around the kitchen, Gillian kept her hands busy. He continued to watch her, his intense eyes following her every motion as she cleaned his cuts. He flinched twice, but otherwise gave no indication of pain or discomfort, and his perceptive blue gaze was beginning to unnerve her.

As she was smoothing antiseptic cream over the last cut, his hand suddenly snaked out, startling her as it closed around her wrist. Gasping, her gaze flew to his, only to be pinned in place by the intensity of blue fire.

“How can you even *think* you’re not sexy?” The demand, issued in that husky growl, echoed like a challenge in the silent kitchen.

She stared at him, nonplussed. “Because I know what I am, and what I’m not. I don’t kid myself. Men look at me, and see—“

“Take it from me, they see pure beauty,” he murmured huskily, his hand tightening over hers as he drew it from his cheek and brought it to his lips. “Gillian, I’ve been going crazy with these fantasies...” He swallowed visibly and shuddered, even as his smoldering eyes met hers. “And when I saw you at the preview tonight...”

Suddenly, he pulled her closer, her body settling between his thighs as he covered her lips in a kiss that sank clear to her soul, and Gillian felt her heart stumble over the final ledge, and fall, hard.

Remy slid his hands over Gillian, desperate to touch her, to feel her warmth beneath his hands, as he plundered her lips like a pirate taking his bounty. He’d been starving for her all night, and now she was here, his angel of mercy. She’d come out of the dark, to rescue him from the horrors in his mind, and her taste was driving him mad. He wanted her more than he wanted his next breath. He was through fighting whatever this thing between them was. He intended to claim her as his own.

As he angled his head to deepen their kiss, Gillian suddenly pulled away, her eyes huge and her expression mortified.

“Remy, we can’t...”

He didn’t want to hear the reasons. He was beyond better sense. Remy pulled her close again, but she turned her head away. “No.”

He blinked at her, certain he’d heard her wrong. God, she’d been driving him crazy ever since he’d met her. He couldn’t bear it any longer. “Why the hell not?”

She backed away another step, and he saw the flicker of regret in her eyes, and knew. Gillian didn’t like what she was saying any more than he did. But she was still going to say it.

“Remy, there’s something not right about this place. You’ve been attacked, someone’s leaving messages scrawled in blood...” Her expression grew grim in a way that made Remy’s gut knot in dread. When her eyes rose, they were overflowing with sadness. “I can’t say, Remy. My month is up the day after tomorrow. I’m leaving.”

Every cell in Remy’s body reacted to those words as if she’d punched him. Pure panic had him surging up from his seat, latching his hands onto her shoulders tightly as a hoarse denial slipped past his lips. “No.”

She tried to pull away. “I have to. I can’t stay here. Don’t worry about the kitchen. The Quintons, who you hired for the preview, have already told me that they’ll be happy to stay on as prep cooks. Elsa and Brian can handle the menu I created just fine, and—“

“God damn it, Gillian, forget about the Manor!” He growled, yanking her against himself so tightly he saw her eyes widen, and knew she felt his arousal. Good. He was sick of hiding the truth between them. He wanted to feel her against him, flesh to flesh, and he didn’t intend to let the matter rest until he had the chance to purge this obsession from him. Keeping her body pressed against his

when she would have pulled away, he sealed her mouth beneath a rough kiss, plundering willfully. He was beyond being gentle, and he wasn't about to let her get away from him, now.

Seared and drowning in fire, her body drenched in electric desire, heightened by the danger of their embrace. She was flirting with disaster, and the worst part about it was, she wasn't strong enough to stop it. She wanted this, more than anything. She swore she could smell the heat of their passion, like smoke on the air. The need to have him a part of her, to feel his flesh against hers, was building so swiftly she was sure she'd combust.

There was a high, urgent sound, and, at first, she thought it had come from *her*; the thought was mortifying. However, as the sensual fog in her brain cleared a little, she realized she was hearing the Manor's fire alarm, an instant before she realized she really *had* smelled smoke. *A fire!*

"Remy!"

"I know, *cherie*." His breath murmured against her skin as he moved his mouth over her throat, his seductive touch nearly shattering coherent thought. But there was a more pressing concern; there was a fire.

"Remy!" She sharpened her tone, extricating herself from his distracting touch. "Listen."

He blinked, as if awakening, and snapped to lucidity as the sound of the alarm finally registered.

"Fire! Gillian, get help, while I see what's going on."

Gillian dashed for the phone mounted on the kitchen wall, even as Remy disappeared through the kitchen doors. Watching him go as she dialed 9-1-1, Gillian prayed that wasn't the last she'd see of him. The thought of losing Remy was one she just didn't want to entertain, ever.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Remy stared morosely at the flicker of flashing lights and the dark curl of smoke rising against the starlit night. From the eerie glow emerged the shape of a woman, her clothes a dance of blue and red light as she strode confidently toward him. It took him a moment to fully register her approach as more than a fluke in an otherwise twisted nightmare, and another to realize who she was. *Gillian*.

"The fire's pretty much out, now," she reported as she came to a stop before him, gesturing over her shoulder at the smoldering east wing of the building. "According to the Fire Chief, there wasn't as much damage as we thought. Mostly smoke and water damage and – Remy, are you okay?"

He blinked at her, and his hand snaked out to grasp hers, pulling her closer to him. He needed to connect with her inner light, with the hope that shone from her violet eyes, as his world steadily engulfed him in bleakness. The hotel had been set to open, the preview gala was behind them; it was all supposed to be smooth sailing from here. But now, this had happened. They couldn't open the doors to any more guests until the safety codes were met. That could take forever, at this rate.

"Remy?" Gillian's voice was a whisper, her eyes filled with worry. "Remy, talk to me. Please. Tell me what you want."

A wave of illness followed shock, and he trembled with fatigue and frustration. She wanted to know what he wanted? He laughed bleakly. What he wanted had never been more simple in his life. He wanted *her*. He wanted to feel her warm skin against his, to bury himself in her sunshine soul and retreat from this dark, ugly world he'd entered. She alone could save him from this curse, with the light in her heart.

Tugging gently, he brought her into his arms, hugging her close as he bent his head to murmur against her ear, "I need *you*, Gillian. Stay with me."

She clung to him for a long moment, as if she couldn't bear to let go, and his heart leapt with newfound hope. Then, with a small noise that sounded suspiciously like a sob, she tore herself from his arms and turned away.

"I can't stay, Remy," she whispered, her words shattering the hope that had built in his heart. "Nothing's changed... No, that's not exactly right, either. One thing's changed – the danger's getting worse."

"Too much danger, not enough thrill?" The quip fell flat, even as it left his mouth, his tone too strangled by the reality of Gillian walking away. If she went, everything that kept him sane would go with her. He was no longer afraid to admit that the dark night of his mind terrified him.

"Remy, I—"

"Wow! That's some bad luck, boss!" The sudden insertion of a new voice jarred them both from their private little world, and they both turned toward Etienne, who was climbing from his car, an almost gleeful sparkle in his eyes as he studied the still-spiraling curl of dark smoke.

Gillian shuddered as she watched Etienne's face. He looked suitably concerned, except for that sadistic gleam in his dark eyes. Suspicion curled inside her, refusing to remain silent.

"What are you doing here?" She demanded, whirling on him fiercely.

"I have a police scanner," he said with a negligent shrug. "I heard the call going out, and thought I better show up and see if my help was needed." He met her gaze head-on, and she saw a spark of malice in his eyes. "I guess I don't have to ask why you're not tucked up cozily in your little cottage, do I?"

His icy, malicious eyes ran over her, and Gillian felt suddenly dirty, a chill washing through her even as Remy stiffened in rage. “Why, you—”

Gillian held up a hand, silencing Remy, and turned a saccharine smile on Etienne. Whatever he claimed, her gut told her Etienne had started that fire. She just wasn’t sure she could ever prove it.

“Well, since it was in the east wing of the building, I guess it’s safe to assume my cooking wasn’t responsible. Forget to check your computer when you left, Etienne?”

He snapped upright, as if she’d struck him physically, and glared down his nose at her. “Are you implying that I had something to do with this?”

Her eyes went pointedly to his right shoulder, where a thin line of red dots was seeping through the material of his white shirt. “You seem to have hurt yourself. Get that racing to the rescue, did you?”

She felt Remy stiffened again behind her, and heard his outraged gasp. She wondered what was so significant about the cut on Etienne’s shoulder.

Turning on his heel without another word, Etienne hurried back to his car, and Gillian turned back to Remy, only to find him literally shaking with suppressed rage.

“Remy? What is it?”

He glared after Etienne for a long moment, and then shook himself, turning his gaze blandly to her. “Nothing, *cherie*. I just remembered something.”

“Remy,” she warned, planting her hands on her hips. “Don’t try that evasion technique on me. I know something about Etienne’s wound bothered you. Now, what is it?”

He sighed heavily. “I guess it’s not going to suddenly make you want to leave,” he said sardonically. “The intruder and I fought, earlier. I shot him... well, grazed him, really, with my pistol. Across the right shoulder. You don’t suppose...”

The words, and the doubt in his voice, filled Gillian with dread. She’d known Etienne was bad news from the first day she’d arrived at Scarlet Oak Manor. Six years of dodging bullies had given her a sixth sense about men like Etienne Fabron. But why would he attack Remy, and why try to burn down the Manor? There just wasn’t a logical answer. She had a sinking feeling that the answers to those questions came with very deadly price tags.

\* \* \*

She knew. Somehow, that nosy little bitch had figured him out. She’d taken one look at him and known he’d set that fire. And she’d seen the blood. Damn Terreau and his gun, anyway! Etienne eased the shirt off, and reached his good hand to his injured shoulder, where blood soaked through the bandage. He hadn’t gone to the hospital, though he supposed he should have. Problem was, they were required to report gunshot wounds, and he couldn’t tell anyone how he’d got shot. Terreau had likely reported the matter to the authorities, already.

As he pulled his hand away, his dark eyes fixed on the sheen of blood coating his fingertips. Terreau would pay, drop for drop, for the blood he drew. Etienne brought his fingers to his lips, slowly savoring the taste of blood. The time was coming when Terreau would be his slave. But first... First, he had to set his snare. Tonight, what had merely been a nightmare for Terreau would become reality. Etienne was through playing games.

Rising from the damp ground, he discarded the blood-stained shirt and reached toward the candle-covered altar. A jar of chalky paint in hand, he stepped back and, dipping his bloody fingers into the jar, began painting, with methodical strokes, on his bare chest and face. One more ritual, before he claimed his slave, and his revenge. He knew that Terreau was Susannah Forrester’s contact on this side. If Susannah’s spirit was captured, she’d cry out to Terreau for help, until either she drove him crazy, or he felt compelled to come to her aid. Either way, he’d be stepping right into Etienne’s trap.



Etienne drew out the capped hypodermic needle from the pocket of his black pants, a sinister smile creeping over his face. It only took a drop of the victim's blood to power the poppet. When he'd given Terreau Camille's drug, earlier, he'd made sure to use the strongest dosage, and to get more than a drop of blood in return. Little did Remy Terreau know, but his entire existence would soon belong to Etienne Fabron. But first, he had to bait his trap.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Remy stared at the contents of the unmarked envelope he'd found shoved beneath the door of his suite, after the fire, his entire reality tilting. Old newspaper clippings, and pictures ranging from grainy black and white images to full-color, full-face tabloid shots, told him that his eyes hadn't deceived him. The headline from the *Washington Post* screamed '*Senator's Daughter Elopes with Fortune's Man of the Year*,' and was accompanied by black-and-white shots of a stern-faced Senator Lily Maren, and a grainier shot of a young woman in a man's arms, smiling for the camera. That smile punched Remy in the heart; he *knew* that impish grin. Eyes narrowing, he studied the man's face, looking for a clue to his identity.

"Son of a—" Remy dropped the articles in a scatter as cold shock poured through him. That was Darrell Anders! He and Remy had been frat brothers at Princeton! Pulse pounding, Remy searched his memory for any girl Darrell had ever shown more than a passing interest in. No. Darrell had been the original player; everything Remy had pretended for the sake of the media. Yet, when he searched his memory, Remy found he could remember one girl. She'd been quiet – shy, he'd thought at the time – and thus totally not Darrell's type. Darrell had thrived on party girls, interested in having as good a time as he was. This girl had been as different from them as night from day. She'd been solemn and serious, with her eyes always downcast and her face veiled by her long, honey-brown hair—. Remy sucked in a sharp breath. Gillian! That mousy creature, so frightened of her own shadow, had been *his* Gillian? He couldn't believe it!

Remy thumbed hurriedly through the stack of articles, searching for some mention of a divorce, or anything that would explain why she wasn't still with Anders. As he reached the last one in the stack, with a color photo of Gillian's smiling face, he felt the air leave his lungs as if he'd been round-housed to the ribs. Hands shaking violently, he was unaware of the flutter of pages as the rest of the stack scattered to the floor.

Splashed in big, dark letters were words that clutched his heart in a vise that he was sure would kill him. He had to be in some kind of alternate reality; he felt it closing over him like a shroud as he read the words. '*Film Star's Estranged Daughter, 22, Falls to Death.*' Lungs burning for the breath he couldn't seem to draw, Remy read the article, his disbelief and horror mounting by the minute.

*'Gillian Maren, daughter of international film star Joseph Maren and US Senator Lily Maren, was pronounced dead on arrival at Broussais University Hospital at 2:35 PM, EST. Ms. Maren, according to witnesses, fell from the balcony of her fourth-story apartment as she attempted to retrieve a necklace that had fallen over the edge. The family has requested her body to be returned to the family estate in Maryland for private burial. Ms. Maren is survived by her parents, Joseph and Lily, sister Grace Maren, and by her fiancé, Darrell Anders.'*

Remy sank back into the sofa, chilled to the core. According to the article in his hands – clipped from the *USA Today* – Gillian was dead. He remembered reading something about it, at the time the accident had happened; he even remembered seeing it on the news, and pitying the pretty, young girl whose life had ended so tragically. Yet, there wasn't a doubt in his mind that the girl who'd fallen to her death in a Paris street was *his* Gillian; and he knew for a fact that she was far from dead.

Shoving to his feet, Remy headed for the door of his suite, the obituary clipping still in his hand. He didn't know what was going on, but he intended to get the truth from the source herself.

Gillian hummed to herself as she ran her brush through her still-damp hair. It'd been a while since she'd had the luxury of a long, hot bath. She'd been making do with quick showers for too long.

A sudden, loud knocking at her front door had Gillian's brow furrowing, even as her pulse tripped in dread. Remy had told the press to clear off; surely, none of them were dumb enough to have followed her...

Wrapping a towel quickly over her hair, she hurried to the front door, aware that she was in nothing but her bathrobe. She shrugged; it couldn't be helped. Let them look their fill, she thought defiantly. That ought to convince them they had the wrong woman. The old Gillian would never have been so bold.

Yanking open the door, she sucked in a startled gasp as her eyes collided with Remy's troubled blue ones.

"You're dead," he said without preamble, his voice flat and his expression somber.

She gaped at him, uncertain how to answer that outrageous charge. Finally, she decided to defuse the bomb completely, and tilted him a wry grin. "Excuse me?"

"You lied to me," he bit out, holding out a crumpled sheet of newsprint. "I want you to explain this."

She took the page from his hand, and felt her blood drain clear to her feet as she stared at the headline. The world wavered before her, and she clutched desperately for something to cling to as her knees buckled. Her fingers encountered Remy's shirt, and she felt herself enfolded in strong arms, before he suddenly lifted her from her feet and she heard the door closing, from far away.

A moment later, as Remy set her down, she felt herself sinking into the softness of the sofa cushions, and calm settled slowly over her. Looking up at last, she met his eyes and released a resigned breath as she raised her hands to remove the towel, letting her hair spill around her face.

"So, you know."

He nodded. "I know."

It was surprisingly easy to have this conversation. She felt as if she was watching herself from far away. "How did you find out?"

"Someone left me a gift, during the fire," he said quietly, as his hand moved to stroke back a lock of her hair. "I don't know who; I assume they thought I'd fire you on the spot, once I knew."

