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by  
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Dedication

~~ To Helen, Millie and Sam

Thank you for everything~~

## Prologue

### *Outskirts of London, 1700*

She was old, tired, with bones that creaked and a back that bowed.

As she cast a dozen and one willow twigs within the circle of truth etched upon the hard packed earth, her green eyes gone hazy with age reached into the future. Life was a twisting maze of choices, some good, some bad and some indifferent. Ignoring the good and the indifferent, she concentrated on the bad, the ones that affected her, hers and the future.

With an old burlap satchel holding the herbs needed, she lowered her old body before the open pit fire and waited for the apex of the full moon. Having cast aside fancy words and rhyming verses many years before, she spoke to the Gods with heartfelt words.

"God of my soul, have mercy on this old woman for being blinded by a mother's love. From this day forward what the Gods have decreed will not be left to chance but tutored through divine visions. With the coming of the first shed blood, the female of my bloodline will know her calling. With truth to self, she will gather her power, live her power, trust her power and use the power in a manner that will honor her soul, her Gods, her truths.

"Within the shadows of dream, her soul will touch the soul created to join with her for all eternity. When the Gods deem the time is right they will meet, test their strengths, learn their weaknesses. Sparks will fly, honor tested, as they learn, accept or deny the true meaning of love, trust, and companionship.

"If a maiden slumbers with any other than her chosen mate, abuses her power or neglects her power, the power will be torn from her without mercy. Have mercy on their souls. As I say so shall it be."

## Chapter 1

*JFK Airport—April 1, 2005*

The unmistakable stench saturated the stale air. As warm liquid quickly seeped into Cole's khaki slacks from crotch level downward, he watched a puddle of the curdled milk drip off the pointed toe of one snakeskin boot.

"Oh, I am so sorry, here let me help." Thrusting a crying baby into his arms, the mother frantically rubbed at his crotch with a damp white washcloth as her pint-sized sons stood close by making gagging sounds.

Cole gritted his teeth. "Ma'am, why don't you give me the rag?"

"But the..."

"Ma'am, trust me, I'm a big boy. I can wipe off my own pants."

Realization came in one big rush—snickers from a few male travelers and her tomato red blush came a moment later.

"Ma'am, it's fine. Really." Handing over the baby, Cole made a hasty retreat.

Exiting the restroom, he paid no attention to the crush of people as he stopped to listen to the crackling intercom. "Departure time for flight 6399 from JFK to Dallas has been rescheduled for 8 P.M. Boarding will begin at 7:30."

With the aroma of sour milk clinging to him like cheap cologne, Cole vetoed the idea of going to the bar to drown his frustration in an ice-cold beer.

As Cole approached the crowded waiting area, the young woman's sons ignored her flustered protests as they made a mad dash towards him.

"Mister, are you a real cowboy? Mom said maybe you were 'cause of your snakeskin cowboy boots."

Not wanting to be ignored, his younger brother shoved him with his shoulder. Tilting their heads back, the boys looked into blue eyes that appeared to be a mile away.

"Bobby said you skinned the rattlesnake for your boots while he was still alive. My dad could do that. He flies jets off a big ship." Demonstrating a plane taking off with his hand, the boy added, "When he comes home, I'm gonna have him kill me a rattlesnake. Did ya know you still stink like barf? My name's Billy, what's yours?"

Offering his large hand, Cole said, "Glad to meet you Billy. My name is Cole Young. My brother might disagree, but yes, I'm a cowboy."

"Mom, he really is a cowboy and he shook my hand. Guess what, he has a brother. And he still stinks like barf," Billy yelled as he dashed across the walkway to stand in front of his mother.

Bobby, following Cole across the walkway, climbed onto the rock hard blue plastic seat beside the one Cole settled into.

Billy looked at Cole with big round eyes. "Do you have a horse?" His voice held a tinge of awe at the idea.

"Of course he has a horse, dummy. He's a cowboy. Bet the horse is big, black and mean." The look on Bobby's face was hopeful as his blue eyes stared at Cole.

"There is a big, ornery black stallion on the ranch. His name is Ash. But my horse is a friendly gray appaloosa mare named Polka Dot."

Bobby wrinkled his freckled nose. "Sounds like a dumb girl's name."

"What can I say, my mom named her."

A look, an eye roll and a small what-can-you-do shrug completed the male bonding.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the plane landed in Dallas, five hours behind schedule, jet lag had muddled Cole's brain, and his wallet, cell phone and passport had been lifted.

Locating Cody, his brother, at the luggage carousel wasn't hard; he stood a head taller than everyone else. "Give me your cell phone?"

"Nice to see you, too." Cody slapped Cole on the back as he handed over the phone.

A cheerful voice at the credit card company informed Cole that within a six-hour time span, his card had been on an amazing fifty thousand dollar shopping trip, courtesy of the Internet.

"What did they buy?" Cody asked as they headed to the pickup.

"A ton of electronics and two-dozen Victoria's Secret bras and matching thongs in a rainbow of colors."

"That should be good for a few laughs around the bunkhouse. But you know it could be worse."

At six, Cole would have copied Billy's earlier actions by shoving his brother just for the fun of wiping the grin off his face. Now he pocketed his hands and eyed Cody with baleful suspicion.

"How the hell do you figure that?"

"It's midnight. April Fool's day is over."

A ghost of dread whispered hello as a shudder rippled across Cole's shoulders and down his spine.

## Chapter 2

"Mom, what the h ... what is a yard beautification project?" Cole asked as he helped load supplies into the back of a horse trailer redesigned into a modern day chuck wagon.

"It's just as it sounds, dear; we're going to spruce up the backyard. Marge Blankenship was telling me the other day ... Oh, that reminds me, yesterday I ran into Maggie Taylor. Her daughter, Carol—you remember her, a cute little brunette, three years behind you in school—just got a divorce. Did you know she went to Texas Tech on a full scholarship? Maggie is going to have Carol and her two cute-as-a-button daughters come out to the ranch tomorrow to ride the horses. Carol started an internet business..."

Virginia Young's disjointed conversations were legend. Cole interrupted. "Mom, you were talking about transforming the dirt berm between the house and the corrals into a raised flower bed. Why do you keep looking at me as you say, we?"

"Because you're going to help me, dear."

Just out of reach, Cody guided his horse in a slow tight circle. Tipping his hat lower on his forehead, he gave Cole an isn't-life-grand grin. "See you later, flower boy."

\* \* \* \*

"Afternoon, Mrs. Gilligan. I need to replace my stolen driver's license."

A beady-eyed glare stern enough to scare a dead man into breathing had Cole swallowing his smile.

"My wallet was stolen. I have no identification."

"Like I said, I need two forms of identification."

Removing his steel gray Stetson, Cole tried his best bedside manner with a charming smile. "You've known me since I was born; surely you can overlook the rule."

"I don't care who you say you are; rules are rules. Two forms of identification."

Her smug look of satisfaction had Cole gritting his teeth as he plucked the Stetson off the counter.

"You drive home to get that identification; I'll notify the sheriff you're driving without a license. That's a five hundred dollar fine."

Like a delinquent teenager, Cole called his mother.

When Virginia arrived, she handed Cole's birth certificate to Alice Gilligan.

"I need a second form of identification," Alice said testily.

"I'm the second form of identification. You have a problem with that, Alice?" The casualness of the question's delivery didn't match the 'be careful what you say' look Virginia gave her.

Meekly, Alice mumbled, "No problem at all," before scurrying down the hall like a fat rat racing towards a two layer chocolate cake.

"Cole, you done planting flowers?" Sheriff Don Cramer slowly ambled towards him.



"I should be so lucky. Mom just informed me she was headed to the nursery to look at fruit trees. I swear if she changes her mind one more time, I'm running away from home."

"As I recall, we tried that once. Think you can make it past the graveyard this time?"

"I can always try. Trouble is Mom would just get on a horse and hunt me down, or worse, send Carol Taylor out to find me."

"Heard she was back in town. Why doesn't she sic her on Cody?"

"Probably because during her last matchmaking attempt, Cody told the poor woman that he had a bad case of genital herpes, while he was shaking her hand. Handed Mom a five dollar bill for the curse jar and stomped out the back door using every foul word he figured wouldn't get him killed to make his point."

"She must be going soft to allow that to stop her. Understand you want to renew that stolen license."

"I do. Can't believe the old biddy dragged you down here for that. Or has she figured out another way to pay me back for not being the one to fall in love with Peggy?"

"Don't take it personally. It's all about bragging rights. Doctors rate a ten."

"What's a sheriff rate?"

"Minus zero."

Cole winced. "Why did she go running to you?"

"There's a warrant out on you. I was sent down here to arrest you."

"Not funny."

"Wasn't joking. Your license was used to post bond on a DUI in Delaware. Before the guy skipped, he robbed a convenience store at gunpoint and stole the clerk's car."

"Shit, hell, fire and damnation!" Cole raked his fingers through his hair.

Don shot a quick glance around the office. "Lower your voice. If there's still a law on the books for cursing in public, you can bet your sweet ass the old biddy knows the code."

The old biddy, eavesdropping from an office doorway, had excellent hearing. Stomping to her supervisor's office, she slammed the door hard enough to rattle the glass.

"Ah shit. Now I've done it!"

"What's the worst she can do?"

"As an employee, nothing. As my mother-in-law, she makes life hell just by breathing. Let's go to my office before she comes out. This shouldn't take long to straighten out."

It took fingerprints, mug shots, a lawyer, and several phone calls to clear his name.

The April fools ghost struck again the following morning when a man smuggling drugs was arrested while using Cole's passport to get through U.S. customs.

\* \* \* \*

As relentless as a drill sergeant giving orders to a powerless recruit, his mother kept Cole working on the hillside. With the end in sight, Cole was counting the minutes before he could jump on a horse to escape from reality and people for a few days.

Lifting one end of the last railroad tie, he started to roll it so he could maneuver it into place. "When Pete gets back with the sprinkler heads—Ah, shit!" He dropped the wood.

"Are you all right?" Virginia yelled as she ran towards him.

It was a good question. The good news was the granddaddy of a rattlesnake was history. The bad news was some loose ground beneath Cole's left boot had shifted. The end of the railroad tie felt like it was embedded in the arch of his foot. Grimacing, he tried to ignore the pain as he pulled the foot out from under the heavy wood. "Couldn't be better."

"Let me take a look," Virginia said as she reached for his pant leg.

"Mom, don't..."

Cole tumbled ass over teakettle backward over the four-foot high retaining wall.

\* \* \* \*

The sounds and smells of the emergency room were getting on Cole's nerves. Or maybe it was the fact that nothing had gone right since he had landed on U.S. soil and his mother hadn't stopped apologizing and fussing since he'd regained consciousness.

Doc Staples, who had swatted his butt at birth, set Cole's broken arm at seven and endorsed his application into medical school, walked briskly into the small waiting room just outside of x-ray. The doctor clipped the x-rays under a light. "You have three hairline cracks on the cuneiform bones and a broken toe. Added to the sprain and the concussion, I'd advise staying off a horse for a few days and don't drink any alcohol for the next twenty-four hours. I'm going fishing in the morning. If you want to come along, be at the dock at five. And bring your own can of worms."

\* \* \* \*

By the time dinner was over, Virginia had apologized a dozen times for causing Cole to fall.

"With all the excitement I forgot to mention that Martin called this morning. He's proposed to the young woman who lives across the street from him," Virginia said.

Cody's eyes narrowed. "How young?"

"She's a Hypnotherapist. Remember that movie where the man used hypnosis to have a guy kill people? Rita used hypnosis to lose thirty pounds before she started dating Harry. But they didn't marry so maybe that wasn't a good thing. Maybe one of..."

"Mom, the woman's age?" Cody asked.

"Oh, I believe he said she was twenty-eight. Or maybe it was twenty-seven."

\* \* \* \*

"Call Martin and find out what you can about the gold digger." Cody grabbed the can of beer setting on the end table next to Cole's hand as he walked by. "And mom says no alcohol until tomorrow." Plopping down on the couch, he planted stocking feet on an antique mission oak coffee table. His smile was smug as he raised Cole's beer can to his lips.

Cole knocked Cody's feet off the coffee table. "Who says she's a gold digger? Just because once upon a time you allowed your dick to control your common sense doesn't mean Martin's a dumb ass."

"She's twenty eight, he's sixty two, what else could she be?"

"If you're so interested, you call."

"Now who's being a dumb ass? If I call, he'll know why and won't say a thing."

"True. But give me one good reason I should be the one to do the prying."

"I asked nicely. I can still stomp your sorry ass. I'll call Carol Taylor and mention your stumbling around here on crutches, the concussion and how you love fresh cherry pie."

Cole shuddered. "Damn, you're mean," he muttered as he reached for the phone.

"Uncle Martin, I hear congratulations might be in order?"

"Could be. She hasn't said yes but I'm hoping. Wait till you meet her. Not sure what a sweet young thing like her sees in me but I'm not complaining."

"If you're fishing for compliments, forget it. When are you bringing her to the ranch?"

"Got offered a two-week photo assignment for a cruise line that was too good to turn down. Leave tomorrow. As soon as I'm back, we'll make arrangements to drive down. Why don't you come up here to keep her company while I'm gone? The local hospital has a new cardiology unit you could check out while you're here."

"Is the unit taking pediatric patients?"

"Haven't heard, but it will be easy enough for you to check out."

"I'll do that. Thanks for the offer, but after being gone for six months I need to tackle the paperwork that's stacked to the ceiling."

"If you change your mind, Ginger has a key. She lives in the yellow Victorian across the street. She's a great cook. You won't go hungry."

"You're the one that can't cook. If I change my mind I'll call you in the morning. Otherwise have fun and we'll see you when you get back."

Cole set the receiver back on its cradle.

"Well, what did he say? From your end of the conversation it sounded like Mom was right." Impatient for answers, Cody started tapping his fingers on the arm of the couch.

"It sounds like he has proposed, but she hasn't accepted."

"Shit." Cody's statement was heartfelt. Because of a short entanglement with a sexy vixen that believed *Texas* and *ranch* were synonyms for *oil* and *wealth*, Cody mistrusted all females.

Turning to their father who had been sitting quietly in his favorite chair during the entire conversation, Cody demanded, "Dad, you can't let this happen."

"He's a big boy. If he wants to get married he's entitled," Walt Young replied.

"Maybe so, but if you ask me when it comes to women, Uncle Martin has a long history of being too damn trusting. At least hire a private investigator to find out more about the woman."

"I'm not wasting good money on some damn fool private investigator. Cole, there's no reason you can't do the same thing."

"What? You want me to play a fool?"

"Beats paying for one. Shouldn't be hard to figure out if she has an ulterior motive."

Cole's one-finger salute answered Cody's smug look of victory.

## Chapter 3

Twenty-four hours later, Cole used the light from the moon to guide him down the alley behind his uncle's house. Parking the rental car in the garage, he used the emergency key Martin had sent his mother to sneak into the house through the back door.

A large open ceiling foyer dissecting the center of the first floor allowed an eyebrow window to bathe the foyer with moonlight. From the foyer, one could access the office, living room, kitchen with breakfast nook, and a formal dining room.

Checking out the modern kitchen hidden behind old-fashioned bead-board cupboard doors, Cole grabbed a cold beer before heading up a staircase tucked between the kitchen and dining room. Off a large sitting area overlooking the downstairs entry were two spacious guest rooms with their own antique-styled baths. The master suite had a small sitting area full of exercise equipment, double walk-in closets and a well-appointed modern bath.

\* \* \* \*

With the sun just creeping over the horizon, Cole felt restless, edgy, like something or someone was trying to push him out the door. Deciding it was early enough to safely check out the neighborhood, he scratched the itch. When his foot and ankle protested at the abuse, he leaned against a tree to rest.

Spotting a jogger coming toward him, Cole sucked in air, then forgot to breathe as he forced his eyes past the breasts bouncing under a baggy t-shirt. If asked to describe an angel, she would have fit the bill. Red hair blazed with golden highlights; emerald green eyes sparkled with mischief; and her lips, blush pink, were full—made for kissing—made for him. For a heartbeat of a moment, he was blinded by a vision of her long slender legs locked around his waist. With his large hands spanning her tiny waist, he paid homage to the bouncing breasts that tasted like sweet golden honey. When the vision cleared, his body was slick, hot, and hard.

When she jogged past without any indication that he existed, a feeling of loneliness, one he hadn't felt in many years, washed over him.

Stopping himself from calling out to her, Cole headed back to his uncle's house.

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later, Cole almost dropped the binoculars when he discovered the jogger with hair the color of a new copper penny and the body of a goddess was none other than Ginger Prescott, his uncle's fiancée.

Martin's physical profile was simple. He had a slight gut, bald spot with a bad comb-over and large ears sprouting turfs of hair. Not exactly a sex kitten's dream man.

With a grain of suspicion wedged into the May-December romance, his brother's 'I Spy' mission had new meaning.

After two days of boredom broken by sporadic moments of action, Cole figured he should have just asked his uncle if hot sex with a woman young enough to be his daughter had allowed his dick to control his common sense. Martin would have crawled through the phone line to kick the shit out of him, but two restless nights of sleep had Cole feeling that way anyway, so it would have saved a lot of wasted time.

Seeing movement across the street, he grabbed the high-powered binoculars Cody had donated to the

cause. Ginger, standing on the porch of the yellow and white classic Victorian, hugged an older woman goodbye before retreating behind the solid oak door to her office. A discreet brass plaque hanging on the door read: Ginger Prescott, Hypnotherapist and Life Counselor.

Having nothing better to do, he flipped through the digital pictures he had printed out on Martin's computer. Standing next to a sweet '65 red Mustang convertible, Ginger had one brow arched as she thumbed through a stack of mail. A red Marilyn Monroe style halter dress showed off her hourglass figure and had him wishing there was a ventilation grate under her feet.

His wish for a second look at her shapely, toned legs came true when she climbed out of a vintage white with red interior '56 Thunderbird wearing a midriff-baring green top and a pair of white shorts just shy of indecent.

But it was the pictures of her beside a sleek black '65 GTO that kicked his heart rate into fifth gear. After getting out, she had stretched over the front seat to grab some shopping bags. Without a doubt, the woman's ass was made for tight-fitting jeans.

Another stack of pictures showed her in an ever-changing array of hairstyles and clothing. What he wanted to know was how much of her high maintenance his uncle was financing.

The last stack of pictures showed her with clients that for two days had arrived at eight, ten and noon. There was nothing unusual unless one wanted to read something into her hugging clients. Or thought it was highly suspicious that a hypnotherapist had elderly men arriving at her office carrying bouquets of flowers. Automatically raking fingers through his mussed hair, Cole muttered, "Shit." It was a sad state of affairs when he started handing out judgments when his own testosterone levels had jumped to new highs since the moment he had first laid eyes on her.

Other than unanswered questions and frustration, the surveillance had netted him nothing, nada, zero, zilch.

He figured his burning desire to see if his uncle's fiancée felt as good in his arms as she looked meant the universe was still playing a colossal April fool's joke.

## Chapter 4

"No. Don't. I'm going to die. It's too big. The man ... Oh..."

"Janie, tell me, what is happening?"

"They're going to kill me!" Janie whispered.

"Who is going to kill you?"

In a soft husky voice so unlike Janie's usual brazen directness, Ginger had to strain to hear, "The men."

*What men? What had happened to the parlor where she had been indulging her addiction for chocolate éclairs and Irish cream coffee?*

Ginger didn't have to ask.

"There are three gorgeous men. They really like me. I mean they really, really like me. The blonde called me a tasty wench." Janie giggled like a teenage girl wickedly aware of her budding sexuality and more than eager to test the power.

"Janie, tell me what is happening?"

"Do I have to?" she whined.

"No, but it would help me to know how I can help you." Under normal circumstances, the situation would be amusing. As a hypnotherapist, Ginger helped clients discover unconscious potentials and untapped talents no matter how ordinary or imaginative their final plans might be. However, two nights of fear-inducing dreams followed by restless tossing and turning had stripped her patience and sense of humor down to barebones.

"I don't need your help. I'm doing just fine on my own. I'm going to stay here forever." A heartfelt sigh turned into throaty whimpers.

"Janie."

No answer. Seconds felt like hours before Janie produced an emotionally satisfied moan. No need to ask what that was about!

"Janie, are you ready to continue?"

"No."

It was time to take control. "Have you created a safe space you can enter when you have a desire to break your diabetic diet?"

"Yes, the men are going to help me."

Heaven help her, after Janie's moan, Ginger didn't want to ask, but nonetheless she had no choice. "Where is the safe space and how are the men going to help?"

"It is a beautiful bedroom. A light breeze fluttering sheer curtains at a cathedral shaped window gently caresses me as it presses the sheer fabric of my nightgown against my body. The walls are bathed in a

soft golden light coming from a small oil lamp sitting on a delicate three-legged table next to an ornately carved wooden rocking chair. The only other furniture is a very large canopied bed draped with blue and gold tapestries. The gold brocade covering the goose down mattress has been invitingly pulled back. When I visit the room, the men will be waiting for me. When you so rudely interrupted, they were showing me how helpful and fun their imaginative games will be in distracting me from wanting to eat."

Remembering the historical romance novels always tucked into the top of Janie's suitcase-sized purse, Ginger realized Janie's subconscious was recreating a scene from one of them. With Janie's flair for dramatics, she wasn't surprised at the attention to details.

"Janie, the room you have created is a safe, inviting, friendly space. A space you can enter any time you so choose. You will always be welcome and safe within the walls of this room. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But you scared the men away. It's the men I want. Want to have the men in the room. Now!"

"Janie, if that is what you want, ask the men to join you in the room. They cannot harm you. Do you understand? The men cannot harm you." Ginger bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing at Janie's seductive smile.

"Okay. They are back. Can they tie me up?"

*Good grief.*

"Janie, as long as you are a willing participant you can do anything you want within the room. Do you understand this is a p ... safe room?" Jeez, she'd almost said 'playpen,' then again, it was sounding like the adult version of one.

"Okay. Maybe I'll tie them up."

Ginger choked on a chuckle as she tried wiping that image out of her mind. "Janie, please create a short phrase, a phrase you can use as a mantra. Make it easy to remember. It can be anything you want."

"Anything?"

She'd forgotten to whom she was talking. "No. Janie, make up a short phrase, two or three words long that if overheard will not embarrass anyone. When ready please tell me the phrase."

"Hello, Lover Boy." Janie uttered the phrase with a seductive purr that put every screen goddess in the last sixty years to shame.

*Okay, don't laugh. It could have been far worse!* "Hello, Lover Boy, is your mantra?"

"Yes. But you aren't saying it right."

Refusing to step into that trap, Ginger ignored the comment. "Janie when you have an overpowering urge to break your diet you will be able to easily enter your safe place by repeating the phrase, Hello, Lover Boy. When you say, Hello, Lover Boy, you will relax and enter your safe place. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Janie, coming back to the present, alert, refreshed, relaxed. Coming back to the present. One. Two. Three. Open your eyes."

Janie's five foot nothing frame was draped in a predominately purple flowing caftan. As if the outfit wasn't enough to grab your attention, her customary shade of cotton candy pink hair dramatically clashed with



inch long fingernails painted tomato red with fuchsia racing stripes across the tips. Though she was the mother of four children, grandmother of nine, great-grandmother to two and had celebrated her fifty-ninth birthday for the last ten years, she came out of hypnosis giggling like a teenager.

She also looked a little flushed. The rapid movement of the pulse in her neck confirmed that her heart rate was a little high. But there was also a certain glow that had not been present before the session. Was the flush from embarrassment, stimulation, or both?

"You cannot believe what happened. Why, let me tell you, I haven't been that turned on since ... well to tell the truth I don't know if I ever was. Mind you, my poor dear Henry was a sweetheart. But in bed he was a little boring and ... oh, never mind ... those three men were really something. Why you ... oh my, I never knew a man's..."

*Okay, she was definitely stimulated.*

Ginger glanced towards the recliner next to her. The shadow that had been suspended above the chair during the session had disappeared. Poor Henry. Sometimes you heard things you did not want to know when you made yourself an uninvited guest.

"Janie, I get the picture. There is no need to share the details." *Please don't share the details.*

"Before you get off the massage table I want you to try out the mantra. Close your eyes and repeat 'Hello, Lover Boy' until you feel yourself slip into the safe room."

"Oh, goody." Pale blue eyes flashed with excitement as she rubbed her hands together.

Ginger pinched the bridge of her nose. "Janie, please don't stay. This is just a test. In, then out. Got it?"

"You know, Gin, you need a man. You're way too uptight."

During the time it took to nudge, encourage, praise and push her out the door, Janie's heart rate returned to normal and she excitedly shared *all*.

After making a few notes about the day's sessions, Ginger left the office through paneled, solid oak double pocket doors leading into the main part of the house. Walking into a large kitchen, she slipped a pink gel mask into the microwave and nuked it.

From there, a few steps took her to a sizeable family room. Immediately she pulled the cord to close the drapes framing a massive set of windows and French doors that opened to a large deck in the backyard.

A few more steps took her to an oversized, overstuffed, red and white checked chaise lounge. Stretching out, she covered herself with a soft, cobalt blue cashmere afghan, laid her head on the lounge's loose pillow back, placed the warm mask firmly over her eyes and sighed as the heat worked its magic on the pressure between her brows.

With the tension headache easing, her thoughts drifted to the events that had started three days ago. A prickling sensation at the nape of the neck, the kind that said someone was watching you, had been the first warning that something was amiss. So far, not even an unfriendly ghost had made its presence known. During a morning jog she had felt eyes watching her, but she hadn't seen anyone—living or dead. Despite the lack of evidence, the feeling of unease was intensifying.

With the new intensity of her dreams, it was possible the universe was getting ready to turn her well-programmed days upside down. She, however, was not ready to hand the controls over to someone else. Ginger was perfectly content with life the way it was.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire!" In a voice that left no doubt her mother was reading her mind, the childhood chant echoed off the walls.

Without removing the mask, Ginger said, "Okay, Mom, so maybe I'm not totally content. But I'm not ready to change anything. Doesn't that count?"

The room was anomalously quiet.

Ginger believed a person's life experiences were created equally by three universal powers: fate, karma and personal choices. Choice, of course, was controllable. Fate was dependent on choice. Karma was the mysterious ingredient that spiced the pot with surprising elements of pleasure and havoc.

Within her family's world, there was a fourth universal power—Aunt Pesty.

Aunt Pesty's divine powers had been known to instantly create gale force alterations within a previous calm sea of reality. She was mischievous, supportive, loving, absentminded at the most inopportune times, and she loved meddling in other peoples' lives. It would be just like her to devise a life-altering spell then leave town while the scheme unfolded. If that was in fact the case, Ginger prayed that whatever magic potion her aunt had concocted would fizzle out before it caused serious damage.

With the gel mask easing most of the pressure, tense back muscles relaxed. Sinking further into the cushions, Ginger let her thoughts shift to the morning sessions. Janie's creative solution to keeping her diet had added a fanciful highlight to an otherwise difficult morning.

The first client, convinced he had been abducted by aliens every full moon since early childhood, was terrified that the blue moon coming at the end of the month was going to be the death of him. He had not been happy when he could not locate any hidden memories of those abductions while under hypnosis.

The second client wanted proof that during her sultry incarnations as Marilyn Monroe, Cleopatra and the biblical Delilah, she had created negative karma that was causing jealousy issues with her current boyfriend. When the answers she received did not concur with what she believed, she had blamed Ginger for not directing her to the truth.

Normally, she loved the stimulating challenges of the eclectic mix of people who came to her for help. But perhaps, due to the rare appearance of two full moons in one month, a blue moon, a Pandora's box of insanity had been released. In the days following the first full moon, on April first, the insanity had spilled forth and multiplied by a hundredfold. According to callers, UFO's, vampires, werewolves, chain rattling ghosts and aliens from Mars had invaded the town. The influx of weird phone calls had depleted her natural enthusiasm and tested her patience, tolerance, sanity and sense of humor.

Comfortable and drowsy, she let one thought drift into another as she wondered if the suspicions about her aunt and the dreams were driving her insane. Then again maybe she was already insane and the person who had been leaving long phone messages stating that the world was coming to an end while begging her to return their call without leaving a phone number was the sane one.

With that scary thought, she fell asleep.

## Chapter 5

*She had been running long and hard. The air being sucked in and out of her tight lungs hugged the air, leaving behind a sour tang of fear that clung to her skin.*

*Every fiber of her being was aware of the hot-blooded power of male energy stalking her. His vision able to penetrate the crushing darkness, observed as he sought answers, information, into what ... for what?*

*With her energy rapidly waning, legs heavy with fatigue began to spasm. Slowing her pace, she felt a warm mint-scented breath caress the back of her neck. A soft grunt filled the air at the same moment a large male hand grasped her arm. When skin met skin they tumbled into a dark, vast void, of nothingness. Twisting and twirling through the black emptiness of space, fear dissolved. In its place was anticipation.*

*As if by magic, they landed gently within the folds of something so downy soft she wondered if it were a cloud. Still shrouded in inky darkness, the only sensations open to the senses were touch, scent and passion. With their bodies comfortably tangled together, she was eager to scrupulously explore all three.*

*Their nakedness neither surprised nor dismayed her. If possible she would have snuggled closer to the soothing warmth of him. As it was, a breath of air could not have passed between them.*

*With her head tucked under his chin, she inhaled the lingering scent of spearmint soap as her lips brushed against his broad chest. Flicking her tongue over the soft nub of a nipple hidden within a light matting of chest hair, she had the satisfaction of feeling a moan of pleasure ripple through his chest.*

*Large, calloused hands gently playing their way up and down her spine before tenderly caressing, than kneading her firm bottom, made her delirious with a hungry need she hadn't known existed.*

*Hoping to get a glimpse of his face, she tilted her head back. Instead, he took advantage of her exposed neck to alternate between tiny little nips and soft butterfly kisses as he slowly worked his way from the erratic pulse behind her ear towards her lips.*

*As he branded his ownership, a soft passion-filled moan parted her lips, unconsciously inviting him to deepen the sensual pleasure. The taste of mint and an indefinable essence that was uniquely his bombarded her heightened senses.*

*On some level of the subconscious, for surely the conscious could not think, she tried to rationalize what was happening. It was a dream, she needed to take control, she...*

*He shifted.*

*Momentarily deprived of his body heat, she whimpered. When a calloused hand covered an aching breast, the whimper turned to purrs as a sensitive nub became a hardened pebble. When he replaced the warmth of his hand with the hot, relentless, ministrations of his lips and raspy tongue, her mind went blank as shockwaves of liquid heat flowed through every vein.*

*With his lips continuing to drive her crazy, his hand stroked her waist then moved slowly down her thigh. After stroking a sensitive hollow behind her knee, the hand slowly moved upward, caressing the soft skin of her inner thigh.*

*Without hesitation, her hands came to life as they began their own exploration. Running a slim hand up and down his back, she became fascinated with the feeling of hard muscle over unyielding bone and hot skin now slick to the touch.*

*She tasted the saltiness of his...*

She felt trapped within the conflicting sensations of lust and fear, like a doe paralyzed in the headlights of an approaching car. Did she allow fear to have her running away from the powerful pull of seduction or did she allow the powerful seduction to give her the courage to stand firm and face the fear? It was an interesting dilemma.

Ginger sighed with frustration over the now familiar dream. Today's version had shifted, altering itself until it fit a new, unknown development. It didn't take a psychic to know the universe was getting ready to offer a new life path. The million-dollar questions were what challenges would have to be faced and was it the choices or the challenges creating the choices that were causing the fear in the dreams?

In the first dream, two short nights ago, she had been instantly plunged into the now familiar sensation of being stalked, easy prey for the person silently watching.

Although still trying to elude him at some level of the subconscious, she was becoming comfortable with the fact that he would catch her. Of course, the mind-blowing passion of today's dream might be a key factor in that observation. The fiery sexual hunger certainly had her plummeting into some very sensual, exceptionally tantalizing, formerly uncharted territory.

With a heartfelt sigh from sexual deprivation, she acknowledged that she could competently handle difficult clients. Shimmering aberrations of the deceased could usually be handled without much difficulty. Until now, raging hormones had never been an issue. Her lack of knowledge certainly wasn't going to be a problem if the dreams were really an indication of what the future held.

Removing the cooled gel mask, she discovered what had awakened her. Standing just inside the living room wearing smug, knowing smiles were her sisters.

Rosemary, the oldest and usually the most outspoken, got right to the point. "Talk! Don't even think about leaving out one minute detail, seeing as you were so caught up in the moment you didn't hear us enter. You might also want to stop stroking that pillow as if it were a lover."

Looking from one set of emerald green eyes to another, Ginger recognized the twinkle of excitement that had them mentally rubbing their hands together in gleeful anticipation of a new adventure. They would get a lot of amusement from this, especially if the venture would only indirectly involve them.

Deprived of a satisfying conclusion to the stimulating foreplay, her emotions were still exposed and raw. Not ready to give an instant replay of the dream and knowing that they had no scruples when it came to extracting information, she sought a reprieve by turning her attention to Rosemary. "And you know what about a lover's body?"

Cinnamon, her other sister, grinned and gave Ginger a thumb's up sign for the good comeback.

Scowling, Rosemary crossed well-toned arms and impatiently tapped her index finger on her forearm. "What I do or do not know is not the issue. You are the one still hugging the pillow."

Although baiting Rosemary was always fun and watching her simmer was entertaining, Ginger casually shrugged a shoulder. Running a hand over the pillow before fastidiously placing it on the arm of the chaise lounge, she knew there was no sense pushing too many buttons since eventually she would tell all

anyway.

"Grandmamma's destiny dream has decided it is time to stir up my life or give me lessons on the birds and the bees. At the moment I'm not sure which."

"That was a given, Gin. Do you think we're blind? Now spill, we want details—every detail."

Not wanting her sisters to read the truth in her eyes, she watched Dum-Dum, a solid, charcoal gray cat, chase her tail as she raced around the room, instead of looking at them. "Only this time I felt he was really close. I'm not sure I can explain it."

"Gin, spit out the rest; you're hiding something and I'm losing my patience." Rosemary's voice was a decibel shy of shouting.

Stubbornness overtook logic when Rosemary became demanding. "For three days, I have felt someone watching me, which is crazy because we know everyone around here. Since we stopped picking old man Kane's prize roses, the only person to pay any attention to what's happening around here is nosey neighbor."

Pacing the floor, Rosemary looked like a puffed up, angry, protective, mother hen. "Forget old lady Comstock. Why didn't you call us? Why are we hearing about this three days into the fact?"

Raising a hand like a shield effectively stopped Ginger from speaking. "No, don't bother answering; you'll only piss me off. This isn't some childish game being played for amusement. Don't even think about hiding anything from us in the future. From now on, one of us will stay with you until this is solved."

It wasn't as if Ginger didn't usually see at least one of them every day; but as babysitters, her sisters lacked finesse.

Rosemary would try controlling her every movement. Cinnamon would dole out lectures on coffee consumption and balanced meals.

Having them as babysitters would not be fun!

During the short exchange, Cinnamon scooped up Dum-Dum, gracefully sat on a cobalt blue suede couch, slipped out of her open-toed mules, and made herself comfortable at home.

Stroking Dum-Dum's silky fur, she smiled with a disarming charm that looked sexy, amused, knowing and innocent all at the same time. "Okay, the lid's popped off Rose's temper; now we can settle down and talk reasonably. If you want help figuring out what is happening we need to know what exactly has been happening, from the beginning. Let's forget about today for a few minutes; start from when the dreams started."

Cinnamon: calm, reasonable and logical, unless Rosemary's barbed comments were directed at her.

Still not ready to talk, Ginger used a tactic perfected years ago—she plea-bargained. "Let's make a deal. Cinn, you help me fix dinner. Rose, you go rent some DVDs. After that, tuck the boys in the garage. Once we have eaten I promise to tell all. Whether or not I need a babysitter is debatable. We can decide that later."

Without comment, Rosemary headed out the door.

An hour later the 'boys,' the affectionate term for their vintage cars, were tucked in a barn-sized garage. The heavenly aroma of garlic bread and homemade spaghetti sauce filled the air. The table was set.

Spinach salads piled high with fresh mushrooms, olives, cheese and grated carrots were made and a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon was opened.

After a leisurely dinner and a final inspection of the now spotless kitchen, Rosemary pushed Ginger towards the living room. "Time's up! From the beginning! Don't even think about sweet-talking your way into postponing this tell-all any longer."

Giving Rosemary a devilish grin, Ginger took her sweet time settling onto the chaise lounge. "Around three hundred years ago, we had a Grandmamma by the name of Maria Romano. As had been the case for many generations within her family, at puberty, Grandmamma inherited mystical powers that were uniquely crafted for her.

"Married to the powerful leader of their gypsy band, Grandmamma had one child, Sophia, a raven-haired beauty. It is said Sophia could seduce a room full of men into total submission simply by swaying her mesmerizing hips and flashing her abundantly lush cleavage.

"Sophia's father, a cunningly ruthless man, planned on using her dark beauty and persuasive powers as a bartering tool to join his band of gypsies with another equally powerful band of gypsies.

"Sophia, however, had other plans. Refusing to be used as a bartering tool, she took a lover, a man not of gypsy heritage. Falling deeply in love, she became determined to marry him with or without her father's permission.

"Grandmamma, sympathetic to Sophia's desire to marry the handsome, rich lover that treated her with kindness, was also disheartened as their laws dictated that if Sophia married the outsider she would be forbidden from visiting or returning to their band.

"Grandmamma, having inherited the dual, *Gift of Prophecy* and *Spell-Casting*, used her gift of sight to look into her daughter's future. What she saw saddened her.