She swallowed hard, trembling in her effort to not sink into his caress. "And are you? Going to fire me, I mean."

A smile twitched at his lips. "That all depends."

Gillian felt her breath hitch as his eyes, like turquoise flames, burned into her. She licked her lips nervously, and saw the flame flare higher. Finally, she managed to whisper, "On what?"

He leaned closer, his hand slipping beneath the fall of her hair to cup lightly against her neck. "On whether or not you plan to tell me the truth, now."

Staring up into his earnest expression and heated eyes, Gillian felt the last of her resistance shred. He'd already figured out who she was; the truth of what had happened should at least come from her. It was only fair.

Swallowing hard, she pulled away from his touch and rose, pacing toward the small fireplace that was as functional as it was ornamental. She couldn't think straight when he was touching her, and she needed to think, to organize what she was going to say. She only hoped he'd understand.

"You know who my parents are, what they're like."

"Only by reputation," he contradicted easily, settling back to watch her. "My father says Lily Maren's tough as nails, but fair-minded. Joseph's a little footloose with the liquor, but he never strays far, for as many problems as he's had."

Gillian laughed weakly, to hear her family described in such cut-and-dry terms. To be an outside observer... "That's a little simplistic, but you've got the gist of it." She drew a breath. "Mother's always been worried about image, and scandal. Even more so since the recent political blunders that've

gone on. It was okay for Dad to be the family scandal, because he's a film icon, and people would be more surprised if bad boy Joe Maren suddenly went straight. But the rest of us," she shook her head. "Grace and I had better toe that line."

"Bet that sat well with Anders," Remy said sardonically.

"The original player?" Her laugh was bitter, as she recalled all the arguments. "Oh, yeah. *Real* well. He thought he was getting Joe Maren's daughter; loose, fast, and dirty. He got Senator Maren's daughter, instead. Everything started going sour when I refused to sleep with him before we were married. He told me I was pathetic, when I told him I wouldn't sleep with a man who didn't put a ring on my finger first. In Darrell's eyes, I was ugly; a fat, pathetic animal that would only get people to like me if I started putting out. I had to become the party girl."

Remy shot to his feet and strode toward her, his expression stern. His grip on her arms, when he touched her, was firm but gentle.

"Darrell Anders was always an ass," he growled darkly, his eyes flashing with suppressed rage. "We all knew that."

"Except me," she whispered, turning her face away. "From where I was standing, everyone worshipped Darrell, because Darrell *said* everyone did. And I believed everything he told me. I starved myself nearly to death, for his approval; I made myself miserable, and my parents furious. They forbade me to see him, but I thought I was in love. Making him forbidden fruit only made the temptation stronger."

"You eloped with him." It didn't sound like a question. She winced, but nodded.

"I was supposed to, yes. We were going to Paris, to get married. I'd just graduated from Scottsdale, and I was going overseas to finish school. Darrell convinced me that getting married in Paris would be romantic."

"You said 'supposed to,'" he pointed out. "What happened?"

His sympathetic murmur, against her ear, sent warm shivers through Gillian as she felt herself being drawn into his arms, and heard the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek. She drew in a trembling breath, and his warm, spicy scent infused her with the strength to go on. She felt cocooned, and safe.

"I told my parents."

He whistled lowly. "That couldn't have gone over well with the Senator."

She smiled sadly, burrowing into Remy's warm embrace. He wasn't judging her, and she'd never be able to tell him how grateful she was for his simple understanding. "Actually, Mom was the calm one about it. She looked me over, sighed, shook her head, and told me that, since I was twenty-one, she couldn't stop me. She did tell me that she thought I was making a mistake, but she let it go, after that."

"And your father?"

Gillian squeezed her eyes shut as she remembered sounds of screaming, and slamming doors, echoed in her ears. "Dad had dropped out of AA, not too long before. He was drinking again, and he was livid when he found out what I was doing. He forbade me, and when I told him it wasn't any of his business, he issued an ultimatum. If I got on the same plane with Darrell, he was going to disinherit me. I was never to contact them again, because I would cease to exist in my family's eyes. I was young and hurt and I didn't care what they thought."

Remy drew in a sharp breath at Gillian's words. Now he remembered where he'd first really seen her before! The news had buzzed with the scandal. The younger daughter of the Marens had eloped, and her father had publicly disinherited her, tearing up a copy of his will on a talk show when asked about her marriage, and declaring, "My daughter is dead. I don't know who that girl is."

“So, you did marry Darrell, then?” He didn’t really want to know. Darrell Anders had been an irresponsible, unforgiving boy, even at twenty-two. The idea of him sully Gillian’s happiness with his dirty games sickened Remy.

“No,” she admitted quietly, her eyes turned away. “When we got to Paris, Darrell found one excuse after another to postpone getting married.”

“But he convinced you to sleep with him, anyway.”

She shook her head. “He didn’t want me, anymore, except maybe as a punching bag. I was a nobody, by then. I wasn’t the daughter of Joe Maren, or even Senator Maren. I was just Gillian, and just Gillian had never been enough for Darrell. He enjoyed taunting me with all the ways I didn’t measure up; he thrived on making me feel inferior. And when I dared to stand up to him, he’d use his fists to make sure I stayed down.”

White-hot fury poured through Remy; fury at the man who’d hurt this wonderful woman. If he ever met up with Darrell Anders again...

“Tell me about the accident,” he managed hoarsely, around his rage.

She laughed bleakly. “That was no accident. I wasn’t supposed to survive.”

He snapped back, those words punching him in the heart with all the force of a nuclear missile. “He tried to *kill* you?”

She nodded, pulling away to clasp her arms protectively over her chest as she struggled with her memories.

“He wanted me dead; he said so. I was holding him back. I told him he was free to leave. We argued.” She turned away, pacing restlessly, and Remy felt his heart crack. She was fighting this, even as she spoke the words.

“They said you were trying to retrieve a necklace.”

“It was found clutched in my hand,” she acknowledged quietly. “Only, I wasn’t retrieving it when I fell. I was getting ready to throw it away.”

“What was it?”

“The necklace Darrell had given me when he asked me to elope. He said it was his mother’s, and that he wanted it back.”

Remy closed his eyes, and winced against the pictures that flashed before his eyes. He could see her, standing on the balcony, her hair whipping in a furious wind, the necklace clutched in her hand as she prepared to sever the life that had bound her to torture. She’d been ready to walk away, so focused on the forward progression of her life that she never saw the shadow passing over her, never felt the hands... He jerked his eyes open with a startled gasp. “You went to throw it, he attacked you, and pushed you over the balcony. You fell to the road below.”

She whipped about to face him, wide-eyed. “How—?”

He offered her a bleak smile, unable to tell her about what he’d seen. “I know Darrell, and I know you. It makes sense. But, Gillian,” he gestured to the page laying on the sofa. “The papers said you died.”

She nodded. “I did. I thought I’d lost everything.”

All the blood drained from his face, before he laughed weakly. “That’s a good one, *cherie*.”

“I’m serious.”

He stilled, studying her intently. “Then how—?”

She sighed. “I died enroute to the hospital, from the force of the landing. But the drug they administered to get my heart started apparently didn’t work as fast as normal. I woke up as they were wheeling me to the morgue.”

“And someone got them to sit on that news,” he guessed, watching her for confirmation.

She nodded. "My sister, Grace, was working with the UN, at that time. She convinced her boss to talk to the French government, and get them to sit on it. They convinced the hospital to issue a press release, instead, claiming that my 'body' was being returned to the States." She met his eyes, and he saw the mingling of pain and wry humor there. "So, you see, I never really lied to you. I have a birth certificate, and official paperwork, proving that I really *am* Gillian Martin. Gillian Maren died in Paris."

"And yet you've still been living in fear that Anders will figure it all out, someday."

She shook her head sharply. "Darrell already knows. He's found me twice – the first time quite by mistake, when I was working for one of his father's clubs."

Guy's words from the first night he'd discussed Gillian with his friend came back to Remy. "The former employer who didn't have anything good to say."

She nodded. "Darrell's father. He heard the story from Darrell's point of view, and decided I was bad news on the spot. End of job."

It was one more piece of the puzzle, explaining her gypsy existence. "And the scarves to cover your hair are to keep the media from figuring out who you really are, right?"

She nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. "A trick I learned from a friend of mine in Chicago. A few small changes make a more convincing disguise than even one huge one."

Watching her, Remy felt all of his jumbled feelings coalesce into one rock-solid certainty – whatever it took, he needed to keep Gillian in his life. That thought swirling in his mind, he reached for her, letting his fingers skim over her cheek as he drew her steadily forward under the power of his gaze.

"Don't hide from me, *cherie*," he murmured huskily, before his gaze dipped, and he caught a flash of skin that sent heat pouring through him as he gruffly demanded, "What are you wearing under that robe?"

A slow, mischievous smile slid over her lips, making his heart catch. "Absolutely nothing."

"Oh, God." He groaned, closing his eyes as he fought his baser wants, and lost. Opening his eyes again, he devoured her with his gaze as he demanded, "Take it off."

She looked startled for a moment, before her gaze met his, and he saw her eyes widen. Then, as the violet grew dark with arousal, he moved his gaze to the front of her robe, and watched her nipples pucker through the thin material. His body jerked in immediate reaction, and his mouth went dry.

"Take it off," he growled again, reaching for her. "Now."

In a move that started him with its swiftness, she shed that single garment, leaving it to flutter to the floor at her feet. His eyes skimming over her lush body, Remy nearly swallowed his tongue. "My God."

Cupping his hand against her neck, he drew her against him in one smooth motion, sealing her mouth beneath his own in a ravenous kiss that he felt clear to the core as her warm, soft skin slid beneath his hands.

Her hands were busy at the buttons of his shirt, even as her lips clung avidly to his, her tongue tangling with his in an erotic duel that spiked his desire into a conflagration he was sure nothing could douse. She was here, in his arms, and she wanted him as much as he wanted her. This was no dream.

With a primal growl, he brought his hands up her skin, until he was cupping her full breasts, their warm weight more erotic than any sensation he'd ever felt before. Tearing his mouth from hers, he buried it against the pulse in her neck, laving and nipping the flesh, determined to leave his mark on this woman. His thumbs swirled outward and flicked over the tight beads of her nipples, and he drank in the soft, desperate sound of her moans and gasps as she finished off his shirt in a move that sent buttons popping left and right. Any other woman might've turned him off by that kind of aggressiveness. In Gillian, however, it only fuelled his lust, until he wanted to howl with the desire thrumming through his veins.

He lowered his head, sucking one taut nipple into his mouth and torturing it with his tongue until Gillian gasped and arched against him, her fingers digging into his back and shoulders.

"Remy!"

He scooped her up into his arms as he felt her trembling against him, and fumbled blindly until he encountered the top of the wet bar he'd had installed in every cottage, back when he'd thought to put guests in all of them. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he recalled that Gillian didn't drink. Thought. He deposited her on the smooth surface and broke contact just long enough to find the condom he'd taken to carrying in his wallet.

Just as he found the foil packet, the realization that silence had descended registered. Gillian had gone quiet, and eerily still. Glancing at her, Remy stopped dead as reality returned in a crash.

The woman sitting tensely, and shivering violently, on the countertop, was a far cry from the wild woman who'd been driving him crazy just a moment ago. Now, she was stiff and pale, her pupils dilated in pain and her eyes unfocused and hazy. In fact, she was *beyond* pale, Remy noted with an indrawn breath of fear. She was shaking so violently he feared she'd shake apart, and her skin was so white it was nearly grey.

"Gillian?" He reached out and touched her face, only to hear a cry of pain fly from her lips. He yanked his hand away in shock that swiftly melted into panic. "Gillian! Talk to me, *cherie*. Tell me what's wrong!"

Desperate to do something, anything, to help her, he scooped her robe from the floor and draped it around her, slipping her trembling, boneless arms into the sleeves. Worries poured over him. What had happened?

"S-sorry," she mumbled as he finished wrapping her in the robe. She was still shivering.

"What's going on?"

She groaned in pain, rocking forward, and only Remy's quick action saved her from tumbling headfirst to the floor.

"Gonna be sick," she mumbled. "Head."

He didn't understand what she meant by the last part, but the first was crystal clear.

Lifting her from the counter, he helped her into the bathroom, and held her hair back as she emptied the contents of her stomach into the toilet. It occurred to him, in a flash, that this would have been funny, if he wasn't so damned worried. He'd never had a woman get sick on him; especially not in the middle of the most heated encounter he'd ever had.

When Gillian finally sat back from the toilet with a groan, Remy pulled her gently back against him and into his lap, murmuring against her ear. "What's going on, Gillian?"

"It's my head," she managed hoarsely, snuggling back against his bare chest as her eyelids fluttered weakly. "Ever since my fall, I get sudden headaches whenever I do anything that overloads my nervous system."

He swallowed hard as he remembered what they'd been doing when this headache had made its appearance. "I can see how that would make sex difficult."

She laughed weakly. "I wouldn't know. That's about as close as I've ever come."

That admission rocked through Remy, tripping his heart and clogging his lungs for a long moment. Dear God, she couldn't mean what he thought she did. Finally, in a strangled voice, he managed, "You mean you've *never*—"

"Nope." She rested her head against his chest, and he felt something warm and blossom within him as she softly admitted, "I am one hundred percent all-American virgin. Sad, isn't it? I wouldn't sleep with Darrell, and I haven't been interested in sex since my fall... until you."

She closed her eyes and sighed, and Remy waited, heart thundering, for her to continue. There was more she wanted to say; he could feel it.

"Remy," she finally murmured hesitantly, her eyes still closed. "There's something else."

His throat closed at the fear in her voice, and he hugged her gently against his chest in reassurance. "What is it, *cherie*?"

"I... I've been having really strange dreams, ever since I fell. I... *see* things, hear things, that everyone else swears aren't there." She drew a shaky breath and opened her eyes, turning her head to look up at him. "Remy, there *is* something here at Scarlet Oak. Someone, actually. I've seen... well, heard, really...her."

Remy closed his eyes as images and memories rushed through him, and he realized that there was no more hiding the truth from Gillian. She'd taken a leap of faith to tell him about her experiences. He could do no less than trust her with his own secret.

"I know," he murmured against her temple, pressing a gentle kiss there.

Her violet eyes widened as a tiny gasp of surprise left her. "You do?"

He smiled softly, turning her in his arms and slowly standing, using the wall as support. When he was standing, Gillian in his arms, he brushed a kiss over her lips. "Yeah, I do."

As he carried her from the bathroom to her bed, he felt her violet eyes watching him silently. Then, as he laid her on the cool sheets, she asked, "How?"

Sighing, Remy sank down on the edge of the Queen-sized bed and clasped her hand in his, studying her work-roughened palm for a moment before he spoke.

"My mother is a Wilmington."

"Wilmington?" She sounded confused, and a smile twitched at his lips as he realized she had no idea what that meant.

He nodded. "As in Susannah Wilmington Forrester."

She gasped, her eyes going wider. "*You're* the Forrester heir!"

He laughed bleakly. "You could say that, since Lyle was an only child, and none of his children survived."

Her violet eyes watched him silently for a long moment, before realization dawned in them, and she struggled to sit up. "The curse! You really do believe in it, don't you?"

"Oh, there's a curse here," he admitted with a dark chuckle. "Only, it's not a curse you need to worry about. It can only harm me."

She propped herself against the headboard and regarded him soberly. "And how, exactly, is that nothing for me to worry about?"

His gaze snapped to her face as surprise shot through him. Was she actually saying she *cared* what happened to him?

"Can it kill you?" She asked in a tremulous whisper, her pleading eyes fixed on him.

"I don't know," he answered gruffly, looking away. Her frightened eyes were making him wish he'd never brought the damned subject up in the first place. He just wanted to hold her, not face that fear on her face. "I don't think so. But it drove Susannah crazy."

"The Midnight Star did?"

"No," he answered hoarsely, turning his face away as he bit out the words he'd promised himself never to speak. "Scarlet Oak Manor drove her insane. I think the Midnight Star's curse only freed her from her misery. Scarlet Oak has a way of... sucking the life from people. And Susannah..." He sucked in a breath. "She's been invading my dreams, ever since I bought this place. She's been begging me to help her."

She shifted in the bed, her eyes curious. "Help her how?"

"I don't know," he admitted rawly. "I don't know anything about this stuff! I have no idea what's going on around here, or how to stop it, but I think I'm going crazy now, too. The only time I feel at peace," he whispered hoarsely as he let his hungry gaze burn into her, "is when you're around. Please, Gillian," he pleaded softly, "stay. Help me stay sane, while I figure this all out."

It was the closest he'd ever come to begging, and Remy already had the sinking feeling he'd only bought himself a stay of execution. Gillian knew he wanted her; she wanted him as badly. That reason alone was going to drive her away from him, because she was afraid she couldn't have what she wanted. Strange, how that same revelation only made *him* more determined to stick by her. It was a problem



with no easy solution, but he was determined to not give up. Too many people had already given up on Gillian; he wasn't about to become one of them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*The air around her felt thick with smoky haze, and every breath she drew in smelled of rotted earth and decay. She gagged on the stench.*

*"Welcome to my existence."*

*Fear lunged along her spine at that chilling voice. The haze parted, and a dark, willowy woman stepped forward. It was the woman from her other dreams, her face set in a forbidding scowl and her dark eyes glittering cruelly.*

*"You ignored me once. Do not do so again. Leave Scarlet Oak. Leave now."*

*Gillian drew herself up in the dream. No one bullied her, ever. "Why should I?"*

*Camille laughed darkly. "You are such an innocent; of course you wouldn't understand. The Midnight Star belongs to me!"*

*She raised her hand, and Gillian gasped at the shimmering image that floated in the air above Camille's outstretched palm. The sparkle of fire in the deep blue gem was breathtaking, and the energy radiating from the stone was like a wave, pulling her nearer.*

*"Twice cursed by blood is the Midnight Star. Twice gifted in violence. Seek it at your own peril; I will let no one come between me and my vengeance."*

*In a swirl of haze, Camille disappeared, leaving only the hanging, ghostly image of the Midnight Star, and a familiar echo of sinister laughter, in her wake.*

Gillian awoke with a start, and lay staring at the ceiling of her bedroom, afraid to close her eyes again. She shivered as the memory of her dream, and Camille's warning, slid over her. Turning her head, she studied the man lying beside her, his even breathing filling her with a kind of peace she wasn't sure she should trust.

After her little episode, earlier, Remy had been the perfect gentleman. He'd been considerate, attentive, and concerned; and he'd never made another move toward her, sexually.

Gillian turned her head away, fighting tears. She still wasn't sure how to take his sudden lack of interest in her body. Maybe that was why she'd asked him to stay when he'd risen to leave. Maybe it was why she'd broken her rule about relying on another person, and asked him to hold her.

She turned back toward him as her heart stumbled over a detail that had eluded her at first. She'd asked him to hold her just until she fell asleep. Yet, even after she'd slipped into oblivion, he'd obviously stayed. Her heart tripped. Not only had he stayed, but he was laying beside her on the bed still, dressed in nothing but his pants, with one arm curled around her, his fingers absently brushing against the underside of her breast.

She shifted, blinking away tears, and watched through blurry eyes as Remy stirred awake. His head lifted from the pillow, and he shifted closer to her, even as his arm tightened possessively, drawing her closer to his side. His breath warmed her skin as he brushed soft kisses over her now-bare shoulder, murmuring, "I must be dreaming."

"Why?" She asked breathlessly as his hand turned up, cupping her breast, and she felt the hard length of his arousal against the side of her thigh.

"Because you're here, in my bed, and so beautiful you take my breath away."

His lips covered hers in a long, sweet kiss that left Gillian weak and dizzy.

"Actually," she whispered with a smile as she eased away, "you're in *my* bed, sweet-talker."

He raised his eyes to take in their surroundings, and a slow smile spread over his face.

"Even better." His hand slipped inside the opening of her robe, to caress her breast, and Gillian barely bit back a moan of pleasure.

"Why's that?"

“Because,” he whispered as he pulled aside the fabric of her robe and bent his head to her bared breast. “It means this is real.”

Gillian closed her eyes against the waves of overpowering sensation as Remy’s tongue laved her sensitive flesh. She wanted this, wanted *him*; but could she have him? For the first time, she dared to believe she could. Arching into his touch, she let Remy’s seductive caresses wipe away the last of her reservations.

He took a step toward her, and froze as she took a step away. “What’s the matter?”

Her violet eyes raised, sad but firm. “You should go.”

“Gillian—”

“Thanks for your help,” she said stiffly. “But it’s time for you to leave.”

“What the hell is this?” He growled as he stalked toward her. He saw the flash of fear in her eyes, and hated that he’d been the one to put it there. But, damn it, he’d had enough of this evasiveness!

“I went through this before,” she reminded him quietly. “No more strange voices, or unknown woman callers. Not again.”

He gaped at her, before hurt lunged through him. That she could even think that of him stung. As she held out his now-ruined shirt, Remy felt anger seep steadily through his pain. Damn it, he’d had enough of being jerked around by her fears. Snatching the shirt from her grasp, he steeled himself against her flinch, yanking it on as he stalked toward the door. Hand on the knob, he fired his parting shot over his shoulder.

“Trust is a two-way street, Gillian. And I’m not Darrell.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Boss, there’re cops at the front desk,” Etienne said as he stuck his head into the office. “They want to talk to you about the fire.”

Remy sighed as he rose and shrugged into his suit jacket before heading for the lobby. It seemed to be his day for bad news.

The older of the two detectives – a lean man in his mid-sixties with craggy features and a head of snow-white hair – saw Remy first. Remy felt a wry grin tug at his lips as he realized it was Lieutenant Andrew Murray. Murray and Remy’s father, Louis, went way back, and Remy had always known he had an ally in his father’s old friend.

The younger man, however, was one Remy didn’t recognize. He was trim and buttoned-down, like any Rookie on his first big assignment. But it was the tenacious look on his face – like an alert bulldog – that worried Remy.

“Andrew! The NOPD so understaffed that they’re sending out lieutenants on fire reports, now?” Remy teased as he reached the men, reaching to shake the older one’s hand.

“I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated than that, my boy,” Andrew said somberly. “Ever since the FBI set up shop out here, you’ve been on our local patrol route.”

That was a surprise. He’d figured it had all blown over, by now. “What for?”

Murray cast a shrewd glance over the foyer, and Remy knew the older man well enough to know he didn’t miss a thing. “C’mon, Remy. Even you have to admit, that fire was awful suspicious. The Fire Investigator’s already poking around outside to see if he can’t figure out how it got started.”

Murray reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a small, worn notepad. Flipping it open, he readied a pen and looked pointedly at Remy. “Anything unusual going on out here, lately?”

Even as he recalled his fight with the masked intruder, the bizarre arrival of the newspaper clippings, Remy knew he couldn’t talk about those things to Andrew Murray, the cop. Whoever was behind these recent events, they weren’t going to be caught by normal police procedure. He or she was way too smart, and far too prepared. So, putting on his best poker face, Remy shrugged. “Aside from the fire, you mean?”

“Now, don’t get cute with me, Remy,” Murray warned gruffly. “You know damned well what I meant.”

Remy faced him squarely, his expression grim. “I do. And there’s been nothing, Andrew.”

“Just the same,” the younger detective piped up, “we’ll need to speak to everyone on the premises at the time of the incident.”

Remy nearly laughed at his audacity. Clearly, this kid was a recent transplant to the area. No one who’d lived here any length of time would ever have assumed they’d be able to speak to all the inhabitants of Scarlet Oak Manor.

“Be my guest,” Remy offered with wry humor.

“Starting with the staff.”

Remy shrugged. “Easy enough. There are only three members of the staff, besides myself, who live on the property. Elsa Oberich and Gillian Martin are both in the kitchen, and Jared Winters is off duty, right now. He’ll likely be in cottage number four, if he’s home today.”

The two detectives shared a glance, and the younger one said, “We’ll start with Ms. Maren.”

“That’s *Martin*,” Remy corrected the young man grimly. “M-A-R-T-I-N. Got that?”

The men exchanged another look, and Murray cleared his throat. “Got it. Kitchen, right?”

Remy nodded shortly, and turned toward his office. He had to show Gillian Eliza's column, and prepare her for the cops. He winced. She wasn't going to take any of this well at all.

A crisis phone call from his downtown office about a project delay in California, due to flooding, kept Remy busy, juggling contractor disputes, for nearly twenty minutes. By the time he arrived at the kitchen, Gillian and the detectives were gone. Elsa, scowling as she slammed pots around, glanced up, saw him, and her scowl deepened in disapproval as she pointed toward the breakfast room. "On the veranda."

The scowl on her face, and the clipped tone of her voice, tied a knot of dread in Remy's gut. Elsa was gruff, true, but never bad-tempered.

Pushing through the veranda doors a moment later, he saw Gillian, her face pale, and her eyes fixed on the hands twisting nervously in her lap as Murray and partner plied her with questions.

"Come on, Gillian," the younger guy was pouring on the charm. Clearly, they were into good cop-bad cop, already. "You can tell us. That's what it's all about, after all. Isn't it?"

"I already told you," Gillian repeated wearily, raising her eyes. "I don't know anything about that fire."

"The Fire Chief says you were right there, even before the fire was out, asking questions."

"Wouldn't you?" She shot back, nearly bringing a smile to Remy's face as her shoulders set determinedly.

"You'd better come clean, young lady," Andrew Murray cautioned sternly. "We can't help you if you insist on lying to us."

"I'm not lying!" Gillian leapt to her feet, eyes blazing. "I wasn't even in the east wing that day!"

"We know you were in the building at Washington Court, Virginia, that day eight years ago," Murray supplied with an intimidating scowl. "That one burned to the ground, didn't it?"

Gillian remained stonily silent, and Remy felt rage avalanche through him as she wavered, and then suddenly crumpled wearily into the chair again. Damn it, she was sick, and this stress was killing her! Crossing the veranda in several long strides, he barked, "This interview is over, Lieutenant Murray!"

Andrew Murray turned his started gaze toward Remy. "We're just getting started, boy. Back off."

"Like hell, I will," he growled, glaring at the older man. "Gillian's sick, and you're making things worse."

"Remy." Gillian's voice reached him, full of pleading. "It's okay. They're just doing their jobs."

"It's *not* okay. And they can do their job with someone else," he answered her darkly, his glare still fixed on his father's friend.

Andrew shot his partner a glance, and then grasped Remy's arm in an iron grip, urging him unwillingly to the other end of the veranda.

"All right," Murray demanded in a low voice, meeting Remy's glare with one of his own. "What is this really about? You give me a straight answer, and we'll lay off. And it better be the truth; none of that P.C. 'sick' shit, boy. Is that woman pregnant?"

Remy rocked back on his heels, stunned by Andrew's blunt question. Then, before he could stop it, a short laugh flew from his lips. "Not unless it's immaculate conception, Andrew. She has stress-induced neuralgia. And your gangbuster technique isn't helping, believe me."

Murray studied him carefully. "But you *are* involved with her."

That sounded more like a statement than a question. Remy's eyes narrowed. "You should know better than to read those gossip columns, Andrew."

"I don't read that shit, and you know it. But I *do* have eyes. You should have seen yourself, boy!"

"I don't give a damn about your perception, Murray; but you *will* leave Gillian alone, from now on."

Murray shook his head. "Not this time. She refuses to supply an alibi for the time of the fire, and she's our best suspect, given her prior connection to a fire scene."

Remy sighed heavily. "She was with me, okay? We were in the kitchen. I... fell. Gillian was fixing me up."

Andrew eyed him warily. "So why didn't *she* tell us that?"

"Probably because I asked her not to tell anyone about my fall. She wanted me to go to the hospital, and—"

"Just how bad a fall was this?" Andrew demanded tersely. "I'm seeing some very disturbing trends with Ms.—"

"You can't interrogate her. She was with me. Give me a polygraph, if you don't believe me."

Murray studied him for a long moment, and then sighed heavily. "All right. So her alibi stands. Oberich doesn't fit the profile of an arsonist, and we haven't had a chance to interview Winters, yet. If he doesn't pan out—"

"He won't. Jared's a straight arrow."

"Then we're left with no one. We'll keep our eye on the place, but you're going to have to cooperate, this time, Remy. You need to report any strange activity, from here on in."

Remy nodded tightly. "I will. Now, kindly call off your partner over there, and let us get back to work. We have a hotel to get up and running."

Murray cast a last, searching look at Remy before he left, signaling his partner that they were done. Watching them go, Remy had the uneasy feeling that Murray didn't believe him. This was clearly far from over.

"Thank you." Gillian's soft voice, beside him, had Remy turning to her in surprise and concern.

"How are you feeling?" He asked gently, leading her back to the veranda chair where she'd been sitting. "You looked pretty shaky, there."

"I *feel* pretty shaky," she admitted quietly. Then, looking up at Remy with frightened eyes, she asked, "How did they know who I really was?"

He cleared his throat and crouched down to meet her gaze more levelly. "I was coming to tell you. Do you know who Eliza Brentwaters is?"

She nodded, a wary light sparking in her eyes. "Why?"

"Somehow, she got a source here at the Manor – someone who's seen us together, and who knows who you are. She printed it in her gossip column, Gillian. All of New Orleans, at least, knows who you are, now."

With a frightened gasp, Gillian leapt to her feet. "I have to leave."

"No!" He hopped up, catching her by the shoulders. "Gillian, whoever is doing these things is trying to get you to leave Scarlet Oak. I don't know why, but I'm not willing to take the chance that they want you to be alone and vulnerable. Are you?"

She sucked in a breath, before her eyes lowered briefly. "No."

"Stay," he said quietly, squeezing her shoulders until her eyes raised to his again. "You're safe here; I won't let anyone hurt you."

He held her gaze, willing her to believe him. Finally, with a sigh, she nodded, though she pulled away.

"All right; I'll stay for now. But next time something happens, either we call the authorities right away, or I leave."

He wanted to avoid making her a promise he wasn't sure he could keep, but, looking into her eyes, he saw her determination, and knew he'd never win. So, with a nod, he capitulated. "Deal."

And, as she disappeared back into the building, a familiar chill crawled up Remy's spine, and he knew. Scarlet Oak Manor sucked the life from everything good and pure. They weren't safe here; Gillian especially. But, God help him, nor could he let her go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Remy blinked his bleary eyes, trying to stay focused on the handwritten journal in front of him. It was three in the morning, and he'd been at this ever since he'd left the veranda yesterday. Susannah Forrester's journals lay stacked around him, and only the antique lamp on the table beside him gave any illumination to Scarlet Oak Manor's family library.

Remy scowled, forcing himself to continue. He knew it was here somewhere; the answer *had* to be here. Somewhere in her journals, Susannah detailed how to break the evil presence that had haunted Scarlet Oak even before the Midnight Star's arrival. His aunt, Briget Wilmington-Pierce, swore by the spell's existence.

Normally, Remy didn't believe in anything superstitious – particularly not curses and spells. But that Scarlet Oak was possessed of some evil was a fact that was becoming increasingly harder to ignore. He couldn't undo the curse of the Midnight Star, but he could find a way to set the rest of the Manor right again, couldn't he? Susannah had supposedly been half crazed by the time she'd been told how to rid Scarlet Oak of its evil; she'd been unable to do what had needed done, already consumed by the spirit of this place. But Remy was still sane; he still possessed rational thought, and control of his baser instincts.

"Remy." The voice – a woman's – whispered his name against his ear in a breathy caress. "Follow me, Remy. I'll tell you how to cleanse Scarlet Oak."

"Who are you?" He glance around, and saw the room was empty. "*Where* are you?"

Silence stretched in the closing darkness, as icy perspiration trickled down Remy's skin, and his heart raced with fear. He could hear, could *feel*, each breath that sawed in and out of his lungs, in tune with the hammering cadence of in his chest, as his eyes searched the empty darkness.