"Sophia, who had been granted the *Gift of Healing*, would abandon her spiritual heritage to appease her new husband's family. In that one act, selfishly asked by people afraid of what they did not understand, Sophia sealed the fate of their ancestry.

"Peeking further into Sophia's future, Grandmamma saw that five children would be born of the union. Three sons would inherit their father's fair looks, their mother's blue eyes and a keen sense for business.

"Twin daughters, born late in Sophia's life, would inherit their mother's dark gypsy beauty. Spoiled and sheltered by their father and much older brothers, the girls learned nothing about the harsh realities of society.

"When the twins came of age, one inherited *The Gift of Knowledge*, the other twin *The Gift of Prophecy*. Without proper training, they lacked the knowledge and wisdom to use their mystical abilities appropriately.

"Not understanding the greed of lesser mortals, both twins were destroyed by poor uneducated choices. Their deaths effectively brought to a close the family's spiritual gifts that had benefited many people for hundreds of years.

"Grandmamma tried warning Sophia of the risks and dangers foreseen. Unwilling to believe the warnings and afraid that her parents would prevent her marriage, Sophia ran off with her lover that night.

"With Sophia's fate cast, Grandmamma crafted a magical spell to protect the granddaughters she would never meet and all future generations of female offspring.

"To ensure the powers would not be used unwisely, Grandmamma skillfully incorporated a key of accountability into the two-part spell. In so doing, she ensured that each recipient would need to accept both *gifts*, or they would lose the use of their magical powers.

"The first *gift*, as was tradition, would be given to a female offspring upon puberty. As had been the case for generations, the universe would take into account each child's unique talents, interests, temperaments and desires to select the supernatural, mystical power that would be uniquely crafted just for her.

"The *gift*, as it is called, would become known during a dream on the night the girl's body blossomed into womanhood. With dream visions guiding her path and with practice, each female heir would be given the knowledge necessary to control and use her unique power.

"Each descendant would be free to use her *gift*, however she desired. However, if the supernatural powers were used solely for the purpose of self-gain, all supernatural powers would be taken from her.

"The second *gift* was the knowledge of love.

"Grandmamma believed a true life mate would never scorn her lover's heritage or ask her to relinquish the *gift*. At age sixteen, all female descendants would begin a series of dream visions where they would meet their life mate. The visions would become more intense as the time to marry drew near. Grandmamma believed that by being able to recognize their mates' touch, future descendants would not be misled into marrying a person who would take advantage of her or the *gift*.

"If a descendant chooses to ignore the second *gift* by giving themselves to someone other than their life mate, she will lose the use of her supernatural powers."

Ginger paused to take a sip of wine.

"Very funny, Gin. We know that beginning, as well as you. You've had your fun, which is why I ever so kindly did not interrupt. My patience lasted through being the errand boy, garaging the boys, dinner, cleaning the kitchen and your futile attempt at sidetracking us. You are now skating on very, very thin ice. Just remember, paybacks are a bitch."

True, Rosemary had been far more patient than normal. But her conflicting facial expressions of self-pride and irritation made Ginger chuckle. That got Cinnamon to chuckling. Within seconds they both were laughing uncontrollably.

Rosemary jutted her chin and looked down her nose at them.

The expression earned more peals of laughter. As tears of merriment ran down their faces, Ginger threw a red, white and blue quilted sampler pillow at Rosemary. The aim was not even close to hitting its mark.

It did earn her *the look*—one lifted brow, jutted chin, arms crossed across the chest with an index finger impatiently tapping on her arm.

"Oh, now I'm really worried. But hey, it was too easy. You set yourself up for that one. You did say, 'tell us everything, from the beginning'. Who was I to argue? I started from the beginning."

Still getting *the look*, Ginger relented. "Two nights ago was the first time I've had Grandmamma's destiny dream in two years, two months and two days."

In disgust, Rosemary shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Funny, very funny. Cinn is the comic, so tell it straight."

"I am not a comic. I'm an entertainer."

"Who just happens to make people think they are buck naked on a stage in front of a few hundred people. Call it what you want, you are still a comic."

Ginger tossed a pillow between them to get their attention. "Hey, guys, cool it. Besides, I'm not trying to be funny. I looked it up in my dream log. What's weird is the last dreams were also during the month of a blue moon."

"Last time I had one was a year ago this month. What about you, Rose?" Cinnamon asked.

Rose shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe nine months. What was with the strong sexual aura Cinn said you were projecting when we arrived?"

Cinnamon chuckled at the spark of annoyance in Ginger's emerald green eyes.

"Hey, what can I say? I tell it like I see it. You, dear sister, were positively glowing with sexuality. Last time I saw that brilliant of a shade of red, Kathy Bates was suckling her new husband's tonsils minutes after the preacher pronounced them man and wife."

Ginger tapped her chin. "Well now, let me think. Oh yeah, maybe because the last part of the dream went beyond PG 13 ratings."

Rosemary casually picked up the quilted pillow at her feet. With perfect aim it hit Ginger in the head.

"How X-rated?" Rosemary's voice held a fake sweetness.

Rubbing her head, Ginger gave her a big grin. "Not that far. Kissyface with a little touchy feely added. This time I could smell his scent and taste his skin." *Hells bells, why had she volunteered that?*

Cinnamon clapped her hands and whooped with delight.

She forged ahead before Cinnamon could pounce. "Until three days ago the dreams started with the feeling of male energy hidden within dark shadows just outside a circle of light in which I am standing. From there the dream would skip forward to our dancing. You know, the arms around necks and waist sway teenagers use as an excuse to hold someone close? Or we would be walking down a lane holding hands. With either scenario we would always end up necking."

"Did you ever see his face?" Cinnamon asked.

"No, his body is always in shadow. I know his hands are strong, large and calloused. The top of my head only comes to his chin, so I figure he must be over six feet tall."

Taking a sip of wine, she was surprised when neither sister interrupted.

"Now there's an element of danger in the beginning of the dream. I run but he's always just a step behind me. He grabs my arm; his grip is as strong as a vice, but it doesn't hurt. We tumble through space before landing on something very soft.

"The first night I woke up right after we found ourselves in each other's arms. Last night we shared a few kisses before I awoke. Just now, well..." Feeling her skin turn warm at the memories, she amended what she had started to divulge. "Let's just say it went a little further."

Cinnamon's grin reminded Ginger of the expression 'the devil made me do it'. "You know, Gin, auras don't lie. A red pulsating glow around you says it went more than a little further. You sure you don't want



to share the rest? You know your poor sexually deprived sisters might enjoy using the images to keep us warm on a cold lonely night."

"Speak for yourself, Cinn. Frankly I am not sexually deprived. Nor do I need or want a man in my life. I have no desire to change my lifestyle to accommodate some male who would screw up my plans."

Lifting one perfectly plucked eyebrow, Cinnamon studied Rosemary. "Not sexually deprived? Pray tell, is there something you need to be sharing? And besides wheeling and dealing our latest hot wheels and bamboozling some easy marks at poker what are your big plans?"

"Gin, would you please tell your sister I have nothing to share. My dreams start with the same feeling of being watched before they change to touchy, feely, spit swapping kisses. The dreams lack substance. They fall more under the category of the teenage crush stage where you worry more about how to angle your head so you don't bump noses and whether you should keep your eyes open or closed than about passion. And quite frankly that is fine by me."

Before they could challenge the declaration, Rosemary continued. "Also tell her I never bamboozle anyone! Can I help it if there is always a line of men with more money than brains who just happen to think they are better poker players than little ol' me. Which reminds me, there's an Austin Healy waiting for me in Savannah. Either of you want to go with me when I pick it up?"

Since Rosemary had started the, 'I am not speaking to Cinnamon game,' Ginger responded, "You won another car in a poker game! How many does that make?"

She shrugged. "Don't have a clue."

"How did you get stuck with this one?"

"If I remember correctly, I was holding a very nice full house, three aces and two jacks to be exact, when Mr. Hotshot Playboy insisted on raising and calling. Not only did the fool not have the money to cover the bet, he only held a pair of deuces in his hand. He generously offered the cloths off his back or his car. Naturally, I chose the car."

"Naturally." Ginger managed to say with a straight face.

Cinnamon rolled her eyes. "Rose, don't you think you took unfair advantage..."

Ginger didn't have the energy nor was she in the mood to referee World War Three. "Cinn, drop it. Let's get back to the problem at hand. Do you think it's possible Aunt Pesty activated a spell that could produce these dreams before leaving for the retreat?"

Having successfully diverted a heated discussion on how Rosemary chose to use her *gift*, Ginger let her thoughts wander. Instead of debating whether her aunt would interfere, for that was a given, it was a matter of *did* she? Over thirty years ago, their dad had nicknamed his only sister-in-law, Pest, for good reason. She believed everyone could use a helping hand, even if they thought differently.

Unlike their Grandmamma, their aunt did not have psychic vision; although, she had never allowed that little detail to stop her from trying. She did, however, share the same talent for casting spells as Sophia's mother. Actually, that too was not quite accurate. Sophia's mother had proven herself to be a master of the craft. Aunt Pesty's well-tuned sense of humor showed itself within a nonchalant attitude when it came to perfecting accuracy on chants or spells. Having cast only one irreversible spell, she was always quick to remind them when a spell went astray that she had never caused a major problem. Problem was there was always a first time for everything.

Because she had been thrown into the role of both mother and father to the three of them after their parents' death, her unconditional love, support, humor and probably a little magic had helped heal their broken hearts. Still Ginger did not figure that gave her the right...

A pillow slammed into her head—this one thrown by Cinnamon. "Earth to Gin, time to land, speak to us, oh mighty one. Give us your opinion or we vote without you."

"Hells bells," she muttered. "Vote on what?"

"You want highlights or details?" Cinnamon asked.

"Sorry, I was thinking about Aunt Pesty. Do you realize that even though she is usually guilty of some mischievous behavior, this time it might actually be fate?"

"Methinks she was daydreaming about the sexy dream hunk instead of Aunt Pesty. If you had been listening instead of flying off into la-la-land, you would know we came to that same conclusion."

"Sorry."

"No, you're not. Anyway, I vote to wait and see what happens next. If Aunt Pesty is behind this, we know from past experience some sort of calamity will happen very soon. If it is fate knocking at your door, it should go smoothly. Right? Right!"

"Yeah, right," Ginger grumbled. "Rose, is she really being this disgustingly optimistic or is she just happy because it isn't her life being disrupted?"

"Some of the first and more of the second. It is fairly close to a draw. Have to say I agree. There isn't much that can be done until Aunt Pesty returns or Adam appears."

"Who is Adam?" Ginger asked.

Rosemary smiled at her own cleverness. "You know, Adam to our Eve. He is the passion fruit that is periodically dangled in front of our noses as a reminder that if we are good little girls, when the universe deems the time is right, big strong men will come into our lives to make everything wonderful or screw everything up. It all depends on how you look at the whole situation."

Ignoring the sarcasm over the *gift*, for they had heard that a million times, Cinnamon and Ginger shouted in unison, "You named him. Why?"

"Why not? It sure as hell sounds better than calling him the shadow, destiny, life mate, soul mate, dream man or any other name you can come up with for a man being pushed on us without our desires being taken into consideration. Besides, I like seeing myself as the enticing Eve who leads Adam down the road of temptation then turns and deliberately walks away. Seeing as I never plan on marrying no matter what temptations fate puts in front of me, it makes an entertaining daydream."

Knowing this was a long-standing declaration said just to get them to argue fate versus personal choice without supernatural intervention, Cinnamon headed to the kitchen without taking the bait. "I'm going to make popcorn."

Ginger picked up the stack of DVDs on the end table. "*Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. Couldn't you have gotten one chick flick?"

Several hours later the empty bottle of wine stood beside an old pottery bowl holding a few lone kernels of liberally buttered popcorn.

Cinnamon, who hadn't made it through the second movie, was comfortably sprawled on the red-checkered chaise lounge sound asleep.

Rosemary, stretched out on the couch, had made it through most of the third movie before a soft whistling snore announced her demise.

Covering each sister with brightly colored afghans, Ginger retired to her solitary bed where she hoped she would dream of work-rough hands gently caressing her soft, warm skin.

## Chapter 6

*Pleasurable, finely tuned sensations of sexual awareness turned him inside out with longing as the aroma of sweet lavender tickled his senses.*

*The red waves of panic he could actually see rising off her body, much like heat waves on hot asphalt baffled him. Why would she fear him when he knew that losing her would create a crater-sized hole within his soul?*

*Thinking to ask her to stop, he called out. The only sound to penetrate the darkness was a short muted grunt.*

*Paying no heed to her panic, he reached for her, to calm her, to protect her, to claim her, to seduce her, to protest her leaving; he knew not which.*

*The moment skin met skin they tumbled. The sensation of twisting and twirling through the black abyss of space lasted for a heartbeat of eternity. Then as suddenly as they had started tumbling, their naked bodies were entwined upon an incredibly soft surreal bed.*

*Blissfully holding her smooth pliable nakedness against his harder mass of taut muscles, he sighed with heartfelt satisfaction. Like a lost puzzle piece that had not been noticed missing until it was found, his soul embraced hers as she nestled against him.*

*The sweet scent of lavender lingering in her silky strands of hair ignited primitive desires of protectiveness and lust. But they paled in comparison to his desire to stake his claim of ownership.*

*As her soft hand tickled its way up and down his spine, the butterfly softness of the caress shot a spark of desire through his body faster than a spark traveling down a fuse of dynamite.*

*With eager anticipation for the prize, he worked his way towards a kiss. When a soft moan gave him the opportunity to deepen the teasing lightness, tongues dueled, sucked, tasted, retreated, than dueled again.*

*On some level of the subconscious, for surely the conscious could not think, he knew this was a dream. There was no desire to return to reality.*

*Like a blind man, he used his hands to read her, to memorize what belonged to him. As a breast filled his large hand, the nipple instantly puckered to pebble hardness. Needing to taste, he suckled as he caressed her waist than slid his hand down a nicely curved hip to her knee. Slowly moving upward, he stroked a soft inner thigh.*

*His body was vibrating with need. Wanting to savor the sensations, he willed himself to slow down. Still, he was vibrating ... vibrating...*

*Damn, hell and damnation! The vibration of the cell phone in the front pocket of his jeans woke him up.*

*If he killed whoever was on the other end of the phone, a jury of nine men would surely call it justifiable homicide. Not bothering to look at the caller ID, he punched the talk button and bellowed, "What?"*

*"Hey, did I interrupt at a crucial moment? 'Cause if I did, I'm happy to see my timing was so accurate."*

With the mind not fully engaged into reality, all he could manage was, "Cody?"

"You sound a little out of breath. Reminds me of the time I caught you and Suzy Peters in the back of the old pickup. You sure I'm not interrupting? I can call back later."

The conscious was frantically issuing orders, *take a deep breath, clear huskiness out of voice, now stick to the truth without revealing anything*. "No, everything's just dandy. You caught me napping."

"Napping? Okay, I'll bite. With whom?"

"Funny. Very funny! Believe me, if someone were here I sure as hell wouldn't be talking to you." Cole ran a slightly trembling hand through his mussed hair.

"No, you always were the gentlemen." Cole could hear the grin in his brother's reply.

Still trying to reign in his emotions, he forcibly calmed the harsh tone of his voice. "Why are you calling?"

"Wanted to warn you, Mom's acting funny."

"Describe funny."

"She's walking around the house humming that tune they always play at weddings. You know, the one that starts when the bride comes walking down the aisle and the groom gets that sloppy grin on his face when he realizes he just castrated himself."

After raking the hand through his hair again, he massaged the tensed muscles at the back of his neck. "Cody, a groom—never mind, get to the point."

"She said something about elopements being romantic. When I asked what she was talking about, she changed the subject. It got me to thinking that maybe Uncle Martin and that Ginger woman eloped. So I called to see if you had discovered anything."

Counting to ten didn't lessen the cutting edge in his voice. "How the hell could they have eloped when Ginger's across the street and Martin's on a cruise liner floating through the Panama Canal. I told you yesterday I was watching her."

"Yeah ... well, hell! Guess you're right. But I'm telling you something weird is going on. Mom's still frantically working on the yard as if it were a do or die situation. In the last two days she had Old Joe help her plant over two hundred red and white petunias plus that many red geraniums in the berm and around the house. At dinner she said that many more were being delivered tomorrow for the front yard. Plus she sweet-talked Old Joe into helping her put down new bark chips."

"You knew she was going to plant flowers in the old berm. Considering some of the fancy yards in those magazines she kept sticking under our noses, it doesn't surprise me. Did you ever think she might just be tired of empty flowerbeds and the view of a weed-infested berm?"

"Try again, genius. She also had Sunshine Nursery come out and work on the lawn."

"If you paid more attention you would know the nursery sprays the yard with fertilizer four times a year. That certainly isn't earth shattering news."

"Bullshit! They also aerated the grass, sprayed for bugs and trimmed all the trees. And Bob gave her a quote on putting in a fishpond with a fancy waterfall. Even Dad made a comment and you know he never questions what Mom does."

"Okay, you got me there. She mentioned the fishpond earlier, but I didn't think she was serious. Still it's no big deal."

"Let me tell you the other thing she did. She went shopping yesterday and bought a new dress."

"Yeah, now that's real earth shattering news. What did she do, spend a few extra bucks on one of those purple or red feather things for that new ladies club she was so excited about?"

"Don't be a smartass. The feathery thing is called a boa. And yes, she bought one in purple plus a red hat with a purple band and bow to match."

"Didn't know you were so into women's accessories. I'll make sure to post that tidbit on the bulletin board next time I'm at The Brewery."

"Screw you. The dress is all frilly and soft, goes clear down to her ankles. Looks like the ones women wear to special fancy occasions. Like weddings! She modeled it for us and made Dad and I swear that it looked good on her. I'm telling you, something is up."

Cole sighed. Even he had to admit that was abnormal for their 'I hate to shop for clothing' mother. "Okay, you win that round. I get the picture. Look, just sitting here watching the house isn't solving a thing. I have another plan; so I'll let you know how it goes. As long as Ginger's here and Uncle Martin's on the cruise ship, they can't elope; so stop worrying."

"What's the plan?"

"Sorry gotta go, batteries going dead."

Turning off the phone so Cody couldn't call back, Cole wondered what possessed him to say that. He didn't have a clue what he was going to do next.

Yes he did, he was going to take another cold shower!

## Chapter 7

Since neither Cinnamon nor Rosemary believed a day started until the sun was fully over the horizon, Ginger slipped out of the house without them being the wiser, for a blissfully quiet, solitary run. Hoping the exercise would clear her muddled mind of everything but the simple pleasure of being alive, she set a comfortable pace as she jogged around the perimeter of the golf course.

When the sun peaked over the horizon, the first burst of golden red rays flooding the sky and surrounding landscape worked their cleansing magic. The unsettling dreams and the prospect of Aunt Pesty's handwork backfiring into a catastrophe took a back seat to the beauty of a new day. Several times she had tried capturing the radiance of this moment on canvas. As good as the paintings were, they never did justice to the real thing.

Sleep had been blissfully void of the haunting dream. The illusion of a dream lover's large gentle hand gliding over her skin had soothed her into a deeper slumber. The imagined sensation had been tantalizingly sexual.

Refusing to allow her thoughts to spoil the peace around her, Ginger muttered to herself, "Stop! Think of something else. Anything else. French toast. Where did that come from? Who cares it sounds good. I'll finish the run and make French toast. I'll even break open that new bottle of chokecherry syrup. No, let's make that strawberries with lots and lots of whipped cream. Wasn't there a movie where the lovers used whipped cream? Good grief, this isn't working, I'm starting to sound like Janie."

Only halfway through the run, her heart and her thoughts were racing out of control as parts of the dreams manifested themselves in the form of pictures that passed in front of her eyes like flashcards. Suddenly, she envied the clients who could successfully bury their heads in the sand while adamantly denying that life, as they knew it, was shifting and changing like windblown sand into a yet unknown reality.

Reaching the two-mile marker, Ginger cut the run short as she headed for home. Turning into the alley behind the house, she paced down to a fast walk. The sight of the yellow two-story house and matching garage her father had designed and built put a smile on her face.

Thirty years of Prescott family memories were permanently imprinted into the character of the house she and Aunt Pesty shared. With the added bonus of a well-appointed office with an outside entrance, Ginger had happily moved back home after college. At the same time her sisters had displayed their independence by moving into their own condominiums just minutes away. Truth was they spent enough time at the house that they still maintained their old rooms.

Quietly opening the French door leading into the dining room, she felt a sigh covering a rumbling stomach as she sniffed the tantalizing aroma of fresh brewed coffee.

Cinnamon, still in sleep rumpled clothing, sat at the bar sipping a cup of hot jasmine tea.

"Do we wake her up or let her sleep?" Cinnamon whispered.

Curled in a ball with only her nose peeking out from under a cranberry colored afghan, Rosemary looked like a red-shelled turtle. "What's the fun in letting her sleep?"

"None." Cinnamon grinned at the prospect of what lay ahead. "Rosie, time to get up, we have a surprise for you."

Not even a muscle twitched.

Ginger stuck a mug of Irish cream coffee in the vicinity of her nose.

The afghan rustled as a husky sleep-filled voice drifted towards them. "What time is it?"

"Time for yoga," Cinnamon replied cheerfully.

"The hell it is. Leave me alone." A hand tightly clutching the edge of the afghan firmly secured it in place at the top of her copper colored head.

"Everyone participating in the yoga class gets French toast and crispy bacon to accompany a fresh pot of coffee. Lazy bed slugs get cold cereal and instant coffee," Ginger said in a singsong voice.

They heard a grunt. Then a growl. "What time is it?"

"Not going to tell you," Ginger said.

"Are there any blueberries?"

"You'll have to settle for fresh strawberries and whipped cream. What's it going to be, French toast or cold soggy cereal?" Cinnamon said as she matched Ginger's teasing chant.

An hour later, Rosemary collapsed onto a barstool.

"Here's the promised coffee," Ginger said as she placed the mug in front of Rosemary.

Rosemary sighed with satisfaction after her first sip of the strong black coffee, Ginger started the promised breakfast and Cinnamon set the table.

When Rosemary started on the second mug of caffeine infusion, Cinnamon figured it was safe to talk. "You know, Rose, despite the grumbling, you exceeded all my expectations. You actually eased into the yoga stretches instead of jerking into them and pushing through them quickly."

Stopping the mug halfway to her mouth, she looked suspiciously at Cinnamon. "Gin, mark the date; Cinn just complimented me. I, being a very generous person, will return the favor. Cinn, you were right. Yoga is better for relaxing then kickboxing. Although, I do miss pretending I'm kicking the shit out of some chauvinistic pig making stupid remarks about helpless dumb females."

"Did you ever think of taking anger management classes?" Cinnamon asked only half in jest.

"Wouldn't do any good. Some superior-acting male jerk would run them. Besides, who's angry? Taking an idiot's money is a nice side benefit to a lucrative skill."

Looking pointedly at Cinnamon, she added, "Of course, if you keep getting me out of bed at an ungodly hour, I could show you how anger looks."

"You don't scare me. No matter what you claim, your aura is a very pretty yellow right now. Besides it's seven-thirty! The sun was fully over the horizon before we dragged you kicking and screaming off the lounge."

"You did not drag me; I slid over the side all by myself. Gin, I can't believe you went along with her ridiculous idea. You two deprived me of three hours of sleep."

"Who said it was her idea?"



That earned a scowl.

"Life can be a real bitch sometimes. Just think, most people are leaving for work about this time of day."

Looking down her nose with one brow perfectly arched, Rosemary glanced over the rim of the coffee mug. "Gin, I am not most people."

*Point taken.*

"That reminds me, the GTO is nice but it's black and has no air conditioning. What are the chances you can find me a new boy toy? One that won't cook me to a crisp this summer."

"How about the Austin Healey I just won?"

"No thanks. I wouldn't say no to another red corvette, but at the moment I need something that will hold more than my purse and me. Preferably red, has air conditioning, four doors, a back seat that folds down, and a nice bonus would be getting decent gas mileage."

Talking business always put Rosemary in a good mood. Being faced with a challenge brightened the prospect of the hunt. "Why four doors and a folding back seat?"

"I need to be able to transport paintings to the gallery. Also, just before Aunt Pesty left, she promised Adele Simmons that she would sell some of her quilts and afghans at the summer craft shows at the park. Which will mean hauling tables, chairs, an awning and who knows what else. By the way, I promised we would help."

No surprise there, so neither sister commented.

"I'll start looking for a station wagon. Maybe an old Rambler or woody, one with the original wood paneling would be fun to drive."

"I'm impressed. Only three cups of coffee and you actually tried to be a comic."

"Might not be a joke."

"Yes it is. You detest station wagons."

Since that was true, there was no reason to defend the comment. "How long do I have?"

"Five weeks till the art show, but Pete needs the canvases a week before that to frame them. First craft show is Memorial Day weekend."

"Do you think you could have given me a little more notice?"

"Nope. Dad said you needed a challenge to keep you out of trouble."

"Did he really say that?" Rosemary asked wistfully.

"Yes, he did. I think he already knows what you're buying because he was wearing that grin he used to get just before a new clunker was delivered."

"Dad never bought clunkers. But I know the grin you're talking about. It used to drive Mom crazy."

"Still does."

Like butter on a hot griddle, the air sizzled as their mother's gardenia perfume filled the air. "That grin is

pure, infatuated lust. It didn't drive me crazy—it turned me on. And made me madder than Dum-Dum when she falls in the pond, because he knew I didn't like sharing that lustful leer with a heap of old metal, leather and chrome."

"That was Mom. Where is she?" Cinnamon said as she looked around the room.

"She didn't materialize. She said..."

"I know what she said. I heard her." Cinnamon's excitement cut Ginger's explanation off.

When Ginger glanced at Rosemary she was grinning. "Me too. That was weird but fun; too bad she didn't stick around. Her perfume has already faded."

"Gin, is there anything about those dreams that you forgot to mention?" Cinnamon asked.

*Like being buck-naked?* "Nothing that would explain what just happened."

"Aunt Pesty?" Rosemary said.

"If she could have managed this don't you think she would have done it years ago?" Cinnamon countered.

"We're talking about a woman who screws up eight out of every ten spells she creates. Nothing would surprise me."

"True. But you know how she likes to bask in the afterglow of success. If this was her handiwork she wouldn't have missed the opportunity to be present when the magic manifested for the first time," Cinnamon said.

"Or to adamantly deny her involvement if something backfired," Ginger added.

"Hells bells, I hate it when you're both right. It was a onetime fluke or an early birthday present. Either way it was nice."

"Rose, what are the chances of it happening again?" Cinnamon asked.

"Fifty-fifty. Which doesn't tell us anything. I really hate it when the universe does that," Rosemary said.

Watching Ginger put strawberries and whipped cream on her French toast, Rosemary changed the subject to mask her disappointment. "What's the special occasion? You never make us French toast."

"Nothing, it just sounded good." Ginger's blush was slight but noticeable.

"I'll let the lie slide if you put an extra helping of strawberries on mine," Rosemary countered.

## Chapter 8

"Hello."

"May I speak to Ginger Prescott?"

"Speaking."

"This is Cole Brown. A friend suggested I make an appointment with you. I know this is really late notice, but is there any chance I could see you today?"

"I'm sorry; I'm booked solid."

"Miss Prescott, I apologize for the inconvenience, but I would really appreciate any consideration you could give me. You see, since a friend mentioned how your work successfully helps people overcome the grief of losing a loved one, I have been counting on your help and it has to be today." There was a trace of distress in the slight Texas drawl.

*Damn, damn and double damn. Why did he have to say that? Just say no. Do not feel guilty! Be firm. You have too many commitments right now. Say no. After goofing off yesterday, you are behind schedule. Just say no.*

"Mr. Brown, I am sorry about your loss. I am booked solid, but if you could be here at three o'clock I will work you in after my last appointment."

"Thank you. I really appreciate this. I'll be there."

"My address is..." The dial tone buzzed in her ear.

When the phone rang a few minutes later she expected to hear the soft Texas drawl. Instead a high-octane bawl exploded through the earpiece. "Ginger Prescott."

"Speaking. May I help you?"

"You certainly can, little lady. The Warlocks of Sleepy Hollow are preparing a ceremonial celebration for the night of the blue moon at the end of this month and we would like to hire your services."

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. "Who is this?"

"Mark Stephens."

Hells bells! The fast-talking irritating voice of local commercials was even more irritating when heard live. The owner of a local appliance warehouse store, he had a reputation for performing attention-grabbing stunts to get free publicity. The last stunt had gotten him into the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest held séance. The sham had infuriated her.

"Why do you want to hire my services?"

His wheezy chuckle had her grinding her teeth.

"We need you to hypnotize a werewolf."

"Have you a particular one in mind?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact we do."

"Lucky me. Why does he need to be hypnotized?"

"He gets a little testy during the three day phase of the full moon. We need him docile. Can't afford the publicity if someone got bit. But we can't have him drugged either. I figure hypnosis will zone him out enough to be relaxed but still able to function."

"Is this a publicity stunt?"

"Little lady, the public ain't ready for this yet."

"Have you ever seen this person as a werewolf? For that matter have you ever seen a werewolf?"

"No, but..."

"That figures. Does this person know that you think he is a werewolf?"

"Hell yes, he's the one who told us. Little lady, I wasn't born yesterday. This guy is legit. Can't wait to see it happen."

"Yes, I'm sure it will be amazing. Once he's hypnotized what do you plan on doing?"

The wheezy chuckle became a sly laugh. "You're not one of us, but if you'll waive your fee we'll swear you in as an honorary member of the Black Lace Witches Coven."

"The Black Lace Witches Coven ... is what?"

"A group of enlightened witches."

"Don't witches and warlocks belong to the same Coven?" Ginger asked.

"Could, but I don't take orders from pushy broads so I created my own order. We might need witches for certain aspects of our rituals, but our order is closed to female members. You work with us; I'll make sure you get sworn in as a member of the Coven. Then you can stick around and watch the whole show. If the hypnosis works, I'll even give you a hefty discount on any appliance in my store."

"How very generous! I'm expecting a client, could you please get to the point."

"One of the witches wants to mate with him, both before and after he turns."

Heaven forbid; she hadn't seen it coming. "Do me a favor, Mr. Stephens, the next time you think you need a hypnotist, don't call me."

"Little lady, you're missing a golden opportunity. If this works, it will make all of us instant millionaires."

"Don't hold your breath. On second thought, do." With that, she disconnected. Punching in Cinnamon's number, she left a warning message after getting the answer machine. Then she switched off the phone.

The day went by quickly.

Kenny Morris beamed with pride on his six-month smoke-free checkup. After a tune-up hypnosis session to reinforce his choices, he scheduled his last visit on his one-year smoke-free anniversary.

Kathleen Hoops had been meeting Ginger for bi-weekly life counseling sessions since her best friend had wiped out their joint business account before disappearing. Although the daily successes were still small,

they nourished Kathleen's self-esteem with enough positive feedback to keep her motivated and positive.

The last appointment was with Ginger's next-door neighbor who held the honorary title of Uncle Gus. An avid golfer, every spring he had three hypnosis sessions to help improve his swing, his stance or the grip on his clubs. The real problem was his 'I know everything, don't tell me what to do' attitude which was never going to change. Still, Ginger tried chipping away at it every chance she got.

Concentrating on updating the notes in client's files, Ginger was startled by a knock on the door.

Soulful bedroom eyes the color of a Tootsie roll had her chastising herself. He was a client, forbidden territory, not a lollipop with a soft chocolate center waiting to be devoured. Wiping suddenly damp hands on her skirt she didn't offer to shake his hand.

"Hi..." Stopping to clear the huskiness from her voice, she tried focusing on the imperfection of a slight crook in his nose instead of the overall package. His mussed chestnut brown hair, square jaw and firm mouth reminded her of Janie's description of the sex-for-therapy hunks her imagination had created to help her change her eating habits.

"Hello Lover Boy." Ginger felt a blush creep up her neck. Not that his tall lean frame and sexy Texas drawl couldn't fit the title, but never having made such a stupid gaff she couldn't decide if she should ignore it or make a tongue-in-cheek joke. If Janie had heard her using that self-hypnosis mantra, with the perfect Mae West infliction, she'd be rolling on the floor with laughter.

"Hi Cole. I'm Ginger, the red-faced hypnotherapist that wishes the ground would swallow her whole right now. I was expecting you to call. You hung up before I could give you directions."

*What? How the hell did she know his name? What did she mean she was expecting him to call? Directions?* Feeling like he had fallen down Alice's rabbit hole, he forced a smile. Walking across the street, Cole had sent out a plea for help with a game plan. Surprised that his prayer had been answered, he decided to play the hand dealt as he firmly shook her hand.

As he thrust out his hand, Ginger couldn't avoid the handshake. When a blue ark of static electricity zapped their fingers just before they touched, they both jumped.

Ginger rubbed her fingers in the palm of her other hand. The jolt, far more powerful than just a little static in the air, felt like it branded her from the inside out.

"Sorry about that," Cole said as he flexed his still tingling fingers. "Nice to meet you. I already had directions. Actually you were easy to find."

Her breath caught in her throat. Lord have mercy, the man was drop-dead gorgeous when he smiled. The sexy Texas drawl was more pronounced than it had been over the phone. The smooth and caressing burr would easily lull a baby to sleep or a female into his sleeping bag.

An inner voice she had dubbed the drill sergeant barked out orders. *Get a grip. Stop drooling. He's a client, not a cone of fluffy cotton candy. For heaven's sake act normal! Invite him in. Mind your truth; he isn't Adam.*

"Cole, please come in. Have a seat."

A bay window with colorful quilted pillows scattered over a window seat topping a double tier bookshelf was the focal point of the room. Flanking the window, the wall was lined from ceiling to floor with bookcases filled with hundreds of books. The remaining walls were covered in six-foot high, richly aged, oak wainscoting with pale marbleized peach and white paint above that. Six-inch deep crown molding

framed a soft cream tin-pressed ceiling. A scarred, antique oak kitchen table being used as a desk held a computer, an oversized sketchpad and an old green canning jar full of sharpened pencils. Two red leather wingback chairs with an old oak square lamp table were placed in a conversational setting in one corner of the large room. A folded massage table with a purple leather cover leaned against a wall. A rich red, blue and gold Persian carpet dominated the center of the hardwood floor. Even with the peach colored walls, the room had a masculine appeal that was comfortable and welcoming.

As Cole walked towards the chairs, Ginger couldn't stop herself from admiring the view. A blue work shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows revealed well-muscled arms and broad shoulders tapering down to a slim waist. As her gaze traveled down well-worn jeans, she appreciated the way the jeans hugged his ass and long slim legs.

Lost in thought, Ginger ignored the drill sergeant's warnings of trouble brewing as her eyes leisurely traveled upward. When her eyes met his instead of the back of his head, she quickly turned towards the desk to hide her blush. "Mr ... Cole ... ah ... please make yourself comfortable."

Handing him a clipboard with an information form firmly held within its spring-loaded jaw, she retreated to the bay window. Focusing on the spring tulips and daffodils scattered among the rose garden, she tried clearing her mind of a rousing vision of his naked body with her equally naked body clinging to him like Saran Wrap.

Scanning the single sheet of paper, Cole knew that as soon as she read his full name he'd have to do some fast explaining. Filling in his address, phone number, and age, he left a blank where it asked for name of referral.

As he handed the clipboard back, the sight of her tomato red toenails had him reconsidering the jokes about foot fetishes as his boy toy twitched.

As she walked towards the desk, her tantalizing wiggle had him shifting in his seat as he went from twitching to attention.

Paying no attention to the form, Ginger placed the clipboard next to the computer's keyboard and turned in time to catch his lustful gaze.

With Rosemary's poker face skills drilled into her head, Ginger was able to stop herself from smirking. Chuckling silently, she made a mental note to tell Rosemary her favorite saying was true; paybacks were a bitch.

Quickly crossing the floor, she sat in the chair opposite him. Automatically tucking her feet beneath her, she smoothed the green peasant skirt over her legs as she pushed personal thoughts aside.

Never in his life had Cole been so totally aware of a female. With her warm smile and comfortable pose playing havoc with his concentration and every other part of his body, he wished she wasn't looking at him so intently. He really needed a moment of privacy to adjust himself into a more comfortable position. As it was, he felt like a vital part of him was being squeezed to death.

"Have you ever been to a hypnotherapist before?"

"No." He thought about elaborating, but decided it might be best to keep answers as simple as possible until he figured out the scam.

As she nodded her head, thoughts shifted into teacher mode as she launched into her first-time client hypnosis 101 spiel. "Hypnosis is a natural state of awareness we all experience several times a day.

During self-hypnosis we consciously allow ourselves to become fully focused on one object while being aware of, but not influenced by, what is happening around us.

"For instance, you leave work with a nagging problem. While driving home, instead of concentrating on the drive you think about the problem. As you drive you slow down, stop, move forward, change lanes and calculate the traffic and road conditions. Not once do you consciously think about needing to put your foot on the gas pedal, the brake pedal, or look in the rear-view or side-view mirrors as other drivers come towards you, turn in front of you or maneuver around you. Before you realize it, you're pulling into your driveway without consciously remembering most or all of the drive. If something unusual had happened, you would have instantly brought yourself out of the trance, but since the drive was uneventful the subconscious drove while the conscious worked on the problem.

"Another example would be becoming so engrossed in a movie that when a bogeyman jumps out, you are startled. Avid readers can become so engrossed in the storyline of a book, they successfully block out all distractions around them."

Cole had not taken those soul-searching bedroom eyes off her since she started talking. With her concentration in shreds, she couldn't remember what she had or hadn't said.

"Do you have any questions?"

"No."