Then, from somewhere behind him, came a new voice – deeper, and more sinister than the first – that chanted rhythmically in a language Remy couldn't understand. The voice was growing closer, louder, and more violent with every moment, and he couldn't understand why the racket did not wake everyone in the building. Surely, someone heard all this noise, by now!

Something pushed against his back and head. Remy whirled, to find himself once again facing empty space. Something pushed again, and he felt a searing pain penetrate the back of his head. With a startled cry, Remy gritted his teeth, muttering, "I don't think so, damn you. You want to attack me? Show me your face."

There was an eerie, mocking laugh that shot chills along his spine, and he felt pain shoot through his head again.

"You're afraid of me, Forrester heir."

The voice echoed around him, now, as if coming from both outside and inside his head.

Suddenly, it clicked. Fear! That's what it wanted! Whatever possessed this place craved fear, and it used his fear of the supernatural against him.

"I'm not afraid," he managed hoarsely, steeling himself against feeling any emotion at all. Life in the business world had taught him to be cold-blooded when he needed to be. Well, he needed it now as he never had before. Straightening, he let his emotions drain away until he was totally numb from the inside out. Staring coldly into the darkness, he quietly repeated, "I'm not afraid of you."

There was a hissing sound, like an ill-mannered cat, and then the darkness was suddenly empty, leaving Remy totally alone in the library. Trembling with all the emotions he'd held suppressed, Remy sank back into his chair and clutched his head, plowing his fingers through his hair in agitation. What the hell just happened, anyway? He didn't know, but there was one thing he *did* know. He needed to talk to someone who understood these things. And whenever he thought of understanding, only one person ever came to mind, these days.



Gillian restlessly paced the length of her living room, her mind racing. She needed to be at work in less than four hours, and she couldn't even calm down enough to sit down. Never a good sign.

Really, though, who would blame her? It wasn't every day that a person had her whole life, and her sense of security, upended on her.

"For God's sake, girl, get a grip! You've been through this before," she chastised herself in a mutter as she paced back and forth. "You know the drill."

Except that the drill for sudden identification by the local media called for her to disappear. This was the point at which she usually ran; this was when she found a new place, a new job, and started her life all over again. But this time, she couldn't run. She'd made a promise to stay.

Gillian frowned as she realized this was the first time she'd ever made that promise, since her fall. Everyone in her life knew from the start that, someday, she'd be gone. They all knew that when Gillian Martin disappeared, she never returned.

She stopped cold in the middle of the room as her heart stalled. Leave Remy? The pain that thought caused was like having her heart amputated. She might as well be dead, if she did; because—. She gasped. Oh, God. She really *had* gone and done something stupid, this time. She'd fallen for Remy Terreau.

"No, no, no," she whispered in stunned horror, terrified by the emotions swirling in her chest. "I don't. I can't. I *won't* fall in love with him, dammit!"

A sudden knock on her back door nearly caused Gillian to jump out of her skin. Grabbing up a poker from the fireplace, she made her way carefully to the back door, and used the poker's tip to push aside the curtains an inch.

The face on the other side of the glass caused her to sigh in a combination of relief and exasperation as she lowered the weapon and yanked open the door.

"Remy Terreau, you had best have a damned good reason for scaring me half to death at three-thirty in the morning!" She stopped abruptly as she took in his pale face and troubled eyes. Laying the poker on the kitchen counter, she stepped up to him and reached up to lay one hand against his cheek. "Remy, what's wrong?"

He blinked, and seemed to return to himself. "Can I come in?"

"Remy, it's almost four in the morning. Can't this wait a few hours?" There was no way she was letting him into her house; not with the emotional struggle she'd been in the midst of when he'd knocked. She remembered far too well what had happened the last time they'd been alone in her cottage. Her heart couldn't afford a repeat, of any of it.

"Please." He reached up and caught her hand as she went to remove it from his face. Staring up into his tormented blue eyes, Gillian felt her world tilt, and knew she couldn't refuse that one-word plea.

With a small, resigned sigh, she stepped out of the doorway and gestured him inside. Shutting the door, she turned to face him as she crossed her arms protectively against the surge of heat she felt. She wasn't going to respond to him, she reminded herself sternly. It was too dangerous.

"So," she said instead, "what's this all about?"

He sighed, running a hand through his hair as he faced her. Then, in a quiet voice, he admitted, "It's happening."

"Excuse me?" She stared at him in incredulity, wondering what she'd missed. "What's happening?"

"The same thing that happened to Susannah," he said hoarsely, turning away as if fighting the words. "Whenever I'm alone, I feel it. This place is trying to control me."

"Remy," she said sternly, planting her hands on her hips as she marched up to him. "Stop this. I thought you didn't believe in curses."

He laughed bleakly in response. “Not curses, no. But there’s something else here; something evil.” He hesitated a moment. “I hear voices whispering and screaming in the dark, feel things brush past me. Gillian, it’s driving me crazy, and I don’t know how to stop it!”

She took a step back, frightened by the sudden fierceness in his voice and eyes. Those ice-blue eyes were wild, and his mussed hair made him look almost dangerous. Her heart tripped, and she licked her lips nervously. “Isn’t there anything you can do?”

He reached out, his hands settling on her shoulders as he met her eyes directly, his alive with confusion and need.

“The only thing that saves me,” he rasped shakily, “is *you*, Gillian. I need to...”

He muttered something unintelligible, and abruptly dragged her against himself as he plundered her mouth with fierce abandon. Gillian stiffened in surprise, and then sank against him as her heart overrode her mind’s resistance. She loved him; she wanted him any way she could have him.

Bringing her hands up between them, she fisted them in his shirtfront, urging him closer. She didn’t care if she overloaded every nerve in her body; she was going to make love with Remy if it killed her.

Remy sensed the change in Gillian – the sudden, aggressive attack – even as sanity returned to him in a flash. They were up against the kitchen counter, with Gillian’s body wedged between his and the wood. God, he had to be crushing her!

He moved to step away, though his body and soul protested leaving her warmth, as he recalled what she’d told him about her nervous system. As badly as he wanted her, he wouldn’t hurt her for anything in the world.

Gillian apparently had other ideas. Releasing her hold on his shirt, she reached down and yanked her loose t-shirt up over her head, her hungry gaze fixed on his in a way that almost frightened Remy. He wanted her – had wanted her so much, for so long – and he could hurt her with that desire.

“Gillian...” His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears.

“Touch me, Remy,” she commanded in a whisper, her own hands smoothing over his shirt, seeking buttons. Her eyes were wide and luminous with want. “Touch me now.”

His eyes skimmed over her, and he swallowed hard as his body reacted violently to the raw sensuality of her. Her cheeks were flushed with sexual heat, and her eyes were bright with fire. Her skin quivered with tension, and her nipples rose in dark pink peaks that made his throat go dry in need.

His hands trembled as he reached to comply, skimming his fingertips lightly over the exposed flesh of her breast. The thin, taut line of control within him snapped as she loosed a shuddering gasp, her head falling back in blatant invitation. Yanking her tight against his body, he turned them both and lifted her onto the tabletop, yanking her sweats and panties down along her thighs as he did. His need was savage, which surprised him. He’d always been able to control himself, to draw out each encounter for pleasure’s sake. But Gillian drove him beyond restraint or control.

He bent his head, sucking her nipple into his mouth with a tugging nip of his teeth, pulling a low moan from Gillian as her back arched and her hips lifted toward him, inviting. With a growl, he pushed her legs apart and delved his fingers into the hot, wet center of her, feeling the shudder of approaching climax as he slid a finger over the nub buried within her flesh, causing her to fall back, her legs splaying further as she cried out in surprise and pleasure.

Sliding one finger down the slippery channel, he pierced her body, gritting his teeth against the erotic feel of her tight, slick flesh closing around him as he added a second finger, and her hips arched up off the table and she gasped his name. He could sense the beginning tremble of her climax, and hastily withdrew, going for the condom in his wallet, even as the memory of the last time they’d done this stabbed through him.

Gillian’s hand suddenly grabbed his wrist.

“Remy, no,” she gasped, pulling him toward her. “I’m on the Pill. I don’t want to take the chance...”

He understood her clearly. Pausing now could bring on another attack, and they were both way past the control to stop now. He felt her hands at his fly, making short work of the barrier still between them. Then, with her smooth, inexperienced hands on him, Remy groaned his surrender, stepping between her spread thighs and, with a harsh, needy oath, impaled her body in one swift, mind-stealing thrust that brought her up off of the table with a cry as her legs wrapped around his hips, pulling him deeper. He gasped and groaned at the feel of her body pulsing tightly around him. It was even better than he’d dreamed. She felt so damned good, he never wanted to move again.

She shifted her hips, and he nearly swallowed his tongue as he felt her pulsing slickness caress him. Opening his eyes, he stared down at her, lying naked and vulnerable on the hard wood, and nearly lost it completely. She was everything bright and lovely in the world, and she was his. His blood thundered through his veins in a primal flood as they moved together, her motions frantic as he lifted her up so that he could feast on her flesh even as he drove himself into her. He felt her fingers digging into the skin of his back and shoulders as her cries grew in pitch, and her inner flesh tightened around him.

Then, with a thunderous cry of her name, he buried himself deep even as she arched with a scream of ecstasy, her body convulsing around him.

Remy’s arms came around her, clasping her tight against his chest as he buried his face against her silky hair, waiting for his thundering heartbeat to return to normal. As reality slowly returned, he realized Gillian was still and unresponsive. Leaning back, he looked into her face, and her vacant, unseeing eyes punched him in the gut, hard. God, what had he done to her, this time?

As her body tensed and convulsed in release, Gillian’s world went dark, and then overflowed with a collage of light and images; of her life, and death. Voices spiraled through her, and each flash of light was a memory, frozen forever in this time and place. Every pain, every triumph, every part of her entire existence played in the crystal clear still-life of her mind, and she realized suddenly that she’d never been closer to home than she was now, caught within the spiral of her love for Remy.

The pain was gone. The thought registered as her eyes closed and a small sigh shivered through her. She’d just had the most mind-blowing experience of her life, and there wasn’t so much as a twinge of discomfort in her head. She felt light, and dizzy with euphoria.

Her lower body was another matter, she decided with a wince. They’d gone at it so hard she was betting she’d have bruises in the morning; but it was worth every bruise, she decided with a small smile as she opened her eyes, and promptly felt her smile freeze.

Remy was standing over her, a horrified look on his face that would have been funny, had she not been totally naked and so not in the mood for guilt.

“What?” She asked, sitting up awkwardly, intent on getting clothes on. She needed armor for what she was sure was coming next.

“God, I never meant...”

Her eyes blazed. “If you say you never meant to have sex with me, I swear to God, I’ll hit you.”

His eyes met hers, and a flare of humor lit the troubled depths, stilling her anger. “I never meant to hurt you.”

She stopped dead, staring at him in surprise, before laughter bubbled up. “If that’s hurting me, I’ll take all the abuse I can get!”

He eyed her warily. “You’re not hurt?”

“Nope.” She lowered her feet to the floor, and winced as muscles she hadn’t known she had, before, protested.

“Then again,” she said with a weak laugh, “I might have been a little premature on that one. I think I’m going to have bruises.”

He stopped, in the process of rebuttoning his shirt, and blanched. Seeing him go pale, she sighed in exasperation as she yanked her sweats from the floor. “Will you relax? I’m fine.”

He moved forward, taking the sweatpants from her hand and kneeling before her. Lifting one of her feet, he slipped the pants leg over her ankle, before doing the same with her other foot. Resting her hands on his broad shoulders, she looked down at his dark head, and felt something quiver in her tummy.

Glancing away, she saw the white flag of her panties, and murmured, “Wait. My underwear...”

“Leave them,” he whispered, and planted a kiss on her belly that made Gillian quiver. “I want to think of you laying in bed, with the sheets against your skin.”

She shivered warmly, and touched her fingers to his face. “Join me?”

He stopped, his gaze locked with hers for a long moment, and she swore she saw longing in his eyes. Then, he matter-of-factly pulled her sweats up over her hips and her shirt down over her head. Giving the shirt a final tug into place, he rasped, “Just promise me you’ll stay until the last guests leave.”

She blinked, startled by this abrupt change from the intimacy they’d shared to all-business. His expression was so cool and businesslike, she felt her heart slowly begin cracking. She’d known it was foolish to fall for him. So, stiffening her spine, she told herself that her heart would mend, and offered him a cool nod in return. “All right. Just until the last of your current guests leave. Then I’m moving on.”

With a sharp nod, he turned on his heel and let himself back out the door. Troubled, Gillian made her way to a cold, empty bed, wishing like hell that she’d never heard of Scarlet Oak Manor, or Remy Terreau. At least then, she’d never have known what it felt like to have love walk out on her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When Gillian arrived at the main house the next morning, it was to total bedlam. Every single one of the guests who'd remained at the Manor after the media left were milling around the front desk, issuing frantic demands to a haggard-looking Remy and a glint-eyed Etienne.

Hurrying past the front desk, she saw several of the staff standing at the foot of one set of spiral stairs, watching the hubbub and talking quietly.

"What's going on?" Gillian inquired as she joined them.

"Maybe if you'd show up for work on time, you'd know," Pam LaRouete sneered, her glare dagger-sharp. Gillian frowned. For some reason, Pam refused give her half a chance. The older woman was petty and cruel in her every assessment of Gillian.

"Gillian isn't supposed to arrive until seven o'clock, Miss LaRouete," Jared informed her starchy. "Since it is a quarter 'til seven, that makes Miss Martin early."

"Martin. Hah!" Pamela snorted disdainfully as she turned on her heel and clomped up the stairs on her ridiculously high heels, muttering to herself.

"Ignore her," Rochelle Cabot, one of the chambermaids, said airily, brushing back a strand of long, blonde hair. "Pam's just pissed 'cause she can't get Mr. Terreau's attention." She gave Gillian an assessing once-over, and her brow furrowed in concern. "You look tired."

Gillian sighed. "Long night."

"Here, as well," Jared said, with a shake of his head. "Apparently, that is what all this fracas is about."

She looked at him curiously, even as a knot of dread formed in her gut. "What happened?"

"It's the curse," Trisha Pasquale muttered. "Everyone says they heard this evil laugh, last night. Probably Lyle Forrester, if you're asking me."

"Loose lips," Jared reminded her pointedly, with a stern glare. He turned back to Gillian with a shrug. "Although I cannot deny that I have heard the same."

Gillian looked over the crowd around the front desk, and felt ice slide through her. "They're *all* leaving?"

"Every last one," Jared confirmed with a brisk nod. "But don't worry. They shan't be Scarlet Oak Manor's last guests."

No, Gillian acknowledged silently, they wouldn't be the last guests to ever come and go through the main doors. However, they would be the last guests she ever saw. Gillian Martin was getting out, while she still had herself convinced she could leave.

Two hours later, Gillian paused at the door to Remy's office, twisting her hands nervously. She had no idea where she stood with him, after the way he'd left her last night, and she was deathly afraid he wouldn't care in the least that she was leaving, now that the guests were gone.

With a deep, steadying breath, she lifted her hand and rapped on the door.

"Come in." The muffled reply from the other side of the door had her heart pounding loudly in her ears. She wasn't sure she could do this; she wasn't so sure she could leave.

She had to. It was the only way she'd ever get out of here, with her heart still intact. She reminded herself, pressing one hand to her chest to steady that lurching organ. With more courage than she'd ever thought it would take, she pushed open the door, and felt her thundering heart shatter abruptly into a million pieces.

Remy sat at his desk, his head buried in his hands and a weary, defeated slump to his shoulders. He looked drawn and miserable, and she suddenly didn't want to tell him what she'd come to say. She didn't want him to know she was leaving. She was too afraid that news might be his very last straw.

As her silence continued, Remy's head slowly lifted, and Gillian watched heat and hope bloom in his ice-blue eyes as they came to rest on her.

"Gillian."

That single, husky acknowledgement was all the incentive she needed. With a small, forced smile, she stepped into the office and closed the door. She ignored the hand that beckoned her around the edge of the desk, and saw his frown as she sat stiffly on the edge of one of the visitor's chairs, the desk between them.

"The last guest left a hour ago," she said without preamble, forcing herself to meet his gaze steadily as she uttered the words.

Surprise flared in his eyes, followed by wary fear. "Etienne already told me. So?"

She straightened, drawing a breath for courage. "We had a deal, Remy. When the last guest left, so did I."

Before she could even blink, he was on his feet, moving around the desk to crouch beside her seat.

"Gillian," he whispered hoarsely. "Please don't go."

She forced her eyes forward, when all she really wanted to do was soak up the sight of him, to collect memories to warm her in the cold future that lay ahead.

"I have to go."

"Why?" He reached for her hands, but froze as she jerked them away. She couldn't afford to let him touch her. She might be tempted to give in, then.

"Because I do," she replied stiffly. This didn't feel right. It had never been in her nature to be cold like this; she wasn't that mercenary. But if it was the only means of preserving her heart, she'd do it without second thought.

Remy's warm hand fell on her arm, making Gillian's pulse pound with remembered passion. God, was she in trouble, if the mere pressure of his skin against hers had the power to weaken her resolve.

"What can I do to convince you to stay?"

She turned her head, met his pleading eyes, and nearly melted on the spot. Stiffening her resolve, she yanked her eyes away again. "Nothing. I have to go."

"Gillian," the raw plea in his voice caused her surprised gaze to shift back to him. "Do you know what I dreamed of, last night?"

He wanted to share his dreams? With her? Gillian's heart picked up speed as she whispered, "No."

"Screaming. That's what I dreamed. Susannah Forrester screaming as if she was suffering all the tortures of Hell."

Gillian's heart stopped dead. This wasn't what she'd expected of him, and it caused a chill to crawl down her spine. "I don't see what—"

"I can't do this, anymore, *cherie*. Not alone. If you leave now, I know the madness will suck me in, the same as it did Susannah."

Curiosity prickled Gillian's brain, and she faced him directly. "The curse?"

"Maybe. I don't know, anymore."

Interesting. Remy had done a total reversal about the curse, from when she'd first arrived. A month ago, he'd adamantly denied that there was anything supernatural at Scarlet Oak. She wondered what it took to change the mind of a man like Remy Terreau. Curious in spite of herself, she finally heaved a sigh and nodded.

“All right; I’ll stay. But on one condition.” She faced him squarely. “I want to investigate what’s happening.”

He opened his mouth, as if he meant to protest, but then snapped it shut, nodding. She rose to her feet as he straightened, and offered him a bright smile, and her hand. “Deal?”

He looked at her hand for a long moment, then met her gaze, his blue eyes glittering with challenge. Then, without warning, he grasped her hand, pulled her into his embrace, and captured her lips in a deep, searching kiss that nearly melted her legs.

Remy drank in Gillian’s taste, warm and spicy and so wonderfully familiar now, and felt his troubled heart ease. Bad enough that Scarlet Oak was driving him slowly crazy, but to be haunted by his own mistakes was a torture he’d been unable to bear. Ever since he’d left her last night, he’d regretted the way things had ended between them. He regretted his coolness, aware that it had hurt her in ways he might never be able to mend. But that cold façade had been his only means of self-preservation. The truth was, he’d felt himself sliding toward feelings he didn’t understand, and he’d been far too tempted by her offer to stay the night in her bed, her warm body against his.

Even now, her scent and taste were overpowering his reason, and he felt himself willingly drowning. He wasn’t afraid of this end; he already knew it meant him no harm. Familiar hunger clawed at him, sharper now that he knew what she’d feel like, naked in his arms. He hungered for her uninhibited response to his touch – half wild tigress, half shy innocent. He wanted her with the same intensity he had from the beginning. That desire frightened him; he’d never wanted anyone or anything that badly.

Backing off a step, he stared down into her passion-flushed face and bright eyes, and felt something punch his heart as he murmured, “Deal.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

She was confused. Gillian didn't have a problem in the world admitting that. In the three days since she and Remy had made love, he'd fluxed between hot and cold so rapidly that he'd left her dizzy and disoriented, wishing she knew how to read him. Thank God all the guests were gone, now. She wasn't sure she could focus enough to make a salad, let alone something as difficult as blackened catfish.

Blinking, she found herself staring at a clipboard that might as well have been written in Greek, for all the sense it made to her. What had she been doing? She looked around, taking in the dim confines of the pantry. Oh, yeah. Inventory.

She was just reaching to move aside a case of tomato paste when there was a click, like a door closing, from behind her, and the pantry pitched into darkness. Drawing in a sharp breath, she tried to turn, only to find herself suddenly trapped against a warm, solid chest as arms banded around her from behind, and a mouth burrowed against her neck, laving and nipping. She drew in a breath that was heady with his scent, and groaned with sweet need as she leaned back into his embrace.

"Remy," she breathed, with the last of her sense. "What are you doing?"

"I can't stand it, anymore," he growled against her skin, the feral intensity of his voice causing a small thrill of fear to race down her spine. "I need you."

She tried to pull away as fright pulsed through her. "Remy? Turn the light back on."

One of his arms released her, and she heard him fumble in the dark, before the dim overhead light came on, piercing the darkness with soft light. Turning, Gillian looked up into Remy's eyes, and gasped in fear as she broke away.

"Oh, my God!" The oath flew, unthinkingly, from her lips. Remy looked like a man on the edge of total breakdown. His normally ice-blue eyes were swirling with stormy emotions, turning them almost sapphire with fear and need. His hair was wild, and his usually immaculately ordered clothing was in total disarray. "Remy, what's happening to you?"

"I..." He stopped, blinked, and then shuddered. "I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged awkwardly, and again she saw uncertainty in his face and eyes that were so at odds with the calm, confident man she knew that Gillian felt fear spike through her.

"I'm doing things I don't remember. It's like I'm awake and asleep at the same time," he muttered in a raw, frightened voice as he shoved his hands into his hair again, further mussing it. "I can't control my actions, or my impulses, and I don't know what I'm doing, anymore. Half of the time, I just wake up somewhere, and have no idea how I got there, or what I was doing."

Wariness shot through her. He'd come here, after her, like a crazed man. "Do you remember coming here?"

A wry smile twisted on his lips briefly. "When it comes to you, *cherie*, I remember *everything*," he murmured huskily, reaching out to caress her cheek, his fingers so gentle against her skin that Gillian felt her heart trip in need. "I don't know why, but you make me calm; you make me feel real, again. Every time I touch you, everything becomes clear again, and I can remember myself."



“Remy,” Gillian laid a hand over his, meeting his eyes steadily and letting him see the worry eating at her. “What you’re discussing isn’t good. It’s not healthy.”

He laughed bleakly, slipping his hand free and sliding both arms around her waist, pulling her against himself.

“You think I don’t know that? Gillian, I’ve known something was wrong ever since the nightmares started.”

“Nightmares?” She clutched his shirtfront tightly as her concern spiked. “What nightmares?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “They started about the same time I bought this place. At first, they seemed like any other dream. Susannah kept coming back, though, and her messages got more and more frightening.”

Gillian swallowed hard as she recalled the terrifying dreams she’d been having lately. “I think I understand. I’ve been having dreams, too; ever since I got here. They’re frightening, horrible dreams about a woman named Camille—” She heard the abrupt intake of Remy’s breath, and met his horrified blue eyes. “What is it?”

“Camille Jamori,” he rasped tightly, “was the true owner of the Midnight Star, and Lyle Forrester’s mistress.”

Gillian gasped, feeling lightheaded as the blood drained from her face, recalling the woman’s threat. *No one comes between me and my vengeance.*

“Oh God. Remy, she means to kill us! She said that the Star was hers, and that she wouldn’t let anyone stop her from her vengeance.”

Remy drew her tightly against himself, his expression grim as he murmured, “Don’t worry, *cherie*. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She stiffened in surprise. Remy Terreau wasn’t reputed to have a protective streak; he’d broken too many hearts to qualify as a white knight. As the thought settled, Gillian bit back a nervous giggle. “You’re going to protect *me*?”

“With my life,” he said quietly, his tone and expression so somber that Gillian swallowed her laughter on a gasp, her violet eyes going wide.

Then, before she could voice the protest her heart screamed at his assurance, Remy stole her breath with the sweetest, most intense kiss she’d ever experienced, dragging a shivering moan from her instead, as she melted into his arms, all thought of curses and evil spirits washed from her mind by his tender assault.

Her taste was more addictive than the headiest wine, drugging him nearly beyond reason. And the feel of her body against his... Remy groaned at the memories that flashed through his mind, of her body moving in sweet abandon. He had to touch her, to see that look in her eyes, again; it was as necessary as breathing, even if he didn’t quite understand why she effected him so deeply.

With a needy growl, he stepped back and, in one swift motion, yanked her t-shirt up over her head, the sight of her flesh making him shudder with desire. His eyes landed on the whimsical, grape-colored scrap of lace that covered her breasts, her nipples taut and straining against the confines of fabric, and raw, urgent heat punched him in the gut.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he breathed, skimming his fingers over the tight buds, wringing a soft moan from her as her breasts pushed forward into his touch. Her eyes closed on a shuddering sigh, and her head tipped back, making Remy wish that her hair fell loose, instead of covered by that damned bandana. He wanted to see it loose, again; he wanted to bury his hands in its silkiness and devour her offered flesh.

Then, as the reason for the bandana’s existence penetrated the sensual fog swirling inside him, Remy remembered why he couldn’t have this woman. He was on dangerous ground, and she was

leaving as soon as she could get away. Why she'd stayed this long, he didn't know; all he knew was that he didn't want her to go, but knew she had to. Her safety had to come first. But, would it be so wrong to have her in his arms one more time – to make a memory to keep him warm and sane once she was gone?

Pulling her flush against himself, he felt her tight nipples branding him even through his shirt, and gave her a drugging kiss, then nipped the skin at the base of her throat lightly, and looked into her hungry violet eyes as he whispered, "I want to see you, tonight. Come to my suite; please?"

Her lips curved in a tremulous smile that wrapped itself around his heart and squeezed, sending sensations Remy had never felt before shuddering through him. Then, she took the shirt he offered her, and softly replied, "All right. But, Remy..."

He watched her slip the shirt over her head, waiting for her to finish. When she didn't, he reached out to straighten her bandana, quirkling a brow at her.

"Yes, *cherie*?"

"What are you going to do about Camille, and Susannah?"

He closed his eyes and exhaled a long, frustrated breath. "Damned if I know."

"You should call in a parapsychologist," she suggested, casting him a look as she tucked her shirt back into her jeans. "There are a lot of good ones out there."

He shook his head. "Why? This isn't the first hotel to ever have a ghost problem."

She stopped, her head rising until her somber violet eyes fixed on his. "Remy, this is more than a simple haunting. They're invading our dreams, and they're driving you crazy. You have to do *something*!"

He leaned back against the pantry door, crossing his arms over his chest as he studied her. "And who do you suggest I call? A psychic? Ghostbusters?"

"Stop it, Remy," she chastised him sternly. "Sarcasm isn't going to get you out of this. I refuse to let you goad me into a fight just so you can avoid the issue again. I'm serious about the parapsychologist. There's a good one that my sister told me about; he was a guest speaker at a museum opening her convention center hosted not too long ago. A Dr. Reboulet..."

Remy stiffened, his gaze darkening. Garner, again. But he already knew what no one else – not even Garner's wife, Maggie – had ever known about his cousin. Garner went way too far for his science, and his theories. He didn't know when or where to stop, and it was going to get him into trouble, someday. Remy would much rather that day *not* come at Scarlet Oak.

"I don't think we need a parapsychologist, Gillian. We just need to stay on our toes, so to speak. There's nothing here that can hurt us if we don't let it."

\* \* \*

He was nearly ready. At last, he had everything he needed. Lightly rolling the small pouch that contained the peyote he'd managed to track down, for spirit form travel from his crypt to the main house of the manor, Etienne grinned to himself. It wasn't a traditional Vodun herb, but he'd use whatever he had to. He'd set the stage; his sacrifice would come to him, and with her blood, which the foolish cow believed would be used in a love potion, he would have his revenge.

Whistling, Etienne crossed the Manor's lawn, heading for the woods. She was there; he could see her hair, already, a bright red slash against the dark night. How could she even think that any man would be taken in by her gutter-whore looks? He snorted. Even Terreau had more class than that.

She was pacing nervously as he neared. When she saw him, she pulled her cigarette from her lips, exhaling an anxious stream of smoke. Another point against her; Terreau hated smokers.

"Etienne, are you sure this is gonna work? I mean, what do you know about Voodoo?"

"It'll work," he said shortly. "Trust me. Have I ever lied to you?"

She swallowed jerkily, fear flashing in her eyes, and shook her head as she dropped her cigarette and ground it out under her heel.

"No," she agreed, anger creeping into her voice. "You were right about that bitch, Gillian. What does he see in her, anyway? She's so... so *ugly*. He could have me, but he chose her!"

Etienne rolled his eyes, but kept his opinion to himself, saying instead, "We'll fix all of that. Just come with me."

And, as he led her toward the cemetery, Etienne's mind ran ahead. He'd have to drug her, first. Pamela wasn't likely to sit still for the whole blood-letting process, and he couldn't have her knowing what he was up to. He needed her blood on the altar – human blood had the most power – but he must be careful not to kill her, or he'd be sharing a jail cell with Michael Burrell. With the blood, he could make use of the drug he'd injected into Terreau during their fight in the Keep. The last of Terreau's blood on the poppet, and he would fully control his enemy.

*Kill the girl.* The words jolted through him.

"Go away, Camille," he hissed. "You had your chance."

"What was that?" Pamela asked, her eyes wide and her breathing shallow in fear.

"Nothing. Keep going; we're almost there."

*Kill the love, and break the heir.* Camille's voice came again, out of the dark. *Make the heir slay the one he loves, and you will own him.*

Etienne stopped, listening intently. Was Camille right? He wouldn't have control of Terreau again, once the blood in the vial was used up. That meant he had one last chance to break Terreau for good.

*Kill the girl.*

A slow, cruel smile spread over Etienne's face. Of course; it was so simple. He would make Terreau kill the bitch – whatever she called herself. Once he realized what he'd done, Terreau would probably run stark mad, and kill himself, saving Etienne the trouble. It was the perfect plan.

"Come along, Pamela," he commanded, grabbing her arm and dragging her swiftly along as excitement thrummed in him. "We have work to do."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A few more minutes, Gillian thought to herself as she turned off the kitchen lights and headed out the door that would take her through the Grand Hall, to Remy's suite, and straight into his arms. Her body thrummed with anticipation, and she felt alive in a way she hadn't realized was missing, these past six years.

Her brow furrowed as she reached the Hall. There was someone in there. Even before she opened the door, she knew there was someone there in the near dark. Clouds passed across the nearly full moon cast shadows through the muted light as she eased the door open and stepped inside.

This was silly. Even as she thought the words, a sudden sound, like someone stumbling around in the dark, assaulted her ears, setting her heart thudding harshly and her breathing shallow in fear.

"Hello?" She tried, her voice coming out little more than a terrified whisper. Clearing her throat, she tried again, managing a louder, "Is anyone there?"

A shadow moved, off to her right, and she whipped her head that direction, just as a familiar form stepped into a beam of returning moonlight.

"Remy! You scared the life out of me!" She snapped, as relief poured through her jangled nerves. "Would you please quit—"

Suddenly, her breath cut off as he stepped forward, his large, strong hands closing around her throat with crushing force. Eyes flying wide in surprise and panic, Gillian looked up into eyes that stared unseeingly forward, and a face that was grey and slack, like a sleepwalker's, and shone with perspiration.

Terror, born of lack of oxygen and the empty blankness of her lover's face, gripped Gillian hard, and she clawed futilely at his wrists, twisting in an effort to free herself. The world was slipping in and out of focus, and her lungs burned with the need to draw air.