"I will use the metaphor of a golden light traveling through your body to relax you into a medium trance. This trance state is one you naturally travel through as you fall asleep and while slowly waking up. You will be aware of cars driving by, children playing in the street, dogs barking, etc. But because your body and conscious will be very relaxed, sounds will not interfere with your inner focus. If you have a cell phone, please make sure it is turned off. That is one sound that tends to pull at a person's conscious even when in a deep sleep.

"You will be able to talk to me or anyone else that might appear to you during the session without coming out of hypnosis. Any questions?"

Cole could think of one prominent one, who the hell had she confused him with? Figuring first time clients would ask at least one intelligent question he said, "I have heard that only simple minded people can be hypnotized."

*Oh, great, what happened to intelligent?* "What I mean is, do you really believe intelligent people can be hypnotized?" *Jeez, now you sound like a geek. Hell, I am a geek. Right now a stupid geek with a rambling mouth, but still a geek!*

Her laughter was bubbly, infectious and too damn sexy for his comfort. Hoping to relieve some of the discomfort, he stretched then rested an ankle on his knee.

"Actually, I have found that the more intelligent a person, the easier it is for them to submit to hypnosis. Trust me, I have never had a client that could not be hypnotized."

*Lord, have mercy. He was in deep shit!* Although at the moment, he was questioning the results of every test that had helped get him into medical school.

"Trust is a deciding factor in just how deep of a trance a person will experience. One percent of the population can be hypnotized into a very deep trance in less than three minutes. Ninety-four percent of people can be hypnotized within ten minutes. Five percent will take longer depending on the issues that

have destroyed their trust. Remember being hypnotized is as natural as breathing; just allow yourself to relax. There is no one in the room that can harm you. If for any reason you become fearful or want to stop the session, you can let me know and I will bring you back to reality immediately. Any other concerns or questions?"

*No one to harm me! Lady, you have no idea the harm you are inflicting. Stall; you don't want to be hypnotized. She might turn you into a turkey. Lord knows you feel as stupid as one right now.* "Can you make me gobble like a turkey?"

He groaned. *What the hell had happened to his common sense?*

"I guess I could. It has been my experience that clients usually prefer to bark like a dog or meow like a cat for a few days after a session, but if a turkey is what you want a turkey you will be," Ginger managed to say with a straight face.

His head shook in self-disgust. His expression was apologetic. "I deserved that. Guess I sound like a turkey or the town idiot. Come to think of it, I feel like both."

"No, I should apologize to you. With movies creating killers out of hypnotized people and stage hypnosis for entertainment a popular attraction at State Fairs, it really is a fair question."

If she kept giving him that sexy smile, he would be talking like a turkey without her help.

Hell, he already was.

He had to get a grip on his emotions *and* keep her talking. "You haven't asked me any personal questions; don't you need more information?"

"If you were here to modify a habit, explore possibilities, heal emotional trauma or for physical pain management, I would need more information. Because you came for grief counseling, the only information I need is the name of the person who passed over."

*Passed over? What the ... okay, get a grip and think fast.*

"Sandy. Her name was Sandy." He congratulated himself on sounding calm.

A nod of her head acknowledged his comment as she wrote the name on a pad of paper. "You can push the chair back into its reclining position or if you prefer, you may lie down on the massage table. Once you are hypnotized, I will take you through some steps so you can personally communicate with Sandy or anyone else that might appear. Communication can be done silently or verbally. When you are done let me know and I will bring you out of hypnosis. Do you have any questions?"

*Can we postpone this a hundred years? Can we play footsy later? Will you go home with me? How about I tell you about some interesting dreams I've been having and we can try recreating some of the more pleasurable moments?*

As the ridiculous questions popped in and out, Cole frantically tried to think rationally. It wasn't working.

"What's the difference between lying down and sitting?"

"The only difference is comfort. Some people can relax faster if they are lying down while others have no problem relaxing in a recliner."

"You really expect Sandy to actually appear and talk? If so, it sounds more like a hallucination into the



outer limits than reality."

She winced. Because all grief-counseling clients were referrals, she had not expected him to be so uptight or cynical. But in the last few days nothing had been normal, so why should this be any different?

"Cole, there are many realities. Your conscious focuses on and responds to the stimulants within this reality. You were willing to sit in the chair because you could see it and feel its sturdiness before you willingly sat down.

"The subconscious deals with memories and past realities that have been stored within an amazing filing system that never forgets anything. The reality is past, but the memories are as real and as tangible as the chair you're sitting on.

"The subconscious takes over while we sleep, dream, daydream or self-hypnotize ourselves, or go to a hypnotherapist for help.

"Whether or not you believe in reincarnation, past lives, UFOs, angels or the devil is immaterial to me or this process. Within the subconscious is the power to find the healing energy to accept your loss and move on in the present. Acceptance creates an understanding within both the conscious and subconscious that a new future is not going to take away from the past or the relationship you shared with Sandy."

Cole now knew, without a doubt, his prayer had not been answered; instead the April fool's ghost had struck again. Boxed into a corner, he either had to admit his deception or allow her to do her hocus-pocus nonsense.

Putting action to his decision to see what she was really doing as she droned on about golden lights in fu-fu land, he adjusted the red leather chair into its reclining position. Then he pretended to fully close his eyes.

"Cole, would you like to be covered with an afghan?"

His brown eyes, round with surprise, popped open. "Why?"

"When hypnotized, your heart rate slows. That causes some people to feel cold."

Sounded reasonable. If nothing else, it would cover the erection he was still fighting.

"Ah. Yeah. Sure. Thanks." What was it about her that had him feeling like he was an awkward teenaged geek? One thing for certain, Suzy might have notched up his self-confidence a peg or two at the tender age of fifteen, but Ginger was making mincemeat out of it at thirty-three.

As she draped the afghan over his reclining body, the sweet smell of lavender tickled his nose. There was something significant about the fragrance, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what.

Taking a deep breath to steady her shattered nerves, Ginger thanked the universe for instantly granting her small prayer. Maybe with the blanket covering him to mid-chest she could focus on the job instead of his very appealing, obviously aroused, masculine body.

Concentrating on the process, Ginger lowered her voice by several octaves and slowed her speech pattern down as if she were soothing a fussy baby.

Her voice carried a slow, deep sexiness that turned Cole's bones to liquid. No need worrying about relaxing with the sound of pure unadulterated sex wrapping a warm cocoon of lust around his already

overheated throbbing body. She sounded like she was going to ... what the hell was she saying anyway?

"Slowly take a deep breath. Allowing your lungs to fill with fresh pure air. Now slowly release the air. Know that each and every breath you take will take you twice as deep, twice as deep ... when you are ready, please tell me what you see, sense, or feel."

Without hesitancy Cole answered with a voice that sounded younger and held a stronger drawl than when conscious. "There's a large gazebo in the middle of a green lawn a few yards in front of me. Orange poppies and wild yellow roses surround the gazebo. Two people are sitting inside."

He fell silent.

"Cole is it possible to walk to the gazebo?"

"Yes, there's a brick path."

Before she could ask if he wanted to approach the gazebo he said, "I'm there."

Every so often he would sigh or mumble. Under closed lids, his eyes continually moved, just as they would move during the dream stage of sleep. Twice, a hand made a fist. A few times, a hand patted the air. The rest of the time, his left hand rubbed the arm of the chair as if he were caressing a lover.

Cole stirred. As if he had been under water too long, he filled oxygen-starved lungs with several gulps of air.

"They left." A deep, emotionally charged sigh drifted out before he firmly pressed his lips together.

Ginger anchored positive emotions before reminding him that although the loss would still be there, he would no longer feel the sharp edges of the pain he had been carrying.

"Are you ready to come back?"

He hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Yes."

"Coming back to the present, alert, relaxed, refreshed; coming back to the present. One, two, three. Take a deep breath and open your eyes."

With eyes wide open, he sat still as a statue as he stared at the ceiling. Giving him time to collect his thoughts, Ginger stood at the bay window with her back to him. With unfocused eyes, she gazed at nothing as she regrouped her own waning energy.

If he wanted to share he would. For the most part, men tended to keep their personal journeys private, which was fine with her. She took her own journeys in private, seldom sharing the information even with her sisters.

"What time is it?"

When she glanced toward the wall behind the desk, he noticed the old black and white Kit Kat clock hanging on the wall. Out of place in the well-appointed room, the whimsy of it was lost on his raw emotions.

"Five thirty. You were under almost two hours."

Cole was not sure where he had been or exactly what had occurred. The woman's powers scared the hell out of him. With her power, she could have already stripped his uncle of his life savings. He had to

get out of here. Fast.

Rising, he extracted his wallet from his back pocket. "How much do I owe you?"

"There is no charge."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Grief counseling sessions are always freely given."

That didn't make a bit of sense, but with panic starting to overpower his normal unflappable rational behavior, Cole did not protest. As he was walking towards the door, a hand gently placed on his arm stopped him. Turning towards her, he jerked his arm away from the touch that was sending small pulsing charges of electricity up his arm. Reaching for the piece of art paper she thrust towards him, he looked at what was now in his hand.

Pain far worse than being kicked in the gut by a cantankerous mule ripped him apart. The room started swaying. Gulping air, he waited until the room steadied itself. "Where the hell did this come from?"

Her chin lifted a fraction of an inch. "I drew the pencil sketch while you were hypnotized."

"That doesn't make a damn bit of sense. Explain."

She had seen him sway before stiffening his body. Concern for his well-being overrode a strong desire to have him leave. "Do you want to sit down?"

Cole didn't move a muscle. Nor did he speak. His eyes sparked with uncontrolled anger as he glared with enough intensity to strip the soul from her body.

"While you were hypnotized, I drew the faces of the souls that came into the room to visit you."

"I don't believe you."

Her temper flared. He might be a client, but she was tired and beyond caring about being polite. "Fine, call me a liar. If you're so damn smart, you tell me how it happened."

He didn't respond.

"Look, I thought you knew about this. When you called, you said a friend referred you to me. I assumed they told you that as a medium and an artist, I draw pictures of the souls that visit grief counseling clients while they are hypnotized."

His eyes, darkened to pools of rain-drenched earth, narrowed another fraction of an inch. Behind the anger and the unspoken belief that she was still lying, Ginger saw pain. Pain so deep, so embedded in his conscious it had become a comfortable second skin.

Her temper dissolved into a puddle of remorse.

"I'm sorry. I only take referrals for these sessions. Everyone who has ever called for an appointment knew what to expect. It is because of the drawings I do and the possibility of talking to loved ones that clients come here. I'm sorry. I thought this was something you knew about." She was repeating herself, but she couldn't seem to stop.

He could not have formed an intelligent response if his life had depended on it.

Turning, he marched out the door across the street and entered his uncle's house.

## Chapter 9

Walking into the living room, Cole collapsed on the couch just as his shaky legs failed him. In shock, he stared at the drawing. Gazing back at him were the perfect likenesses of his childhood friend, Porter, his beloved Nana Belle and Sandy, the dog who had slept at the foot of his bed for eighteen years. For the first time in his life, Cole could not come up with a rational explanation for what he had stumbled upon.

There was absolutely no logical explanation for how Ginger could have known these intimate details. The identical first names were a simple case of mistaken identity. Even if she had read the form he had filled out and recognized his last name, she couldn't have come up with any information that would account for the drawing.

The whole situation made no sense. Except for the name of a person who had passed away, she had not asked any personal questions. She had expected the name of a person, not a dog!

As a doctor he had been taught to believe only in what could be scientifically proven. This defied science. Hell, it defied everything he believed.

Tossing the sheet of paper onto the coffee table, he lifted his arms to rake his fingers through his hair. He stopped short when the current separated a second sheet of paper from the top one, just as the papers floated onto the coffee table.

Ignoring the slight tremor in his large hand, Cole gently picked up the bottom sheet of paper.

His hand went from tremor to trembling, beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and the paper emitted a crackling sound as it shook.

Princess Lizzy, Sweet Baby Peter, Sally Sweet Cheeks, Clown Face Jack, and Brown Eyed Hanna's young faces were chubby, healthy, glowing with life, and filled with the unmistakable aura of child-like curiosity. The artist had captured their essences perfectly. The nicknames he had given each of them were written under the appropriate portraits.

The faces smiling back at him had haunted his dreams and many of his waking hours for years. He believed he had failed them as surely as doctors had failed Porter, he and his bother's, sidekick, companion, blood brother and best friend.

Like Porter, their young hearts had been damaged, their hopes of living high, their plans for their futures as diverse as their personalities. As their doctor, he had done everything medically possible to save them. His best had not been good enough.

After Peter's death, he simply couldn't face the prospect of having to tell another parent that his skills had not been good enough to save their precious child's life.

There were no regrets over the decision to sell his thriving practice. The new surgical tools and surgical procedures he had designed had been well received and had helped save many young lives. The demand for his private cardiologist consultations and education seminars for surgeons and patients alike was on the verge of needing another doctor to assist.

Still the loss of these five lives haunted him, talked to him, as it drove him to achieve, create, perfect, test, and teach so that young lives could be saved and families could be spared the pain of loss. And maybe someday he could forgive himself for being human, for failure, for not being God.

Thinking about what he had experienced during the time spent reclining in the chair, defied his logical mind. Abstract philosophies were as foreign and meaningless as hard rock music. Even if his uncle had told Ginger his entire life history, he would not have had pictures of his young patients or the nicknames he had given them as a way to get them to smile during tedious hospital stays and frequent office visits.

Just a few hours earlier, he would have scoffed at the idea of ghosts visiting the living. Now those beliefs were being challenged as possibilities were playing tug of war with concepts he had always believed to be created by slight of hand, or by conmen waiting to swindle the gullible out of money.

Cole had thought himself too smart and too strong-willed to be hypnotized. What type of a fool did that make him? When he had started listening to what she was saying instead of the effect her creamy smooth seductive voice was having on his body, he had made the mistake of fully closing his eyes.

In half a heartbeat, he had found himself in his grandmother's backyard. Porter and Nana's welcoming embraces had been bone crunching; warm and so natural, it was easy to forget it was a figment of his imagination.

Sandy had jumped into his lap, rested her head on his chest and closed her eyes while he stroked her glossy golden fur during the ensuing conversation. They had talked about family events with uncanny knowledge as they laughed over Cody's ability to outwit their mother's matchmaking, remarked on Cole's quick reflexes with the rattlesnake and told him that the woman that had lightly bumped him as he was leaving the restroom was the one that had lifted his wallet.

When he had heard other voices, he had thought they were going to leave. Instead, the children had come running towards the gazebo. They had laughed, told jokes and assured him they were exactly where they wanted to be. Before they left, he had made them a promise that he would keep even if it killed him to do so.

Placing the pictures side by side on the table, he lowered his head into his hands.

For the first time in years, he cried.

## Chapter 10

Thinking back through all the training she received while getting her master's degree in counseling, Ginger wondered why she had bothered. For the most part her professors had been closed-minded stuffed shirts who had no idea what happened in the real world. Never having practiced their craft outside a classroom, they had tried beating her into submission by slapping her down if she dared to say or do anything that deviated from their precious books. If they had attended some of the classes she had taken while studying various hypnotherapy techniques, reiki, reflexology, aromatherapy, past life regression, rapid eye movement, water therapy and a hundred other healing practices, they would have hyperventilated themselves into the next realm.

It had taken trial and error to blend what she learned into a distinctive combination of hypnosis, counseling and energy work that complimented her *gift* as well as her beliefs.

For the first time none of that training, in fact, nothing she had ever learned had prepared her for this moment.

Obviously the man who had just left her house and entered Martin's was not Cole Brown.

Not able to think beyond the raw pain in his eyes, pain she believed she and the sketches had inflicted, she did not question why he had not corrected the mistaken identity.

In a futile hope of easing the tension spreading from her neck down to her lower back, Ginger rolled her shoulders as she berated herself for skipping over her standard explanation about being a medium.

Why had she forgotten? Dumb question. Simple answer. Sexual dreams that had her hormones raging out of control mixed with the sight of a male body that had lust screaming, "please feed me," short-circuited her brain. Maybe that wasn't so simple considering her life and the fact that Mr. Right hadn't been introduced yet.

At the moment, why it happened was not near as important as getting advice on how to help Cole deal with the pain she had seen reflected in his eyes.

Aunt Pesty was at a retreat. Cinnamon was doing a benefit hypnosis performance for the local children's hospital and Rosemary was picking up the Austin Healey. That left two people on her short personal support list to call.

Standing in the middle of the office, Ginger closed her eyes and filled her lungs to capacity before slowly expelling the air to the count of five.

Calmer, she walked to her favorite spot in the office. Sitting cross-legged amongst the colorful pillows on the window seat, she concentrated her thoughts and energy on her father and mother.

Smiling over some of the more creative ways her parents had made their presence known in the past, she waited to see if today's show would be relatively subdued or spectacular. She imagined a lot would have to do with their opinion of what had happened with Cole. There was no doubt they knew; they were adept at knowing everything the family was doing. She and her sisters had learned the hard way, while working through their anger and grief after their parents' untimely deaths, that breaking house rules set in stone from the time the girls were born, would not be tolerated from either side of the veil. With or without visual contact, there had never been any doubt when they incurred their mother's wrath or fell short of their father's expectations.

With the budding power of their *gifts*, they had been taught to adhere to a code of ethics that was slightly off center of conventional. The rules they lived by were a little more lenient than and as contradictory as it sounded, slightly stricter than a person without supernatural powers.

It had been quite awhile since she had called upon them for advice. Until now, her most pertinent problems had been passing exams. For that, the same advice had always been given, “if you study you won't have a problem.” After whining that they were giving the same answer they had given when alive, they had smiled patiently and laughed at her pouting. Then in a time honored tradition for all of life's ups and downs, her dad gave her a lemon drop.

Perhaps because her energy was waning, it felt like an eternity before the sweet scent of licorice, rum and vanilla-scented pipe tobacco tickled her nose.

The sweet scent of gardenias, her mother's favorite perfume, overpowered the pipe tobacco's comforting scent as a twinkling swirl of green light slowly fashioned itself into the ghostly form of her mother. As she sat with poise on the corner of the old table, her hair was more auburn then copper. She tilted her head as she gazed at Ginger. Smoothing a crease in her filmy, emerald green dress, her mother displayed a striking full-figured hourglass shape.

Her dad's long lanky form appeared out of a smoky haze the same shade of robin's egg blue as his eyes and the shirt he was wearing. Bald as a cue ball, he was wearing what Ginger thought of as his work uniform: bare feet, well-worn denim jeans and a polo shirt with a slight bulge in its one pocket. He sat comfortably slouched in his old office chair, arms folded, pipe firmly clamped between his teeth, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles.

No matter how long Ginger used this space, it would always be his office. When she asked his opinion before glazing the walls peach he had looked horrified. Then shrugged with compliance after her mother had given him *the look*, which translated to trouble if you did not agree to whatever was being asked of you immediately.

Looking pointedly at her husband before addressing Ginger, her mother broke into her thoughts. “Before you ask, we cannot tell you anything.”

“Can you give me a hint? Anything, a crumb, a mere morsel of information that will help me stop a disaster?” Ginger implored with the most touching pout she could muster. She was hoping the expression that had worked like a charm since she was old enough to plead for one of the lemon drops creating the bulge in her dad's shirt pocket would get her some answers.

“Good try, sweetheart. Do you want a lemon drop?”

“Of course.” She popped it in her mouth without questioning the mechanics of how it appeared in her hand.

He winked. “You need to work on the pout. You're out of practice. You always were a demanding little brat when it came to wanting to know something. Simply put, the answer is no. Your mother and I cannot tell you anything about the future. We will, however, promise to keep a close eye on everything just in case something Pesty did blows up in—”

Seeing the look of horror on Ginger's face, her mother interrupted. “Your father picked a poor choice of words, dear. Nothing is going to blow up.”

Smoothing another crease in her dress, she muttered, “At least we hope not.”



"Mom, I didn't call you to ask about Aunt Pesty, although now that you mentioned it, I would certainly like some answers. What happened just now with Cole?"

"We cannot give you the answer. It is something you need to explore on your own. Trust me, in the end everything will be alright."

"Mom, this isn't a history test I'm worried about flunking."

"Well, everything always works out, doesn't it?"

"Honey, really, your mother and I would happily tell you if it was allowed. But we cannot interfere. We will fully support you in whatever decisions you choose to make. As you tell your clients, you have arrived at a fork in the road. Shortly, you will have to make a decision as to which path you want to follow."

"Is Aunt Pesty behind the fate dreams starting?"

Silence.

"Can she alter the dreams?"

"No, absolutely not." The words exploded from her mother.

"Is something she did behind my feeling that someone is watching me?"

Silence.

"Did she bring Cole here?"

Silence.

"Do you know why Cole Brown didn't show up for his appointment or call to cancel?"

Silence.

"Do you know why Cinn and Rose were able to hear your comment this morning?"

Her parents glanced at each other but said nothing.

"Did Aunt Pesty create a spell before she left?"

Silence.

"Is she really on a meditative retreat where she can't be reached?"

"Well, that would certainly be a new description for..."

"Herb." Ducking his head, he grinned, but knew better than to continue.

Ginger looked at her father. "Was it the pictures or the whole medium thing that upset Cole?"

"Both. But the picture was what emotionally hit him the hardest because he couldn't brush that off as nonsense created through hypnosis from a witch."

"He thinks I'm a witch?" Her voice went up an octave when she said witch.

"He can't figure out what you are."

"Why didn't he tell me who he really was when he arrived?"

"Don't know. I'm not the mind reader in this family. We can oversee family members. We can materialize. With practice we can move small objects. My specialty is moving Pesty's reading glasses. It's sweet payback for all the times she drove me crazy."

"Giving you answers to things you need to discover for yourself might change how you decide to handle the situation. Now, before your mother glares a hole through my handsome ghostly figure, I will stop. I have said far more than I should."

"Are you saying this is fate and not Aunt Pesty?"

Her mother sighed. "We are not answering that question."

She glared a warning at Herb before focusing on Ginger.

"Let me remind you, young lady, that as long as you have the ability to make choices, fate is not carved in stone. Every choice offered will create a different ending to a situation. Every day your choices alter your future and current reality. If you had told Cole Brown 'no' instead of setting an appointment, your reality right now would be vastly different from what it became. So what right do we have to say that Pesty's calamities are not really the precise way in which the universe intended situations to unfold?"

Herb rubbed his baldhead as he wisely kept his thoughts on that possibility to himself.

Glancing at her father, Ginger was reminded of some of the more dramatic reactions her mother had exhibited to some of Aunt Pesty's more inventive spells over the years. Obviously, she had had a change of heart. Like her father, Ginger made no comment.

"Timing is crucial. Even a minute can prevent or create a chance encounter. If we give you information before it is needed, you could miss a golden opportunity."

"Mom, are you saying you would help Aunt Pesty in some scheme she has concocted if you thought it was the right time for something to happen?"

"Mind readers cannot cast spells, which is a good thing. If I could have, I would have turned your father into a donkey's backside before we married. Then think of all the fun we would have missed raising you three girls."

Ginger smiled but Caitlin ignored the kissyface sounds Herb directed her way.

"Maybe I know something I have not shared even with your father, but I stand by what I said and I will say no more."

"Mom."

"Don't mom me. You go across the street and talk to that young man. He might try biting your head off, but Rose has given you lots of practice in avoiding permanent damage."

"Is he still angry? What will he say? How he will react?"

"I am a good mind reader, but I'm not that good. Must I remind you that I can read current thoughts and beliefs, but not what is going to go through someone's mind in the future? As for anger, he was in total denial. He just expressed it as anger."

Ginger sat quietly watching her parents. They radiated the type of loving support for each other and family that most people only dreamed about. She knew she wasn't going to get the solution to the problem. She had their support. Ginger would have to be content with that knowledge.

When it came to work, she was confident about what could be accomplished. Talking to individuals or small groups about hypnosis never made her nervous. Ginger was also willing to admit that where her outgoing sisters had no problem being the center of attention, she was more reserved around strangers and avoided confrontations whenever possible. With Rosemary and Cinnamon she easily used humor, sarcasm and teasing to defuse prickly situations. Not knowing Cole, Ginger was not looking forward to what might happen.

Without giving a thought to her mother reading her mind, Ginger's head was spinning with ideas on ways to postpone walking across the street as long as possible.

"I know you would tell me if you could. Thank you for sharing what you have. I don't suppose I could talk you into a game of Monopoly before you leave?"

Her father looked longingly at the old Monopoly box sitting on a shelf below the window seat.

Her mother gave her a disappointed frown.

"Okay. I will talk to him."

With one brow arched, her mother stared her down.

"Now. Right this minute. I will not pass go. I will not collect two hundred dollars. I will not use my get out of jail card. See, I'm standing. I'm going. I'm walking to the door. Bye. Love you."

In answer, she felt velvety soft touches as warm air stroked her cheeks just before their presence faded amongst a glittery display of twinkling lights.

## Chapter 11

Her parents had dissipated but Ginger wasn't fooled. With the presence of their energy hovering by the door, her mother was treating her like an eight-year-old by sticking around to insure that she followed orders.

Light tan siding, an eyebrow window that Aunt Pesty used to make wink to change toddler tears into laughter, and soldier blue and maroon trim gave Martin's house a masculine appeal. A deep front porch covering the full width of the wide structure held an inviting array of high backed, wood rockers. Squaring her shoulders, Ginger mentally prepared for whatever happened next as she crossed her fingers for luck and lightly tapped on the front door.

Cole groaned with frustration when he saw a kaleidoscope version of Ginger through the prisms the leaded glass on the door created. Outside of childishly refusing to answer the door, he could think of no way out of talking to her.

Opening the door, Cole met her silent appraisal.

His mussed hair glistened with dampness. Small drops of water slowly dripped onto his shirt collar. The insight that he had stuck his head under a cold faucet of water to wash away telltale signs of tears whispered through her mind. Silently she said, "Thank you, Mom."

Cole's bloodshot eyes held mistrust. Irritation shimmered off his body like heat waves on hot asphalt. As bad as he looked, Cole still carried himself with a commanding presence. She knew he was a doctor; Martin bragged about him continually. Right now, standing before her in stocking feet, he looked more like a handsome, rumpled cowboy in need of a friend and a good night's sleep.

Cole found an oddball kind of humor in the thought that if he said, "boo," she would run away. Her ramrod straight back spoke of determination. Her crossed fingers almost had him smiling. As she bit her bottom lip with worry, her eyes pleaded with him not to make this any harder than it already was.

He realized that the confidence in which she carried herself made her appear taller. In truth, the top of her head didn't reach his chin. He really was going to rethink the foot fetish. Her bare feet and red painted toenails once again sent jolts of sexual awareness cruising through his body.

Without saying a word he stepped back, allowing her entry into the house.

Walking into the living room, she noticed a steaming cup of coffee set on an antique mission oak side table. The simple classic lines of the mission oak tables, cream white walls, oak trimmed fireplace, and hardwood floors were accented with brightly colored upholstered furniture. One of Aunt Pesty's lap quilts in a lone star pattern of multiple shades of blue, tan and yellow diamonds was draped over the back of the couch.

The pencil sketches were sitting side by side on the otherwise empty clock-face-round coffee table. Not wanting to share the butter soft navy blue leather couch with him, she used the coffee table as a safe buffer as she sank into a navy blue and tan striped overstuffed chair.

Looking like an animal ready to pounce if provoked, Cole perched on the arm of the couch with his hands braced on his knees.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room as they tried unsuccessfully to read each other's thoughts.

"Cole, I..."

"Ginger, I..."

When Cole glared, she fell silent. "I have one question." He pointed a finger towards the pictures. "What type of trickery did you use to draw those pictures?"

Fingernails cut into tender flesh as her hands balled into fists. Refusing to lose her temper over the word trickery, she gave the same explanation she should have given him before being hypnotized.

"Since age twelve, I have had the ability to see beyond the human veil that shields souls who have passed over from people still earth bound. Some spirits who visit are more transparent than others, but all spirits are three-dimensional. It is not quite accurate, but imagine a person standing behind a campfire in a haze of shifting smoke. The person is solid but looks semi-transparent. Spirits are vaporous but because they are animated and often excited to be talking to a person on this side, I tend to forget they are spirits. While a client is hypnotized, I draw what I see. It is that simple."

*Simple? She had to be joking!*

"Let me get this straight; you are telling me you see ghosts?"

That did it. Trickery. Ghosts. She knew the next uncomplimentary word would be witch. In mere minutes, he had successfully pushed several buttons that could get her temper boiling. "I do not think of them as ghosts. Ghosts are aberrations that go bump in the night, scream when provoked and generally have surly dispositions. They have a far different presence than the souls I communicate with. When souls want to be seen, they take on the appearance of their earthly bodies so we can recognize them. They deserve the same respect you would give any human being."

*Shit, the body and face that had him launch a few hundred fantasies of marathon sessions of sexual fulfillment was totally delusional. How the hell had she conned his uncle?*

The look of total disbelief crossing Cole's face had her wanting to scream with frustration. His reaction was why she never volunteered the information that she was a medium unless absolutely necessary.

"Look, you asked the question. I gave you an honest answer, so stop looking at me like I'm lying. And that reminds me of a question I want answered. Why didn't you tell me I had confused you with someone else? I don't believe you didn't realize the mistake."

Busted.

Cole had hoped to avoid her asking any questions by keeping her on the defensive. Finding himself in the awkward position of needing her cooperation, he knew his flimsy explanation had better be good.

Raking fingers through his damp hair, he sighed as he remembered the old adage, *if you're going to lie, stick as close to the truth as possible.*

"I really don't have an excuse." Not bad. Not an apology and not the truth.

"When you called me by name, I assumed that before Uncle Martin left he mentioned I might be visiting. I thought you saw my walking out of Martin's house and figured out who I was." So far so good, she wasn't acting like she didn't buy the explanation. Of course it wasn't too far off the mark.

"By the time I realized you had me confused with someone else, I had become interested in what it would be like to be hypnotized. When the other guy didn't show up, I decided not to correct your mistake." He

crossed his arms. From the look of disbelief on her face, the intimidating tactic didn't work. Cole's gut told him it was time to shut up while he was ahead of the game.

She pointed at the pictures. "Which one is Sandy?"

"The cocker spaniel. The woman is my maternal grandmother. The boy is a childhood friend."

Instead of looking at him, she was staring at a point behind him. "Who are the children?" Ginger ignored the sharp catch to his breath. The sadness that crept into his eyes tugged at her heart but she refused to tell him he didn't need to answer.

A deep breath steadied his voice. "I don't know if Uncle Martin told you, but I'm a cardiologist. Those portraits are the faces of my patients that I was unable to help. They died of heart failure."

The last explanation had cost him far more than admitting that Sandy was a family pet. If she had been feeling generous, Ginger would have eased his guilty conscience by telling him several people over the years had made appointments with her for the sole purpose of contacting a deceased pet.

Ginger knew he was telling the truth because the spirit of his childhood friend had materialized behind him when she had asked why he hadn't admitted the mistaken identity. The spirit then nodded his head to confirm Cole's completely truthful statements. When Cole had told a half-truth, the spirit had ducked his head to try to hide a lopsided smile. Ginger would have liked to question the half-truths, but figuring she wouldn't get a straight answer she pushed them aside.

Assuming the spirit was there to offer Cole moral support, she thought it sad Cole was oblivious to the positive energy his friend was radiating around the room. She didn't need Rosemary's abilities to know there was far more to the story on why he was here and why he had posed as her client.

Too emotionally drained to press the issue, she changed the subject.

"What is your friend's name?"

"Porter."

He watched her anger dissipate as quickly as it had ignited. She certainly wasn't sending out friendly fibs, but at least she wasn't spitting mad.

She nodded. "Are you alright?"

He shrugged.

"Look, I know we need to talk, but do you mind putting it off until tomorrow. I apologize for not telling you who I was when I realized your mistake. How I feel right now is my own fault. So stop wasting time blaming yourself. Right now I need some time to think about what happened. Why don't I come over tomorrow morning to finish this discussion?"

Now that the opportunity was being offered to postpone the inevitable, she was reluctant to set the matter aside. Porter's expression was definitely asking her to back off. No matter what, she had to apologize or as soon as she got home she would be visited by her mother who would not be happy if she took the coward's way out.

"Cole, I appreciate your trying to accept the blame. Bottom line: I made the mistakes that caused the problem."

"Look, it—"

Holding up a hand she stopped him. "Please, don't interrupt. If I had read the information form you filled out, immediately, I would have known who you were. Putting that fact aside, as a first time client, I should have explained that when a soul appears to talk to you they also appear in the office. If I had done my job properly, all of this could have been avoided. I am truly sorry for the pain this caused you."

Her sincerity made it difficult to remember she was the lady they suspected was plotting to take his uncle to the financial cleaners. He would never have thought his savvy uncle gullible enough to get involved with a crazy lady. Hell, who was he kidding? Looking at the sexy package in front of him, even knowing she was a lunatic, he could easily see the attraction.

When she stood to leave, Cole started to rise. "Don't bother getting up; I can see myself out. I'll be home all day tomorrow. Ring the doorbell. I can't hear someone knocking on the door from the back of the house. Goodnight, Cole."

Looking past his shoulder, she grinned. "Porter, thanks for the support, even though he thinks you're a figment of my imagination. Make sure he doesn't drink too much coffee, or at least get him to lace it with some of Martin's expensive whiskey. The old wooden icebox in the dining room is used as a liquor cabinet. Also, you might want to persuade him to get some sleep; he looks like hell."

Cole watched a sweet, genuine smile light up her face; her eyes danced with mischief. He found himself wishing she were directing the smile at him instead of the imagined presence of a ghost.

Ginger nodded affirmatively. "I'll think about it. First, he'll need to prove himself worthy." Pausing, she tilted her head to the side as if listening to someone talk. Talking around her laughter, she said, "Yeah, well my momma says all men claim that when they want something."

Looking at Cole, she sobered. "I like your friend Porter. Try listening for what he has to say." With that said she walked to the door and let herself out.

With a sigh, Cole landed sprawled on the couch as he slid off the couch's arm. Closing his eyes, he thought about all that had happened since April first. He was positive the universe's April Fool's prank had now taken a turn into never-never land as it continued screwing with his mind.

Since entering college, Cole had never wasted his time. Since arriving home, that was all he had done. Feeling a twinge of guilt, he amended the thought. Helping his mother with her project hadn't been a waste of time. It had been a pain, in more ways than one, but he would do it over again if asked just to see her look of pleasure at the end result.

In truth the only time wasted had been here playing I Spy. He muttered, "Shit," as he realized he was now obligated to stay until the promise to both his father and the children had been fulfilled.

After meeting the prospective bride, he couldn't understand his uncle contemplating marriage. Hot and heavy sex he could relate to, till death do us part, no way in hell.

Cole had never had the inclination for self-reflection. No amount of analyzing was going to change yesterday, so why waste time dissecting it under a microscope? Now he found himself acting like a mad scientist scrutinizing his life while hoping to find a cure for the virus that had suddenly destroyed his well-planned days and peace of mind.

Before Porter's death, Cole had dreamed of a job in oceanography or aerospace, afterwards every waking thought condensed down to the next requirement towards his goal of becoming a cardiologist. He

now saw that as daily, weekly, monthly and yearly goals had been set, met, and crossed off the list, he pretty much ignored the world beyond the hospital corridors or the ranch's property lines.

When not on the road traveling for work, he slept in the same room he had since he was born. After selling his practice, Cole had built a large shop at the ranch that became his office. Hospital facilities were always available when needed.

An unforeseen advantage to the arrangement had been the ability to climb on a horse to help around the ranch when his mind got stuck on a problem or stressed to breaking point with pressure. The mindless tasks of mending fences or rounding up stray cows gave him plenty of time to clear his head and keep the body fit.

Cole found himself ashamed to admit, even to himself, that his occasional dates had no meaning beyond mutual sexual gratification. He had never been into one-night stands, but he tried to steer clear of any female, no matter how enticing the package, he thought might be interested in a permanent relationship.

Nights at a local tavern playing pool with his brother and an odd mixture of life-long friends had always been relaxing and enjoyable. Nevertheless, Cole had never felt the need to overindulge in booze or to partake of the women that hung around the bar hoping for lord only knows what.

In retrospect, it was effortless to see that he was spoiled in having exactly what he wanted, when he wanted. His beliefs and free time were tidy, uncomplicated and unencumbered. In truth, his life consisted of little more than endless work, mindless cow herding, inconsequential sex and sleep.

He hated to admit it but when analytically reviewed, his perfect life sounded as sterile, bland and uninteresting as a flat white gauze bandage.

Now thanks to some unseen universal force, he felt like he'd fallen into a vortex of madness where his life was unraveling faster than a ball of yarn being chased by a kitten. He hoped the ensuing mess the promise was sure to invoke wasn't as hard to untangle.

Now on top of the dreams haunting him, Cole had to deal with a woman who believed she could talk to ghosts, or break a promise to the children. Oh yeah, life was really looking good!

It surprised him to realize that where he would stand when he popped out of the whirlwind was beginning to intrigue him.

With a grunt of disgust, Cole picked up the cold mug of coffee as he headed for the kitchen. Halfway there he decided a shot of whiskey wasn't such a bad idea. "Porter, if that crazy lady wasn't lying I'd really appreciate it if you'd make your presence known."

Walking into the dining room, the first thing he saw was the bottle of whiskey. Sitting next to the bottle were two crystal tumblers; each held a double shot of amber liquid. The left hand door to the antique icebox was wide open.

Muttering, "ah shit," he picked up one of the tumblers and gulped down the amber liquid.

\* \* \* \*

"Mom, I'm home."

Within seconds the sweet smell of gardenias, her mother's clever calling card, filled the air.

When she didn't materialize, Ginger knew she had used her remote viewing to listen in on the conversation.