As darkness crept in around the edges of her vision, one desperate thought struck Gillian. She had to find a way to reach Remy. He was trapped inside this glaze-eyed, zombie-like stranger— *That's it!*

Zombies, she knew from reading, were supposed to be without a heart, controlled entirely by the one who raised them from the dead. Only, Remy had never been dead, meaning that he was under some kind of strange, hypnotic spell. As she felt consciousness slipping away, Gillian made a desperate gamble – the only hope she had left. Forcing her leaden arms up, she latched them around Remy's neck and pulled with all her failing strength, forcing his head down until his lips came in contact with her own.

Kissing him was like kissing a dead fish. She tasted cold sweat, and got no response as she poured what was left of her fading heart into that kiss. Then, just as she was slipping away from consciousness, she felt his lips tremble, and his iron grip loosened enough that she could draw small puffs of air. Suddenly, he was kissing her back, with all the ardor she'd come to expect from Remy. With a gasp, she pulled away from his kiss as he hands loosened more, and dragged much-needed air into her starving lungs.

"My God." Suddenly, Remy's hands were gone completely, and Gillian looked up in surprise to find his clear blue eyes staring not at her, but at his hands, as horror infused his stark, grim features. Then, his eyes snapped up to her, and her gasp this time had nothing to do with the need for air. "Tell me what I did."

There was no way she was doing anything of the sort, Gillian decided grimly. Remy looked too close to the edge as it was. "Did?"

"Dammit, Gillian," he growled menacingly, causing her to take an involuntary step back, her hands flying protectively toward her sore neck. She saw his eyes flicker, and knew he'd seen. "Don't

play dumb with me! I can see the marks,” he reached toward her, and she flinched slightly, drawing a frown from Remy. “And I can see that flinch. What happened?”

“I... I’m not sure,” she finally admitted shakily. “I was coming to your suite. When I got here, to the Hall, I heard something. Then you were here; only, it wasn’t you. Your eyes were... *empty*. You grabbed my throat, and I couldn’t breathe. But I knew you were under some kind of hypnotic... something; so, I thought, maybe if I kissed you...” Her voice failed her momentarily, before she met his eyes head-on and asked, “Why were you trying to kill me?”

The next thing she knew, she found herself crushed protectively against Remy, and she could feel his trembling all along her body. His lips brushed her ear, and he breathed, “I would never harm you, *cherie*. Never.”

She pulled back to study him skeptically. “You tried to *kill* me, Remy.”

“Not me,” he muttered, his eyes averted, before he finally met her gaze, and she saw resignation and indescribable pain. “Didn’t you even wonder why I refused to let you call the cops, or take me to the hospital, the night of the preview?”

She shrugged awkwardly. She had wondered, but had decided it wasn’t any of her business. “I guess I figured it had something to do with insurance.”

He laughed harshly. “No. My insurance on this place would have covered those slight damages without hesitation. But if the police got involved, I would have had to go to the hospital; and they would have had me locked up in no time.”

She blinked as new fear washed through her. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that, whoever that intruder was, he knows chemicals, and probably Vodun, as well.” At her gasp, he smirked. “It’s not that uncommon in this part of Louisiana. Everyone not claiming Southern gentility in their bloodline claims to be descended from some *mambo* or *hougan*.”

She gave him a quizzical look as she stepped away. “How do you know so much about Voodoo?”

“Vodun,” he corrected easily, and shrugged as he slipped an arm around her waist, leading her toward the doors on the opposite end of the Hall. “My mother and aunts are obsessed with the supernatural, and I was born and raised in New Orleans. I guess it’s in my blood.”

She chuckled, and then grew somber as she recalled the reason they were even having this conversation. “What does all of this have to do with the intruder, Remy?”

His expression was grim as he unlocked the door to his suite. “He was a master. I didn’t even register the needle, until my arm started hurting after the fight was over. He must have given me a drug, to make me susceptible to his control. It’s the only logical reason I can think of.” He looked at her soberly. “He wants you dead, Gillian. I can still hear his voice echoing in my head.”

She shook her head in confusion. “But, who would—?”

“I think we have to consider every possibility, including your ex.”

She stopped dead in the middle of his sitting room, her eyes wide in disbelief. “You’re kidding, right? Remy, you knew Darrell; he hasn’t changed. He’s too lazy for that kind of planning. If he wanted me dead, he wouldn’t act so secretive about it, either. Besides, I haven’t had one of those damned hang-up calls in months! Why now?”

He sighed. “I don’t know. But he’s the only person I can think of who’s warped enough to want to kill you.”

She bit her tongue against voicing her suspicions about Etienne Fabron. Gillian might not like Etienne, and he might despise her for reasons she couldn’t fathom, but she’d never seen any proof that he meant to kill her.

“So, what do we do, now?”

“We aren’t going to do anything,” he said, scowling. “I want you to leave Scarlet Oak.”

“No.”

“Gillian,” he reached for her shoulders, clasping them lightly. “Go back to *Duex Regali*; or, even better, leave Louisiana completely. Please.”

She pulled away as anger and determination settled over her like a dark blanket. He wasn’t getting rid of her that easily. “No.”

“Please,” he whispered, his eyes closing as he paced away from her. “God, Gillian, what will it take? I almost killed you, back there!”

“But you didn’t,” she pointed out softly, taking a step toward him as she realized the truth. Remy was afraid of himself.

“Next time, I might!” He shuddered. “I couldn’t deal with that; I couldn’t live with myself if I did something like that to you.”

“There won’t be a next time,” she countered quietly, her eyes glued to his as she took another step forward. “You won’t let it happen again, Remy; not now that you know what he wants.”

“Gillian...” His voice was husky, his pupils dilating in hunger as she slowly pulled off her shirt, determined that he wouldn’t send her away. She wouldn’t leave him to this evil, alone.

She dropped the shirt onto the floor as she took the final steps that placed her body flush against his. She heard the shuddering quality of his indrawn breath, felt it shimmy through her, as well. His jaw tightened, and she knew how close to the edge he was. Smiling softly, she placed one hand against his chest, right above where his heart beat, strong and sure. “I trust you, Remy. I trust you with my life.”

With a groan, his arms came around her as his lips descended on hers, sweeping her away into a kiss that Gillian knew came straight from his soul. Unlike the last time they’d made love, when his kisses and caresses had been rough and all-consuming with a need they’d neither one been able to control, this time his kiss was deep and reverent in a way that stole into her soul like a thief. And, when his hands skimmed up her flesh, it was with a gentleness that brought tears to her eyes.

“Remy,” she murmured, her eyes closing and her head tilting back to give him greater access as his lips skimmed over her throat, seeking to erase the marks of his unintended violence.

“Ah, *cherie*, you take my breath away,” he murmured against her skin, setting Gillian’s body trembling with need.

Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, but she finally separated the fabric, pressing her heated flesh to his and feeling the friction of hair against her abdomen and breasts, the heat of flesh to flesh.

Sliding her hands from his waist, up over his chest, she skimmed her fingers over his nipples, and heard his low growl of pleasure. He was trembling against her in an effort to control what she didn’t want controlled.

With expert ease, he unclasped her bra and released her aching flesh into his hands, wrenching a desperate groan from her as she felt the heat of his hands on her breasts.

“God,” he whispered as he kissed her, his hands tormenting her flesh with gentle caresses, “you feel so good.”

Then there were no more words, as they stripped away the rest of the barriers between them. Gillian felt the hot track of tears slipping along her face as Remy made love to her with such tenderness it reached inside her soul and shattered her. And, when the sweet waves of fulfillment crashed over her, her body folded around his in an effort to keep him forever a part of her. She knew, as she drowned in the sensation, that her fate was sealed. There was no way she could ever willingly walk away from this man.

Remy sensed the change in Gillian, in her silence. He looked down into her tear-streaked face, and felt his heart clench. Bending his head, he tasted her tears with the tip of his tongue, and smiled softly at her.

“You,” he whispered as he pressed kisses over her face and neck, “are amazing.”

She smiled tremulously, making his heart trip and his body stir again. “You’re not so bad yourself, Terreau.”

He caught the teasing lilt of her voice, and rolled to his side, holding her thigh still twined over his, unwilling to break the intimate contact of their bodies. Cradling her against him, he kissed her softly and murmured, “Stay the night.”

The words surprised him as much as they clearly did her, to judge by her wide eyes. He’d never invited a woman to stay the night in his bed, before; usually, he never even had a woman *in* his bed, preferring to be able to leave when he was ready for space. But, with Gillian, he didn’t want space. He wanted to stay right where he was, with her in his arms and their flesh joined, forever. The thought shocked him, but not nearly as much as the realization that his interest in Gillian had slipped beyond the infatuation that normally accompanied his affairs. Somehow, when he wasn’t looking, Gillian had slipped past his defenses and into his heart and soul. He recognized the tightness in his chest for what it was – love. And, suddenly, he felt free in a way he never had before. Gathering Gillian closer, he burrowed his face into her silky hair, inhaled her sweet scent, and let himself drift off to sleep.

Gillian lay still, feeling the warmth of Remy’s hands – one on her back, the other still splayed against her hip. He buried his face in the hair that cascaded around her neck, and his deep, even breathing told her that he was asleep. With a small smile, she shifted slightly to get comfortable, and felt his hands tighten as the flesh within her twitched and stiffened. Chuckling, she ran her hands over his chest, and eased away enough to study his face.

How had she ever got this lucky? Gillian’s throat tightened with happy tears as she studied the strong planes of Remy’s face. The tenderness he’d shown her earlier, and the fierce need he’d held under control, made her feel cherished in a way she’d never felt in her life. Still smiling, she traced his face dreamily as a contented lassitude slid over her. She’d figure it all out, later, she promised herself as she burrowed into Remy’s warm body. Right now, sleep beckoned, with dream-filled arms.

Something squeezed her tightly, and a harsh voice muttered unintelligibly in her ear. Disoriented, Gillian jolted from sleep, fear slashing through her. How had she ended up in Darrell’s bed? She’d told him no; she knew she had... She started to scramble away, before reality finally pierced the haze of panic as a familiar voice cried out with all the pained ferocity of a wounded animal. She wasn’t in Darrell’s bed; she was in Remy’s, and she knew exactly how she’d got here.

Turning back toward the man tossing beside her, she gasped in terror as a new fear sliced through her. Remy’s face was as pale as the moonlight that streamed through his windows, and the little she caught of his muttered words froze her blood.

“Curse... blood... Manor brings death.” He tossed his head fitfully, and his hand reached across the sheets as he cried out her name. His tone so heartbroken, she felt the last wall protecting her heart shattered and fly apart. There was no way she could leave him; but she was damned if she’d let the evil in this place take him away from her, either.

Scooting over close to him, she laid her head against his chest, hearing his rapid heartbeats, as she smoothed one hand over his feverish skin. “Shh. It’s okay, Remy. I’m right here,” she murmured, pressing soft kisses to his chest. “I’m right here, baby.”

A shudder lunged through him, and she heard his heartbeat begin to slow again. She lay still, except for the hand that stroked gently over his skin, until his pulse and breathing quieted back to the rhythm of peaceful sleep. Then, carefully extricating herself from his arms, she climbed from his bed, slipped into her panties and t-shirt, and crossed to the solid oak desk where Remy’s laptop sat open. Plugging the phone line into the modem, she settled herself in the leather desk chair as the laptop booted up.

Remy might be adverse to admitting that he needed professional help with these spirits, but Gillian wasn't about to watch them possess the man she loved; not when she could stop them. Connecting to the Internet, she clicked on the search bar and typed in "Dr. Garner Reboulet." According to Grace, and what she'd read so far, Reboulet was the most experienced and qualified parapsychologist out there, for this kind of problem. He specialized in dangerous possessions and hauntings, and his primary location for investigation was Louisiana.

Frowning, she studied the list of search results. First up, with a 100% rating, was a site called *The Phoenix Group*. Curious, she clicked on the link, and knew she'd hit the jackpot as the site loaded a moment later. The Phoenix Group was a paranormal investigative agency run by Dr. Garner Reboulet. Its focus was on verifying paranormal events and piecing together otherwise unsolvable crimes. Gillian's heart sped up. Would they be interested enough in Scarlet Oak to help?

"Only one way to find out," she muttered, and clicked on the *Report Phenomena* link. A text box popped up, and Gillian cast a nervous glance at the man asleep in the bed before drawing a deep breath and typing:

*Dear Dr. Reboulet;*

*I'm writing to you from Scarlet Oak Manor, outside of New Orleans. I have seen evidence of a very dangerous paranormal phenomenon at work in this place. It's even said that Scarlet Oak is cursed, and while I'm not sure how true that is, I am certain that it is haunted. I will warn you that the owner, Remy Terreau, might not be quite amenable to the presence of paranormal investigators, should you choose to study this. However, due to recent events, I believe immediate intervention is necessary, before someone gets killed.*

*Gillian Martin*

Pressing the *Submit* button, Gillian sat back with a sigh, and glanced toward Remy again. She would eventually have to tell him, of course. If only she knew how. He'd already made his opinion on parapsychology quite clear.

Confusion poured through Gillian. She wanted to believe that Remy's earlier display of tenderness, and his request that she stay, meant that he loved her. But Darrell had been tender when he'd thought it would get him what he wanted, and he had tried his best to persuade her to give in to him. Yet, when she searched her memory, she was surprised to realize that he'd never once uttered a word about love. And... Gillian closed her eyes and swallowed back tears as she faced the bitter truth. Remy had never said he loved her, either. Want, need; yes, he'd proven his desire. But never love.

Reeling from the pain stabbing her heart, Gillian rose from her seat and slipped into her jeans and sneakers. She couldn't find her bra, but nor did she care. Let Remy have a souvenir. She just wanted to escape before she gave in to her pain.

With a final, tear-filled glance at the man lying naked and peacefully asleep, she fled.

Fifteen minutes later, Gillian was pacing restlessly in her living room. She'd been back in her cottage for long enough that she should be dead asleep, yet she was wide awake, and walking the floor. She sighed as she stopped by the window facing the main house. A pleasant ache still throbbed in muscles she'd never been aware of, before Remy had crashed into her life. She rubbed her arms against the chill that slipped over her. She missed the warmth of his arms around her, and the sound of his breathing. That was why she couldn't sleep.

Gillian groaned, and grabbed up the phone. There was only one person she could turn to, in her confusion. There was only one person she trusted to give her an honest answer. Punching in the familiar digits she hadn't used in far too long, she waited tensely through the first couple of rings, before a gruff, masculine voice answered, "Yeah?"

"Hey, Detective. Where'd you stash your favorite hostage?"

There was a moment of silence, and then, "Gillian?"

"Yeah."



She grinned at the surprise in Dillon Talbot's voice. She heard Grace's soft voice in the background, before her sister came on the line with an uncharacteristically sharp, "Gillian, what's wrong?"

Gillian felt her legs wobble, and sat heavily on the sofa as she fought back tears at the worry in her older sister's voice. Why had she never realized how much her distance hurt Grace? Swallowing back her tears, she forced a note of lightness to her voice as she quipped, "Geez. You marry a cop, and all of a sudden, you're paranoid!"

"It's the middle of the night, and you're calling me. My sister *never* calls," Grace said sternly. "Of course I'm worried!"

Gillian closed her eyes as the tears pricked again. How she'd managed to overlook her family's love, she wasn't sure, but she was beginning to suspect it was her stubborn pride, and hurt rebellion. Maybe her mother had called it right when she'd called Gillian her father's daughter. She'd fought so hard to prove Lily Maren wrong, to be the good daughter the Senator expected. Heat flushed through her as she recalled the first time she's made love with Remy, and her eyes flashed to the kitchen as she recalled her uninhibited response to him. Oh, yeah; there was a lot of Joe Maren's wild-child ways in his younger daughter. How had she been so blind, for so long?

The memory of making love, however, brought all her fears and confusion bubbling back to the surface, and she drew a deep breath for strength, before quietly admitting, "Grace, I think I've really done it, this time."

There was a pause. "This time?"

Gillian nodded, though she knew Grace couldn't see her. "I think... Oh, God, Grace. I *know* I'm in love."

There was a longer silence, before Grace suddenly broke into laughter. "Ah-ha! Finally, an explanation for your bizarre behavior!"

"Grace, I'm *serious*," Gillian said in exasperation. "I'm really in trouble, here."

"No, sweetie," Grace said gently. "You're in love."

"With a man who doesn't love me." Gillian buried her face in her hands, the phone propped between her shoulder and cheek. "What am I going to do?"

"What makes you think he doesn't love you? Did he tell you that?"

"Well... no," Gillian admitted, and then sighed. "But he's never said he *does*, either."

Grace's laughter washed through the line. "Oh, Gilly, honey! No man who would ever mean those words says them easily. The poor dears don't realize that we need to hear it." Grace chuckled warmly. "Do you have any idea how long it took Dillon to come out with that?"

"I thought you said it was love at first sight!"

"It was. But he never said he loved me until after he proposed, the silly man. He didn't say it until he nearly lost me."

Gillian swallowed hard. "So, how did you know?"

There was a small sigh. "Because he begged me to stay, when he could have let me walk away."

*Stay the night.* Remy's words, and the imploring expression on his face, struck her out of nowhere. She'd been surprised at the time, that a playboy like Remy Terreau would ever feel the need to ask a woman to remain in his bed. He didn't seem the type to *need* anyone—

"Oh, God..." The truth descended in a rush of elation, fear, and shame. Remy *didn't* need just any woman. That was the whole damned point; that was why he'd looked as pole-axed by the words as she'd felt.

Grace sighed. "Finally getting the picture, little sister?"

"Yeah." Gillian winced. "Too late, though. I already walked away."

“Gillian, it’s *never* too late, with love!” Grace argued. “Quit being such a defeatist.”

Anger flashed through Gillian. What did Grace know about hard times? She’d always had the world handed to her. It was easy to be optimistic when your life was a bed of roses... “I’m *not* a defeatist!”

“Please,” Grace scoffed, and sighed in exasperation. “You spent all of those years while we were growing up trying to be like me. The truth is, Gilly, you were never cut out to be like me.”

Gillian snorted. “Not another lecture about how looks are everything, please. I got enough of that from everyone else.”

“There’s absolutely nothing wrong with the way you look, dammit!” That harsh oath, from her normally refined sister, rocked Gillian back in her seat in shock. “You let Darrell and the rest of those idiots tell you that skinny was perfect. That’s not true! God, Gillian, don’t you know how many times I wished I had even half of your daring or spirit? So you’re not a size two. You told me that it didn’t matter to you; and your natural charisma draws people in ways that leave me in awe.” Grace drew a breath, and irony laced her tone as she said, “So I got Mom’s figure and her Caruso bearing. You, my darling sister, could have been a screen goddess, if you’d got past your need to prove yourself. You’re a Maren, clear through. You saw what happened to Dad, when he ran away from his troubles; he wasn’t strong enough to face them. But you, Gilly, are tougher than all of us put together. For God’s sake, *use* that.”

Gillian sat back, stunned by her sister’s impassioned speech. Grace *never* let go like that, that Gillian knew of. If Grace believed it was possible... “All right. Tell me how.”

Grace chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll figure that out all on your own, Gilly.”

A slow grin spread over Gillian’s face as she realized Grace was right. She knew exactly how to deal with Remy Terreau.

“Thanks, sis. You always did know just what to say.”

Grace laughed again. “It’s a curse. Go get ‘em, tiger; and be sure I get a wedding invite.”

Grace was still laughing as Gillian hung up the phone. She wasn’t after wedding bells, she told herself with a smile. She just wanted to know she had Remy’s love. Anything else, she’d let happen in its own time. She’d learned her lesson; she’d believed that marriage was all there was to love, before, and it’d led her into a disaster. She was wiser, and she knew that love was so much more than a ring. It came straight from the heart.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"You are in a very good mood, this morning, *Liebling*," Elsa observed with a smile as Gillian hummed a whimsical tune as she mixed ingredients for Crêpes Suzette.

Brian looked up from where he was making beignets and grinned wickedly. "That's post-great-sex glow, old girl. Someone got laid last night!"

"Brian!" Gillian scolded, blushing. But she couldn't be mad at him for the truth.

He grinned, and flashed her a wink.

"I got a c-note riding on who," he informed her with a waggle of his eyebrows. "So, dish already, girlfriend."

"A lady never tells," Elsa huffed. "You are a very naughty boy, Brian Parker, to even suggest—"

The kitchen door opened just then, halting Elsa's tirade, as Remy entered the room. Gillian's heart gave an involuntary kick, and her knees wobbled with the assault of heat pouring through her. His eyes met hers, and his smile softened as he strode up to her and, right there in front of Elsa and Brian, planted a kiss on her that she was sure should have melted the whisk in her hand.

"Good morning, *cherie*," he whispered as he slowly drew back, his eyes shining with heat.

Embarrassment shot through Gillian as she caught the flicker of Elsa's smile, and the wicked gleam in Brian's eyes. Heat flooding her face, she glared up at Remy, hissing, "What are you *doing*?"

"Kissing you," he answered unapologetically, and flashed her his most charming, playful grin as he brushed his lips over hers again. But it was the tender heat in his eyes when he drew back that arrested her attention, before he leaned to nuzzle her neck. "I missed you, this morning."

She flushed anew; this time in shame. She'd left him, after he'd begged her to stay. He had a right to revenge, but still... "Remy, this isn't the time or place..."

He chuckled, reaching to loosen a strand of her hair from beneath her bandana, twining it through his fingers and giving it a little tug. Then, he sobered, his eyes steady on hers. "Where did you go?"

"Home." She sighed in resignation. Clearly, Remy was determined to hash this out; she had no choice but to see it through.

His fingers slid loose from her hair, tracing an invisible line over her throat that made her shiver with heat. "Why?"

She turned back to what she was doing, determined not to let him unnerve her completely. "Because I didn't belong there."

Suddenly, Remy's hand engulfed hers, whisk and all. Taking the implement from her, he set the entire bowl grimly aside, and then swept Gillian into his arms and covered her mouth in a deep, searching kiss that she swore she could feel clear to her soul. When, at last, he released her, he murmured, "Let *me* be the judge of that, *cherie*."

The intensity of his eyes, the heat that flared there, held her captive, until she finally capitulated with a nod. Then, breaking free of his hold, she turned back to her work. "Do you want to talk about your nightmare?"

"Not particularly," he returned blandly, wrapping his arms around her from behind and trailing nibbling kisses down her neck. "I don't see any marks."

He sounded relieved. She closed her eyes, fighting her weakening resolve. "Make-up's a wonder."

His hand lifted, rubbing lightly at the base of her throat, removing a small patch of the make-up she'd applied so carefully this morning. A low oath slid from his lips, and his arms tightened around her. "God, I'm so sorry, Gillian..."

She drew a breath against tears at the self-loathing in his voice. She wasn't about to let him drag himself down about this. A subject change was clearly in order. "I used your computer last night."

He blinked at her. "For what?"

"Remy," she turned her head toward him again, "Scarlet Oak Manor has something very wrong. I found a place called the Phoenix Group, owned by Dr. Garner—"

"Reboulet. Yeah, I know," he said, dipping his head to kiss her as his hand slid up along her side, his destination clear.

"Remy!" She hissed, pulling away. Good God, what was his problem this morning? He was acting so... *strange*.

"Yes, *cherie*," he acknowledged with a small sigh. "What about this Phoenix Group?"

"I think you should call them."

"For what?" His hands grasped her hips, pulling her back until she could feel his arousal against the juncture of her spine and rear. Gillian's knees went watery, and she leaned into his touch briefly as heated memory flowed over her.

"You done with that crêpe batter yet, Gill?" Brian's voice broke the spell, jolting Gillian from her sensual haze. Oh, God. One touch, and she'd forgotten they weren't alone.

Handing the bowl of batter over to an impishly grinning Brian, she turned to Remy, straight-faced. "For help, Remy. This place is eating you alive, from the inside. They can help."

"The only help I need," he murmured huskily as he drew her flush against him, "is from *you, ma chérie*."

All right. That did it. As much as he was melting her, right now, Remy Terreau was clearly not himself. With an exasperated roll of her eyes, she pushed away from him. "Get out of here, Terreau, and let me get back to work, before you have to fire me for causing food poisoning."

He laughed, his eyes twinkling.

"If I must," he murmured, swiping one last, quick kiss. "*Adieu, ma amour*."

*Amour*. Love. The air rushed from Gillian's lungs as Remy disappeared through the door, leaving her world reeling with one question – had he really meant what he'd just said?

He had it bad. With a groan, Remy dropped into his chair and closed his eyes. What had possessed him, to think that he could just waltz into the kitchen and she'd fall into his arms? The answer of course, was so obvious that he'd be surprised if it appeared tattooed on his forehead. He was in love with her.

Not just any love. This love threatened to consume him in ways Scarlet Oak never could. Remy frowned as he remembered the cold fear that had gripped him when he'd first awakened this morning, alone in his bed. He'd been afraid it had all been a dream, that he'd never really had her there in his arms at all. But her sweet, wonderful scent had clung to his skin and sheets, and he'd known it was no dream.

He hadn't known how to take her departure, at first. Then, he'd found her discarded bra, still crumpled on the sitting room sofa where he'd dropped it last night. It'd been at that moment, with wrenching dread that he'd known. Gillian had left in the night; sometime while he slept, probably. The pain was still sharp, knowing that she hadn't cared enough to stay. And he'd gone and made a fool out of himself in front of his staff...

A wry smile twisted Remy's lips, before they softened as he remembered the look in her eyes as she'd asked about his nightmare – what had he said or done to scare her so badly? And talked about the Phoenix Group. It was the second time she'd mentioned Garner, though he was pretty sure the two had

never met. Especially since sunny Gillian suggested bringing in moody, troubled Garner to solve their problems.

Remy sighed. It wasn't that he didn't like his cousin; but there was something about Garner that made Remy uneasy. He was *too* focused, too intense in ways that were almost frightening. No; Remy had long since decided that asking Garner for help would essentially be turning the Devil loose among innocents.

However... Remy straightened. Gillian did have a point. Scarlet Oak was getting too dangerous. If Remy was ever going to make a go of this venture, he'd need to have the evil here expunged. And, while he would never ask Garner, there were other members of the Phoenix Group who he was sure would help. Like Maggie, Garner's ex-wife.

Remy smiled to himself, picturing outgoing, auburn-haired Maggie Snyder. Gillian would adore her, and Maggie was a trained and very powerful psychic. If there was anything at Scarlet Oak – perhaps the understatement of the Millennium – he could trust Maggie to deal with it.

Reaching for the phone, Remy ran through his mental checklist. He didn't have time today to make a trip into New Orleans, but he had business to conduct that he wasn't about to let wait any longer. First, he called his cousin, Garner's sister Terese.

"*Bonjour!* Terreau Imports," the cheery voice answered on the second ring.

"*Bonjour*, Terese."

"Remy!" She squealed into the phone, as excited as a little girl at Christmas. Remy grinned to himself. In a lot of ways, Terese was still a girl; at twenty-three, she was the youngest of his cousins, and the only one who'd shown even the slightest gift for the meticulously crafted jewelry for which his father's family sold.

"I need a big favor from you, *ma petite chatte*."

There was another squeal through the line, before her excited voice came through, breathless with excitement. "You want it, don't you?"

"Yes. But I can't come into New Orleans for it, today."

He heard her calling something out to someone in the background, then, "It's on the way, Remy. Charlie'll bring it out to you."

Remy chuckled. Terese Reboulet was a Terreau clear through – bull-headed and commanding – but it seemed Charles Seigler didn't mind. Ah, the wonders of love.

"Thanks, Terese. I owe you one."

"Just be happy, *mon cher*. That's all I ever asked."

Remy hung up a moment later, feeling peaceful in ways he hadn't realized he'd been missing. The idea of giving the piece Terese had crafted especially for him to Gillian made him feel light, as if a weight he hadn't realized he'd carried had suddenly lifted from his shoulders.

Remy spent the rest of the day on the phone, handling business, and it wasn't until that afternoon that he finally got a chance to place a call to Maggie, to see what it would take to gain her anonymous assistance. And, if he was very lucky, that would gain him the one thing he wanted above all else – Gillian's love.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

She heard the rich tones of Remy's laughter as she paused with her knuckles poised to rap on his office door. Then, a humorous lilt to his voice, "You're priceless, Maggie."

Gillian's heart froze in her chest at the familiarity in his tone. *Maggie?* Forcing herself to breathe normally around the lump that was aching in her chest, she felt anger rising slowly but steadily, blotting out her fear and pain. How dare he! He'd come into the kitchen this morning, all hands, making her hope, for the first time in her life, that she'd actually found what she'd spent so long dreaming of. Someone who loved her just as she was. Now, he was flirting with another woman?

Twisting the doorknob hard, she shoved open the door and stormed into his office, set to give him a substantial chunk of her mind no matter *who* he had on the line.

Remy glanced up at her entrance, and a soft smile creased his face, making Gillian's heart stop again – this time in pure, sweet need. "Come on in, *cherie*. I won't be but a minute."

She paused, confused. He'd looked at her with that sexy grin, and those smoldering flames in his eyes, and called her *cherie*, without even covering the phone or looking surprised. Now, he turned back to his conversation as easily as if she always sat in on his phone calls. Resolutely, Gillian closed the door behind her, surreptitiously flipping the lock as she did. Every time she and Remy had a conversation in his office, some distraction intruded. Not this time.

"I was thinking, around the twentieth. You can stay as long as you need to; I plan to be gone for about a month."

As he paused to listen to the mysterious Maggie's response, Gillian felt a lump lodge in her throat again. Remy was *leaving*? And the twentieth... God, the twentieth of October was less than two weeks away! Her knees wobbling, Gillian sank into a chair, staring bleakly at Remy. She loved him, and he was going to walk away from her.

"That works," Remy was saying, his attention focused on the calendar spread open on his desk. "Just remember, this is between us. I don't need any more disasters around here." There was another pause, and then, "Okay. See you then, Maggie."

Remy flicked Gillian an apologetic glance as he hung up the phone, and she saw the glint of fear, before he swiftly brushed it aside with a soft smile. "Sorry about that. Business. What's up?"

She drew herself up as his words sliced through her. She wasn't stupid; there was more than *business* between him and this Maggie. She had to remember why she'd come in here in the first place. "I've had enough."

He blinked, and the fear returned to his eyes, flaring almost out of control. She swore he stopped breathing completely for almost a minute. Then, in a quiet voice, he asked, "What do you mean, Gillian?"

She leaned forward, pressing her advantage. "You've evaded and procrastinated long enough, Remy. There's something very wrong at Scarlet Oak, and I want you to call the Phoenix Group, before someone gets seriously hurt. This is too dangerous to keep playing ostrich with."

He sat back, and some of the fear melted from his eyes as a half-smile tugged at his lips. "I told you; it's nothing you need to worry about. It can't hurt you."

"It's not *me* I'm worried about," she shot back.

He leaned forward again, suddenly intense, as his gaze probed hers, his features tightening as if he was about to take a tremendous leap. "Who are you worried about?"

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. Remy was a highly intelligent, very intuitive man. Why didn't he have a clue, yet? "*You*, Remy. I'm worried to death about you."

That seemed to fascinate him as much as it clearly frightened him. She could see the tic in his jaw, and the pulse hammering in his throat, even from where she was sitting. Then, in a tight, hoarse voice, he asked, "Why?"

She laughed in disbelief, startling him. Then, rising regally to her feet, she leaned across his desk, until barely an inch separated them, and, in a soft murmur, slowly enunciated, "Because I love you."

Remy sat back, stunned. She loved him? Slowly, those words penetrated his shock completely, and sunlight poured through all the dark areas in his soul. *She loved him!* He was on his feet in a flash, sidestepping the desk to pull her securely into his arms as he traced a trail of tender kisses over her face and neck.