Not in the mood to cook, she wished her mother would send a genie to whip her up a nice hot meal as a reward for doing as told. When the kitchen came up empty of anything resembling a Magic Chef, Ginger got a container of left over stir-fried vegetables and brown rice out of the refrigerator, peeled off the cover and ate it cold as she headed towards the back of the house.

She did not want to think nor did she want to dream. She could only think of one solution to both quandaries. Walking into her studio, Ginger immersed herself in her paintings.

After a final touch up on several canvases and finishing two others she felt energized.

Three prepped, pristine white canvases were placed on easels. Ideas soared through her mind as she made the first brush stroke. If her hand could have transferred the inspirations as quickly as she was visualizing them, the three paintings would have been finished before she began.

Hours flew by.

At dawn she tumbled into bed.

## Chapter 12

As tempting as the prospect was, Cole did not get rip roaring drunk. Polishing off three double shots, he left the bottle on the dining room table. Walking out of the dining room, he yelled over his shoulder, "Porter, you took the bottle out, you can put it back. And shut the door."

He slept without dreaming or perhaps he passed out. The booze on an empty stomach had immediately relaxed him. But not enough to have him forgetting talking ghosts, a sexy nymph haunting his dreams or his inappropriate physical reaction to his uncle's fiancée.

Just before dawn he awoke. The dream, no, the sultry nymph in the dream had shattered any sense of relaxation.

Frustration ate his gut as he showered, wrapped his ankle with an ACE bandage, put on running gear and headed downstairs.

The empty tumblers were still on the table. The bottle was missing; the icebox door was closed. Not ready to question how it happened, Cole wrapped his mind around the problem of being hornier than a stallion in a barn full of primed mares as he made a strong pot of coffee.

Like a lovesick fool, he stood at the living room window impatiently waiting for Ginger to dash out the front door. When the sun crept over the horizon, he realized she wasn't coming out to play.

Forced to walk more than run around the perimeter of the golf course hadn't helped his disposition. By ten when he still hadn't seen any sign of life across the street, his patience snapped.

She answered the door wearing a man's dress shirt. Smeared and spattered with paint, it was almost impossible to locate a spot of white material on the shirt. In bare feet with shirttails skimming her knees and her hair tucked behind her ears, Ginger looked like she'd just rolled out of bed—sexy as hell.

Thinking the shirt was all she was wearing his blood pressure shot up several points.

When she moved her arm in a sweeping gesture to invite him in, Cole realized the shirt was unbuttoned. His breath hitched. As he glimpsed shorts and a snug knit top underneath the roomy shirt, the vivid vision of her naked body seducing him shattered with acute disappointment.

*Hells Bells. Be still my heart.* Knowing her life mate could never doubt her spiritual abilities, Ginger understood there was no possible future for them. It didn't matter—she smiled at him as if he was a long lost lover.

"Come in. Have you eaten? I was just going to fix some breakfast. It won't be any problem to throw a few more slices of bacon on the griddle."

"Thanks, but that really—" The rumbling of his stomach stopped him.

"Well, I guess that answers that question."

As she turned towards the kitchen, she thanked the universe for granting a short reprieve. Maybe after a few gallons of caffeine, she would be ready to answer his questions and ask a few of her own. Not likely! She really did hate confrontations.

He was still standing at the entrance when she glanced over her shoulder. "Follow me."

Entering the spacious kitchen, he couldn't help but notice the liberal use of primary colors on a black and white palette. Cabinets and appliances plus all the walls in the kitchen and adjoining dining area were painted milk white. Countertops and a bar top were black granite with granular sugar sized specks of crystal sprinkled throughout the rock. The neutral colors made the perfect backdrop for an eclectic mix of countertop appliances in cranberry red, canary yellow and royal blue.

The cozy dining area opposite a long bar held a wide bay window with blue and white checked café curtains. Placemats and napkins on the table and bar were made of blue, red, yellow or green gingham check material. Old-fashioned rag rugs were scattered across the wooden floors.

"The coffee's fresh. Hope you like French Vanilla. Mugs are in the cupboard above the coffeepot. While you're pouring yourself a cup, would you please pour me one? No cream. No sugar. If you don't want coffee there's a large selection of loose tea to choose from in the pantry."

Pouring the coffee, Cole speculated on how long he could postpone asking for help. Being a procrastinator was a new experience. Tackling problems head-on had always made more sense, but her so-called reality wasn't something he wanted to deal with. But needing her cooperation meant he couldn't wait too long or it would just become more awkward to bring up.

Placing one steaming mug beside the stove where Ginger was working, Cole casually leaned against the counter as he took a tentative sip of the hot brew. It certainly wasn't the strong black caffeine infusion fixed at home, but it wasn't half bad.

Turning, she gave him another dazzling smile. "Would you please set the table on the deck? The weather is too nice to waste it sitting inside."

She didn't wait for or expect an answer. "Silverware is in the drawer by the dishwasher. Use the napkins, salt, pepper and placemats off the bar top. Orange juice and homemade strawberry jelly are in the refrigerator. Glasses are on the shelf above the coffee mugs and take the coffeepot out. Don't worry about plates; I'll put the food on them before bringing them out."

Having been raised to help around a kitchen and a chuck wagon run by an old timer that never said please, Cole set to work without replying.

The backyard was double the size of Martin's. Like the kitchen and the glimpse he had gotten of the living room, the yard was alive with color. Tulips of every imaginable color, yellow and orange daffodils and yellow, white and purple pansies shared space in several well-tended flowerbeds under large oak trees. A row of lavender with newly planted pink petunias and purple pansies lined the wall and walkway by an oversized barn style garage. A huge brass turtle, turned green with age, was half hidden in a flowerbed filled with tall slender stalks of pink and white pampas grass. A thick tall hedge of lavender, pink and deep purple lilacs across the back of the property effectively blocked the alley view and filled the yard with their perfume.

There were two tables on the deck along with flowerpots packed full of ferns, strawberry plants bursting with pale pink blossoms and aroma packed herbs. Ignoring the long picnic table, Cole set items on a round glass-topped table positioned to overlook a small rock garden that surrounded a pond full of well-fed red, orange and white Koi.

A large gray cat, wearing a rhinestone studded pink collar, sat at the edge of the deck ignoring him as she concentrated on the fish swimming in and out of shadows made by wild grasses growing around the rocks.

The yard reminded him of pictures his mother had shown him from gardening magazines. Someone spent

a lot of time tending to the yard or a lot of money was spent to have the yard maintained. He needed to find out which was true and who was paying the bill.

He turned to walk back into the house as Ginger came through the door carrying two large plates holding steaming red pepper, onion, mushroom, cheese and ham omelets, crispy bacon and slices of fresh strawberries. A smaller plate was stacked high with thick slabs of homemade wheat bread.

As his stomach once again growled, they ravenously tucked into the hearty, hot meal.

When the hardest of the hunger pangs were satisfied, Ginger broke the surprisingly comfortable silence. Looking at the cat that moments before had switched attention from the pond to the hand that was now alternately tossing her bits of bacon and grated slivers of sharp cheddar cheese, she said, "Cole, this is Dum-Dum. Dum-Dum, this is Cole. Dum-Dum if you are nice to Cole he might let you visit Martin's house before Martin comes home."

Dum-Dum did not seem impressed.

Neither did Cole.

Ignoring both their reactions, she explained. "Martin made the mistake of allowing Dum-Dum in his house. Dum-Dum, deciding she liked having a male slave, started howling at his door whenever she wanted to run away from home, which was usually about one in the morning. In self-defense, he installed a cat door. Knowing you're at the house, she may try to visit. I know he locked the cat door before leaving. If you don't like cats jumping on your bed in the middle of the night, I would advise you to leave the door locked."

Needing her cooperation, Cole decided it might be best to humor her. "No problem, I'll unlock the door. I'd wondered about the cat door and food dishes. At the ranch we have a Siamese named Brownie. I doubt Dum-Dum could yowl any louder than the old tom, but I can't say I'd appreciate midnight serenades."

They had both finished eating. Used to dates who picked at their meals, he had been surprised by her healthy appetite. Even with the generous portions, Ginger had cleaned her plate as easily as he had. When a vision of them working off some of the calories clouded his vision, he shut it down. But not before it had gotten another part of his anatomy's attention.

Lingering over a cup of coffee, he said, "The yard is beautiful. My mom just had me working on what she's calling a yard beautification project. It gives me a newly formed appreciation for all the hard work and time a yard like this takes to create and maintain."

"For my mother, I say thanks. She did all the designing and all the original planting so she deserves all the credit. The yard is her pride and joy. Now, a garden service maintains everything."

Where was the mother? It certainly hadn't been an answer he had even remotely expected.

She certainly didn't owe him an explanation. From the puzzled expression on his face and knowing he could easily ask Martin, Ginger decided to be generous. "My parents died in a car accident when I was sixteen. My sisters no longer live here and I have a tendency to kill plants. Mom tells me what she wants done and I give the instructions to the garden service. Mom is happy. The yard always looks great and best of all, I don't get weed-pulling duty, which is a job I hate. When we were growing up, Mom used to hand out that chore as a punishment if we disobeyed."

Damn, it unnerved him that once again she was talking about ghosts as if it were as normal as picking up

the phone and calling someone in another state. He made a mental note to do a little research on mental illnesses that created delusions when he got back to Martin's.

Since she had mentioned talking to ghosts as if it were a normal everyday occurrence, he was thinking now would be a good time to tell her about the promise he had made.

Before Cole could say anything, Ginger started stacking dishes.

When had he become a coward? Never had he found it difficult to express his opinions or skirted around an issue. Yet here he was accepting the reprieve with a sigh of relief as he helped carry dishes into the kitchen.

By the time the table was cleared and cleaned, Ginger was fresh out of ideas on how to postpone their talk any longer. It was times like this, Rosemary's devil-be-damned attitude would be handy. Ginger believed everyone had a right to his or her own opinions, including her. On the other hand, when confronted she found it difficult to express her feelings when she knew the other person thought her a certifiable nut case.

"Let's go to my studio. I need to work and we can talk just as comfortably in there as in the living room."

Following her down a hallway that intersected the foyer and living room, they walked past the closed double doors to the office as they headed towards stairs that led to the second story of the house. Just before the stairs, they turned to enter a large room bathed in sunlight. Windows and another French door made up the wall facing the backyard. Long, narrow windows about a foot below the nine-foot ceiling lined the other wall. On the floor and leaning against that wall were dozens of unframed finished paintings.

A large cube-styled bookcase filling the wall with the hallway door held every imaginable item an artist could possibly want. Seeing tubes of oil and acrylic paint, boxes of chalk and colored pencils, Cole realized she didn't restrict herself to just one or two mediums. Three easels holding different sized canvases were set up in a semicircle in the center of the large sunny room. A paint-splattered canvas tarp protected the hardwood floor beneath the easels.

Without a word, Ginger picked up a well-used painting palette and squeezed dabs of paint onto it. Selecting a paintbrush out of an old canning jar sitting on a small table that also held tubes of acrylic paint in a full spectrum of colors, she started painting.

With his legs planted shoulder width apart and hands stuck in the back pockets of his well-worn jeans, Cole watched a wooden swing hanging from a thick-limbed tree take shape. The swing looked like it was being blown by the wind until precise brush strokes started to shape the ghostly figure of a young girl holding onto the thick ropes that suspend the wooden seat. The setting for the picture was the backyard. Not having noticed a swing, he looked out the French doors. From this angle of the house, he clearly saw the swing hanging listlessly as it waited for someone to come play.

He smiled as he watched Ginger using her forearm and the cut off sleeve on the old dress shirt to sharpen a point on a liner brush. A few minutes later her stomach became the backboard to remove a glob of paint on a wide flat brush. Engrossed in what she was doing, he was fascinated by the infinite array of expressions she wore as she mixed colors, tested, remixed and selected different brushes. As her hand flew between the paint and canvas, she made the process look effortless, the true mark of a professional.

Breaking the emotional pull that had his gut starting to twist into a rock hard ball of desire, Cole shifted his eyes to the canvas placed in the center of the group she was working on. Remembering the fun of Halloween, the dilapidated old house decked out to welcome the trick or treating ghosts, goblins and witches put a grin on his face.

The third painting in the group wiped the grin away. It also had him speculating on just how much she knew about the family ranch. A night scene, the painting showed a full moon bathing light over a field with low rolling hills in the distance. The scene looked eerily like the view he could see any night he cared to look out his bedroom window. The only thing missing was a huge, old, red barn his great-great-grandfather had built when he had homesteaded the property over a hundred years ago. A few transparent figures, in the middle of the canvas were posed in a manner that resembled a square dance. With a lot of work still to be done, he figured he could be totally wrong about the dancing.

Ginger was not quite as engrossed as Cole thought. At first it had been difficult to concentrate with the musky male scent of him standing beside her. When he didn't immediately start asking questions, she relaxed. Now she kept an eye on him as he slowly walked down the row of paintings against the wall flipping through canvases to examine each one.

A slight stiffening of his spine indicated the exact moment it dawned on him that each painting centered on the world of those that had passed over. True, some were whimsical like the haunted house painting currently in progress, but most depicted everyday scenes with supernatural twists.

She was about to explain how some of the paintings had come about, ghosts included, when he turned to face her. Seeing the wariness in his eyes, Ginger nixed the idea. She wasn't in the mood to hear negative comments about her supernatural abilities, metaphysical capabilities in general or spirits that liked to play as much, or more than humans.

He had been right about the square dancing. While he had been focusing on the finished canvases, she had started painting a barn onto the canvas, a barn exactly like the one on the ranch.

"Will it interrupt you to talk while you work?"

She shrugged one delicate shoulder. "Maybe. But we need to talk and I need to paint. Let's see how it goes."

"Do you always work on several paintings at once?"

"Good grief, no. It would wear me out. Rose, my sister, has a friend who owns an art gallery. Against my better judgment, I got sweet talked into allowing her to do a special showing of my work. Last night I went a little crazy. Ideas were flowing so I kept painting."

"How long does a painting take to finish?"

"That depends on a lot of different factors. Right now, I'm using acrylic paint because it dries fast. Figure there's about ten hours invested in these three canvases so far. I fell into bed around dawn."

That explained why she skipped the morning jog.

"Where do you get your ideas?"

*Hells bells. Was he ready for this?* "Things I see when I'm out and about, visions that come out of nowhere and daydreams that build one layer at a time. Sometimes a painting just happens, one idea builds another idea. When I'm lucky, ideas flow faster than I can paint them."

As nonchalantly as possible he asked, "What about the one you are painting now, did you see that somewhere?"

She frowned then shrugged both shoulders. "To tell you the truth I don't know. The haunted house and the scene from the backyard are both ideas I've been working on for a few days. The barn just sort of

happened, can't really explain it. Even now, I don't know what I am going to do on it next. It feels like the brush is controlling me instead of my controlling the brush. Can't say as it has ever happened that way before."

She could be telling the truth or she could be a really good liar. Short of asking if Martin had shown her pictures of the ranch, Cole couldn't think of a question that would elicit more information.

"When I woke up, I came back in here to see if I was still pleased with how it was turning out. I was going to start painting when I realized I was starving. That is when you showed up." *And had me imagining things better left alone.*

"And?"

When he didn't say anything else, Ginger stopped painting long enough to look at him with a puzzled expression. "And what?"

"Are you pleased with what you painted?"

*Jeez, she was losing it.* "Oh. Yes, I am."

"When is the show?"

As usual, singularly engrossed in the play of colors and brush strokes, she effectively blocked out distractions, hypnotized. When within the silence she realized he had asked a question and she had no idea what the question was, Ginger put the brush she was using in a jar of soapy water. While cleaning brushes she said, "Sorry, guess I can't paint and talk at the same time. What did you ask?"

"When is the show?"

"Five weeks from today."

There was no way he could wait five weeks to follow through with his promise. It would haunt him until it was done. Maybe 'haunt' was not the word he wanted to use considering the subject of every painting in the room. Still, the word perfectly described all that had been happening since the first of the month.

Ginger had watched his facial expression change from frustration to calculating as he struggled with whatever was on his mind. For the first time in many years she actually wanted to be able to read a persons' mind. Then again, she probably would want to sic Aunt Pesty on him if she knew all his unfiltered thoughts.

Watching him rake fingers through his hair for the third time since entering the studio she said, "You know you could just say what's on your mind. It would sure be easier than pulling all your hair out."

Turning to look at her, he hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Yesterday, after saying they had been patiently waiting a long time for this opportunity, the children in the drawing extracted a promise from me. They want you to travel to their parents' homes to let their families know that they are happy and that they visit them all the time."

Of all the things she thought he might be struggling to ask, Ginger had not anticipated this one. No one had ever asked her to travel somewhere to talk to people that might be totally opposed to talking to a medium. For that matter she knew that despite what Cole had personally experienced, he was still not a believer. So how could he have made such a promise to those children?

Outwardly, there was no sign of annoyance as she meticulously cleaned the rest of the paintbrushes.

Putting the palette and clean brushes on the table, Ginger walked towards the French doors. Once outside, she sat in one of the two white wicker chairs on the small porch before nailing Cole with a glare that stopped him in his tracks.

Her eyes were now mossy green, like the deep recesses of a pool of water. Cole felt the cold chill clear down to his bones.

"How could you? How could you make a promise to those children without asking me first? Of all the nerve—you had no right—no right whatsoever to make that type of decision for me."

If she had yelled, he would have felt better. Her soft-spoken criticism had him wanting to apologize, but a promise had been made. No matter what he personally believed about the talking ghost hocus-pocus, Cole had every intention of fulfilling that promise. No matter how enticing the package, no matter that he would be taking cold showers morning, noon and night until this was settled, he was not going to back down or give an inch until she agreed.

Turning the second chair so it faced her, he sat before answering. "I agree, it was wrong to make a promise that involved you, but I don't see that I was given a choice. Yesterday, I didn't believe in ghosts. I didn't believe in friendly or unfriendly spirits watching me, or talking, or pouring whiskey into shot glasses. For that matter I haven't changed my mind today. What I do know is that whatever you call it, whatever slight of hand you used to create the illusion, it happened. I saw them, I talked to them, and I made a promise. No matter what my personal thoughts were, are and continue to be, I will not disappoint those kids. I am not leaving until you help me fulfill that promise."

The dreams had stirred her hormones into a restless state of wanting but that didn't mean she had the right or the freedom to be attracted to him. But she was. Major, big-time attracted. Even as pissed as she was at him she wanted to see if she could change his eyes into smoldering passion instead of cold determination. Why now and why Cole left her baffled and annoyed.

She was also disappointed that he believed the experience to be an illusion created by hypnosis. He wasn't the first client to be highly skeptical but despite a healthy dose of cynicism they had been open to the opportunity to reach beyond the grave. Once loved ones mentioned personal memories, no one else would know even the most cynical had changed their opinions.

Regardless of the fact that her powers had never failed she made certain people understood there were no guarantees that a loved one would appear. Never having been asked to give a command performance of her talents, she wasn't comfortable with the situation but she didn't doubt that the children would appear and make the meetings memorable.

It didn't matter. She wasn't a puppet on a string that could be manipulated no matter how handsome the manipulator. There were people other than herself to consider and protect. Let him think she was acting selfishly. It was safer than disclosing the truth.

"Cole, I do not publicize the fact that I am a medium. There are a lot of morally righteous people that make it a goal to publicly destroy the reputations and lives of metaphysically gifted individuals. I have met several mediums that are public figures; they do excellent work and are reputable mediums. If I ask, any one of them would be happy to work with you. Although I admire what they do, for personal reasons, I will never subject my family or myself to that pressure or scrutiny."

There was no logical explanation for the conviction that it was vital to the outcome that Ginger be the one to talk to the families. Cole simply had to get around her defenses. He figured all he had to do was discover what it would take to get her to agree.



He raked his fingers through his hair. "Look I don't care what it costs. I will pay whatever you ask, just promise me you will talk to the parents." Before the words faded, he knew he'd made a major mistake.

First, she looked insulted; an instant later cold fury settled in her eyes and around her compressed lips.

"You think this is about money? Are you out of your frigging mind?"

When he opened his mouth to say something, she stopped him cold. The bone chilling calm of her voice was far louder than a lion's roar. "I would suggest you leave before I fully lose my temper and tell you exactly what kind of a horse's ass I think you are. Furthermore, if you do not leave, I will ask for help and I guarantee you will not like their methods."

He didn't have to be told twice that it was time to retreat, regroup and rethink his strategy. Which was a total joke since he hadn't prepared a strategy in the first place.

Maybe if she had time to think over the blank check offer, she would reconsider. Then again, considering her reaction, maybe not.

Despite all indications to the opposing view, he was not stupid. By the time he opened the front door to Martin's house, Cole was thinking maybe an apology was in order.

## Chapter 13

As Ginger utilized a paintbrush as an extension of an index finger, her thoughts were punctuated with flourish as history was rewritten into what she wished she had said. Each progressive thought slowly transformed the paintbrush into a dagger as it stabbed instead of stroked the devil with a familiar handsome face that had materialized with a few brush strokes in the Halloween scene she was painting.

The flow of anger crested then slowly ebbed its way down the other side. Before reaching the self-blame stage she was muttering, "What a moron, a damn fool, I should have asked a ghost to escort him off the property. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. That would have taught the jerk a lesson. How the heck can he be related to someone as sweet as Martin? Why couldn't he have asked me first? He could talk—even hypnotized he could talk. Yeah, right as if he'd remember that. Hells bells, I was so sidetracked by his body, I didn't even tell him I was a medium. To think I thought the jerk handsome. Hell, he is handsome. Jeez, I need my head examined. Even the Texas drawl turns my mind to mush. If Adam doesn't appear soon I'm in deep trouble."

Her anger spent, she saw the canvas for what it was, not what it had represented. Pushing thoughts of Cole aside, she started repairing the damage.

Not until her sister's voices drifted down the hall did she realize the room had lost most of its natural light.

"You aren't ready," Cinnamon scolded as her eyes skimmed Ginger from head to toe. "How the heck do you manage to get paint on a canvas? Look at you! There's paint on your face, in your hair. And look at your feet, they look like colored Easter eggs with toes."

"Really, I'm ready. This is the latest fashion statement. You must have missed Nicole Miller's spring fashion collection." Rubbing her nose, she smeared the wet burnt umber paint on her knuckle into a mustache.

"Do we dip you in paint remover or is that mess wash and wear?" Cinnamon asked.

Ginger stuck out her tongue.

Rosemary, who by this time should have at least verbalized one barbed comment, was oblivious to everything. Turning to look at what had caught her attention, Ginger said, "damn," with enough heart felt energy to have Cinnamon lifting a brow questioningly.

She grabbed Rosemary's arm. "Rosie, why don't you come pick out something for me to wear while I jump in the shower?"

Shrugging off the tug on the arm, Rosemary ignored the comment as she knelt in front of an oversized canvas. Within an old riverboat setting, their father with a full head of ash blonde hair and two other males, all wearing evening dress reminiscent of the mid-1800's, sat at a poker table. Rosemary in a red, low-cut evening gown and copper colored hair done up in fancy ringlets sat between her father and a sandy haired male.

Shimmering aberrations drifted out of the smoke made by burning cigars, candles and a pipe clamped between their father's teeth. Their mother, dressed as a dance hall girl, had her arm draped around their father's shoulder. An ace of hearts peeked out of the low cut bodice of her black lace gown.

"That's me! How? When? Why? It's beautiful. Have Dad and Mom seen this?" Seeing the tears glistening on Rosemary's cheeks, Ginger felt like she had been handed a few billion bucks and loose pocket

change.

With the damage done, there was no sense getting upset that she had been too angry to notice Cole had moved the painting to the front of the stack. "Happy Birthday. Guess you were supposed to see it early. I was going to let you find it opening night of the show with a sold tag on the frame. Figured my entertainment for the evening would be watching you go crazy, trying to find out who you were going to have to sweet talk into selling the painting to you."

"Thank you. It's amazing. Can I take it home now?"

"No." Before Rosemary could protest she pushed both sisters out of the room and firmly closed the door.

"Do not, I repeat, do not even think about setting one foot in that room without my permission. If you do, so help me I promise to sic Aunt Pesty on you." As threats went it was lame, but they got the idea.

As she jumped into the shower and prepared for the evening out, Ginger filled them in on all that had happened during the last two days.

They sympathized, but didn't offer advice—yet.

\* \* \* \*

Cole noticed the British Racing Green Austin Healy parked behind the '65 Mustang in the circular driveway as he started across the street.

Being Saturday night, she probably had a hot date. Needing to know what type of guy she would be seeing on the sly, he didn't feel the least bit guilty about interrupting their evening.

The same sexy smile delivered that morning greeted him. Maybe he was going to get lucky and find out that the generous payment offer had been reconsidered; then again, maybe not.

Something seemed different, out of whack by a fraction of a hair, but he dismissed the thought as being imaginative or just hopeful thinking that he could put off the inevitable.

"Ginger, I want to apologize for offending you this morning. I acted like a complete idiot. I spoke without thinking about your feelings or how offensive the offer would sound. If you would graciously forgive a talking fool, I would really appreciate it. Whenever you are ready I would be sincerely grateful for any help you could offer me, the children and their families."

She studied him as he spoke. His aura was a strong clear blue, with a thin layer of darker blue around his gut, no doubt caused by the anxiety of needing to apologize.

Chuckling to herself, she wondered how long he had spent drafting the fancy apology. It was certainly well rehearsed. The fact that Ginger had neglected to mention that Cole looked like a tall sexy cowboy rather than the nerdy doctor they had imagined was very interesting.

Wanting to have a little fun at his expense, after all he had upset Gin, she skimmed a finger up his arm, coyly tilted her head and smiled seductively. "Why, Cole, how very charming. Please do come in. It would be terribly rude to leave you standing on the porch after apologizing so sweetly." The voice purred with familiarity.

The hair on the nape of his neck tingled a warning.

Something was definitely different. She was acting a whole lot friendlier. Then again, maybe this was the

real Ginger and he was about to get really lucky in a way he had not been contemplating for at least, oh, at least a minute or two.

Stepping into the foyer, he got a whiff of a spicy perfume that reminded him of the spice and raisin cookies his grandmother had made.

"The sight of you sure does warm my heart. Why don't we go into the living room and make ourselves comfy." Her voice purred with pure sex—the type men paid to hear.

Following in her wake, he let his gaze gravitate to the exaggerated sway of her nicely rounded hips emphasized by a pale pink one-piece outfit. In a daze, he watched her sit on the red-and-white checkered chaise lounge, kick off her backless heels and stretch like a seductive pink clad kitten.

If he hadn't locked his jaw shut when the mouth started falling open, he would have looked like a wet-behind-the ears kid drooling over his first glimpse of a sexy centerfold.

The distinct sound of high heels tapping as they made contact with wood floors penetrated his dulled conscious. Glancing towards the foyer, he did a double take.

A green spaghetti strap silk top exposed an ample amount of creamy cleavage, well-toned arms and smooth as silk shoulders. With a gold comb sweeping her shoulder length copper hair into a style that exposed a delicate shell-shaped ear and a large gold hoop earring studded with tiny emeralds, she looked like every man's vision of a really hot date that started at the door and ended in the bedroom.

Her voice oozed sex appeal as she entered the room with a loose-limbed stroll. "Well, hello handsome. Are you going to come out and play with us?"

He glanced at the woman on the lounge chair then back to the woman now standing close enough for him to smell the rich scent of roses. Except for hairstyles, they were identical, right down to the seductive grins and sparkling mischievous eyes.

His brain turned to mush.

Before he could form a thought, another movement caught his eye. A crackling bolt of lightening from the now familiar jolt of sexual attraction created a ringing sensation in his ears.

Complimenting her skin tone and copper colored hair piled in an elaborate topknot, an espresso brown top draped low enough to give a hint of cleavage. With her arms crossed in defiance, Cole didn't have to ask if she was happy to see him. Emerald green eyes held sparks not sparkles and her glossy lower lip pouted with annoyance as she glared at him as if he were an annoying pest.

The woman next to him gave a throaty chuckle. "Honey, you need to learn how to keep a poker face when you're dealt three queens and you only fancy holding one. It spoils the fun when you give away your thoughts so easily."

His brain recharged, kicked into high gear and faster than a computer, spit out several missing answers.

Focusing his attention on the triplet standing beside him, he said, "You drive the '56 Thunderbird."

Nodding towards the woman still on the lounge, he added, "You drive the '65 Mustang."

Looking back at Ginger, he said more to himself than them, "And you drive the black '65 GTO." Something else dawned on him. Cole smiled as he looked at each of them. "Who is driving the Healy or is there one more beautiful surprise?"

Again the one next to him answered. "Our mother would cut your tongue out if she heard you ask that. As it was, she said the three of us were four more than she could handle. The Healy belongs to me. By the way, we thank you for the compliment. I am Rosemary, Rose to family and I'm betting you are family. I am also the leader of the pack by six minutes."

Cinnamon, having slipped into her shoes, walked towards him with feline grace. Still in sexy vamp mode, she wrapped both her arms around his waist, tilted her head back and smiled seductively. "I am Cinnamon, or Cinn with a 'C' to family. I am the poor misunderstood middle child. I would love to cry on your shoulder sometime, handsome."

Cinnamon nodded towards Ginger who had not moved a muscle during the whole production. "I believe you met and then upset Gin, our baby sister. Maybe you should repeat that pretty little apology. It might just help put a smile on her face. It's going to be a very long evening if she doesn't stop pouting."

"I have a better idea." Rosemary said. "After you apologize, why don't you join us for a night on the town? We were headed to dinner and a movie, but that's no big deal to change. We can have dinner then head to the club."

Turning her head slightly so Ginger could not see her face, Rosemary gave him a quick wink and slight nod. "Maybe the four of us can come up with a plan that will make both of you happy."

From the scowl, it wasn't hard to tell Ginger was not happy with the situation or the suggestion. Having personal experience of being the youngest, Cole didn't doubt that she was used to her sisters' taking charge. He would also bet money on her standing up to them when it really mattered. With any luck this would be one time it didn't really matter.

"Sounds good to me. How about giving me five minutes alone with Ginger and another ten to change clothes?"

"Since you seem familiar with the cars, which one do you fancy driving for a night on the town?" Rosemary asked.

He looked like a little boy being granted an early birthday present. "The GTO."

As Cinnamon and Rosemary headed towards the garage he was again faced with the tricky predicament of apologizing. With hands stuck in the back pockets of his jeans he walked towards Ginger.

He didn't stop until she took a step back. "Cinn is right. I spent all afternoon rehearsing an apology. Thought it sounded pretty good until I stood on your doorstep and repeated it to Cinn. Guess I'm lucky she decided to teach me a lesson by pulling my chain instead of slamming the door in my face. Truth is, I really am sorry. I don't know what got into me except maybe a dumb shit attack of desperation to get you to say you would help. Guess it overrode every ounce of rational behavior and common sense in my pea-sized brain. Will you please forgive me?"

His expression was sincerely apologetic. She had exhausted most of her anger and holding a grudge wasn't her style. Besides, how could anyone stay mad at a guy willing to call himself a dumb shit!

The smile was hesitant. The sparks in the emerald green eyes turned to flickers of caution. "Apology accepted. Your dumb shit attack is forgiven. You really don't have to go out with us. Rose can be just a tad pushy, so don't feel obligated."

The million-watt smile showed off perfect white teeth and a slight dimple in his right cheek that made her knees go weak and her heart go soft. "Are you kidding? Three beautiful women escorting me around

town. I might have acted like a complete idiot earlier today, but I'm not a total fool. I wouldn't miss this for anything. Besides I liked Rosemary's idea of four heads being better than two when it comes to solving my dilemma."

Without giving her time to find a reason he shouldn't spend the evening with them, he walked out the door.

## Chapter 14

The restaurant, a small family establishment in a renovated old mansion, had fires blazing welcoming warmth from two fireplaces. One was surrounded with red brick, the other more formal with a Cherry wood mantle. The odd assortment of china, silver and old linen tablecloths covering two-dozen or so mismatched antique tables reminded Cole of a large family holiday get-together, minus the wobbly card table for the younger kids.

With all but two tables taken, the room was comfortably full, bursting with laughter, conversation and in the background, the sound of one really unhappy baby.

There were no menus. Instead, a waitress set a large vintage soup tureen full of peanut butter soup and baskets of homemade yeast rolls on the table. A place card put in the center of the round table stated that the family style meal would include Caesar salad, prime rib, mashed potatoes, gravy, two vegetables and more warm homemade yeast rolls. Dessert would be a sample platter of bite size, mouth-watering temptations.

After the shaky start with Ginger, Cole was pleasantly surprised at how easily the three of them included him in the fry of disagreements, teasing, well-executed barbs, sarcasm and self-deprecation.

"How often do people mistake you for each other?"

"All the time. Frankly, it's annoying. We don't look anything alike." Rosemary smirked.

"Really. Guess I'd better get my eyes checked."

"Honestly, we don't look alike." Cinnamon had the grace to smile impishly.

"If you're trying to sell that trust-me look of innocence, I'm not buying."

Three identical voices rang out in protest.

"Let me finish. Physically, there aren't any visible differences I can see. Now if you want me to do a closer inspection..."

"Good try. As you said, we're not buying. Earlier, you mentioned what cars we drive. Since you perfectly matched the cars to each owner, I assume you saw each of us at least once before today. What made you figure out the cars?" Rosemary's voice was casual but there was more than casual interest behind the question.

He wasn't about to admit he had taken pictures of them getting out of those cars. Or that he had studied those pictures until every detail was burned into his memory.

"Martin's living room window is directly across from Ginger's driveway. Beautiful women and classic cars tend to grab a guy's attention."

"That may be true, but I'm betting there is a whole lot more to the story. I'll let you get away with the half truth for now," Rosemary said.

When Ginger looked like she was going to question Rosemary Cole cut her off.

"It's your attitudes, persona, the way you carry yourselves. Individually, you were one and the same; together, each of you is unique. You squint when you're ready to blast out a sarcastic remark. Gin gets a

smirk and Cinn's eyes light up with mischief."

"You're observant. What else do you see?" Rosemary asked.

"Not a thing."

Cinnamon lifted her wine glass. "Let us toast that obvious lie and the man smart enough to hide behind it."

What he hadn't told them was that Rosemary was the most vocal and forthright about presenting a viewpoint. Without a strong sense of self-confidence, her sarcastic sense of humor could have been intimidating. Although she feigned insult and anger when a joke was at her expense, she took as well as she gave. Cole was not sure if she had a gambling problem, but gambling was definitely a sore point between her and Cinnamon. Although her style of dress was blatantly sexual, it had not taken long to realize the appearance was deceiving.

Cinnamon, the natural comic, entertained them with funny tidbits from a benefit hypnosis show she had done the previous evening. The sex kitten persona, part of her well-tuned act had been dropped the minute they left the house. As the middle child, she had sharpened her survival skills to perfection. Knowing where to get the biggest reaction, she usually directed cutting remarks at Rosemary than sat back with a smug smile of satisfaction as sparks flew.

Ginger was the most reserved of the three. He figured it had something to do with the medium mumbo jumbo. Her sense of humor was usually teasing, but there was also subtle sarcastic humor that surprised or went unnoticed if one was not paying attention.

He had been paying close attention. Or more precisely, another part of him had been paying close attention to every gesture, comment and breath she took.



## Chapter 15

The first indication that the club was not going to be the usual garden-variety beer joint was the two eight foot tall black cast iron cats wearing witches' hats that stood guard on either side of a blood red door. The second was the caldron suspended from a poll with 'Witches Brew' written on its belly.

The club was crowded, noisy and smoke free.

The décor, a combination of high tech and tacky Halloween garb, had Angel hair cobwebs clinging from the ceiling to rafters. Large framed holograms, reminiscent of the *Harry Potter* movies, hung on three walls.

A bartender dressed as a vampire, complete with fangs, nibbled at the necks of three giggling females as he personally served Bloody Marys. Cocktail waitresses wearing skimpy black witch costumes and black pointed hats served drinks in cauldron shaped glassware with eyeball ice cubes bobbing in the drinks.

Like the biblical parting of the sea, the crowd parted as a tall, eye-catching woman with hair the color of polished obsidian strolled towards them. Her gauzy purple dress with a handkerchief hem emphasized a well-packed frame. When she turned her face towards Cole, he was surprised to see a two-inch band of pure white hair outlining the right side of a deep widow's peak.

A deep purple amethyst, the size of a peach seed, refracted light when she lifted her hand in greeting. "Hey, what's up? I wasn't expecting to see the three of you tonight."

"We are introducing this handsome guy to our local haunts. Cole Young, meet Pagan Phoenix, the owner of *Witches Brew*," Cinnamon answered.

"Nice to meet you, Pagan." Cole's Texas drawl was as smooth as aged bourbon.

Tinkling bells of laughter met his ears. Pagan was ogling him, but so was every other female within listening range.

"Pagan, focus." Rosemary snapped her fingers in front of Pagan's face.

"I was! Believe me I was! Just not on anything printable. Are you Martin's nephew?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Oh my, for a nerdy doctor you sure make a handsome cowboy. Do you think you could bottle the voice? I could sell it as an aphrodisiac."

"If that's a compliment, thanks."

"Sorry, Pagan is still learning social skills. The picture Martin showed us was a little outdated," Ginger said.

"Which one?"

"Black horn rimmed glasses, GI haircut, Adams apple being strangled by a sober blue stripped tie, eyes dilated in fear. You were standing in front of a podium."

"You forgot the white medical tape holding the glasses together." Rosemary's tongue in cheek comment

had Cole cringing.

"No, I was trying to be polite."

He resisted the urge to run his fingers through his hair. "Graduation. Stepped on the glasses moments before the ceremony began. It is one of my more memorable bumbling moments."