She stiffened in surprise. "Remy?"

"Gillian, *ma amour*," he murmured against her ear. "You have no idea how desperate I've been to hear you say that. I love you so much, and I've been going out of my head wondering how you felt."

Gillian's hands pressed lightly against his chest. When he looked down into her eyes, he found stunned hope, and a tinge of fear. "What did you say?"

"I've been going crazy—"

She shook her head. "Before that."

Understanding seeped through him, bringing a soft smile to his face as his arms tightened around her. Looking into her beautiful, violet eyes, he murmured, "I love you, Gillian."

Tears welled in her amazing eyes, sending a rush of fear through Remy. Gillian never cried. Reaching up with a trembling hand, he brushed the tears from her cheeks. "*Cherie*? What's wrong?"

She shook her head, a tremulous smile blooming on her face. Her hand brushed against his cheek, and Remy reached to cover it, holding her hand against his face. They stared into each other's eyes for a long, silent moment. Then, unable to contain the words that had been swelling within his chest since last night any longer, Remy blurted, "Marry me."

She blinked in surprise. "What?"

He chuckled, giving her hand a squeeze as he brought it to his lips. "You're having a hard time hearing, all of a sudden, *cherie*."

"I just..." She stopped, an endearing blush spreading over her face. "I could have sworn you just said something about... getting married?"

"I did," he assured her softly. Then, quirking her a smile, he teased, "I've heard that's what people who love each other do."

Suddenly, a radiant smile covered her face, knocking the breath from Remy and nearly bringing him to his knees. He'd thought her mischievous wild-child grin was lethal? It was nothing compared to the pure joy and love engulfing her face now.

"Marry me," he managed hoarsely, uncaring that he was begging. "Today."

It was her turn to chuckle as she snuggled into his embrace. "Impatient, aren't you?"

"You have no idea," he growled, pulling her tight against himself, until he knew she could feel the arousal that'd been growing since the moment he'd looked up to see her standing in the doorway.

The throaty quality of her lighthearted laughter arrowed straight to his groin, it turned discomfort to clenching pain. God, he wanted her; today, tomorrow... forever didn't seem like such a bad idea, from where he was standing. Then, she sobered abruptly, looking up at him with somber eyes.

"Remy..."

He felt his breath catch in dread. She hadn't answered his question, yet, and he wasn't sure he could bear it if her answer was no. "Yes, love?"

"We're already sleeping together. You don't have to marry me..."

"Yes, I do," he contradicted firmly, meeting her eyes levelly. "Gillian, I don't want any halfway, with you. I want it all. I want you in my arms when I go to sleep at night, and I want you there when I wake up in the morning. I want to see your smiles, hear your laughter, and be there when you need someone to lean on." His voice dropped, husky with emotion he could no longer hold back, as he murmured, "You're everything I could ever want, and I don't want to miss a moment of life with you."

He heard her breath catch, and saw the tears rise back into her shining eyes.

"I want that, too," she whispered. "But, Remy..."

He cut her off with a drugging kiss, feeling her melt against him. "Yeah?"

"Not today." She drew away slightly, to smile up at him. "How about next week?"

He stared at her, and his pulse skipped a beat. He was too afraid to hope; he wanted to make sure he hadn't misheard her. "Was that a yes?"

Her impish grin was back, as she pressed against him and shifted her hips, making his eyes roll back as he groaned with need.

"That, baby, was most definitely a yes," she murmured in a sultry whisper that crawled along his skin, driving him crazy.

"Good." He bent his head to capture her lips, but she pulled back.

"Just one thing."

He groaned, feeling her soft flesh against him. "You're killing me, here."

Her eyes narrowed on him. "Who's Maggie?"

"No one," he growled, at the end of his rope. He was ready to burst with his need to be inside her, and she wanted to talk about Maggie? Not bloody going to happen. With another low, feral sound, he backed her toward his desk, his hands already working her shirt up as he nipped lightly at her neck.

"Remy," she warned, pulling away. "Who is she?"

He raised his eyes to her face at her somber tone, and sighed as he realized she was serious. This was a dead woman's fear he was facing; the fear of being replaceable. The thought of her ever being replaceable would have been laughable, except he wasn't in the mood to laugh. He wasn't in the mood to talk, either, but he knew that, to get his Gillian back, he had to answer this fear. She needed his reassurance.

"She's my cousin Garner's ex-wife."

"Garner?" Her eyes widened. "As in Garner Reboulet?"

"Yeah." He moved his hands to the clasp of her bra, releasing it in a deft motion. "Maggie's going to come check Scarlet Oak over, while you and I," he dropped to his knees before her, pressing reverent kisses over her belly, "spend a month on a tropical island, without all this distraction. What do you say? Convinced?"

Her only response was a low moan of need as she leaned back against his desk to steady herself as he learned every inch of her body with his clever hands and mouth. He covered her mouth with his own, drinking in her cries, as he entered her, and knew that, against the odds, he'd finally found the one place he truly belonged.

\* \* \*

She clenched her hands until her manicured fingernails bit into her palms, and gritted her teeth against the urge to scream bloody murder. There was no way she was letting this happen!

Pamela LaRouete stood stiffly outside Remy's office, listening to what she knew were sounds of muffled screwing. Bad enough he spent his nights with that slut; but to flaunt this sordid behavior in public...!

Damn it, Gillian didn't need Remy's money; she loved her silly little existence clunking around in all those pots and pans. She'd *chosen* to live like that, though Pamela couldn't see how anyone would



turn down living on Joe Maren's money. Remy should be marrying *her*, not Gillian. She'd worked too hard to get him; she deserved the good life, for what she'd put up with.

Her mind flashed to the revolver she kept locked in the glove box of her Firebird, and her eyes narrowed. She knew just how to solve this problem, for good.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

She'd heard the expression "walking on air" before, but she'd never quite understood what it meant, until now. Glancing down at her left hand, Gillian felt her eyes fill with tender tears again as she studied the unique white gold band, inset with a beautiful blue diamond. It wasn't like the large, gaudy things she'd seen far too many rich women sporting over the years, and she was glad of that. And when Remy had told her that there wasn't another ring like it in all the world, she'd burst into tears, scaring him, until he'd realized why she was crying. Then, with a tender smile, he'd told her the story behind the ring; that his cousin Terese had crafted it especially for the woman she'd predicted Remy would one day find to wear it.

A delicious shiver passed through Gillian, and she felt like giggling as she recalled where her impromptu visit to Remy had led. Her body still tingled with their lovemaking, and the ring on her finger reminded her constantly of the promises he'd made. He intended them to be married as soon as possible; she'd been the one to insist on a week, to bring her sister to New Orleans, and any of his family that wanted to be present.

"Somebody's been doing something naughty with the boss man," Brian observed with a wink as Gillian entered the kitchen, still grinning widely.

She flashed him an impish grin and stuck out her left hand, cautioning, "You better watch your tone, Parker. I can get you kicked out of here on your ass."

"And have Elsa quit on you?" Brian teased back, and then whistled as he inspected the ring. "Whoa, Gill, that's some rock."

Elsa suddenly materialized at her side, a beaming smile on her normally austere face.

"I knew it," she crowed happily, studying the ring with a glow Gillian could almost believe was maternal pride. "When I saw him this morning, I knew."

Caught up in congratulatory hugs from Elsa and Brian, she first heard the noise and it was quiet, like something dropping in the distance. And it was coming from the Keep, she realized as she listened closer. Gillian's heart sped up as adrenaline poured through her. The intruder was back!

"Brian, go use the phone at the front desk, and call the cops," she instructed as she lifted one of her butcher knives from the storage block. "Elsa, get Remy. Tell him that the intruder's back. He'll know what you mean."

With a worried frown and a nod, Elsa shuffled off to find Remy, while Brian dashed for the front of the hotel. Gillian grasped the knife tighter, drew a breath for courage, and stalked toward the Keep. This was the man who'd scared her silly with his stupid little message, and then come back and attacked the man she loved. She'd taken enough of his terror. Gillian Martin had one hell of a score to settle.

Pushing through the Keep's door, Gillian froze as she heard a click, and a familiar voice hissed, "Drop the knife, bitch."

Gillian blinked. It wasn't the intruder, after all! "Pamela?"

The woman stepped from the shadows, a revolver clutched in her shaking hands. "I said drop the knife."

"Pamela," Gillian tried quietly, as she laid the butcher's knife on the floor. "You don't want to do this."

A harsh laugh broke Pamela's lips. "Oh, you are *so* wrong! I've been itching to do this for weeks."

Gillian stared at the other woman, her pulse pounding as she noted the maniacal gleam in Pamela's green eyes. "Why?"

Another bark of laughter answered her. "Because you've taken everything I wanted."

Confusion shot through Gillian. "I never—"

"Don't lie to me, bitch!" Pamela screeched, her face mottling in fury as she waved the gun. "Remy's *mine*! Do you hear me? I'm the one who deserves to be wearing that ring; I've worked my ass off to get it, and you waltzed in and stole it away."

Gillian sucked in a sharp breath, feeling her heart clench. "You love Remy?"

"Love?" Pamela laughed scornfully. "Is that what you really think all that screwing you've been doing is all about? Men like Remy Terreau don't love; they're not made that way. Remy can give me the good life, and all the comforts money can buy. I'll let him screw his brains out. Who needs love?"

Gillian closed her eyes, drawing a steadying breath, as she remembered the tenderness that had glowed in Remy's eyes as he'd made love to her earlier. Pamela was so wrong. Softly, she murmured, "Remy does."

"Shut up!" Pamela waved the gun in her face. "Remy was supposed to fire you."

Gillian's eyes flew open at that admission. "You're the one who left the clippings!"

"Yeah." Her finger tightened on the trigger, her eyes narrowing. "I took the chance that he'd be pissed enough about the lie to fire you. I would have been. But I'm not taking any more chances, now."

She was going to fire. The realization crossed Gillian's mind a split second before she reacted, diving for the other woman's knees even as the weapon discharged, the bullet imbedding itself in the door behind where Gillian had just been standing. The gun went flying as Gillian's tackle brought Pamela to the floor with a screech of rage. Her head hit the stone floor, and she slumped, out cold.

Gillian rose to her knees, shuddering with the aftereffects of the adrenaline still pumping in her system. She felt stiff and a slight ache throbbed in her head, but she knew she'd survive. The crisis was over. Looking at the woman laying on the floor, her red hair spread out over the stone, Gillian shook her head sadly. It was hard to believe what the promise of money did to some people.

She was rising slowly to her feet when the door burst open, causing her to whirl, only to be swept up into Remy's tight embrace. She felt him shaking against her, and when she looked up, the panic in his eyes was nearly overwhelming.

"Are you all right?" He muttered, his hands running over her in search of injury. "My God, Gillian..."

"Remy, I'm fine," she assured him softly, laying a stilling hand against his chest.

Relief flooded his blue eyes, and he crushed her against him again, his mouth finding hers in an ardent kiss. No feeling in the world, Gillian decided weakly, had ever been so welcome.

\* \* \*

Lt. Andrew Murray sat back in his chair, shaking his head as he offered Gillian a wry grin. "Young lady, that was a very brave, and quite reckless, thing you did. You've got more guts than half my detectives." His eyes sparkled with laughter. "Want a job?"

"No way," Remy growled, his arm tightening around her shoulders as he held her snuggled close against him on his sitting room sofa.

Gillian elbowed him playfully. "So much for enlightenment, Terreau. You are a total Neanderthal!"

Remy nuzzled her ear, setting off a series of warm shivers, as he whispered, "You haven't seen anything yet."

She grinned, but turned her attention back to an indulgently grinning Murray. "What'll happen to Pamela, now?"

Andrew blew out his breath in a sigh. "That all depends on you and Remy. I'm going to assume she doesn't have a job, anymore."

Remy grunted. "You got that right."

Andrew looked back at Gillian. "Are you going to press charges?"

"Definitely," Remy responded gruffly.

"We'll discuss it," Gillian countered, giving him a quelling look. She didn't believe Pamela was anything more dangerous than a scarred, misguided woman who'd developed an unhealthy fixation. She couldn't send the woman to jail for that.

A brief grin flickered at Andrew's lips as he rose to his feet. "Then I'll leave you to it. Just remember; you only have forty-eight hours to press charges."

With that, he nodded farewell, grabbed up his jacket, and let himself out.

Remy turned to her with a lifted brow and a wry smile. "We'll *discuss* it? I always knew you were a marshmallow."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Marshmallow, my ass. I went into that Keep intending to draw blood, Remy."

"And now you're going to let her walk, aren't you?"

She shrugged, knowing he'd seen right through her. "I don't see the point in sending the poor woman to prison."

"She tried to kill you," he reminded her gruffly.

She shot him an impish grin. "So did you. You're still here."

He blinked at her, and then laughed softly, and bent his head to taste her skin. "So sweet."

"Remy..."

He moved his lips along her skin, and she felt herself melting. Through the sensual haze, she heard his husky chuckle. "Yep. Definitely a marshmallow."

## EPILOGUE

Soft music floated through the air from the cantina down on the beach, and the moonlight caught at the gold highlights in her hair, forming a soft halo around her head. But she was no angel; she was wild, and amazing, and all his. Remy watched her from the balcony door of their suite as she turned her head up, her sweet face drinking in the moonlight, and felt himself hardening again as her tranquil beauty hit him in the heart.

“Are you just going to stand there, all night?” Gillian’s murmur wafted to him on the warm Caribbean breeze, stirring him.

He smiled. He hadn’t realized that she’d known he was there. He’d been too busy enjoying the vision of her in that sheer, silky white peignoir. Crossing the space between them, he wrapped his arms around his wife of five days, drawing her sweet, familiar scent into his lungs as his heart expanded and overflowed. He’d never put much stock in love, until Gillian. Now, with every day that passed, she was teaching him how sweet love could be.

“You looked like you were a million miles away,” he whispered against her ear, drawing her closer against his body. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Her smile softened as her hands came to rest over his at her waist, bringing their matching rings into contact. Terese had crafted the rings using interwoven strands of white gold, forming a flowing oak tree design; a symbol of the strength of everything that bound them together.

“I was just thinking about the wedding,” she admitted softly.

He squeezed her gently, as guilt pricked him. He’d been worried about that; he didn’t want her equating their hurried nuptials in the judge’s chamber with the memory of Darrell Anders. He didn’t want any more ghosts between them. “Are you upset about it, *cherie*?”

She turned her head to smile up at him. “No. Actually, I’m relieved. A regular wedding would have meant media; I think I was nervous enough.”

He chuckled, and dropped a brief, sweet kiss on her too-tempting lips. “Then what is it?”

She turned in his arms, until she was pressed against him, only her robe and his pants between them. Twining her hands around his neck, she whispered, “You set up that whole reception at *Duex Regali*, didn’t you? Because we didn’t get married the normal way?”

Remy smiled down at her, letting her see the love she stirred so easily within him. “I had a little help from Guy and your sister, but yeah, the idea was mine. I wanted you to have something beautiful to remember.”

“I have you. What more could I want?” She traced a hand over his bare chest, before she turned tear-filled eyes to his and breathed, “And my parents? Whose idea was that?”

Remy swallowed as he remembered the tender, tearful reunion between Gillian and her parents. Grace had been right when she’d said it had been too long in coming.

“I did. It was time to lay the past to rest, *cherie*,” he murmured huskily as he bent his head to trace soft caresses over her face and throat. “No more ghosts, Gillian; no more regrets.”

Gillian’s eyes closed as tears slipped down her cheeks, and she melted against him, setting off a rush of fresh sensation through Remy’s body. “No more regrets.”

Pulling Gillian securely into his embrace as he claimed her mouth in a loving kiss, Remy wondered briefly, in a corner of his mind, how Maggie was handling Scarlet Oak. And then, he shrugged it away. Whether Scarlet Oak Manor failed or succeeded, he no longer cared. He had everything he needed right here in his arms. Gillian’s love was more than enough.

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Book Three in “The Curse of the Midnight Star” series