"Nice to know you're not perfect. The contacts are a definite improvement and along with a much-improved haircut, I do believe you grew a few more inches. I love meeting a man I can actually look up to. I just might have to steal you away from these three pint-sized shrimps."

When Cole smiled but made no comment, Pagan focused her attention on Ginger. "Rumor has you getting phone calls from Mark Stephens."

"Rumor is right. What do you know about him?"

Holding up a finger to stall a waitress walking towards them, she replied, "Your table is ready. I'll join you after I take care of a few things."

Cole heard Cinnamon order two pitchers of beer as Rosemary pulled him towards a large, crowded dance floor.

While dancing with Cinnamon and Rosemary, Cole worked himself into a fine state of nervousness just thinking about holding Ginger in his arms. The fact that she was going to marry his uncle stabbed at his conscience, but didn't stop the physical attraction that was short-circuiting his brain.

Leading Ginger away from her sisters' prying eyes, Cole staked a claim to a small portion of the crowded dance floor. The fit was perfect. Ginger's soft feminine curves stroked his lean body in all the right places. With the additional height from stiletto heels, her cheek rested against his shoulder. It took considerable willpower to not bring the contact just a little closer by pressing his hand against the small of her back. With warning bells already screaming over the five-alarm fire within his body, he contented himself with inhaling her intoxicating scent mixed with the scent of lavender lingering in her hair.

He would have been a lot happier if his libido jumped at the sight of Cinnamon or Rosemary. They at least were normal and not about to become his aunt. The April's fool ghost must be laughing his fool head off by putting him in the position of having his hormones going into overdrive every time he looked at his uncle's fiancée.

Not wanting to waste time thinking, Cole pushed the thought aside as he memorized the way it felt to hold her in his arms. Something about the feel of her and the scent tugged at the edges of his memory. For the life of him, he could think what it was.

Ginger had never been so aware of a man's body. The subtle spicy scent of aftershave and the light brush of thigh against thigh had desire ricocheting through miles of nerve endings that she hadn't known could be erotically sensitive.

The only thing disrupting the pleasure of the moment was a frantic mental tug of war playing within her head. The devil's naughty voice tempted her to press closer, test the waters, explore possibilities and discover if his awareness of her was as strong as hers for him.

The other end of the rope, manned by common sense, screamed warnings about playing with a sexual fire that was inappropriate and if allowed to rage out of control would leave her in a pile of smoldering ash without her *gift*.

With common sense winning this round, Ginger contented herself with committing the dance to memory.

By the time they made their way back, two pitchers of beer stood on the table. One pitcher had a black witch's hat painted on its side. The second pitcher was adorned with dozens of polka dotted clown hats.

Cinnamon answered Cole's look of confusion. "Designated drivers drink alcohol-free beer. The fool's beer tastes like the real thing, thus the dunce or clown hats. It's a reminder to everyone that only fools drink and drive."

Picking up the pitcher of fool's beer, he poured a glass and took a tentative sip. "It's not bad, but I'd argue on it tasting like the real thing." Wiggling his brows, he rubbed his hands together. "Okay ladies, here's the deal, I am now the official designated driver. Let me tell you, I take my job seriously. Not only will I drive you home safely, I will happily tuck each of you securely into your beds, so drink up and be merry."

"Cute try. But not in this lifetime, unless you want to be turned into an ugly brown horny toad." Rosemary's scowl didn't match the amusement in her eyes.

"Ouch. You're breaking my heart, Sunshine. What about you two beauties?"

"You must have ditched the bumbling geek status along with the glasses. A gentlemanly offer for sure, but not for me," Cinnamon said as she batted her eyes at him.

Laughing along with everyone else, Ginger made no comment as she fanned her heated face with a paper napkin.

"Hey, what did I miss? Gin's blushing." Pagan wedged a chair between Cole and Rosemary.

"Cole's trying to earn a Boy Scout badge by graciously offering to be the designated driver and tuck us into bed if we imbibe a little too much," Cinnamon answered as she gave Ginger a look that meant she would use whatever means necessary to pry answers out of her later.

"What a sweetie. I gather there were no takers."

"No ma'am. Got two cut-me-to-the-core refusals and one abstention."

"Looks like your ego was strong enough to take the beating." Pagan glanced at the blush Ginger was still wearing. "Give it a week or two; you never know what might change."

"Before something demands your attention, tell us what you know about Mark Stephens," Ginger said in hopes of taking the focus off her.

"Most of what I know comes from Stella, a waitress who had the misfortune of getting mixed up with him. Before leaving town like a scared bunny rabbit, she told me how he dabbles in the occult and petty blackmail. A few years ago he organized a group called The Warlocks of Sleepy Hollow. Supposedly, it's a front to get incriminating information on those he wants to cultivate for other purposes."

"Never heard of blackmail being petty," Cole said.

"Rumor said the same thing. What Mark demands is free advertising, dental, medical, meals, cars, heavy discounts on purchases, favors, that sort of thing. Nothing traceable, just friends doing friends a favor, not a thing the law can touch."

"With friends like that you couldn't afford enemies," Cole said dryly.

"Why haven't we heard about the Warlocks before today?" Rosemary asked.

"Until a few months ago they kept under everybody's radar. It wasn't until Stella told me that he was trying to blackmail her that I learned about the group."

"What did he have on her that scared her into running?" Ginger asked.

"Home made movies. She didn't volunteer the contents."

"As if she needed to state the obvious. What was Mark demanding?" Rosemary asked.

"Rumor. Mark hoped to get information on the bar that could be used for leverage. Blackmailing Rumor would insure he could get away with anything short of murder."

"Bet that made Rumor real happy. What's Rumor's take on his calling me?" Ginger asked.

"Haven't had a chance to tell him. Mark had lunch at Tulle's Pizza today. With the high-backed booths, he didn't see me sitting behind him. He called several people, hassled your answer service and left a message for Cinn."

"Anything we need to know?" Rosemary asked.

"No. Just whining about females playing hard to get and swearing that one of you two wouldn't be able to resist the temptation to be a part of the group."

"Guess he'll find out differently soon enough. Do you know if anyone in the group helped Mark stage the phony séance?" Ginger asked.

"No. Rumor said he hired actors for that farce. Why did he claim he needed a Hypnotherapist? I was told the group is for men only," Pagan said.

"To hypnotize a werewolf. A group called The Black Lace Witches is also involved. He offered to make me an honorary member and let me watch a cheap peep show if I waived my fees," Ginger said.

"That figures! Rumor wouldn't deny or confirm Stella's claim that it's the getting naked during full moons that cultivates the blackmail. I know for a fact Mark's neighbor filed a complaint after catching her husband watching one of their orgies through his binoculars."

"You've never mentioned the group; do the members come in here?"

"The ones I know about don't come in here."

"Can you name any members of the Black Lace Witches?" Rosemary asked.

"Until today I couldn't have. But Mark talked to Shelby Turner, Heather Beavers and my former hairdresser. From what I overheard he knew where each of their belly buttons were located."

"You had this information and didn't call to share?" Rosemary huffed.

"You didn't whine about me not sharing the poison ivy I got last month. I figured our sharing days were over."

"Smart ass," Rosemary said with a smile.

"Too true. But you love me anyway. Personally, I think they should have named the group Black Lace

*Bitches."*

"Meow," Ginger yowled.

"Hey, I'm not too proud to admit the idea of Shelby and Heather being blackmailed makes me purr with pleasure."

All four of them nodded in agreement.

"I gather they aren't friends," Cole stated in a matter of fact drawl that left Ginger's belly feeling warm and fuzzy with desire.

"You could assume that. Imagine being fourteen, six foot one, honor student, no boobs, lots of zits, a white band of hair that will not hold hair dye and a weird name. They made my life a living hell." Pagan shuddered at the memory.

"The four of us didn't dress or act like sluts trolling for the next trick, do drugs, smoke, or party every weekend. For some unknown reason, our being triplets rubbed them wrong and Pagan is like a sister," Rosemary added.

Cole shook his head slowly. "Can't imagine having boobs. Didn't hit the six four mark until I was twenty-two. Zits, braces, geek title, and nonconformist friends I understand. Got drunk a few times, but it was not the norm. Puking my guts out after two puffs on a cigar cured that fascination. The white hair is distinctive and striking, the name unique, not weird. Snubbing the four of you was their loss."

"You really are a sweetie. Too bad you're taken." Pagan ruffled his hair and left a Paprika Red lipstick kiss on his cheek.

"Do you think they know Mark is calling me?" Ginger asked.

"They know. Probably have some idea of putting us through some new form of torture or they're hoping for a way to destroy our reputations," Rosemary said with a conviction that no one questioned.

"Well, if he wants a hypnotist at his beck and call he'll have to find someone else. Gin and I are not falling for his trap. Is this a no big deal situation, or should we shuffle it past Rumor?" Cinnamon asked.

"Is Rumor a person or thing?" Cole asked.

The question created bubbling amusement around the table.

"I'm not sure. My folks claim him as a son; there are days he even acts human. I'll pass this by him."

"Don't let her fool you. Rumor is the deputy sheriff and part owner of the club. That's why you are drinking fools beer, offering to be the designated driver and polishing the tarnish off your Boy Scoot badge. And yes, Rumor is his real name. Pagan worships the ground he walks on until he tries telling her what do. What did he do this time to tick you off?" Cinnamon asked.

"Ran a check on a guy I met last week."

"And?"

"And the guy turned out to be a fat lying horny toad disguised in a tall, dark and handsome body."

"So you're not *really* annoyed at Rumor. You're mad because the guy was a toad and Rumor's being punished because he was the unlucky person who had to tell you." Ginger looked directly into Pagan's

dark chocolate eyes.

"I really hate it when you do that. Why couldn't you have let me direct my anger at Rumor a little longer?"

"Wasted energy. Besides, handsome toads learn at an early age how to be experts at presentation. Stop kicking yourself for noticing the package first," Ginger said.

"Yes, mother." Grabbing Cole's hand she tugged. "Cole, how about showing off that fancy Texas two step one more time before I go back to work?"

\* \* \* \*

Settling around the table after another round of dancing, Cinnamon opened the can of worms. "Cole, you made a promise then expected Ginger to go along with it. Your apology was real pretty. The second apology must not have been too bad either or Gin would have pitched a fit about your coming along for the evening. Now let's hear your plan."

"My only plan has Gin and I traveling to where the families live. She's the expert, so she can figure out how to do her hocus ... hypnotherapy session with the families while she draws the pictures."

Ginger looked annoyed.

Rosemary arched a brow. "Great save. Exactly where do these families live?"

"Seattle, Houston, San Antonio and Los Angeles."

Sheer panic paralyzed Ginger. Traveling to the towns could be tricky, but not a huge problem. But the idea of spending that much time alone with Cole in airplanes, cars, meals and *oh God*, hotels had her screaming, *no, no, no*. This was tempting fate and her willpower way beyond the norm.

"You expect me to drop everything I'm doing to fly all over the country with you? Are you nuts?"

"Can you think of a better plan?"

"One comes to mind, retract the promise or make arrangements for the families to travel here."

Narrowing his eyes, he glared at her. "I will not retract the promise. Surely, given the fact that you take this grief counseling seriously you can understand that."

Rosemary intervened. "What about having them travel here? It would be faster than you two traveling all over the country." In truth, she was thinking they should be the ones to travel but she knew Gin wasn't ready to hear that.

Raking fingers through his hair, Cole tried to get his temper under control. "Believe it or not I thought about that. The problem with that scenario is all but one of the families has children in school. That would mean four families would have to pull their kids out of school or they would need to locate babysitters which can be difficult because every trip would mean being gone overnight."

"Have you talked to the children's parents?"

"No, I have not talked to any of the families."

"So call them. Find out what their reaction to my *gift* would be? There's a good chance they will be as stubborn and close-minded as you."

"Gin, you are being obstinate. Why on earth would I call them, get their hopes up and then have you

refuse to do what is right. That would put me in the position of having to call them back to explain how you refused to help fulfill a promise given to their children."

Shit! And here he thought he had his temper under control! And what happened to tact? Still he was not about to retract what he saw as the truth, nor would he apologize. Sitting back, Cole took a sip of fool's beer and waited for the fallout. With her face flushed with indignation, he had no doubt her fury was going to be a scorcher.

Obstinate. Of all the damn nerve! Who the hell did he think he was to judge her after making a promise without asking permission first? Ginger looked to her sisters for support. They did a good rendition of mute and dumb.

"Gin, your aura is blinding me. It's time for a break. Let's go visit the little girls' room." Leaving Rosemary to deal with Cole, Cinnamon pulled Ginger out of the chair and pushed her towards the Witches' Pit Stop.

While pushing her through the door, checking to make sure they were alone and locking the door to insure privacy, Cinnamon did not say a word. Leaning a hip against the sink's counter, she crossed her arms, cocked her head and waited for Ginger to calm down.

For her part, Ginger was inhaling deeply through the nose then slowly exhaling through the mouth.

Cinnamon watched as bit by bit, Ginger's aura changed from flashing neon blasts of fire engine red to the more subdued flashes of red on a cop car's light bar.

"You want to tell me what happened out there?" Cinnamon's composure grated instead of smoothed.

"I ... you want me to explain? Did you hear him? The guy is a complete jerk. I can't travel ... I won't travel. Besides it isn't just me; what if someone found out and started looking at our family a little too closely?" Cheap shot but hopefully it would stop Cinnamon's analytical mind from figuring out her reaction had nothing to do with helping Cole and everything to do with an inappropriate sexual attraction that was gnawing at her insides.

"I want you to think. Since when did you become selfish? Not helping those kids goes against everything you believe. Besides, Rose and I are big girls; we are more than capable of protecting ourselves. You didn't hear us vetoing his plan, so why are you *really* making this so difficult?"

Well, hells bells, what could she say now? Cinn would know the minute she tried to walk around the truth.

The heavy scent of gardenias stopped the conversation. Ginger's red aura was overlaid by her mother's fury as red sparks flew, and rolling thunder echoed around the small bathroom.

"Hi, Mom."

Nodding towards the counter between the two of them efficiently indicated where their mother had appeared.

"Young lady, your attitude is deplorable. It is really disappointing your father."

Oh, that was so unfair. By starting with an opening argument that their dad was disappointed, she stepped around Ginger's thoughts and immediately hit the conscience with a fast-fisted punch that created instant guilt. How very cleaver she was and how unfair when she could read Ginger's mind and knew the real reason behind her refusal.

Neither of them noticed Cinnamon's posture change. "Gin, keep her mad. I can see Mom's aura. This is ... Oh, my gosh, I can see Mom. I can really see her. This is so cool. I wish I could hear her like we did the other day. I know she's mad, but it doesn't matter."

The look of pure joy engulfing Cinnamon touched Ginger in a way no amount of words could have duplicated. Watching her sister reminded her of one of the reasons she had been given the *gift*. The children's parents had a right to experience the miracle of visiting with their child if they so chose. Her being uncomfortable for a few days was a small price to pay in exchange for the precious gift she could give.

Hells bells, she didn't look forward to apologizing!

She knew her mother had read her mind, but not a word was said as she focused her attention on Cinnamon.

When their mother began to fade, she tried delaying the moment. "Mom, what just happened?"

"I don't know why or how this happened. But Rose is not going to be happy that she missed it so be prepared for her anger. You made the right decision, we will talk later."

Tears rolled down Cinnamon's face as the aura that had cocooned her in warmth vanished along with their mother.

Neither heard the fists pounding on the locked bathroom door or the colorfully explicit threats the person was yelling as Ginger gathered Cinnamon in her arms and let her cry.

When Cinnamon turned towards the sink to try repairing the damage, Ginger unlocked the door. Two furious women ran towards the open stalls. Ginger apologized to a woman waiting in line, for having accidentally locked the door. The woman brushed the apology aside. "Not a problem. Men can be such assess! She needs to dump him, no guys worth crying over."

\* \* \* \*

With one brow arched, Rosemary watched Cole. If she was waiting for him to say something profound, she was in for a surprise. He didn't want another verbal sparing match, but he wasn't going to back down on helping the kids.

"Am I wrong in asking for her help?"

"No, but you never asked. You made a promise. Then, after the fact, you demanded she submissively submit to your plan. In case you haven't noticed, we didn't inherit submissive genes."

He'd noticed. It was one of the things he liked about all of them. Until this evening, Cole hadn't realized how tired he was of the submissive, agreeable, interchangeable clones he had been dating.

"Nor is life within this family that simple. When one of us makes a major decision, and believe it or not this is a major decision, it could affect all of us."

The last, sounding like a cryptic warning, left him puzzled, but Cole didn't want to change the subject to obtain an answer. "Fair enough, I concede; I went about it wrong. It's been a lot of years since asking someone's opinion before making a decision has been part of my life. I blew it. Any words of wisdom on how to rectify the problem?"

Instead of answering she took a sip of beer as she thought about how much she should tell him. Ginger was going to help; that was a given even if she was acting differently. The odds favored the idea that her



panic was due to the subconscious picking up on the fact that Cole was her Adam. Despite an easier going personality, she knew Ginger didn't like being pushed into a corner any more than she did. The cloak and dagger dreams weren't making the situation any easier; but until they revealed the truth, Rosemary had decided to keep her knowledge to herself.

Having made a decision, Rosemary casually glanced at the surrounding tables to make sure no one was paying attention to their conversation. "Whether you believe it or not, Gin sees ghosts."

His brows shot upward.

Her smile was conspiratorial. "I know she hates for anyone to call them ghosts. They are dead. In my book, that makes them ghosts. Anyway there is a little more to it than that. Most mediums see ghosts, but a few only sense their presence or see hazy images that resemble a smoky haze. Some mediums hear voices; but more common are mediums who see images that need to be interpreted. Interpretation can be tainted by a medium's personal experiences and usually sounds like a guessing game as the medium tries to figure out if the car he is seeing means the ghost died in a car accident or the client has just bought a new car and the ghost is saying that he knows about the purchase.

"Then there is Gin. She sees and talks to the ghosts that visit. No guessing, no mistakes."

"You want me to believe that just as we are sitting here talking, Ginger has cozy two sided conversations with ghosts? Do you realize how crazy that sounds?"

"It's not crazy, it's fact." Rosemary's voice held an iron edge of control.

"It's not my specialty, but I have seen people who believe they talk to ghosts. With good medicine, the individuals are able to control the schizophrenia and lead normal lives. She really needs to be seen by a specialist."

Emerald eyes rimmed with black-green turbulence narrowed as she muttered loud enough for him to hear. "If Aunt Pesty were here, so help me, I'd have her turn you into the stubborn horse's ass you are acting like. Then I'd sell you to a glue factory."

Feeling better, she continued as if she hadn't paused for a life-altering commercial. "Believe it or not, there are things in this world that defy conventional explanations. If you want the help of this family you had best open up that narrow jackass mind of yours. It takes intelligence to see and believe what closed-minded fools are unwilling to believe unless they can see, touch or taste something. So, let's pretend your genius IQ goes beyond book learning to include a higher intelligence called 'common sense'. I am going to believe you are smart enough to accept as truth everything I am about to tell you, so don't waste time pissing me off. Do we understand each other?"

He didn't believe Ginger talked to ghosts, but he knew that without Rosemary and Cinnamon's approval she would never help him. Setting his crossed arms on the table, Cole leaned forward as he nodded his acceptance of the terms.

His closed off body language screamed defiance, but at least he was going to listen. When he had been around long enough to see what happened firsthand, at least he wouldn't be able to say he hadn't been warned. "What I'm telling you is privileged information. Whether or not you believe me right now is immaterial. Listen up if you want Ginger to travel with you. Got it?"

"Got it!"

"When you or I look around this room we see a room full of people. Gin sees the people and probably a

ghost or two. We have no idea why, but ghosts know she can see them. Usually, they leave her alone. If they decide to approach, she goes outside or into the restroom to talk to them. If possible she will help them with whatever they ask.

"Sometimes a ghost is angry at life, death, or perhaps it just has a nasty disposition. A few times the situation has gotten a little out of hand." She could tell him some of the pitfalls to helping a ghost communicate with someone and she was downplaying the times Ginger had run into unhappy ghosts. But she didn't want to get sidetracked and some things were best left for one to experience because without seeing it there would be no believing it.

Taking a gulp of the fool's beer, Cole wished it were the real thing. A slightly dulled mind might make the whole story more plausible. "When we entered the restaurant, and again when we arrived here, she hesitated just after entering the room. I assume this has something to do with what you are telling me."

"I'm impressed. She tries to be discreet. Yes, she will scan a room. If everything looks normal she stays. If not, we leave before anything can get out of hand."

"How out of hand?"

*Hells bells.*

A sigh and a shrug defied the sudden tension. "A ghost she encountered one day was a little testy. Who knows, maybe she was going through PMS."

When he didn't laugh, Rosemary continued.

"The lady liked throwing tantrums. When she realized Gin could see her, she started shrieking with righteous anger over her lot in life and death. Before we could react, she started grabbing china off a table and throwing it at us. Mind you the plates had food on them. As plates continued to mysteriously fly through the air, we got Gin out the door."

She stopped.

He waited.

She arched the brow and pressed her lips together.

He pushed. "Are you going to finish the story?"

"Nothing to finish. We were lucky; no one knew us or had time to realize we were triplets. If they had, our identities would have been figured out. Anyway, the next day there was a full-page article, with pictures, in the local paper on the haunting of a local restaurant. Needless to say, we never went back there."

"Any other times?"

"A few, nothing unmanageable." Rosemary couldn't look him in the eye.

"Why don't I believe that?"

"Hey, they didn't make national news. That makes them manageable."

He stopped himself from raking fingers through his hair. "For the sake of not arguing, let's say I believe you. I got the impression you were in favor of Gin helping me. What do you think I should do to get her to agree?"

"Nothing. Stop arguing. Ask instead of demand. Stop questioning and trying to find logical answers for what will never be explainable or logical. Start seeing and feeling with your heart instead of that scientific robot mind of yours. In other words stop pushing every button that gets her pissed off."

*Hell, all she was telling him to do was become a different person. Piece of cake!*

She was impressed, not one trace of the turmoil her words had to have created showed. "I know it is unethical to ask, but since you are now part of the family all rules can be broken. What happened while you were hypnotized?"

Looking like someone who'd been offered a million dollars for a correct answer and knew they were going to blow the reply, he said, "Don't know. To begin with I didn't believe I could be hypnotized."

When she raised the eyebrow, he caved. "What can I say, I was a fool. Still it's hard to believe it was that easy. One minute I was listening to her sexy..." Cole cleared his throat. "I was listening to her talk; the next minute, I'm standing in my grandmother's backyard."

The storm had passed. Her emerald green eyes gazed at him with playful humor. "Interesting, I've heard her hypnotizing voice a million times, can't say I ever thought it was sexy."

She patted his arm when he hung his head. "Don't worry I'll keep that bit of information to myself, for now. What happened after you arrived in your grandmother's backyard?"

Reflecting inward, his eyes became unfocused. "There's a gazebo in the backyard. She's sitting inside along with Porter, a childhood friend. Sandy, a family pet, is sitting beside Nana's chair, although at first I didn't see her. I don't remember walking towards them, but suddenly we're hugging and they are telling me how happy they are to finally be talking to me. We sit down and Sandy jumps into my lap, I could feel her weight. That surprised me, still does. It's one of the odd things that keeps playing through me mind. Anyway we talk about things that have happened since they died. To tell you the truth their memory for details far surpassed mine.

"At some point, the children come running out from behind some lilac bushes screaming, 'surprise'. Once again I'm hearing how they had been waiting for the opportunity to talk to me. It was as if they knew this was going to happen long before the actual event."

Shaking himself out of the reverie, he cleared his throat. "The rest you know. I made a promise to them and I intend to keep it."

"Good so far, now tell me the real rest."

*The real rest? What was she talking about?*

"Porter. Last night. Martin's house."

"How in the..." He didn't think about it, his fingers raked through his hair. "After Gin left the house I went searching for the bottle of whiskey she told me was in an old wood icebox in the dining room. When I walked into the room the whiskey bottle was on the table. The icebox door was open, double shots of booze had been poured into two glasses. This morning when I walked into the room the bottle had disappeared. The icebox door was closed. The empty glasses were still on the table."

Trying to make light of the twilight zone experience, Cole added, "Now personally, I think whoever took the glasses out of the cupboard should have washed them and put them back where they belonged, but what the heck do I know."

"Amazing, after all of that and here you are still trying to deny what happened? Are you always this jackass stubborn?"

Funny, he had never thought of himself as inflexible when it came to changing his opinion. Still she had a point and he was not happy about admitting it to himself much less her.

"Let's make a deal. I promise to be more opened minded about all of this if you promise to stop calling me a jackass."

"Deal."

Her tantalizing smile was identical to Ginger's, but it didn't move him. It was interesting that his libido had recognized the difference between the three of them even when his eyes had deceived him.

He knew for certain that even as a bumbling geek he had never experienced as many embarrassing slips of the tongue as he had since arriving in Kansas. Now he needed to figure out what had disengaged his brain and affected his survival skills. Instead of worrying about talking ghosts it might be more advantageous to figure out if the three of them were witches. Or if it was one more thing caused by the April fool's prankster.

"How long you figure it will take her to calm down?"

"Of the three of us, she deflates the fastest. Cinn won't have any trouble sharing her logical perception of the situation."

Rosemary grabbed his hand. "Enough talk. Let's dance."

They were returning from the dance floor when Cinnamon pushed Ginger into his arms. "Go dance."

The music turned slow, the words heartrending as the singer sang of memories, lost opportunities and love. Cole swore the April fool's ghost either hated him or wanted to punish him for some unknown gaffe. Gathering Ginger in his arms, he tried to control desire. This was his uncle's fiancée, soon to be his aunt. An unseen force flashed parts of the dreams through his conscious. He muttered, "The hell with it."

She tilted her head back to look into his eyes. "Did you say something?"

"Nothing worth repeating." Refusing to think about how his thoughts were betraying his uncle, Cole pulled her closer. Dying the agony of the living, he enjoyed the feel of her body lightly rubbing against his.

Cole was not her destiny. The inner voices of caution and the devil's advocate had a two-second duel. This time, the devil's advocate won. Resting her head on his shoulder, Ginger closed her eyes, inhaled his scent and enjoyed the closeness of the dance.

Back at the table the atmosphere was sober.

"Cole, I apologize if it seemed I was being unreasonable but frankly I didn't like your tactics."

"Fair enough. I apologize for my jackass pushiness."

Only Ginger smiled.

"I will travel with you to talk to the children's families. Before we get into another argument, you need to call the kids' parents. If they are willing to talk to me, you can make the arrangements to visit them."

"I'll work on it tomorrow."

When no one spoke, Ginger rushed in to fill the void. "You certainly enjoyed driving the GTO. Last year I had a '70 Corvette. Keep hoping for another one, but someone hasn't been taking the hint. What's your favorite classic car?"

Somehow he had missed something significant. Cinnamon had definitely been crying. Rosemary looked upset. Ginger was trying hard to act like everything was normal.

"Until today, the closest thing to classic I'd ever driven was a black '50 Ford, pickup. Rust, a little barbed wire and prayers held it together and it shuddered if pushed past fifty. My folks gave it to Cody and me because it eliminated all worry about us drag racing."

"If you sweet talk Rose she might let you drive the Thunderbird."

The silence at the table was now louder than the band's music filling the room.

"You know I might have acted like a blind fool a few times in the last forty-eight hours but even I can see that something is upsetting all three of you. Are you going to tell me what that something is, or am I supposed to politely pretend everything is normal?"

Cinnamon looked up from the napkin she had been systematically shredding. "Since our folks died Gin has been the only one who could see them. Tonight, Mom was so mad at her for putting up a stink about visiting the kid's families she appeared in the bathroom to express her thoughts. I ... We don't know why but for some reason I was able to see her."

"Hasn't Gin hypnotized you?"

"Of course. But..." A gulp of air helped to steady Cinnamon's voice. "This was different. It was as if Mom was still alive. I could see the fury in her eyes. I couldn't hear her talking but somehow I knew what she was saying. When she realized I could see her she forgot about Gin and concentrated on me. As selfish as it sounds I loved it. I never fully understood what Gin experienced. Now, well to tell you the truth I'm more than a little jealous."

Knowing what that admission had cost her, Ginger hugged her as more tears threatened to spill. "It's okay, really I understood. There's absolutely no need to feel guilty."

Nearing midnight, the evening came to a natural end.

Parking the car in the oversized garage Cole escorted them into the house. "I will talk to one set of parents at a time. That way we won't be pressured about which set to visit first."

"That sounds fine. Breakfast is at ten on Sundays. It's a casual affair with everyone cooking, making a mess and generally eating too much. If you want, you're welcome to join us. Maybe by then you will have more information."

"Appreciate it. See you in the morning."

As Cole walked across the street he realized that for the first time since shortly after Porter died he felt lonely.

He thought about calling his brother but it was late.

Than again!

The phone was picked up on the fifth ring. "Yeah?" The voice was defiantly drugged with sleep.

"Did I wake you up big brother?"

## Chapter 16

The tantalizing aroma of coffee diffused Ginger's concentration as Rosemary walked into the studio carrying two steaming mugs.

Casually scanning the room as Ginger took a welcoming sip of the mocha mint coffee, Rosemary's smile slipped a notch.

"Thanks, I needed that. Don't waste your time looking. The painting has disappeared."

"What, you don't trust me?"

"Is that a trick question, or do you really think I'm rummy enough from the lack of sleep to answer?"

Placing her hands on the small of her back, Ginger arched backwards. Several vertebrae popped as sore muscles stretched. Watching Rosemary, Ginger was amazed when she gracefully gave in without an argument.

"I heard you get up, but thought for sure you would go back to bed. Looks like you got busy instead."

Sipping coffee, Rosemary studied the two finished paintings still sitting on the easels. "I like. The Halloween scene reminds me of the bedtime stories Dad used to tell us about Nipsy, Dipsy and Whitsy, the ghosts too dumb to fly."

Ginger smiled at the memory. "I always thought the antics of those three ghosts resembled some of our dumber moments."

"Maybe a little. Mostly they reminded me of the Three Stooges. Always bumping into each other and causing calamity. This haunted house would have fit them perfectly."

Looking at the picture of the little girl gleefully holding onto the swing's ropes for dear life as she tried to swing to the sky, Rosemary said around a chuckle, "Remember how we used to dare each other to go just a little higher, then jump out of the swing in the backyard?"

Ginger snorted coffee. "How the heck could that memory put a smile on your face? For some reason, the whopping and the whole summer of weed duty we got when Chelsea took the dare, then landed on her hands hard enough to break a wrist, stands out more than anything else."

Rose wrinkled her nose. "Chelsea was a whiny brat, she deserved what she got." When the scent of magnolia perfume drifted through the room, she hastily added, "Then again, maybe we did too for egging her on."

When the scent of their mother's perfume disappeared without her making an appearance, Rosemary concentrated on the other two easels. "Interesting, it looks like a time warp scene within the same setting. What gives?"

"Who knows, maybe a new form of dream therapy. The square dancers painted themselves. Other than being the hand holding the brush, I have no input into its creation. I'd say it was spooky, but considering our lives, that would be ridiculous."

"The couple dancing is a very vague recreation of the dream I had this morning. Again, the painting is creating itself. It's kind of interesting that the backgrounds are so similar since I have no idea where the

scene comes from. I'm at a loss as to how either one relates to my dreams, although I bet they do."

Rosemary cocked her head in thought. "Odds are one hundred percent in your favor."

The doorbell rang before Ginger could ask any questions.

When Ginger reached for the doorknob Rosemary grabbed her arm.

"Unless you want to give Cole heart failure, I would suggest you let me open the door while you put some clothes on under Daddy's shirt."

Scurrying up the stairs, she was still laughing when she reached her bedroom. How could she have forgotten that she was naked? Well, almost naked, the shirt went down to her knees but there was nothing under the shirt and in the right light, that fact was evident.

Without painting to keep her thoughts at bay, Ginger started thinking about the dreams. Why had last night's dream been different? Instead of being stalked, it had felt like she was being watched and seduced at the same time, which made absolutely no sense. If the dream had shifted to accommodate a change in her life, what was the change? She muttered, "Hells bells." Without more answers, she was only chasing her tail as she circled around the same questions.

\* \* \* \*

The aroma of cranberry muffins filled the air.

Cole looked comfortably at home and proficient as he worked the waffle iron and kept an eye on the electric mixer as it beat whipping cream into stiff peaks.

Using an electric skillet, Cinnamon was efficiently scrambling eggs with ham, red peppers and cheese.

Rosemary, standing at the stove, was making the Sunday morning specialty, which only left the table on the deck to be set and a pitcher of Ambrosia to make.

Ginger set to work.

Dipping a spoon into the Sunday morning specialty, Cole took a cautious taste. Licking his lips, he tipped the gravy boat until a generous helping of the sauce covered a waffle. Then topped that off with a generous spoonful of fresh whipped cream.

Triplicate images of smugness watched every move.

"You can wipe the smirks off your faces. I graciously bow to your superior culinary skills. You were right, I was wrong. I will never again question how apples, onions, a few spices and wine can make a tasty topping for waffles."

"Someday you'll meet Aunt Pesty. She claims fruit syrups are too sweet and she doesn't like Maple syrup. She took a recipe from a really old cookbook and started experimenting. This is the result," Cinnamon said.

"Later today, I will make good on the wager. Atoning for my lack of trust, I promise to hand wash and wax all four cars."

Dum-Dum, having eaten her fill of scrambled eggs, laid on a rock beside the pond. Swatting at fish as they glided past the rock, she lost her balance and fell into the water. Yowling with indignation, she managed to shower water onto everyone before looking for a less perilous form of entertainment.



After darting around the yard, she jumped onto a tree branch several feet off the ground. Like the Kit-Cat Klock in Ginger's office, her long tail swung back and forth beneath the branch. As quick as a wink, she would lift the tail and curl it around her body. A few minutes later, the tail was once again swinging, then once again around her body. Back and forth the game went.

When curiosity overrode the plan not to ask questions that could bring up ghosts Cole asked, "Does 'Dum-Dum' stand for more than 'sucker'?"

"'Sucker' would be appropriate; nevertheless, the thought never entered my mind when I named her. If I tell you what I see, will you promise not to freak out?"

"Would I freak out?"

"I certainly hope that's a rhetorical question."

"I have argued, questioned, shown strong skepticism, and challenged. I have never freaked out."

Diplomatically, she did not remind him of his reaction to the sketches. "Fair enough, I stand corrected. Dum-Dum is antisocial towards the cats and dogs that live in the neighborhood. But she loves playing with animals that visit from the spirit world and to tell you the truth, they seem to appreciate being noticed. Right now, she is teasing Sandy. Looks like both of them are enjoying the game."

He didn't freak. He didn't question a cat being able to see spirits. Instead, he surprised everyone, including himself by grinning.

"She would enjoy that. A few years ago, a black-and-white kitten taunted her unmercifully. Mom was sure Sandy would kill him if she was ever able to catch him. One day Mom walked into one of the horse stalls and found them curled around each other, sound asleep. After that they became each other's shadow."

"Where's the cat now?" Ginger asked.

"Terrorizing the mice in the barn and making sure every other tomcat stays out of his territory."

Thinking it was time to change the subject on a positive note, Cinnamon started to offer to help him get all the paraphernalia together for the car-washing marathon when Cole's next statement caught everyone off guard.

"I was able to get hold of Liz's parents in Seattle this morning."

Ignoring the silent glances the three shot each other, he continued. "They were receptive to what I told them and are willing to meet you. I know it's a little quick, but I would like to fly there tomorrow. We could meet with them tomorrow evening."

"Let me check my schedule. I'm not certain how many appointments I have or who can be rescheduled."

Relieved of cleanup duty, she went to the office. In a matter of minutes, Ginger was back in the kitchen.

"Well, it seems my next two weeks are clear. Somehow, three pages in the day timer were stuck together. I skipped two whole weeks when I set up appointments and never noticed."

Rosemary muttered just loud enough for Cinnamon to hear. "Aunt Pesty strikes again."

Cole's smile showed his pleased victory. "Great. If everyone is agreeable, how about I contact the family in Los Angeles to see if we could meet with them the day after meeting with the Jordan's in Seattle?"

Looking at her sisters, they held a silent debate on the pros and cons.

Cinnamon grinned her approval.

Rosemary lifted a brow before nodding her consent.

Ginger watched her sisters for a very long second. "Go ahead." Feeling like the sacrificial lamb being thrown into the lion's den, she did not smile.

## Chapter 17

Flights to Seattle and Los Angeles were scheduled. Hotel rooms were booked, car rentals taken care of and appointments set up with Liz and Sally's parents.

With the plan in motion, Cole had more than a few qualms. Uppermost on his list of questions was whether or not ghosts appeared on command. Deciding not to borrow trouble, he walked outside with a pleased look on his face ready to tackle the cars.

Blinded by water dripping down his face, Cole shot a hand out in a futile attempt to stop the spray of water from hitting him.

Not until his t-shirt and jeans were sopping wet did the two streams of water abruptly stop. Swiping at a drop of water rolling down his nose, he listened to gales of laughter drifting up from the three copper heads crouched behind the GTO.

"Where's my hose?"

"Who says you have one?" With identical voices, it was impossible to know who had spoken.

"It seems to me you could at least give me a fighting chance."

Ginger stood up. A very wet t-shirt clung to every curve.

He gulped. His jeans shrank.

"Define a fighting chance, cowboy?" She spoke in the same seductive purr Cinnamon had used the previous evening. She knew she was playing with fire. He wasn't her Adam, never would be, but the dreams were leaving her antsy, and playful and ready to test her flirtatious wings on a living, breathing handsome male. Besides this was payback for pushing her into a corner she didn't want to be in.

As effective as a cold shower, a quick blast of ice-cold water hit him just above the crotch.

Rosemary batted her lashes when he glared at her.

"Need some help, son?" The man asking the question was carrying a high-powered, dual barreled, air pump, long-range, water-rifle.

"Uncle Gus, that's not fair," Ginger wailed.

"Now, the way I see it, in more ways than one you three aren't playing fair. Looks to me like this poor guy needs all the help he can get."

Easily catching the water rifle Gus tossed his way, Cole ran for cover as blasts of ice cold water from two hoses hit him in the back.

"Thanks, I appreciate the help."

The next double blast barely missed giving Gus an icy bath. "That does it. Connect my two hoses together. At least it will give you a fighting chance." With that, he retreated to the safety of his kitchen where his bawdy laughter and occasional words of warning floated through the kitchen's open window.

Hours later the four of them were dirty, tired, hungry and after one last water fight, soaked to the bone.

Cole hadn't had so much fun washing and waxing cars since he was fourteen and been given the old beat-up ranch pickup.

In the end, they washed and waxed the Mustang, GTO, Thunderbird, Austin Healey, Martin's Mercedes, Gus's Audi and a pale yellow '66 Mustang that had been parked in the big yellow and white barn they called a garage.

When the pizza delivery truck pulled up, they had just finished coiling the last hose onto a hook by the faucet.

Not bothering to clean up, they sat around the white wicker table on the front porch as the early evening sun warmed them.

Only Ginger noticed the woman walking up the circular drive.

"Hello, Agnes." With lips dragged downward in a permanent thin-lipped scowl, the lady's thin face had more lines on it than an AAA road map.

"Which one are you?"

"I'm Ginger."

"The three of you should be ashamed. Ladies don't compromise their reputations by sitting down to a meal half naked."

Three brows arched and Cole's brows drew together, but no one took the bait.

Pointing a bony finger she demanded, "Which one are you?"

"I'm Cinn."

"Cinn is a disgusting, vile nickname, shouldn't be tolerated. Absolutely disgusting! Your daddy should have put a stop to such filth."

When her eyes landed on Cole the expression, evil eye, took on a whole new meaning. "Who's this young man you girls have been cavorting with all afternoon?"

"This is Cole, Martin's nephew. Cole, Agnes is our neighborhood historian. Like the *National Enquirer*, she makes certain enquiring minds know everything, real and imagined, that happens in our little Peyton Place," Rosemary said before giving Agnes a toothy smile.

"You watch you manners, young lady; men don't like females with smartass trashy mouths. Told your mother more than once she needed to paddle your bottom for mouthing off. Too bad she never listened."

A gust of wind brought with it the heavy scent of magnolias.

"Does your uncle know you're here, young man, or did you sneak into his house after he left just so you could play around with loose women?"

He laid the Texas drawl on extra thick. "Actually, ma'am, Uncle Martin gave me an open invitation. As for loose woman, why ma'am, that's been a really sweet bonus."

When he winked, Agnes almost swallowed her tongue. "Why I never, such insolence. Your uncle will be hearing about this when he returns."

Caitlin materialized, drew her arm back and swatted Agnes in the ass. Agnes jumped as her body bowed forward. "What the hell?" Her head jerked backwards, her mouth flew open and her eyes about popped out of their sockets. As if she had been released from someone's hold, she bent at the waist gagging then grabbed a can of soda off the table to guzzle. No one moved or commented.

"Where is she?" Agnes demanded.

"Who?" Ginger waved her fingers as her mother blew her a kiss before disappearing.

No one noticed Gus until he spoke. "Agnes, get your skinny ass and big mouth out of the kids' faces. They don't need your nose in their business anymore than I do. And I don't want to hear any more stores about this place being haunted. Now skedaddle."

With several glances over her shoulders, her bony carcass fled down the driveway.

"How on earth do you manage her? If anyone else spoke like that, she would eat them alive for supper." Ginger's voice held admiration.

"Let's just say we have a history. Probably only time in her life she didn't blab everything to the world. It's a handy leverage."

"I swear, when I see her coming I revert to being six years old. The woman positively terrifies me," Cinnamon said as she kept an eye on the woman's retreating back.

"She has that effect on a lot of people. If she gives you any more problems, let me know. Cole, you play golf?"

"No sir, never had the time."

"When you are not playing around with these loose women, I'll give you a few lessons. Course, if I was thirty years younger I'd be sitting where you are and telling an old fart like me, thanks but no thanks."

"I'll make time between the cavorting and work to take you up on the offer."

"Sounds good. Gin, tell your mom that was a good one. Night."

"What happened?" Rosemary demanded as soon as Gus closed his front door.

"Mom smacked Agnes in the butt, pulled her hair to make her open her mouth then ran a bar of soap over her tongue. Just like she did to us that time we wouldn't tell her which one of us had called her a mean old lady."

"I love it. Too bad we couldn't see the whole show, but Agnes's actions were comical. What does Gus know?" Cinnamon asked.

"Don't have a clue. He's made other comments about Mom and Dad visiting, but he's better then a politician at sidestepping questions," Ginger said.

Relaxing, Cole half listened to the talk. Except for suggesting that they wash his uncle's car and making a few comments about how much they liked the way he had redone the house, Martin's name had not been mentioned all day.

He had the distinct impression that they were not too happy with their aunt at the moment. Other than learning that their father had given their aunt her nickname and that she was currently at some sort of retreat, she too had not been mentioned.

The t-shirts they had worn over their swimsuits produced enough coverage that they didn't worry about anything being unexpectedly exposed. But when wet they clung to every scrumptious curve. Still, it was only the sight of Ginger's delectable body that had him wanting to peel the clothing off her body as he touched and tasted his way over every inch revealed.

He knew Gin had interpreted his lustful glances correctly, but he had the feeling she was afraid of him. No, that was wrong; it was more like she was afraid of showing any signs of attraction towards him.

Having admired his uncle's bachelorhood in the fact that he had seen how much less complicated his life could be without the commitment of a family or permanent residence, Cole had planned on following in his footsteps. Like his uncle's career, Cole's practice entailed a lot of travel, which left little room for a relationship. Which he admitted was nothing more than an excuse to justify the one-dimensional life he had been living.

Then again, until Ginger, he had never met a female able to put a dent in his single-minded dedication to work. The incident with Agnes and the crazy idea that she talked to ghosts put a different spin on the vow: till death we do part. Still, he figured it could be worse; she could have the ability to read his mind.

"Cole, you said you just got back from England; what..."

As the three of them discussed travel, Ginger's mind wandered. Her breath hitched like an out of shape runner each time Cole smiled at her. When he had stripped off his wet t-shirt, her hormones had gone haywire at the sight of his bare torso. He had put the shirt back on before sitting down to eat, but the wet jeans still emphasized his well-proportioned maleness. Fortunately, for her sanity, his bottom half was hidden under the wicker table.

There was still the unanswered question of why he had not corrected the mistaken identity, and she still had the sneaky suspicion that there was more behind the story of his being here.

When talking about life growing up on a ranch, his brother and Porter were continually mentioned. She got the impression he was a little miffed at his brother at the moment. In spite of whatever had Cole peeved, there was no doubt the two of them were close friends.

As the sun set, casting a colorful impressionist watercolor of pinks, blues and lavenders across the evening sky, Cole stood between Rosemary and Cinnamon. Tipping Rosemary's face up with his finger, he kissed her on the nose. "Good night, Sunshine. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help; you can collect on my gratitude of debt anytime."

He kissed Cinnamon on the cheek. "Good night, Gorgeous. You, my dear, are Sin with a capital 'S' and I hope I get to see the sparks fly when you meet the right guy."

By the time he reached Ginger's side, her palms were sweaty, her heart was racing and her sisters were watching with amused anticipation. She could not bring herself to look at him. Gently placing a finger under her chin, Cole tilted Ginger's face up. Ever so softly, he kissed her lips. "Good night, love. Sweet dreams, I will see you in the morning."

Stepping off the porch, he was whistling, "There Is Nothing Like A Dame", from the movie *South Pacific*.

Once he was safely behind closed doors, all three sisters came out of their stupor.

Rosemary grinned and tapped her index finger on her lips. "My, my, he does learn quickly."

When Cinnamon was able to stop laughing, she added, "Methinks the fun has just begun."

"Omigod, what do I do now?" Ginger, eyes wide open with sheer panic, squeaked. She was having earthquake-sized feelings for a man that could mean nothing, be nothing to her.

Why couldn't life be simple? Dreams start. Life mate appears. She swoons. He's captivated. They marry; have two point five children to make the statistic counters happy, one dog, one cat and a house with a white picket fence. They live happily ever after, end of story.

"Simple is boring," her mother's voice whispered in her ear.

Once the trash had been tossed and the utensils put in the dishwasher, they bid Ginger goodnight without so much as an "if you need to talk while you're gone give me a call."

## Chapter 18

After a panic attack on what to pack, Ginger threw caution to the wind. Every piece of clothing she could possibly think might be needed was neatly folded and stacked into her largest suitcase. An overnight bag held a small cosmetic bag and a wide selection of shoes.

Sleep had blissfully come the minute her head hit the pillow. If she had dreamt, Ginger certainly didn't remember. Which she hoped was a good sign.

Ready to leave an hour early, she impatiently paced the house making sure nothing had been forgotten. Pulling the front door open so she could hear Cole pull up, Ginger walked into the kitchen intending to make a second pot of coffee.

Her mother and a cute little girl with coal black hair and big blue eyes were sitting on the bar stools like co-conspirators playing a new game.

"Good morning, dear. This is Elizabeth, or Liz; I believe you two have already met."

*Where is Dad?* Except for his refusal to materialize in bathrooms occupied by females, they were always together. "Morning Mom, Liz."

"Don't fret. Your father is attending to another little matter. Elizabeth is so excited that you finally agreed to see things our way that she didn't want to wait until you got to Seattle to be with you and Cole. So, we decided to travel with you. Won't that be fun?"

"You're kidding, right?" *What did she mean by, 'our way'?*

"Kidding, why would I be kidding? Don't you want company? Flying first class will be a special treat. Besides, if any bogeymen appear, I will get rid of them so you needn't worry about pesky annoyances."

"Bogeymen?"

"You know dear, G, H, O, S, T, S. Elizabeth is a little afraid of them. That is why I am traveling with her as her chaperone."

*Could a spirit be afraid of a ghost?* This was getting too unreal even for Ginger.

"Does the other matter Dad is attending to have anything to do with Aunt Pesty?"

"Well, now, you know, I just don't know. You know there is always something going on that needs special attention."

"Mom, your nose is growing."

Instinctively, she touched the tip of her nose. "It is not." Liz giggled. Caitlin shrugged. "Oh well, I tried. Yes, he went to visit Pesty. Of course, she can't see him, but he thought it was time to see how that end of the—anyway, he just wanted to make sure she was all right."

Ginger didn't believe it for a minute. "So tell me, where is this *retreat* Aunt Pesty was so excited about?"

"Maine, Vermont? Oh, I don't know, one of those tiny New England states."

Funny, Aunt Pesty had mentioned Florida. If her mother had banded together with her aunt, Ginger knew



it wouldn't be for an innocent prank. She was getting earthquake-sized vibrations that had disaster written all over them. There was also the fact that her mother was acting rattled, which was totally unlike her.

"Mother, does your traveling with me have anything to do with the kiss Cole gave me last night? Or the fact that he is not my life mate and you read my mind during and after that little exchange?"

Liz clamped her hands in delight then placed them over her mouth as she giggled.

Her mother failed miserably when she tried looking shocked at the allegation. "No, of course not. Yes, I saw the playful kiss. I thought it was given in innocent fun. Now you tell me it curled your toes. How absolutely delightful! How did it compare to your dream man, or as Rosemary says, Adam?"

"I haven't a clue. I was too rattled to compare."

"You will have to tell me all about that later. Elizabeth was telling me that her parents are a little concerned that you are a flake that has somehow enchanted Cole. Don't be surprised if they are a little reserved. Cole just arrived; have fun and stop worrying. Everything will be fine. We'll see you on the plane." With that, they both gave a little wave and disappeared.

Maybe she was dreaming and this was just an episode of Bewitched that was replaying itself as a nightmare. At least with her mother, the ghost buster, tagging along, Ginger wouldn't have to worry about unexpected complications for the first part of the trip.

She didn't like the idea of her mother watching her every move. It was not only highly unusual, she found the thought a little intimidating.

Cole looked around the kitchen as if he were expecting to see something or someone besides her standing by the counter with an empty coffee mug in her hand.

When he didn't say anything, she walked towards the foyer. "I'm ready; let's get this show on the road." As soon as the words were spoken, she realized just how appropriate the comment might turn out to be. If her mother felt the need to be overseeing the trip, she must be worried that one of the poorly versed spells her Aunt Pesty was notorious for concocting could be leading Ginger down a path to any number of problems.

Cole made no comment when he placed the bulging suitcase and overnight bag next to a small, efficient duffle bag in the trunk of the rental car he had decided to return. Nor did he make a comment at the check-in counter when told there would be an extra charge because the large bag was over the fifty-pound limit.

As the plane taxied towards the runway, Cole asked, "Do you enjoy flying, or are you a white knuckled passenger?"

"That depends on the weather. When the air is smooth as glass, I relax and enjoy the ride. If it gets bumpy, I have been known to check out were the exit signs are located. You?"

"Not too much bothers me. In the last four years, I've spent so many hours in the air I pretty much take it all in stride."

As the plane accelerated down the runway, Cole tucked her hand inside his. Ignoring the electrical charge that ran up his fingers, he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "Just in case the take off is bumpy," he whispered in her ear. His wickedly handsome smile and the two charming dimples had her heart skipping to a new beat. If her mother and Liz hadn't chosen that moment to appear in the aisle, Ginger would have been tempted to act on the devil's advocate suggestion to act nervous just to see what

happened next.

"Everything is fine. We have another passenger from this side, but otherwise I haven't seen anything unusual."

With Liz tugging on her hand, Caitlin smiled. "We'll be back after take off."

Cole had not said much since arriving at the house. If he'd heard her mother's conversation, it would be a first. Except for the one fluke, even her sisters couldn't hear their parents' voices.

Her world, crazy as it might seem to others, had been very normal and routine. Now it was turning itself upside down and inside out. Like a crossword puzzle, clues were being given but only a few answers were materializing. Problem was, she was beginning to think some spaces hadn't been filled in correctly.

Topping the list of new developments was Cinnamon seeing their mother. *If* Cole had heard her mother talking, it would be the first time a non-family member had been able to hear her mother. In a crossword puzzle, she imagined those two events would intersect.

Since her mother had never been overly protective, Ginger questioned the reason she was now hovering as she escorted Elizabeth to Seattle.

"I am not hovering."

What would you call butting into my thoughts and checking out the passengers and the plane as if I were twelve years old and just learning to use my powers?

"Being considerate. Liz really is nervous about what is about to happen. Or rather what she is afraid won't happen since..."

Ginger watched her mother's lips move as if she were talking to someone. A moment later her mother waved a hand as if swatting at an annoying fly.

"Anyway, as I was about to say, traveling with you and Cole is keeping Elizabeth's mind off her concerns. She has waited patiently for the opportunity to talk to her family. If it doesn't happen, she will be very disappointed." Turning her back to Ginger she effectively shut off further questions.

Ginger would bet that her father's conspicuous absence was related to her mother's presence. Her parents were worried about something; a spell created by Aunt Pesty was the likely answer. The desperate client who never arrived or called to reschedule, but conveniently shared first names with Cole, probably fit in this section of the puzzle. But how, she couldn't begin to guess.

Spirits asking for help had happened on occasion, but only when Ginger had come upon them by accident. Spirits actually soliciting her help, not to mention doing that by way of a client, had no cross-reference.

Then there were the clues in the dreams. Working off of Adam there was: darkness, stalking, falling, overwhelming fear, awareness, innocent delight and heated passion. The last dream brought to mind: romantic dance, tender, loving and permanent. In listing everything systematically, Ginger felt more frustrated than ever as the words seemed mystifying rather than enlightening.

Cole's kiss had been innocent; the panic jolting her emotions, frenzied. With her emotionally charged reactions to his nearness and the fact that he wasn't her life mate, Ginger knew that her teasing and flirting was a big fat no-no. One that was going to backfire on her when he left. There was also something poking her conscious that she knew she should be remembering. She just couldn't seem to grasp what

that something was.

Sighing with frustration, Ginger pushed all the thoughts aside as she watched a handful of spirits dance amongst the clouds.

\* \* \* \*

Cole sat with an opened paperback on his lap. Not once did he turn a page.

Shifting in the seat, he again tried to find a comfortable position for his now familiar erection. He hadn't been in a state of constant attention since before Suzy had crushed the existence of his sex life by dumping him for the football captain after he had helped her get a passing grade in chemistry. He had forgotten how frustratingly uncomfortable it could be.

He had always been an exceptional student. When Porter had been alive, he and Cody had forced him to take his nose out of the books long enough to behave like any normal, hormone driven, male teenager. Reflecting back on how obsessed he had become after Porter's death to find a cure for a friend who was beyond help, Cole was surprised his brother still spoke to him. His tunnel vision had resulted in who he was and for that he would not complain. Still looking back, Cole realized he had made a lot of sacrifices during the long tedious journey.

Perhaps there was more to the grief hypnosis session than rocking his world into a science fiction dimension. Preoccupied with getting Ginger to agree to help he hadn't noticed any difference until he had been ambushed with the water fight. Silly playfulness was so out of character for him that his enjoyment of the water battle had surprised him. Cole couldn't pinpoint the exact moment it had happened, and maybe that wasn't how it worked, but his grief had shifted, cracked and crumbled. As easily as the dust had washed off the cars, he had shed the overpowering helplessness and anguish he had worn like a second skin for half his life, leaving little of his former staid self behind. If the hypnosis was behind the change, it was far more powerful then he could ever have imagined without going through the experience.

When it was time to call it a night, the goodbye kisses had started out as innocent fun. What had possessed him to kiss Ginger on the lips, he would never know. His intention had been to kiss her forehead. Cole could have sworn that was where he had aimed.

The minute their lips met, he had recognized the touch, the taste, the scent of her that clung to his skin during the dreams and long after awakening. It had only been seven days, his first night in his uncle's house, since he had experienced the same sensations during the first dream.

As light and innocent as the kiss had been, it had seared his heart faster then a red-hot branding iron hitting a cow's hide. With the heat generated from the kiss, his emotions had jumped from lust to love before their lips had parted.

If he ever figured out the how and why, within all that was happening he was going to make a point of thanking whoever was responsible for reacquainting him with life.

With the front door wide open that morning, he had walked in without knocking. Hearing voices coming from the kitchen, Cole had assumed Cinnamon or Rosemary was there to see them off. When the conversation registered, it stopped him in his tracks. Shamelessly eavesdropping, he had been disappointed that her mother and Liz had vanished by the time he walked into the kitchen.

"Gin."

"Hmmm?"

"Where are they? We're sitting in First Class; all the seats are taken, so where are they sitting?"

Turning to face him, she studied his expression. He looked in control of his emotions, interested but not panicky. "They were already on the plane when we boarded. They poked in and out of stuff for a while. I assume Mom was checking things out and showing Liz how everything works."

"What about after that?"

"During take off they pretended to strap themselves onto the engine domes. It reminded me of a bronco bull rider. It was really pretty funny. Right now, Liz is having a great time walking the aisle mimicking the flight attendants."

"Any other ghosts?" This was totally insane. Never in a million years would he have placed a bet on ever having such a conversation.

Ginger grinned. "Nope, no ghosts, but there is another spirit on board."

She watched his eyes dilate. He started to rake his hair then stopped as he tried to read her expression. "You're kidding? You said that just to get a reaction out of me."

"I kid you not. And you can relax, he's a nice guy."

"God help me for being foolish enough to ask, where?"

Her smile made him grow a little more uncomfortable. He shifted in the seat.

Watching him squirm, Ginger wondered if he really was getting comfortable with the idea of spirits or just humoring her so she would talk to the children's families. "I think you will appreciate this. Tom's brother is the pilot. Before passing over, Tom was also a pilot. Now he travels on his brother's flights to make sure everything is safe."

"You were right. I like that. You called him by name. He talked to you?"

"Yes, it's a novelty to have someone on this side who can really see and hear him. A man sitting in the tail section can feel their presence, but that just doesn't offer the same satisfaction as talking to a medium."

"How do they know the guy can feel them?"

"Every time they walk by, the guy looks up, shivers and turns another shade paler. Tom and Mom keep cracking jokes about him looking like a ghost. Right now, they are trying to keep Liz away from the poor guy."

"Does the pilot know his brother is on board?" He surprised both of them by asking the question.

"See, even you, the eternal skeptic are realizing there's more to this mumbo jumbo than meets the eye."

Cole gave her a sheepish grin that melted her heart into a big puddle of happiness. Ginger knew she needed to guard her feelings. Getting emotionally involved with any male beyond the big brother feelings she had for Rumor was wrong. But talking like this to Cole felt right, comfortable and fun. And if sexual tension could be called such—relaxing.

There was nothing in Grandmamma's spell that said she couldn't enjoy a little light-hearted flirtation, but she had never indulged. Not for lack of opportunity, but because of a lack of interest in the male species that had thus far paraded before her.

"The answer is, yes, his brother has sensed Tom's presence. When we leave, I'll pass him my business card, with a note on the back. If he is interested in knowing more, he'll call."

Cole picked up the paperback book setting in his lap. "You're telling me I can stick my nose in this book and not worry about anything but profilers, psychics, and who gets murdered next."

"You can. Want me to tell you the ending so you don't get scared?"

"You wouldn't? Please don't tell me you read the ending before you read the book."

She laughed at the comical look of horror. "Guilty as charged."

With lips compressed to keep from smiling, Cole shook his head in disappointment.

"Well not all of the time. Sometimes though, when it's dark outside and the house is extra quiet, if I get scared and want to make sure everything is going to turn out okay I skim the last chapter before reading the guts."

"Gin, it's a story, there has to be a happy ending."

"Not all the time, sometimes the ending is sad, bittersweet or haunting. I gather you don't want to know the ending."

"No, I don't want to know the ending. Believe it or not half the fun is supposed to be trying to figure out who is guilty."

She laughed. "You don't scare me. Be nice or I will tell you anyway and then I will tell you the ending of all the other books in the series."

The teasing was stimulating. If he weren't a macho guy, he would say that his heart was swelling with joy. Being macho, he reduced the feeling to full-blooded lust. "I am always nice, just ask my mother and never believe a word Cody or Porter say. If I promise to be extra nice, will you please let me discover who the bad guy is on my own?"

"What's extra nice?"

"Fresh crab, Pike Street Market."

*Hells Bells, she'd been hoping for a kiss.*

She leaned over until her lips almost touched his ear. "The brother did it."

With her breath tickling his ear and her arm lightly pressed against his, Cole discovered that lust came dressed in capital letters painted seductive shades of red. Sucking in life-sustaining air, he forced his thoughts back to the book. "There is no brother."

"Are you positive?"

They both declined lunch and drank too much coffee. The flight pattern and the beautiful clear day gave them spectacular views of Mt. Saint Helen, Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainier. As the plane turned for the final approach, there was a breathtaking view of Puget Sound and the lush green-forested land beyond the water.

\* \* \* \*

The first thing Ginger noticed when she walked into her hotel room was the connecting door. Making

sure the door on her side was firmly locked, she placed the luggage rack in front of the door and balanced the heavy suitcase on top. Cole had given her no reason not to trust him, so that wasn't the point behind the exercise. She was blocking her entry to temptation.

Walking down the steep hill to Pike Street Market, they stretched cramped muscles after the long flight and enjoyed the crisp fresh air.

Nibbling on shrimp and crab cocktails purchased at a small stand, they leisurely strolled through the market place. The large variety of locally grown fruit and vegetables on display was fascinating. Huge red strawberries and the largest green grapes Ginger had ever seen became the second course to their meal.

"Are Liz and your mom still with us?"

"Haven't left our side. Although, I don't think Mom is real happy right now."

"Do I want to know why?"

She waved off the concern stamped on his face. "It's no big deal. Well, I guess it is to Mom; she just stuck her tongue out at me and Liz played copycat. Seems they both love strawberries, the fact that they can't taste these is driving them crazy."

The aroma of broiling fish was not always pleasant, but the teasing scent of spices and fresh baked sourdough bread filling the air had them walking over the threshold of a small self-service, café overlooking the waterfront. Large sourdough bread bowls filled with the best clam chowder Ginger had ever eaten satisfied their hunger.

"Liz wants to feed the seagulls."

"Can she do that?"

"Liz is very proud of the fact that she can move objects. She really wants to show you what she can do."

"As in objects flying through the air without anyone having obviously tossed them?"

"Yes. Don't panic; Mom has figured out a way to make Liz happy and not have the incident make the evening news. Grab a handful of crackers and follow me."

"Where to?"

"Don't know. Guess we play follow-the-leader. Or in this case follow-the-spirit."

Where turned out to be an old pier. Walking past several fishermen more intent on an afternoon nap than fishing, they found the needed privacy.

While Cole held his hand out, as if flinging a broken piece of cracker to the wind, Liz was able to use the rouse to feed the gulls.

Ginger thought it a shame that Cole couldn't hear Liz's delightful giggles every time a gull caught a cracker in mid air.

"What just happened?" Cole asked when he felt a warm brush of air against his cheek.

"You're Liz's hero. She just gave you a kiss."

## Chapter 19

Cole handed Ginger a scrap of paper. "Tell me where to go."

"Did you mean that literally or figuratively?"

He shook his head. "And here I thought we were getting along so well. The paper has the directions to the house. Do I go north or south on I-5?"

"Depends. Are we below or above where this line is?"

"According to Kathy, the hotel is below that line."

"Which way is north?"

"Gin, please tell me your kidding."

"Nope. Don't have a clue."

"The ocean is behind us, which means we are driving east. North has to be to our left. Surely that makes sense."

"If you say so, I guess it's true. Without familiar landmarks, I get hopelessly confused when it comes to directions. According to this, if we are below that line we want to take a left onto the freeway."

Awhile later she was nibbling her lip with worry. "Cole, I think we're kind of going in the wrong direction."

"How 'kind of'?"

"Well, this paper says take exit 164 to Mercer Island. We just passed exit 172 and the sign says the next exit is 173. I think you better turn around."

He took it in stride.

"Okay, take a left at the gas station. Not that gas station—the one with the trees lining the street."

"Now what?"

"Go two blocks. There should be a coral house on the corner with a big brass deer in the front yard. Take a right."

"The road doesn't go right."

"Hey, don't yell at me. You're the one who wrote this. So, take a left then turn left into the next driveway."

The house was a large single story rambling affair that blended in with the heavy foliage and trees on the property.

Ginger hardly gave the house a glance as she focused on the two greeting committees standing at the front door. Only one was aware of the other.

No matter what guilt Cole harbored over Liz's death, Kathy and Glen Jordan and their children greeted

him with the warmth of a welcomed member of the family.

"Have any trouble finding the place?" Glen asked as he slapped Cole on the back.

"Not too much."

Glen gave a knowing grin. "Good. When Kathy said she had given you directions I tried calling, but all I got was your voice mail."

Liz's siblings, Grace, April and Billy were eager to talk about ghosts. Billy, at nine, was all boy as he made crackling sounds and hackling laughter to tease his sisters.

Although Kathy and Glen were friendly, like her mother had warned, there was also a slight tension that said they were reserving judgment about Ginger's abilities.

After a walk around the spectacular backyard to admire the view of the lake and a new blue and white sailboat tucked into a small boathouse, they settled down in a comfortably furnished, kid friendly, family room done in multiple shades of green and tan.

Taking a deep breath for courage, Ginger briefly closed her eyes and said a silent prayer.

"I know this has been a shock. Because of that, I appreciate your willingness to talk to me. Let me explain what I do as a hypnotherapist and as a medium. Then we can decide how to proceed."

Keeping the explanation the same as she would for a first time client Ginger quickly covered the basics. As she talked, a yellow number two pencil flew across the pad of art paper setting on her lap.

"Billy, just before you tried freaking your sisters out you asked if there was a ghost in the house. I prefer the word spirits because they are not here to harm or haunt us."

"Cool, are there any spirits in the house?"

Smiling and nodding, she glanced around the room at the spirits waiting to be recognized before focusing her attention back on Billy. "Yes, there are several spirits in the room." Not taking her eyes off him, she slowly turned over one of the pictures. "Do you recognize this man?"

Billy's parents, sitting next to each other on a forest green leather couch, gasped. Grace and April slowly looked around the room with eyes that had grown as large as saucers. Billy, with nine-year old exuberance jumped up and down, his face lit up with happiness. "That's my grandpa. I'm named after him. He went to heaven last year to be with Grandma and Liz. Wow, this is so cool. He's really here? Where is he?"

"Yes, he's really here." Turning over another drawing, Ginger added, "Right now he's standing behind the couch with his arm around this woman."

With eagerness, Billy ran to Ginger's side. "That's my Grandma. She made really, really good oatmeal raisin cookies. There's Liz, I was just a baby when she died. She had Mom's black hair and blue eyes. I don't know them. Where are they? Can they talk to you? Can we talk to them?"

All Cole could think as he watched the scene unfold was, thank God. The 'what if' syndrome of doubt that had been eating him alive since shortly after landing in Seattle disappeared. As the knots of tension in his gut untangled, the last spark of doubting fear that Ginger was a hoax dissolved.

Billy became the catalyst to making the special moment even more potent. With the natural enthusiasm



and open acceptance reserved for those young enough to be untainted by worldly opinion, he allowed his parents and older sisters time to accept and absorb the truth of what they were experiencing.

As the drawings were passed around the room, Kathy Jordan, with tears running down her face, identified the unidentified portrait as her mother and father.

For the next two hours, Ginger patiently answered questions, listened closely to what only she could hear then good-naturedly repeated what was said while everyone exclaimed, cried, cheered and laughed. Curiosities were satisfied if spirits were able to answer.

Ginger's commitment and compassion for both sides was obvious, as she made certain everyone, on both sides, had a chance to be heard.

Like any holiday gathering, after the first rush of excitement the group settled into a more tranquil visit as the older generation had fun sharing embarrassing scraps of information on their children.

Cole had just been thinking that the evening was a resounding success when Ginger's next words took everyone by surprise.

"I would like to try something. It might not work, but unless we try we will never know. Several times I have hypnotized couples while they held hands. During those sessions the couples were able to travel to the same location. If you are willing, I would be happy to try the same thing now."

Kathy looked at her husband then at Ginger after their silent conversation. "You mean you think we might be able to see Liz and our folks the same way Cole described his hypnosis session, but as a group?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I'm hoping for. Except I will ask you to go to a pre-arranged spot instead of allowing your subconscious to create a space. I honestly have no idea if all of you can travel to the same spot at the same time. If it works it would be the fantasy trip of a lifetime."

Billy looked worried. "What if they all get to meet them an' I don't?"

For a moment, the uncertainty in Billy's voice had Ginger wishing she hadn't made the offer. She also knew not making the offer would have deprived them of the opportunity she had given so many others.

"Billy, I promise that if this doesn't work tomorrow I will come back and hypnotize each of you one at time, just like I did Cole."

They decided to use the patio in the backyard as the prearranged spot. Forming a circle on the floor they joked about falling asleep, but the tight grasp on each other's hands showed their underlying fear as well as a desperate hope that this would work.

Ginger took extra time smoothing everyone into a comfortable state of relaxation as she monitored heart rates, rapid eye movement and breathing. When satisfied that everyone was hypnotized she suggested they might be able to visit with loved ones within the safe environment of the family's backyard.

As Cole watched them slowly recede into the twilight land of hypnosis, he stepped into the professional role of doctor. He wasn't concerned about anything going wrong. He did it because he wanted to help Ginger. She was good at hiding it, but he had noticed signs that her energy was waning.

With that responsibility taken out of her hands, Ginger concentrated on drawing. For the next two hours, all that could be heard was the steady ticking of an old grandfather clock and the scratching of pencils as pictures were drawn.

When Glen Jordan began to stir, Cole placed a hand on Ginger's shoulder.

Putting the drawing pad aside, she brought them back to the present then gave them space to emotionally and physically adjust to their surroundings and what they had just experienced.

Grace broke the silence. "I was the first to arrive on the patio, then April, Mom, Billy and finally Dad."

Which made perfect sense since no two people will relax into the twilight zone at the same pace.

"After everybody arrived, Liz came skipping out from behind the blue spruce. Everybody else followed her. It was really neat." April's voice squeaked with excitement.

"Grandma Rachael says I look just like her when she was a little girl." For the only blonde in a dark haired family, that was welcoming news to Grace.

Billy, who all evening had been the most vocal, now sat quietly, his face sad, as his sisters became the excited chatterboxes.

Ginger and Cole were saying their goodbyes when Billy grabbed Ginger's hand. Pleadingly, he looked into her eyes. "Can I talk to you, in private?"

She looked to his parents for approval before answering. "Sure, Billy, lead the way."

Leading her into his bedroom, he quietly shut the door. "You can sit on the bed."

Sitting on the narrow twin bed covered in a red bedspread, she watched him walk to a tall navy blue bookcase crammed with toys, books and his grandfather's bowling trophies. Taking a big fat sky blue piggybank off a shelf, he set the piggybank in her lap.

"Grandpa said he hears me talking to him. That makes me happy, but it's not the same as knowing what he thinks, an' having him tell me how proud he is of me when I catch a fish or hit a homerun. I even miss him telling me to be nice to my sisters. I want to hire you to call me once a week so I can kinda talk to him? There's not a lot of money in the piggybank, but you can have all of it and I'll send you my allowance every week if you'll say yes."

It had been five years since opening the doors to her practice. Ten years had passed since talking to the first non-family member about a loved one that had passed over. In that time, Ginger had heard many heart rending stories as she held the hands of young and old alike who wanted one last opportunity to speak to a loved one. A few clients faithfully came back each year on a loved one's birthday or anniversary. Nonetheless, she had never been so emotionally touched by a request.

Biting her bottom lip in a frantic attempt not to cry, she swallowed the golf ball sized lump lodged in her throat. "Billy, my services are very expensive. In fact, this piggybank would never hold what I will need to ask in payment for such a request. Please think very hard before you accept."

Billy's tiny body stiffened. His expression solemn, he did not utter a word as his dark haired head bobbed up and down.

"Here's the deal, you write down my cell phone number and when you want to talk to your Grandpa you call me. I don't know if he will always be available, but I promise to try to connect with him. To pay for my services, you will owe me two jokes for each phone call. I know that is a very high price to pay; however, there is no way I could possibly do it for less. Do you want to think it over, or is it a deal?"

He stood looking at her. He wasn't quite sure if she was serious, but he was having a hard time

controlling a grin from splitting his face in half.

"Is Grandpa here?"

"Right beside you, he just promised that both he and your grandmother would be available. He also says you have to ask your mother's permission to use the phone and no more then once a week. He also says no, 'knock, knock, who's there,' jokes, he's a little tired of them."

Billy giggled.

"If it's okay with your folks, why don't we try for Sunday evenings just before you go to bed? If something really important happens during the week that has you busting at the seams to brag or a little sad, you can call. Deal?"

"Deal. This is so cool."

He started to run out of the room, stopped, ran back to the bed and threw his arms around her neck. "Thanks. You're the greatest."

Then he was running down the hall, yelling at the top of his lungs. "Mom, Dad, Grandpa says I can call him anytime I want an' I need to go to the bookstore for a new joke book 'cause Grandpa says he's tired of knock, knock jokes."

After promising to come back for a fish fry later in the summer, Cole and Ginger pulled out of the driveway.

Turning towards Cole, Ginger squealed with delight. "Cole, it worked; it really, really worked."

There were a lot of comments he might have thought she would have said, this one not one. "You had doubts?"

"Of course I had doubts. We are talking major production here. Emmy awards could be presented for what happened tonight."

"Thank you for not sharing that morsel of information earlier. Just for the record why did you, the master of hypnosis and friendly, talking spirits, think it might not work?"

Playfully, she punched him on the shoulder. "Don't be a jerk. For your information, I never doubted Liz would be there. Especially since she hadn't let us out of her sight since this morning. The other family members were a welcome bonus. What I had doubts on was hypnotizing all of them at the same time *and* having them all arrive at the same location."

"I thought hypnotizing large groups was fairly common. Don't guys travel the country offering group rates for smoking and dieting?"

"You're right. But you are talking about people sitting in a chair listening to some guy talk. There is no active participation. I have several thick books with scripts for all kinds of behavior modifications that anyone could read in a monotone voice and get some rate of success."

Stopping at a red light, he looked at her. "You said you had done this before."

"Wrong. I said I had hypnotized couples before. Besides they were doing past life regressions. That was a lot different then what we did tonight."

Past life regressions, voodoo stuff, for some reason he suddenly felt like hitting his head against the

steering wheel. "Please, not tonight. I don't even want to go there. I am not sure I will ever want to go there. Tell me about the doubts."

"If you remember, when I hypnotized you I never told you where to go or what you would see. I believe that planting any idea in someone's mind is unethical. Everything you experienced was created by your subconscious and your soul. Although I did not tell them to do anything I did make the suggestion that they *might* meet on the patio. There was never any guarantee that it would work. Anyway, I am very happy for them that it happened."

Reaching over the console, he squeezed her hand. "So am I. Thank you."

Ginger was getting used to the electrical current that zapped her every time Cole touched her. Or at least that was what she told herself when she didn't withdraw her hand from his. As she leaned her head against the headrest to think about the sweet sensations his touch was producing, exhaustion hit her in waves of unbelievable force.

By the time they reached the hotel, a jackhammer had taken up residence behind her eyes causing a kaleidoscope of colors to shift into a new pattern each time the jackhammer pricked a nerve ending.

## Chapter 20

Riding in the hotel elevator, Ginger realized the floor numbers were blurry. By the time they arrived at their rooms, she was fumbling like a drunk as a shaky hand tried inserting the key card into the slot.

Thinking she was half asleep, Cole took the card, opened the door and waited for her to walk past him. Instead she stood staring vacantly into space before starting to gracefully crumble. Fast reflexes had her landing in Cole's arms.

Kicking the door shut, he used the light coming in the window to locate the bed. Using a washcloth as a hot compress, he sat on the edge of the bed and monitored her pulse until the muscles in the small of his back began to protest.

Moving the heavy suitcase to the top of a low dresser, Cole put the luggage rack back in the closet. With quick efficiency he had both connecting doors open.

At some point during the process of changing into comfortable old sweats, the heavy scent of gardenias caught his attention. Dismissing the scent as coming from an air freshener, Cole dubiously eyed Ginger's bulging suitcase as he wondered what would pop out when the zipper was released. Remembering his father's irrational refusal to ever get into his mother's, purse he realized he was experiencing the same phobia over the suitcase. Squaring his shoulders he grasped the zipper and pulled.

A soft whistle filled the quiet air. "Cody lied to me. There really is a Santa, and he just delivered my presents." Now all he had to do was figure out a way to persuade Ginger to model the skimpy little garments, in a rainbow hue of colors, he had found. Not that she would stay in them for long but what a sight it would be for a few short seconds. It wasn't the right time to be ogling underwear, but oh man, what skimpy wonders of delight they were.

The scent of gardenias became so overpowering he sneezed. He started to look for the air freshener to dismantle the stinky contraption, then changed his mind; there would be plenty of time to hunt it down later.

Scanning the top layer of clothing, he didn't see a nightgown. Trying not to disrupt the neatly packed clothes, Cole forged through the layers looking for the elusive nightie. Without finding anything that resembled sleepwear, he resorted to placing clothing in drawers as he continued the search. When he reached the bottom of the suitcase, it was obvious there was no nightgown despite the fact that it looked like nothing else in her closet had been left behind.

Grabbing a soft cotton t-shirt from his duffel bag, he tackled the next task. Undressing a comatose female was no task for the faint of heart. Her champagne colored bra covered more than many bikini tops, but the nicely rounded pink mounds of breast swelling above the lacy cups had him reciting the Gettysburg address in hopes of distracting his libido.

It didn't work.

Even the sneezing brought on by the increasingly strong smell of gardenias did not distract the swelling of his manhood or the surge of desire racing through his veins.

For all of a heartbeat he debated about whether or not to remove her bra. Deciding his heart couldn't handle the added stress, he left the bra alone, pushed her arms into the t-shirt's sleeves and successfully hid her luscious torso as he tugged the t-shirt over her flat stomach.

Looking at the slacks still needing to be removed, he uttered a few choice curses. By the time he got a glimpse of champagne colored lace panties, his blood pressure had reached boiling point.

With her enticing body finally fully covered, he sighed with relief. Suppressing the lusty cowboy part of him that was in dire need of another cold shower, the professional doctor once again emerged. He was totally pissed that she had not told him she was feeling ill. Unfortunately, yelling at a comatose female wasn't going to do him any good.

Leaving the bathroom door open, he took a quick shower that did little to relieve his sexual tension or the slight headache the overpowering aroma of gardenias was giving him.

Checking the room from top to bottom, he couldn't find the malfunctioning air freshener. As a last resort he opened the window. Ten minutes later the room had cooled considerably, but the smell had not lessened. As a light rain began to fall and the wind picked up, he closed the window in defeat.

He was dead tired. Eyeing how little of the king size bed Ginger was using, he contemplated lying down next to her. He was exhausted; she was comatose. Surely, there was no harm in trying to get a little bit of sleep, fully clothed on a comfortable bed where he would be close if she stirred. Yeah right, whom did he think he was kidding? There was no way he would sleep if he laid down next to her.

Collecting a pillow and blanket from the bed in his room, Cole punched the over-plump pillow into submission before trying to contort his frame into a comfortable position on a four foot long, uncomfortably hard couch.

\* \* \* \*

*He was free falling without a parachute. Before he could feel fear, the high-speed descent abruptly stopped.*

*Suspended in space, neither moving up nor down, he concentrated on what was around him. A billion or so glittering stars, almost within touching distance, twinkled without generating any light. The moon was conspicuously missing and not a breath of wind stirred the warm air. The darkness held no sense of impending danger. So he waited, listened and waited.*

It felt like an eternity passed before he became aware of her essence. No, that was wrong. From the moment he had stopped falling, he could smell lavender, which he automatically associated with his lover. Her soft, warm form, curving perfectly into his, materialized within his arms.

With the stars sparkling against the inky blue-black sky, a faint tinkling of music swelled around them. They swayed to the sound of Frank Sinatra crooning, "All The Way."

Their clothed bodies were close enough to resemble lovers carved out of marble. Unlike their cold marble counterparts, they generated enough body heat to spontaneously combust. Yet, as close as they were, he could not see her face. For some odd reason, it did not matter. As they danced they memorized each other. A kiss, a touch, a sigh, a scent, a taste, a moan—each sensation instantly imprinted itself to memory.

The slow poignant music never ended. As one love song smoothly blended into the next, time became irrelevant as they danced among the stars.

*In the recesses of his mind was the sensation that others were watching as they smiled their approval and applauded themselves for being astute enough to help create this reality.*

Hoping to see her face, he tried moving them closer to the stars.

*As he moved*—Cole caught himself just before he fell off the couch. The digital clock on the nightstand read 5:11. Getting up, he walked to the bed to check Ginger. The fact that she had not stirred and her vitals had not changed did not make him happy.

Opening the drapes, he watched a jagged finger of lightening flash across the sky. The windowpane rattled from the force of the wind as rain hit the glass and bounced back into the darkness. Moving the couch towards the end of the bed, Cole used the bed as a footrest to stretch himself into a more comfortable position. Watching lightning spit out of the clouds, Cole was mesmerized by the blue trails of ghostly light the lightning created. For some illogical reason, the spectacular show soothed Cole as it mirrored his personal feelings of unrest.

Watching the power of Mother Nature, he fell into a deep dreamless sleep. When he next opened his eyes, the rage of the storm had passed leaving behind nothing more than a gray dismal sky and a steady light rain.

Ginger rolled onto her side looking small and vulnerable. Her coloring was still pale, but he was pleased that her pulse was back to normal and her body was now getting the restful sleep it needed.

He had a lot of questions. The most relevant being why she hadn't told him about the physical after-effect of the sessions. If that was one of the reasons for being reluctant to help, why hadn't she told him? There were going to be some changes made for the next four meetings, of that he would be adamant. He needed to fulfill the promise, but he wasn't about to jeopardize Ginger's health in the process.

Settling back onto the couch he thought about the dreams. Believing that dreams were nothing more than a by-product of an overactive imagination stimulated by daily events, made the whole concept of what was happening that much more confusing. The dreams were a duplication of each other with some slight shifting of events. If he didn't believe differently, Cole could make a strong case for the dreams being both a warning and a promise.

He pushed aside the first part of the dreams. Fear and free falls had nothing to do with his life, past or present. With and without the sexual attraction, he wanted to be near Ginger. There was a new wholeness to his purpose when they were together. As corny as it sounded, he wanted to hear her laugh, see her smile and heaven help him, he wanted to watch her eyes turn dark turbulent green when her temper ignited. He was looking forward to testing his theory that her eyes would turn the same shade of green when her body was throbbing with passion.

Someday he expected to get to the bottom of the tale that had sent him on the fool's mission. He had spent enough time with her to know she was not romantically involved with his uncle. That was an obvious lie, but the reasoning behind it left him baffled.

The fact that she had refused payment from both him and the Jordan's was another revealing facet into her character. Then there was Billy. The kid was a pistol. He wouldn't have been happy at being compared to a girl, but he was a lot like his sister Liz. With the two jokes a week payment, maybe Cole would buy Ginger a joke book. Let them start a little friendly competition.

She was not a con artist out to deplete someone of his or her life savings. After all of his adamant denials, he realized there was no longer a need to see ghostly figures to know she was actually communicating with someone only she could see. The expressions of joy, surprise and sheer pleasure that had crossed Liz's family's faces was proof enough.

As for past lives, reincarnation and heaven only knows what else she believed in or worked with, he knew that Rosemary had been right. It was time he stopped balking at the first implication of what might be and start being a lot more open-minded.

## Chapter 21

Fifteen hours after collapsing, Ginger's eyes fluttered open.

Before her mind could clear enough to register that she was not in her own bed, Cole was at her side. Trying to come up with a logical reason why he was in her room left her totally confused. "What happened?"

The question, taking him by surprise, lessened some of his anger. Before answering, he checked her vital signs. Satisfied, he continued holding her hand as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"You passed out right after we got back here last night. What's the last thing you remember?"

She didn't immediately answer. "I remember pulling out of the driveway. We talked about the session. You were surprised when I admitted I had not been totally confident in the outcome. I remember thinking I was getting a headache, so I laid my head back on the seat and closed my eyes. That's it. I don't remember anything else."

"Have you ever passed out after a session before?"

"No. Never."

"What about headaches?"

"No, I get tired. Communicating with spirits drains my energy, but never to the point that I couldn't function."

Pushing herself into a sitting position, she noticed the blue cotton t-shirt. Lifting one eyebrow she looked at him.

Thinking a good offense might be the best defense, he threw back an accusation. "You forgot to pack a nightgown."

Gardenias; the scent was overwhelming. Looking around the room it didn't take long for Ginger to discover the ghostly, solitary figure of her mother sitting on top of her empty suitcase.

With pure mischief, Caitlin reenacted Cole's reaction upon opening the suitcase and then pantomimed him gingerly removing the clothing as if at any moment something would bite him.

She had been staring into space for several minutes when she started laughing.

Cole couldn't stand the suspense. "Care to share?"

"Are you sure you're up to it cowboy?" She gave him a devilish grin.

"Try me."

"My mother's sitting on top of the suitcase. She just did a cute little pantomime of your opening my suitcase."

He groaned as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Ah, it seems you were a little surprised, at, ah, not finding a nightgown or maybe something else. She's



laughing too hard for me to figure it out."

*Lucky me!*

Deciding to skip the obvious modeling of the skimpy bras and panties, she got her mother's attention and a lifted brow by thinking it would have been more fun if she had been an active participant.

"She is now showing me what great care you took in putting on the t-shirt."

Her mother rolled her eyes before pantomiming a chicken.

Cole knew that meant she had watched him sweat bullets as he tried to keep his sexual fantasies under control. Hanging his head he muttered something she couldn't hear before he looked at her. "Please tell me you are joking?"

"Sorry, no joke. She seems to think it was pretty comical." With her grin contradicting her words, he knew that she was also getting a great amount of pleasure from his discomfort.

Ginger watched her mother pinch her nose closed with one hand and wave her other hand in front of her face.

"Okay, now she has me totally confused."

Pointing at Cole, Caitlin again pinched her nose.

Was she saying Cole *stunk*?

Caitlin threw her arms up in the air and disappeared.

Pulling her legs towards her chest, Ginger wrapped her arms around her legs. Resting her chin on her knees, she tried to put the pieces together.

A vision of Cole looking around the room for something flashed before her eyes. "Do you by any chance smell anything in here?"

"Yeah, the hotel must have one of those automatic air fresheners going through the ventilation system. I tried airing out the room, but the smell wouldn't go away."

She drew her brows together. "What do you smell?"

"I don't know, some type of flower. Is it making you feel sick?"

"No."

Looking around the room, then concentrating on the area around the suitcase Cole realized she had the answer to the mystery. If he wanted to be a part of her life he needed to know, accept, and be a part of everything in her life. "Care to explain?"

"My mother's favorite perfume is Gardenias. She uses the perfume as a calling card to announce her arrival, or if she wants to give a message without appearing. Cinn, Rose and Aunt Pesty can also smell the perfume. What amazes me is that as far as we know no one else has ever been able to detect the scent."

*Oh boy.* She was telling him that her mother had been in the room *all* night. Going through the events, he realized the scent had been the most obnoxious when his thoughts had been directed at the most basic

form of testosterone driven sexual desires.

Something else occurred to him.

He blurted out, "Oh, shit. Gin, just by chance, is it possible that a ghost could read someone's mind?"

He was trying hard to hide the alarms going off in his head, but his eyes showed sheer panic. It was a feeling she was intimately in touch with. Over the years, her mother had effectively read her innermost thoughts when she least wanted them read.

"To be honest, I don't think so."

She hated to change his look of pure relief, but she didn't figure he'd be all too happy if she didn't tell him the whole truth immediately. But there was a reason for family secrets, so she vacillated. Shimmering lights caught her attention just before her mother's voice drifted through the air. "Trust your instincts."

"But you see there is a ... um ... another ... ah, unusual ... ah, really interesting little thing you should know about my mom."

He couldn't believe she was stammering. Nervousness had her pleating the edge of the sheet. Placing a warm hand over hers, he ignored the electrical sparks that nipped his fingers. "Spit it out. Nothing can be that bad!"

His hand acted as a balm to one set of nerves and sent another racing as she absorbed the electrical charge running up her arm. "Even though I do not think spirits in general can read minds, my mother was able to read minds when she was alive. So ... ah, she ah ... still has the ability."

For the first time in her life, Ginger had divulged a family secret. Instinct had her believing she was right to have done so. A speck of doubt had her praying she wouldn't be proven wrong. Curiosity had more demanding questions: why Cole, why now, and what part was he to have in her family's life that made it all right to divulge family secrets. Excluding him as a life mate, what was the purpose for throwing them together? What fate could lie ahead that made it acceptable to include Cole into the family fold without the benefit of marriage?

Was Cole destined to be Rosemary or Cinnamon's life mate and was she being used as a tool to bring them together? The idea of that was a bitter pill to swallow and it left a hollow, empty feeling in her gut. She might not have the right to express her feelings, but Ginger knew they were there, fluttering around her belly, warming her heart and playing footsy with her awakened desires. If Cole belonged to one of her sisters, could she step aside graciously? She didn't like the answer.

*Hell, fire and damnation.* "Guess I was wrong. It really is that bad!"

Raking fingers through his hair, Cole started chuckling as he remembered some of the more explicate thoughts that had gone through his mind since meeting Ginger. He was in deep shit and there wasn't a ladder tall enough to help him climb out. Her mother might not be here in physical form, but he had no trouble believing she could make his life very miserable. He didn't even think damage control was possible.

His expression sobered. "Does your father read minds?"

"Well, to tell you the truth he was pretty good at it, especially when it came to reading the minds of boys we dated. They had already passed over when we started dating, but that didn't stop Dad from meeting every boy at the door and giving me a running commentary of his opinions."

His face drained of all color.

After her mother's mischief-induced mimicking, Ginger didn't have to read his mind to know what he was thinking or know it was time to stop the teasing.

"Relax. Dad wasn't able to read minds and still can't, as far as I know."

*Thank you Lord for small favors.* "Since your mother thought my drooling over your sexy underwear was funny, will she mention it to your dad?"

"You drooled?"

Mentally kicking himself, he rubbed his hands down his face. Obviously he hadn't gotten back his sense of self-preservation yet.

"Gin, I did not say that; just forget it. Promise me you will forget I said that. The comment came from a deranged mind that has not had enough sleep."

She laughed at him, and damn it felt good to laugh and share her life with someone besides her sisters and aunt. Her mother had said to trust her instincts. Maybe that meant it was also time to enjoy the moment instead of worrying about the future.

"If your mother was here all night, what about your father?"

That was an interesting question. He hadn't been here a few minutes ago, so she really didn't know. Plus, her mom had said he was checking up on Aunt Pesty, but surely that wouldn't take that long. "Yesterday Mom said Dad was busy with something else. I don't think he was here."

As he thought, *thank God for small favors*, another thought occurred. "Do you read minds? For that matter, do Cinn and Rose read minds?"

A smile lit up her face as her eyes took on a faraway look. "No, we can't. We used to cry at the injustice of mom's *gift*. We couldn't get away with anything unless she decided to overlook something we'd done. The three of us thought she had the greatest *gift* in the world."

"Why do I think there's more to that story?"

"Now who's reading minds? We wanted to experience it. We knew we couldn't have the *gift* forever, but we wanted to know what it was like. For our fifteenth birthday, we asked to be granted a wish. We wanted a week of being able to read minds. Mom and Dad weren't at all happy with the idea, but we negotiated a deal. Starting on a Sunday, we were able to read everyone's thoughts for forty-eight hours."

She smiled at the memory. "What Mom didn't tell us was that whenever we left the house we would have acute cases of laryngitis."

Cole was intrigued. For the moment he forgot Ginger should probably still be resting. "What was it like?"

"At first it was noisy, confusing and interesting. There is a subtle difference in what is being verbalized and what is being thought. A person's mental voice sounds very similar to their vocal voice. It took a while to recognize which was which. At first we answered questions that hadn't been asked and made inappropriate comments on private thoughts. As we became accustomed to hearing everything, we thought it was pretty cool to know what Mom, Dad and Aunt Pesty were thinking."

He thought about trying to read his mother's scattered thoughts. No doubt it would be a colossal

nightmare. "Did they try shielding thoughts from you?"

"Oh, I'm sure. Although Dad was pretty funny! You were embarrassed at my mom reading your thoughts. Imagine reading your dad's thoughts about your mom."

He shuddered. "Did he know?"

"When we started giggling, he figured it out. He made himself pretty scarce after that."

"What else happened?"

"Walking down to the general store Sunday afternoon, we ran into Agnes. That was our first encounter with the negative side of the *gift*. Rosemary hasn't given her an ounce of tolerance since then."

"After meeting her, I can't say I will and I didn't have to read her mind."

"When we got to school on Monday morning, we discovered why Mom had kept telling us that as *gifts* went it was a bigger headache and heartache than a *gift*."

"How so?"

"Things people think but wouldn't necessarily say tend to be negative. You know who is having problems at home or school. Many of those things you would rather not know. Whether you mean for it to or not, it changes your opinion of people. The ability came with a huge responsibility that I am happy not to have."

Cole was silent for a few minutes. "Had never thought about the negative aspects, but it makes sense."

"Don't get me wrong. There was a funny side, too. But Mom was very astute about human nature when she made sure we couldn't talk."

When she didn't continue, he was forced to ask, "Are you going to make me beg to hear the story?"

"Would you?"

"You bet! But how about bribery instead? There's still some hot coffee in the pot."

"It's a deal." As Cole poured coffee into two mugs, Ginger settled back against the pillows.

"Rose slapped a boy she had really liked after hearing the real person under the nice guy image that had girls swooning at his feet. When he got vulgar she slugged him in the gut. He deserved what he got and more, but there was no way we could tell him why Rose had gone ballistic. Cinn and I had to drag her away before she caused a bigger commotion."

He chuckled. "I can picture that. Rose does tend to leap in wholeheartedly with whatever she is doing or saying."

"She was also hurt when she discovered a girlfriend had only been friendly to get answers for homework she was too lazy to do herself."

"I had the same thing happen. How did Rose retaliate?"

"Mom came up with a sentence fitting the crime. Phony answers were shared. When the papers were returned with F's, the girl whined. Rose acted shocked and said she didn't understand what she was talking about as she flashed the A's on her papers. The gal was furious and never spoke to any of us

again."

"That was far more creative than my solution. I punched the kid in the nose. Made me feel good, but when he bled all over both of us we both got in trouble."

"Don't think Rose wasn't tempted to do the same. Remember our talking about Heather and Shelby?" Ginger asked.

"Sure, The Black Lace Bitches."

She toasted him with the coffee cup. "Cinn got so mad at what was going through their minds she dumped a lunch tray full of stew and chocolate pudding on them. She was smart enough to make it look like she had tripped but if there hadn't been a teacher monitoring the room there would have been a catfight."

"I gather they still hold a grudge!"

"Big time. They are more subtle now, but they are still vindictive."

"And you, what did you do?"

Feigning insult she stared at him, then chuckled when he tried to lift one eyebrow. Instead, both eyebrows moved up and down in a comical gesture.

"After watching them, I was determined not to retaliate for anything that upset me."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Gin, Don't try selling that innocent 'I did no wrong' smile on me. I'm not buying. What did you do?"

"You don't trust me to have done the right thing?"

"Who's talking trust? I'm thinking a fifteen year old, with that type of power, is bound to screw up somewhere."

"You win. Tommy Hutches was a conceited jock, a bully and Shelby's boyfriend. I was still learning how to use my medium powers, so you have to remember they were a little erratic. Anyway, I was thinking how he needed to be taught a lesson when some ghosts materialized and proceeded to do just that."

When she didn't elaborate he looked at her expectantly, then grinned as he shook his head. "Oh, no you don't. You snitched on your sisters. So fess up, tell me exactly what happened."

It was all the encouragement needed. "Okay. Here's the scene: school assembly in the gym, two thousand kids, one principal droning on and on about nothing. The three of us are sitting two rows behind Tommy on the bleachers. Everyone is bored and restless. Spotting a kid he has been bullying for years, Tommy starts thinking about what he can do to humiliate him in front of the whole school.

"Like I said, I thought he needed to be taught a lesson. I really don't remember thinking anything else. Next thing I know a movement catches my eye and I see four ghosts materialize out of the ceiling.

"They were enormous, nasty looking suckers. You know the type, big burly guys you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. We have no idea how or why Tommy was able to see them. Before you could say, boo, he's screaming. Jumping up, he tramples over everyone below him on the bleachers. Then he trips

over the last row and falls flat on his face. He jerks about as if he were a puppet on a string as he stands up. Then he ran out the gym doors screaming, 'get them away from me!' No one knew what he was talking about so everyone was laughing by the time the door slammed shut behind him."

Cole realized that if he hadn't been well built from years of working on the ranch, his geek status could easily have made him a mark for someone like Tommy. He had no sympathy for the guy.

"Did they attack him?"

She had to stop laughing before she could answer. "Well, I guess that depends on what you call attacking. They floated through and around his body. One kept grabbing at his crotch and another was flying around him in circles saying, 'Who's the baby now?' When he regained his footing after the fall, they pretended like they were going to beat him up. Sad to say, the ghosts didn't have enough energy attached to them to follow through with a punch that would move him. Always thought that would have been funny, to see him go flying through the air."

He shook his head. "You know what scares me about that story?"

"What?"

"The fact that you think that was discreet."

She grinned and shrugged. "Hey, it *was* discreet. Except for my family and Pagan, no one ever knew what really happened. Cinn and Rose were asked endless questions and they couldn't say a word. It about drove them crazy."

"Did he change?"

"Yes he did. His little band of merry men deserted him. Without his backup muscle, Shelby dumped him and everyone pretty much ignored him after that. Want to hear the end to the story?"

"Of course."

"He's now a fire and brimstone preacher doing tent revivals."

"Somehow, that isn't surprising. At the nightclub, Rose threatened to have your Aunt turn me into a jackass so she could sell me to a glue factory. Is she the one that cast the spell for your birthday?"

Not ready to answer the question, Ginger changed the subject. "Not right now. I need the bathroom, a shower and some food."

As she entered the bathroom, she called over her shoulder, "By the way I don't own a nightgown." With that, she closed the bathroom door.

Returning to his own room, Cole decided there was time for one more cold shower before they checked out of the hotel.

## Chapter 22

Headed for Los Angeles, Cole studied Ginger. Her coloring was good, but light smudges beneath her eyes attested to the fact that she still needed rest. With her heart rate accelerating each time he held her hand, his ego was getting a tremendous boost but it was impossible to take her pulse. From the amount of food she had consumed at The Crab Pot during lunch, her appetite was healthy.

Getting her to agree to postpone the meeting with Sally Brooks' parents by one day had taken some persuasive arguing. She hadn't argued at all over limiting the sessions to no more than three hours.

She was comfortably trapped. Unless she could suddenly fly out the window, he was determined to get some more questions answered.

"Have you seen your mother or Sally since we left the hotel?"

There was no hesitation. "No, I haven't seen Mom since right after I woke up. Which, considering everything that is going on, seems strange."

He had also noted the absence of the scent of gardenias. Unlike Ginger, Cole felt grateful for the reprieve. "How many spirits are on the plane?"

"Two. The Canadian woman you spoke to is so afraid of flying, her husband's spirit is holding her hand and whispering words of encouragement in her ear. The three military guys have a buddy tagging along."

"Is he the one that approached you?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"Right after we took off you stared at a spot in the aisle for several minutes. A few times your lips moved like you were going to talk before stopping yourself."

"If someone were to walk into a room when I'm visiting with my folks, they would think I was a nut case talking to myself. It doesn't seem natural to communicate telepathically so I have to fight the urge not to voice my comments when in public."

"Did he want something or did he stop by just to say hi?"

"He asked me to relay a message to his buddies. I told him I would try to do that after landing."

"Anything else?"

"No, all is normal."

With that comforting bit of information, Cole fully relaxed.

"You sidestepped my question very nicely earlier today, so let's begin again. Will you tell me about Aunt Pesty and her magical box of tricks? Also, does anyone else in your family have supernatural powers?"

Where to begin? There was also the problem of just how much to tell him. Ginger had been struggling with that question since sidestepping it the first time.

Pagan, having shared everything from baby bottles to lipstick with the three of them, had witnessed far more than one strange event that couldn't be ignored. Still it wasn't until the day their mother had sat

Pagan down to give her a lecture over something Pagan had been contemplating, but had not shared, that she learned the whole story. As far as Ginger knew, no other non-family member had ever known about her mother's ability to accurately read a person's thoughts.

A few times it had taken some fast-talking, but they had miraculously managed to keep Aunt Pesty's abilities within the family as well. Secrecy was partially due to her refusal to seriously study her craft, but also because people being people they would start asking favors that were best not asked or acted upon when asked.

Cole already knew more about the skeletons in the family closet than any outsider had ever been told. Rosemary had wagered that he was family. Her mother had told Ginger to trust her instincts. As much as she would like to pretend that he was her Adam, Ginger was still more comfortable with the belief that he wasn't her life mate because of his strong skepticism. She felt like she was riding a seesaw with positive and negative facts tilting her decision both ways. If he were her mate, why the mystery, why the disbelief of her powers, why the electrical charge when they touched—unless it was a way to warn her of danger?

The sweet scents of licorice, rum and vanilla filling the cabin caught her attention.

Glancing past Cole's shoulder, she saw her father contently puffing on his pipe as he casually sat in the aisle seat across from them. As a light haze of smoke lazily swirled from the pipe, he looked at her and winked.

Cautiously turning, Cole tried to see whom she had acknowledged. The seat directly across the aisle was empty. The window seat held a businessman busily using his index fingers to peck away at his laptop's keyboard between sips of a neat scotch sitting on the empty seat's open tray. The other passengers in first class were engrossed in conversations with the people sitting next to them.

When he caught the light sweet scent of licorice, mixed with rum and vanilla, he thought nothing of it. Then the aroma tweaked a long forgotten memory of an old farm hand tapping loose tobacco into a corn cob pipe. Without saying a word he looked at Ginger questioningly.

"You can smell that?"

"Yes. It reminds me of pipe tobacco."

"It is. My dad just arrived. Guess we aren't traveling alone after all."

A humorous vision of a flight attendant telling a ghost it was against the law to smoke on an airplane passed through Cole's mind. "Does he know it's against the law to smoke on a plane?"

"He says he won't have to worry about that until humans figure out how to use their natural abilities to see beyond the obvious."

"Good point."

"Your mother is busy right now. She thinks I'm bugging Pesty, so let's keep my visit between the three of us. Trust your instincts; they know what needs to be said." Putting the pipe back in his mouth, Herb swept his vaporous hand over the glass sitting on the tray in front of him.

The businessman stopped his typing. Watching the glass slide across the table, he looked at Cole and Ginger. When they didn't react he looked up and down the aisle. Seeing no one, he looked back at the glass still slowly sliding across the tray. Grabbing the glass, he gulped down the contents in one swallow then signaled the flight attendant for another.



"Did your Dad do that?"

"He did. The guy has been embezzling money from the company he owns with his brother. This morning he emptied personal accounts, leaving his wife and kids broke. Right now he's shifting everything from one bank to another because he is also dumping his girlfriend who thinks they are leaving the country tomorrow. I'm betting that by the time Dad's done with him he will be wishing he were someone else."

"The guy deserves whatever he gets, but what can your dad do to change anything?"

"Dad says wait and see. You asked about Aunt Pesty, but I would rather tell you about Rose. Do you remember Rose and Cinn snipping at each other over Rose's gambling?" Ginger asked.

"Yes. I thought she might have a gambling problem. Figured I hadn't been an honorary part of the family long enough to ask."

"You should have asked. They both would have gotten a good laugh. Simply put, Rosemary is a psychic intuitive."

"Gin, even I know you don't need to be psychic to be intuitive."

"True, but how often is your intuition correct?"

He relied on instinct when performing surgeries and lately, like a dream he'd had this morning, it was intuitive visions that helped design surgical instruments. Then again, thinking about why he had traveled to his uncle's house in the first place and all the conclusions he had jumped to without supporting evidence, he shrugged. "With work, my intuition is very accurate. Lately, on a personal level, I would say my intuition is minus one."

"Sounds about right, most people ignore intuition. Intuition, hunches, gut reaction, sixth sense, insight, suspicion—it doesn't matter what name you use, it's the most fleeting of supernatural instincts."

"Okay. What makes Rose's ability unique?"

"What if I told you her percentage of correct hunches is one hundred percent."

He blew a low whistle as he thought about the ramifications. With that type of gift he could have saved a lot of time over the last few years during the preliminary stages of some tool designs as well as with his practice and with patients.

Speaking before thinking, he blurted out, "And she uses this ability to gamble? I have to agree with Cinn, it's a waste of talent."

Ginger bristled at the criticism. It didn't matter what she personally thought, you did not criticize one of her sisters unless you had all the information needed to make a fair judgment.

Her dad was chuckling. Since he had never been comfortable with the gambling, she wasn't really surprised at his response or his comment.

"Dad says to tell you he likes the way you think. What would you have her do?"

"I don't know. There has to be something she enjoys doing more than gambling."

"There is. She loves the wheeling and dealing of buying and selling vintage cars. She could do that for a living. However, like Dad, she prefers to keep it as a hobby. She also manages all of our portfolios."

"Wait a minute, are you telling me she can read the stock market?"

"No," she said impatiently. "I told you she doesn't *read* anything. She listens to that inner voice that tells her things. Then she buys and sells accordingly."

"How often is she wrong?"

"I told you, never."

*Holy cow! The goose that laid the golden egg!*

The thought scared the hell out of him. He could just see the wrong person getting wind of that information. Rosemary would be locked in a gilded cage and never be seen again. He also realized that with her talent none of them would be in need of marrying for money.

"With what you have told me, why does she gamble?"

"It started out as an experiment. Then it became a hobby. Now she does it just to have fun. I also think she continues to gamble because she knows it drives Cinn crazy."

It sounded to Cole like she was taking a lot of risks for a few cheap thrills. "Are all the poker games at the casinos or does she participate in private home games and high stake off-shore gambling?"

"She promised Dad that everything would be legal and above board, so all games are at the casinos where there is plenty of security and the high rollers have the money to play high stake games without losing the shirts off their backs. If she ever did differently, she knows Dad would find a way to skin her alive."

Ginger could have told him the rest of the story, but figured that was Rosemary's story to tell, not hers. Besides she could see this was really bugging him, and it was nice to have him thinking about something besides spirits and her dad sitting across the aisle.

As the flight attendants freshened their drinks, offered them a variety of snacks and generally hovered, they talked about more general topics.

When the man across from them stood up, he was unsteady. Stumbling, he half landed in Cole's lap. Lurching forward, he didn't bother apologizing or looking back as he headed to the front of the cabin.

Picking up the black leather case that had landed in his lap, Cole gave a low whistle. "Was that what you call divine intervention?"

"Dad's chuckling but not answering. What's inside the case?"

"Credit cards, driver's license, passport, airline ticket to France, address book. I'm guessing that we aren't to hand this back to him."

"Smart guess. He says to call Jerald Conner, the brother, when we land. All you have to do is tell him where you are calling from, say that you have the case and ask how to get in touch with his brother. Since Matt was supposed to sit in on a lecture at Microsoft today, the brother is smart enough to figure out what is happening without you having to explain anything."

"I like your dad's style."

\* \* \* \*

Walking into the baggage claim area at LAX, Ginger approached the three men in Air Force uniforms."

"Excuse me, a friend of yours is insistent that I repeat these words, 'Tag, you owe me a beer.'"

As one, the three men shifted from relaxed to feet shoulder width apart, chest out, shoulders back, hands clasped behind their backs. "Who would that friend be, ma'am?" The low baritone carried a trace of Boston. The speaker had the lanky build of a basketball player and a nametag identifying him as L.C. Tucker.

Looking at a spot between him and a Brad Pitt look-alike, Ginger lifted a brow. "You have got to be kidding. I don't care how you got the name. Tell me your given name."

She sighed. Made sure no one was paying attention to the conversation then whispered, "He says his name is Fart."

"I'll be damned," the Brad Pitt look-alike muttered.

"He says you're wrong, you will never be damned. Do all of you have nicknames describing disgusting bodily functions?"

He smiled sheepishly. "You'd have to know the story to understand."

"But..."

"Gin, it's a guy thing. We like gross names. Don't try figuring it out." Staking his territory, Cole placed a hand at the small of her back.

The three nodded an affirmative. "Can we talk to him?" Tucker asked, as he casually looked around the small circle their bodies made.

"Absolutely, he is standing beside you. I will repeat what he says."

"Why didn't he bail out? There was time." Tucker's frustration was evident.

"Malfunction, everything jammed, smoke filled the cockpit, canopy wouldn't open, every option failed. He says he did jump before impact; he just didn't need a parachute."

"Thank you. The not knowing was driving us crazy," Tucker said as he relaxed his stance.

The grinding of the luggage carousel announced the arrival of their bags.

She handed each of them a business card. "We can do a conference call or..." She paused. "You called him what? Hells bells, that's what I thought you said."

Looking at the men, she said, "I refuse to address anyone by the name he gave me. Which one of you is from Kansas?"

"That would be me." The nametag read R.W. Comstock.

"Your hometown is only an hour away from me. F ... your friend said the three of you are flying there in a couple of weeks. Give me a call. I'll make sure to have cold beer in the refrigerator if the four of you promise not to have me repeating words that would have my mother washing all our mouths out with soap."

"Is she dead or alive?" Tucker asked.

Before Ginger could answer, he rubbed his arm. "Who socked me?"

"Fart. He and my mom are bonding."

\* \* \* \*

Instead of heading towards a car rental agency, Cole directed Ginger to a limo service where a black town car and driver were waiting for them.

"I figured this would be a whole lot easier than getting lost on the LA freeway system."

Ginger arched a brow. "Are you by any chance insulting my map reading skills?"

"Now why on earth would I do that?"

As soon as they pulled away from the curb, the driver began singing Frank Sinatra's hit, "Fly Me To The Moon".

Leaning her head back against the seat, Ginger closed her eyes and thanked the powers that be that so far the trip had gone smoothly. Approaching strangers to give them a message ranked as high as you could go on her 'I hate to do' list. Considering their reaction, she was looking forward to quizzing them on why they accepted the situation so readily.

The driver, sounding very much like Frank Sinatra, was singing, "Let's Fall In Love" as she dozed off.

When she opened her eyes, a doorman was welcoming them to the Disneyland Grand Hotel. Stepping out of the car, Ginger felt like Sleeping Beauty waking up to find Prince Charming ready to carry her off to happy ever after land.

She wondered if Cole had planned a day here in advance. Then knew that couldn't be true, because she had heard him talking to Kimberly Brooks to postpone their meeting.

When he took her hand, a small jolt of electricity running through their entwined fingers had them both tensing. Refusing to release her hand when she started to pull away, he looked pleased with himself as he guided her into the large foyer. "Surprised?"

"Flabbergasted. When did you have time to plan this?"

"Actually, this was part of the agenda from the beginning. I had no idea if there would be time to do more than walk down Main Street, but when Cinn told me you had never visited LA, I thought you might get a kick out of staying here even if we didn't have time to enjoy the park."

"This is perfect. A fantasy world within my fantasy world! Thank you."

Ten minutes later, frustration had Cole raking his fingers through his hair as he argued with the clerk at the check-in desk.

The April fool's ghost had struck again! Instead of two separate rooms, the reservations had been made for a suite with two rooms.

Ginger touched Cole's arm to get his attention. "Take the suite. I'm sure we can manage to share a living room area without any problems. Besides it could be worse, they could have put us in a single room with one bed."

Since seeing Ginger's assortment of bras and panties, then the announcement about not owning a nightgown, he hadn't been able to think about much else. Taking the suite was going to test his willpower to the stretching point.

Entering the spacious suite overlooking the hotel's well-lit grounds, Ginger collapsed onto the couch as the bellhop opened the drapes and sliding door leading to a small balcony before depositing her bags in the room furthest from the entry.

Thumbing through a pamphlet that listed all the restaurants and side entertainment offered at the hotel and surrounding grounds, she figured it would take days to enjoy everything being offered. Tomorrow was going to be an extremely busy day as she had every intention of seeing as much as possible.

Hearing a popping noise, she walked onto the balcony just as the night sky above the Magic Kingdom came alive with a spectacular array of colorful fireworks.

Cole, walking out to join her, leaned against the railing. Casually, he pulled her against him. She stood between his legs with her back and bottom comfortably nestled against his torso and his arms casually draped around her waist.

Fire, tempting licks of seductive fire—not enough to scorch, just singe the edges so you'd notice the warmth—curled around her belly. Tempted to turn in his arms and allow herself the luxury of tasting his kisses, Ginger reminded herself that playing with fire was dangerous.

Knowing the dangers of allowing herself to become involved with the wrong man years ago, she had decided that passion without all the other components needed to create a healthy, happy relationship was not worth jeopardizing her *gift*. Ignoring the devil's advocate's taunting suggestions, when the show was over, she stepped away, walked inside and didn't stop until she was outside the door to her room. "I'm beat; how about an early breakfast before heading to the park?"

"Sounds good. Night."

He had been playing with fire, not the puny flame of a match, but the scorching flame from a heat-seeking missile when he pulled her into his embrace. If she had wiggled, he would have embarrassed himself, but the feel of her in his arms had been worth the gamble. Now, standing alone on the balcony, Cole felt deprived, as if someone had amputated a major part of him and left him bleeding. Deprived of the most basic of life sustaining nourishment—a partner, a mate.

Hearing the water in her shower, an elaborate, full color, fantasy of slick wet bodies entwined under a steady stream of warm water entertained him.

He was gripping the balcony's railing for dear life by the time the sweet scent of licorice filled his lungs. A rueful grin crossed his face as he slowly shook his head in self-disgust. "Yeah, right, I get the point. No midnight panty raid. Good night, Mr. Prescott."

Walking into his room, he locked himself in and took a cold, solitary shower.

## Chapter 23

She ignored the prickly sensation of warning that not everything was as it seemed within the black hollow of darkness surrounding her.

Using an inner radar she didn't know she possessed, she knew the exact moment that reaching forward would have her connecting with him. The tender passion of belonging, matching interlocking halves to make a whole, branded her soul as they clung to each other in a welcome home embrace.

When the hello kiss turned into pulsating passion she snuggled closer, clinging when her legs felt too weak to support her. The second kiss, drugged with unfulfilled longing, swept all thoughts of danger from her mind until the surface beneath them vanished.

Dropping feet first, she tightened her hold around his waist until an abrupt bone-jarring landing tore their bodies apart.

*Within the new pit of darkness, the awareness of danger hung heavy, thickening the air with the foul odor of greed and death. She did not question whether it was a physical or emotional death as her Adam propelled them into action.*

Intense fear brought her fully awake and into a sitting position where she quickly scanned the semi dark room for intruders. As her heart raced out of control, a light sheen of sweat caused goose bumps to dress the skin exposed to the room's cool air. Lying back amongst the soft pillows, Ginger pulled the covers up to her chin as she tried deciphering the dream.

Was it her or her Adam that had changed? Shrugging a shoulder, she decided it was probably a moot issue.

Her feelings had shifted, blossomed into maturity. Leaving behind the touchy, feely, teenage crush stage she wanted, no needed, the passion of a mature intimate relationship. If the dreams were any indication, sexual intimacy was certainly not going to be an issue.

Along with the passion, there was an empty hole in her belly demanding to be fed. Not that there were any complaints about the foreplay, but she wanted to be able to look into his eyes, read his expressions, know what his smiles meant, know when he was angry, frustrated, happy, sad or sexually on fire.

The fact that Ginger had grown emotionally did not go unnoticed. Less than two weeks ago, life had given the impression of being satisfying. Now it glaringly lacked the one ingredient that made life interestingly whole—intimacy. She longed for a genuine, honest, relationship, with someone that was solid, warm-blooded and returned her feelings. Greed filled her with a yearning to build the same type of relationship her parents had shared, still shared for that matter.

As she thought about the scene on the balcony, there was a tinge of regret in not taking the opportunity to taste Cole's kiss. Being a tease wasn't her style, but she had an unexplainable need to compare his kiss to Adam's.

She sighed. Regrets were a waste of time. But damn, she hated missing golden opportunities.

*There's always tomorrow,* the devil's advocate whispered.

A wisp of a smile lingered as she fell back to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

*His finely tuned sixth sense told him when she drew near. Their embrace was filled with the hunger of unfulfilled passion, like lovers separated for far too long a time. As eager as he was to explore the unknown, an underlying knowledge that they needed to be discreet, alert and cautious held his emotions in check.*

*Cupping her cheeks with strong, callused hands he gently tilted her head. The kiss was tentative, the touch light as a feather, a poignant experiment that quickened into full-blown passion. They broke apart only to come together again a second later as basic primitive hunger overcame common sense.*

He was holding the second kiss within the boundaries of respectability by sheer willpower, when without warning the surface beneath them evaporated. Falling feet first into a dark cavity that stung his lungs with the overpowering stench of decay, a bone-jarring landing ripped them apart.

*Danger lurking within the darkness stimulated his survival instincts. Grabbing hold of her hand, he could only hope that they were running from, not to the ghosts that meant them harm. They...*

Mummified by the sheets wrapped around his torso, Cole awoke frantically trying to force his legs into a run. The adrenaline high had him physically prepared to battle with the unknown assailant.

As he kicked back the covers, the cool air evaporated the sheen of sweat covering his overheated body.

When his heart rate slowly returned to normal, Cole rubbed both hands over his face in an irrational attempt to wash away the fear and clear the cobwebs off the fuzzy remnants of the dream.

Still frazzled and more than a little apprehensive over what the dream was trying to tell him, he started working his way backwards through the nightmare.

Allowing the fear to overpower him, Cole tasted the danger lurking in the darkness. What was behind the danger, who was the enemy and how many people were involved? He hated not knowing. Without that knowledge it was impossible to mentally or physically prepare a battle plan.

Like an oral test, questions popped into his head as if someone were taunting him. Had he been the one to put them in danger, or was this something beyond his control? Was the danger intentional? Was someone trying to harm Ginger or was he the target? Were they really running from ghosts or had that been a metaphor? With no logical answers, nothing made sense. But since when did experiencing an ongoing sequence of dreams that kept subtly changing without reason make sense?

He remembered thinking they were being chased by ghosts, but for some reason that didn't seem quite right. Ghosts, goblins, friendly spirits or man made danger that revolved around the spirit world? Realizing that any or all could be the answer didn't give him comfort.

The fall had changed. Instead of the tumbling freefall through space, the descent had been short, straight down, as if a trap door had been activated. Until the moment of impact they kept their arms firmly around each other. He could still feel the panic that had raced through him when they had been torn apart.

Pushing those memories aside, he concentrated on the kiss. No, kisses. Positively, there had been two kisses. The first had been tender, tentative, not completely innocent but still a kiss meant to explore possibilities. The second kiss acknowledged the hunger and mutual desire lurking just beneath the surface of their intense awareness of each other. He knew that it had taken both of their willpowers to keep the second kiss from exploding into a physical passion more combustible than the fireworks that had exploded over Fantasyland.

If Ginger had read his mind and turned within his arms while standing on the balcony, would they have been making their own type of fireworks right now instead of his lying here alone wondering what the hell was going on? Remembering the sweet scent of tobacco, he knew there wasn't a chance in hell that would have happened.

Pushing sexual frustrations aside, he thought about the seesaw effect of the sequence. Instead of starting with fear and ending in passion, the dream had reversed itself. How significant was that to reality or for that matter, were the dreams a premonition of reality?

The intense darkness was now the only constant in each dream. The dream lover was Ginger. Of that, he had no doubt. Regretfully, he acknowledged that 'lover' was a little short of what had transpired so far. Still he had high hopes. But what was the reason behind not being allowed to see her face?

Punching the pillow in frustration, he tried to find a comfortable position.

He had never paid much attention to the random bits and pieces of dreams he remembered, which made the intensity and realism of these dreams more remarkable. However strange the messenger, he knew for certain the dreams had changed his life.

Lulled into the twilight zone between sleep and wakefulness, he saw a clear fast moving vision of his parents' marriage. From the early struggling days of newlyweds to the strong affectionate acceptance of each other's faults and strengths, he watched them build an extraordinarily strong, resilient relationship. With crystal clarity, Cole knew he wanted to duplicate that relationship.

If the dreams were showing him the future, then he had already found his mate. If the darkness in the dreams was being created by evil, it would seem logical conquering the evil would expose the light and allow him to see his lover. Still able to feel how she felt in his arms, he knew there was a far easier and more enjoyable way to confirm the truth. It was not going to happen, though, without a wedding ring on her finger, of that he was sure Ginger's father would make certain.

The fool's mission he had been sent on had certainly changed his life. He wasn't proud of how easily his mother's comments had swayed the superficial gems of half-truths and misinformation his pictures provided. He didn't need anyone to tell him that Ginger and his uncle weren't engaged. He knew without the clarification that the information was incorrect. Someday he would have to ask his mom if he had missed something she had said, or if she had been misinformed. Then again, maybe he should just send her a dozen roses and say thanks.

As he drifted deeper into sleep, his last thought was that if these dreams were somehow conveying the future, he wanted answers. Before instead of after the fact, if there was indeed a need to protect his Ginger.



## Chapter 24

"What are you doing?" Ginger asked as she poured herself a cup of coffee and watched him address a priority mail envelope.

"Talked to Conner last night. His brother hadn't called him yet but he asked to have the case shipped back to Seattle."

"Did he ask any questions?"

"No. There was a hesitation, but when he resumed talking there was a razor sharp edge to his tone. I got the impression he had experienced one of those hallmark moments of understanding."

\* \* \* \*

"Where do we head first?" As she stood in front of a flower tapestry of Mickey Mouse, Ginger's eyes were greener than shamrocks glistening with dew as they tried to take everything in at once.

"The train. From there we can visit every section of the park without having to walk quite as much."

By mutual agreement they saved the haunted house as the last ride of the day. Entering an elevator, Ginger blinked but said nothing when she saw several vaporous shadows hovering around the ceiling that were not programmed into the manmade environment.

Settling into the car that would take them through the ride, Cole casually draped his arm around the back of the seat. "You let me know if any of the big bad ghosts scare you. I'm right here to protect you."

Laughing, she tilted her head up as she turned to look at him.

A light tap on the back of the Cole's head pushed him forward. He would have yelped in protest if his lips hadn't come in contact with the sweet softness of Ginger's lips. The kiss was light, innocent and short. Not so his reaction. Thankfully the relative darkness hid the obvious bulge.

Every muscle tensed when alarms of recognition shot through Ginger's conscious, her senses and her heart. "Hello, Adam."

Ginger's mega-watt promising smile had Cole hoping he had misunderstood what she had said.

Snuggling into Cole's side, she whispered, "Don't panic, but those ghosts you mentioned have us surrounded."

He couldn't stop himself. Scanning up, down and side-to-side, he frantically searched them out. When something tapped him in the back of the head he could have sworn he heard laughter fill the air.

Absently rubbing the back of his head, Cole asked, "This just might be a tad stupid of me to ask, but when the hell should I panic?"

She ignored him as she looked past his shoulder. "Stop that this minute. That is not only rude it is irritating. Plus, don't you see, he can feel that."

The tapping stopped.

"Apologize."

"Gin, Honey, he doesn't..."

"Yes he does, stay out of this," she hissed.

As a breath of air walked up his arm and across his left cheek, Cole thought that maybe now would be a good time to panic.

"Good. Now who wants to start telling me what the devil is going on?"

One brow arched. "Don't try conning me with that 'I'm just an innocent child' nonsense ... You're right, you don't scare me in the least ... You're a pint size bit of trouble without a whole lot of energy." Ginger knew she could be wrong about the energy, but without the feeling that the spirits were unhappy, she didn't feel threatened even if they were trying to bully.

"Talk fast or I'll call my mom ... Oh, you know about her abilities ... Yeah, I never got anything past her either." She smiled, chuckled, then slowly shook her head. "You're wasting time, talk."

Cole and the surroundings were ignored as Ginger stared unblinkingly at nothing. Fascinated, Cole watched her ever-changing facial expressions as she periodically nodded her head without making one comment.

Stepping out of the car at the end of the ride, she didn't notice that the electric shock that plagued them with each touch was gone. In minutes, she had silently navigated them back to the haunted house entrance.

Locked behind the car's safety bar, she gave Cole her full attention. "They promised that this time we could enjoy the ride without any ghostly antics.

"By the way, Thomas apologized for hitting you on the back of the head."

"Was that the warm air I felt running up my arm and onto my cheek?"

"Sounds right."

"Want to tell me what that was about?"

"He said someone had to get the sparks flying. They had a contest to see who would have the fun of getting us to kiss."

"What was the contest?"

"They had one chance to move a hockey puck. The spirit that moved it the furthest won the chance to push you into kissing me."

"I'm honored. I've gone from being a horse's ass to a hockey puck."

She patted his cheek. "Poor baby, so abused. By the way, the sparks were brighter than expected. He promised not to hit you in the back of the head again because they are afraid more sparks could set the place on fire."

His mind was spinning with so many questions he didn't know where to begin. Several times he started to speak then stopped.

"Why did they want us to kiss?" he finally asked.

"They mentioned my mom, Liz and Sally but they wouldn't give me a straight answer or didn't know the answer, I'm not sure which." They had also mentioned Aunt Pesty and spells but hadn't elaborated and she wasn't ready to go there. What she really wanted to do was stand up and do a victory dance. After all, it wasn't everyday that a girl met her life mate or found out that he was the same sexy hunk that had her itching to explore her sexuality.

"Why are they here?"

"Would you believe they are on vacation?"

"Am I also a country bumpkin?"

Leisurely running her eyes over him he knew the telltale bulge had not gone unnoticed.

"Country? Absolutely. The cowboy boots, western shirt, jeans and the slow Texas drawl are a dead giveaway. As for bumpkin, nay, don't think so. Too much polish to mistake you for simple minded."

No ghost had to push him into the second kiss. Keeping in mind where they were, he tried keeping it playful as he kissed the tip of her nose, but her intoxicating scent thickened his voice with emotion. "Gin, Honey, you keep looking at me like that and I swear more then a few sparks are going to fly."

She might be a late bloomer, but she was a quick study, and Cole was her life mate. For the first time she didn't have to guard her emotions or actions. Her voice flirted with seduction. "Is that a promise or a threat, cowboy?"

"Definitely a promise. Are you prepared to finish what you're starting?"

Okay, maybe not totally prepared to jump into the fire feet first. Feigning fear, she held her hands up in surrender. "Okay, you win. All the spirits are children. They might not think of it as a vacation, but they have a lot of fun playing with the hologram ghosts. They come here because they can."

"Did Thomas say who started the contest?"

"No, he refused to say. The little devil even tried bullying me. When I called his bluff the group realized I wasn't intimidated by their actions or their lack of substance."

"How many are here?"

"Besides Thomas, there were six spirits with him."

"What made them different then a ghost you would not want to tangle with?"

"Their substance was light; it lacked intimidation and the subtle glow of resentment that lingers around the parameter of an angry ghost. And they are children. I've never met a young spirit who learned bitterness before passing over."

"I heard you say you would call your mom."

"Only because they tried bullying me. They are well acquainted with her ability to read minds. They wanted to know if I ever got away with anything as a kid."

"Has anyone ever been able to see them before?"

She didn't try hiding her surprise at the question. "They said a few have sensed their presence, but only once has someone else actually seen them."

"Are they still here?"

"A dozen boys are showing off and horsing around. Nine girls are giggling, dancing with the holograms and having fun mimicking different holograms. Why..."

He placed his fingertip over her lips. "Later. How about sharing what you see."

\* \* \* \*

Sitting in a secluded booth enjoying a late dinner, Ginger brought up the earlier question. "What made you think to ask if anyone else had ever seen the spirits in the haunted house?"

"The whole situation has me curious. Unless you and some of your family members are mutant oddities there has to be others with the same talents." Shrugging, he continued. "For me it seemed like a very logical question to ask."

Not wanting to speculate on what he was going to think when he knew the whole story, she looked at him with an ambiguous expression. "You think I'm a mutant oddity?"

*Hell, when would he learn to censor his choice of words?*

He sighed and chose his next words carefully. "No, as a matter of fact I do not. However, I do think that with you and Rosemary having these unique talents there have to be others with the same or similar abilities. If like you, they have kept the talents relatively quite, or like Rose a well guarded family secret, the only way to know of their existence would be by talking to spirits that have seen them."

"Are you thinking along the line of relatives or strangers?"

"Could be either."

"Funny, I never thought about strangers having the same exact talents we do. Guess anything is possible. As for relatives my great grandmother had a sister she never spoke to after leaving home. My grandmother discovered she had an aunt only after her mother passed over. When she was cleaning out her house she found a handful of old family pictures of the two of them hidden in a shoebox. Mom tried tracking her down, but never got any leads."

"Have you thought about the fact that since meeting me you have discovered that your abilities go beyond what you previously knew and how you used them?"

"Some. Although there are some very talented mediums who do not go public with all they are capable of doing."

He stared until she started to squirm. "Gin, you are far more than a talented medium. You talk to spirits. No, that's wrong. You have full-fledged conversations with spirits, some of which are telepathic. That, in itself, is amazing. You have both audio and visual powers. You are open to the sense of smell when a spirit is present. You have a one hundred percent accuracy in connecting spirits with their living families. You talk to your deceased parents regularly and what's more they not only appear, they share confidential knowledge that many people would pay millions to know."

"Kind of scary, huh?"

He thought seriously for a moment, then placed a warm hand over hers. No buzz shot up their fingers, but it didn't make the contact any less charged with energy. "A few days ago I would have agreed with that assessment. Now I find it intriguing and admittedly a little intimidating. I think your ability to cope with the *gift*, as you call it, is totally amazing."

She greedily gulped fresh air in a vain attempt to clear the tingling lightheadedness his straightforward compliment had caused.

"Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"Gin, why did you tell me?"

She was going to evade the question. As her life mate, he would learn everything about the family, but the destiny dreams held danger and real or imagined, she wasn't totally comfortable with the situation or the idea that Cole was part of the danger. Before she could say anything an inner voice warned her that if she was ever going to be given all the answers to her puzzle she needed to answer truthfully. "Trust. Sometimes you have to trust that what feels right is right."

Looking him in the eye, she asked, "Does that make sense?"

Within their brown depth was a gravity of understanding that went far beyond her statement. Hanging his head down he muttered. "Hell, fire and damnation. Yeah, it makes sense."

Clasping her hand he helped her out of the booth. "Let's go see if this town has a nice honky-tonk bar where I can hold you without your father breathing a hands off warning down my neck."

\* \* \* \*

The bar, within walking distance, had hundreds of old license plates hanging on walls covered in old weathered barn siding and randomly spaced shelves holding old whiskey bottles and tobacco cans.

The five-member band was pure country.

When the band announced the last dance of the evening, Cole took Ginger in his arms and tried duplicating the lovers in the dream. There was too much noise, too much light, too many people and the singer crying over missed opportunities was wrong. Losing himself in the feel of her warm supple body, he forgot about the dream.

\* \* \* \*

Cole drew her into his embrace as they entered the suite. He didn't give either of them time to think as he placed his hands on either side of her face and tenderly claimed her lips. The sexual tension that had been slowly building all evening detonated. As tongues tasted and teeth gently nipped, their bodies melted into each other.

Without breaking contact, he leaned against the closed door and nestled her between his legs. As a hand rubbed her lower back then dropped lower a whiff of licorice tickled his nose.

Pulling his head back, he placed his forehead against hers. As they listened to each other's ragged breaths, sanity slowly returned.

"Gin, Honey, look at me."

Her passion filled eyes were the dark emerald green he had imagined. As he soothingly massaged the back of her neck, she closed her eyes. Tenderly kissing each eyelid, he vowed that someday soon he would finish what they had started.

"I swear this is the last thing I want to say, but you need to go to your room—alone. Something tells me your daddy is going to make his presence known any second if I so much as blink wrong."

Her eyes popped opened. "He wouldn't..."

"You think not? Don't you smell the pipe tobacco?"

As realization hit home, she gave him a rueful grin.

Brushing her tender lips lightly against his, she stepped out of the embrace. "Guess you were right."

Before closing the door to her room, Ginger looked around the small living room and efficiency kitchen. Other than Cole leaning against the door the room looked empty. "You know, Dad, you could have turned the lights on and off a few times like you did when we were teenagers instead of warning him off with your presence."

"Yeah. Guess you have a point."

Looking at Cole, she grinned sheepishly. "He said our eyes were closed. Turning the lights off wouldn't have made a difference."

As she closed her door, she murmured, "Sweet dreams."

He shook his head. Who was worried about dreams? He'd be damned lucky to get any sleep.

Walking towards his room, he called out, "Night Mr. Prescott."

## Chapter 25

Waiting for the limo service to arrive, Ginger thought about the previous night.

She had heard Cole start the shower. Figuring that the shower had been a cold one, she couldn't talk herself into taking the same drastic measures. Instead, she had tossed and turned until just before dawn.

If Cole had had any problem sleeping, it had been well hidden behind a sunny smile and a chaste kiss delivered to the tip of her nose as he handed her a steaming cup of strong black coffee when she'd entered the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

When the town car arrived, Cole gave a prestigious Hollywood Hills address to the same driver that had picked them up at the airport before settling back in the leather seat.

Ginger's quietness had him concerned. If a person wanted to get paranoid, he could read a lot of different things into silence.

"Quarter for your thoughts."

The smile would have been worth a million quarters if it had reached her eyes. Still it dissolved his concerns that she was having second or third thoughts about the previous evening's events.

"I thought the going rate was a penny."

"Inflation; gotta' keep up with the times. Besides, I wouldn't want you to think I'm a tight wad."

The driver impersonating Elvis singing "All Shock Up", and doing a very good job of it, was ignoring them.

"All the children were so eager to make contact with their families. Yet since leaving Seattle, my mother and Sally have been conspicuously absent. Then there is Dad and Mom splitting up, which is highly unusual."

Rolling her shoulders, Ginger couldn't release the nagging tension that had settled in her shoulder blades. Whether the feeling was produced by the drama in the dreams, gut instinct or both she couldn't guess. "Who knows, this is new territory so I can't really say what is normal or abnormal."

"Help me out here. Your mom and dad, who are normally together, have separated. Did you by any chance talk to your dad last night after going into your room?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Just wondering. Can you ask them to appear whenever you want?"

"Probably. Until yesterday, they have never ignored a request to talk to them. Which probably means they can't interfere, and that thought is what probably has me a little jumpy."

"What do you mean they can't interfere?"

"Spirits are not allowed to tell us about events that are going to happen in the future if it means that we might not learn a lesson prepared for us."

"How about we come back to that one later. Explain the rules on asking them to appear."

The driver singing "Suspicious Minds" paid no attention to them.

"There are no real rules. Yet, I have always understood that it would not be appropriate to call them just to chat. But, yes if I really need to talk, I contact them."

"How?"

He looked serious, as if all the problems in the world could be solved if he learned the answer. She imagined that this was how he looked when absorbed in a medical problem.

"It's a very complex ritual. The day of the full moon I purchase a freshly slaughtered chicken. Luckily it is not a blood ritual so I can buy one from the local butcher."

It was hard to keep a straight face when she saw a shudder ripple down his spine.

"After dark, white, vanilla scented candles that have been placed in a circle in the backyard are lit. These candles appease the God of Visions. Disrobing, I stand in the middle of the circle, raise my arms towards the heavens and chant a complex spell that my mother secretly passed on to me one sentence at a time. The spell calls to the God of Spirits to allow my parents to appear.

"Still naked, I do a ritual dance to please the Moon Goddess. After that, I burn a letter I have written to the God of Interaction requesting permission for their help. Then I gather fresh thyme, rosemary and parsley from the garden. By that time, the barbecue is fully heated."

From the passionate expression and the sudden sucking in of air when mentioning naked dancing, she had the glorious satisfaction of knowing he had believed everything ... right up to the point of the barbecue.

He'd been had. Sucked in by the belief that what she did was connected to witchcraft, he had behaved like a suckerfish with a rubber worm dancing in front of him. His hearty laughter at what a fool he'd been caught the driver's attention.

He wanted her so badly his entire body ached. But with each new insight, the overwhelming desire to get to share every aspect of life's ups and downs with her claimed a little more of his soul than just the overwhelming need for her to share his bed.

When nothing happened, the driver lost interest. When the driver began singing "Love Me Tender", Cole kissed the pulse on the inside of her wrist. He had the satisfaction of feeling the beat instantly go erratic. Settling her hand firmly within his larger one, he poured on the charm. "By stealing Rose's favorite phrase, let me remind you that paybacks are a bitch. I promise one day soon when you least expect it you will be begging me for mercy."

She felt the heat of a blush creep up her neck. She had no doubt where he was visualizing conducting his punishment.

Pretending ignorance, she pleaded. "Cole, you wouldn't hurt poor defenseless me, would you?"

"Gin, Honey, I doubt you have been defenseless since the day you learned how to bat those pretty big green eyes and pout so seductively."

"You have been talking to my daddy, haven't you?"



"No. I got a strong whiff of his pipe tobacco out on the balcony the night we arrived in LA, then again last night. But, so far, we have not had the pleasure of talking."

Interesting. Her dad had made his presence known to Cole even when she wasn't present. Outside of family, no one had ever detected the scent of her dad's tobacco or her mom's perfume. Yet, Cole was able to do so easily. There were two more puzzle clues to add to the list of things that had changed since April first.

The tempo of the music changed as the driver began singing "Return to Sender".

"Hate to disappoint you, but the reality is very simple. If I really need them I sit, clear my mind, erect a pyramid of protection around the room and concentrate on them. Within a few minutes they appear. Until the Seattle trip, I have never seen one without the other unless I was in a bathroom. My dad has a real phobia about visiting bathrooms."

"Gin, believe it or not that sounds complicated. Picking up a phone is easy. Sending a letter is straightforward. Emails are fast and simple. Calling spirits is not easy, natural or simple. What is a pyramid of protection and how do you erect one?"

He was starting to recognize the devilish grin that lit up her face. "Do not even think it. Give me a straight answer."

She exaggerated a pout. "Honestly, one little tale and you instantly become suspicious. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Gin!"

"Oh, all right. When working with spirits you never want to send an open invitation to just anyone. I say a prayer of protection, then I visualize a crystal pyramid around the room I am in that will lock out all but those invited."

"Okay, in some weird way that makes sense. How fast do they appear?"

"Under three minutes."

He was impressed. "Not bad. What happens when they appear?"

"You have to understand my mom. When alive she was passionate about everything. Emotions were expressed to the fullest. Now she uses those emotions to create spectacular entrances. Usually, she coordinates the color of her outfit to the smoke, haze, sparkles, glitter, shamrocks, flags, or holiday icons that appear when entering the room. The happier the occasion, the more colorful the entrance. When she is ticked off it is downright dramatic. Unless Dad is helping Mom with some grand entrance, he is very subtle."

"Does the room change temperature?"

"A lot of people say differently, but I have never felt a temperature difference when around spirits. Not even unfriendly ones."

"How often do you request their presence?"

"Seldom. With Mom reading our thoughts, they pop in and out regularly. Plus Mom likes to add her opinions to my thoughts without actually appearing. Sometimes their scents or their voices echo out of the blue with a comment about what is happening or something one of us has said or is thinking."

"What do you usually talk about?"

"Everything and anything. Only, answering questions that would intervene with life altering choices are off limits."

He frowned. "You said something about that earlier. Are you saying they won't answer even if they know the answer? That doesn't seem fair."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Life is made up of fate, choices and karma. If they say something that might alter a major life choice, they would be interfering with the future and that is absolutely forbidden."

"This morning I tried to get hold of my folks to ask about Sally. Dad appeared alone. He stayed long enough to tell me they loved me and that they were watching over us. He also said they could not help or interfere. Then poof," she snapped her fingers, "just like that, he was gone."

The driver singing "Devil In Disguise" slowed, turned into a wide driveway flanked by opened double black wrought iron gates then navigated a sharp bend that started them down a sharp decline.

Spread out below them stood a magnificent pink brick mansion and well tended grounds.

The driver stopped the car as he gave a low whistle. Turning, he looked at them with new interest. "You guys some sort of celebrities or something?"

"No," they answered in unison.

"Man, are you sure? I meant no disrespect in not recognizing you, so are you sure?"

Something in the driver's tone pricked Ginger's sense of unease.

"Yes, I'm sure. Look, we have an appointment so how about driving us..." Pressing her free hand against Cole's thigh effectively stopped him in mid-sentence.

Glancing at the driver's nameplate on the visor, Ginger did a double take. "Elvis, before driving down there, would you please tell me why you suddenly think we are celebrities?"

Pointing towards the far side of the red brick, circular drive, Elvis was matter of fact. "See that white van with the satellite dish on top. That belongs to Channel Twelve news. The black one parked behind it is a movie studio van. All those cables coming out the open doors say that they are ready to tape or are already taping something. They don't waste money or time setting up something like that unless they think they have a big story."

"Are you positive about that?" Cole asked.

"Hey man, my cousin is a driver for Channel Twelve. He helps the cameraman and Jill Bennett, one of their roving reporters, sets up equipment when they are on assignment. As for the black van, you can see the studio's logo from here."

Ginger's face turned chalk white. The fingers on the hand still resting on Cole's thigh dug into muscled flesh.

Known for staying cool and thinking quickly during a crisis, Cole calmly asked, "Elvis, do you think you could back up and drive out of here without being observed?"

"Sorry man, no can do." Using his thumb to point behind them, they turned to see a black stretch limo blocking the entry.

Scanning the driveway, Cole saw Sally's parents exiting large double doors leading onto a wide brick porch. "Get us out of here as quickly as you can. Unless forced, do not stop. Can you do that?"

"Sure man, no problem. Just leave it to me."

As the town car moved forward the limo pulled up behind them until it almost touched their bumper. Any doubt about walking into a staged trap vanished.

"Gin, Honey, how about sitting on the floor? I don't want anyone to see you. They might already know you're female, but with the tinted windows and from this distance I doubt they could identify you if they saw you again."

She didn't have to be told twice. Sliding onto the floor, she braced her back against the door after making sure the door was locked.

As they approached the mansion's portico Cole noted the thin pinched mouth, clutched hands and rigid posture of Kimberly Brooks, Sally's mother.

Trent Brooks, Sally's father, stood with his hands tucked into the pockets of an expensive pair of dress slacks. A broad toothy smile showed off sparkling white-capped teeth. The only outward sign of tension was a slight rocking motion as he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

At the moment the car should have stopped, Elvis tromped on the gas pedal. As the car shot forward he navigated around the cables, snaking across the pavement and through a narrow opening between a circular red brick hedge on his left and the black van on his right with expertise. Reaching the gate, he glanced in the rear view mirror.

"Holy shit! They must really want to talk to you guys."

Slipping back onto the seat, Ginger buckled up as Elvis accelerated onto the road. The black Mercedes, driven by Trent Brooks, was inches from their back bumper as they reached an intersection. The stretch limo was nose to nose with the Mercedes.

"Don't you guys worry I'll lose 'em for ya."

Cole watched the angry expression on Trent Brook's face turn to fury when Elvis ran the red light seconds before a semi entered the intersection.

"Freeway entrance is two blocks from here. If we're lucky, it won't be backed up in gridlock," Elvis yelled over his shoulder.

"And if it is?" Ginger asked as the car shot through another red light and up the freeway ramp. The Mercedes was a car length behind them.

"Not going to be a problem. If you tromp it, that Wal-Mart semi will cut Trent off." Cole became the perfect backseat driver. "There's a break in the left lane right after the blue van. The commuter lane is empty."

When the car shot through the hole, Ginger broke a nail squeezing the armrest.

Two wheeled corners, fast lane changes and the stress on shocks and tires as they hit every bump in the road had Ginger wishing she could get her hands on the rosary beads dangling from Elvis's rearview mirror.

"The Mercedes is closing in, change lanes *now*!"

Ginger squeezed her eyes shut.

Tires squealed. Horns honked and more than one obscenity drifted through the air.

"Good going, cross over to the right lane then weave in front of the triple load UPS truck. With the bus on the other side of him, they will hide us for a minute or two," Cole exclaimed, as his head seemed to twist in five directions at once.

When the car finally came to a full stop in a grocery parking lot, Ginger was speechless.

Cole and Elvis, wearing huge grins, were like little boys on a sugar high. In between high-fives they praised each other for successfully ditching the two other cars.

By the time they replayed the final coup de grace of crossing over four lanes of traffic going ninety miles an hour to take an off ramp, Ginger was able to swallow the lump of fear that had been lodged in her throat.

"Are you positive we lost them?"

Looking at her, Cole lost the grin. "Yes. Are you okay?"

"A little worse for wear. On the whole, yes, I'm fine. Now what?"

Before Cole could answer, his cell phone began playing, "Talk to Me" by Little Willie John.

As he looked at the caller ID, his voice was as frigid as an arctic cold front when he answered. "Hello, Kimberly. Do you want to tell me what the hell that was all about?"

A frown turned to a look of pure anger before the call was finished.

"Elvis, how far are we from the hotel?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes, tops."

"Brooks is tracing your license plates right now. With his contacts he will be able to trace your dispatcher and find out where you picked us up without a problem. We need to check out of the hotel as soon as possible. Also, if your dispatcher calls could you be vague about where we are?"

Still wearing the goofy grin of success, Elvis gave an overconfident answer. "No problem, man, you just leave it to me."

Raking fingers through his hair, Cole included Elvis in the conversation. After risking his chauffeur's license, his car and his life, Cole figured he deserved to know what was happening even if the information made no sense.

"Liz and Sally became good friends while they were ill. Their mothers have kept in touch. Yesterday, Trent told Kimberly to call Kathy Jordan to see if they had also heard from me. Kathy is still on cloud nine over all that happened. Although we asked them not to divulge what had happened, to anyone, she must have felt that Kimberly was excluded from that request since she told her I had set up an appointment to meet with them."

His drawl became more pronounced as he continued. "With Trent listening in on another line, he started calculating public response as well as what he saw as soaring ratings and a chance to be the first to break

a headline story. Kimberly swears she tried talking him into meeting with us before bringing in a camera crew. She said he got furious and made some kind of a threat. According to her, he doesn't allow anything, which seems to include private family issues, to stand in his way of a hot story if it will draw ratings and put his name in the limelight."

Elvis accepted the explanation without asking a single question.

Cole looked at Ginger for the first time since hanging up the phone. "I'm sorry. I promised this would be kept quiet. Guess I blew it. The only consolation I can give you is that Kathy didn't reveal your name."

She kept thinking about the dream and the danger lurking in the darkness. At this point it was impossible to know if the two were related. With her parents not making their presences known, she knew it would be futile to seek answers from them.

As the car stopped in front of the hotel entrance, Ginger squeezed his hand. "Stop beating yourself up. In the end everything is going to be all right." Now all she could hope for was that her mother's favorite phrase would turn out to be true.

Twenty minutes later, they were exiting an elevator when Cole abruptly took her arm.

"Trent is at the front desk. Keep your head down and follow me." Standing in front of a rack of tourist attraction brochures, they kept their backs towards the elevators until Trent entered and the doors were firmly closed.

When they arrived at the customer service counter, Cole's smile was charming, his manner calm. "Hello Brenda, I'm Cole Young. I'm sorry to say we need to check out a day early."

She jutted her chin towards the elevator. Her clipped voice simmered with anger. "You just missed a guy looking for you. He's on his way up to your room."

"Yes, I know and we would really like to avoid him if at all possible."

She looked them over speculatively. After two years on the job, she was fairly accurate at reading people. Still it never hurt to ask pertinent questions. "Brooks is with Channel Twelve News. You in some sort of trouble?"

If Cole was surprised or shocked at the question he did a good job of hiding it. "Not unless you consider knowing Brooks trouble."

As she worked on the paperwork to check them out, she had no qualms about voicing her opinion. "I'd call that trouble; the guy is a slime ball. Thinks he can get anything he demands just because his picture's plastered on billboards and he's on TV every night. Even had the nerve to tell me who he was, as if I'm too dumb to watch the news. Guess it's not often that a lowly clerk doesn't smile and kiss his ass, because he started demanding to speak to my supervisor.

"When my boss saw him at the counter, she got all gushy. I swear she'd kiss the devil's ass if she thought it would get her something. After she fluttered her fake eyelashes at him and he used his phony charm to make her think he was hot for her body, she gave the creep your room number."

"Sorry he gave you a hard time," Ginger said.

"Thanks, but it's not your fault. I'm on duty for the next five hours. Until I leave, this checkout slip stays in my pocket. I'll make sure both the creeps think you are still checked into the room. Can't stand arrogant ass ... creeps. People act like that, they need to be squished."

With a gleam in her eyes, Brenda rubbed her hands together. "This is going to be fun. Now get going before he comes back down."

Smiling their thanks, they didn't need a second urging.

Elvis grinned as he watched them through the rearview mirror. "My dispatcher called about the same time I saw Brooks pull into the driveway. Told her I was taking the rest of the day off, because I didn't feel too good. I'm all yours."

Smoothly coming to a stop at a red light, he turned to look directly at Ginger. It was the first time she had really taken notice of his looks. With his light mocha skin, jet-black hair, baby blue eyes, square jaw, slender build and wickedly sinful grin he reminded her of the best of Sinatra and Elvis rolled into one. "Where to now, boss?"

Ginger surprised them both. "Someplace quiet where we can get plenty of strong, black coffee and a huge cinnamon roll. I'm starving."

\* \* \* \*

Deciding that the safest path to follow was one that led them out of town as quickly as possible, Elvis drove them to San Diego.

Before getting out of the car at the San Diego Airport, Ginger said, "Elvis do you believe in spirits?"

"I'm Catholic. Are they saints or ghosts?"

"Friendly ghosts."

"My grandma reads tea leaves. She's been talking to my dead Grandpa for over twenty years. My mom has conversations with cats and swears a black haired angel told her to name me Elvis Francis. So yes, I guess I gotta believe or I'd have to admit that I'm living in a house full of crazy ladies."

As she handed him the drawings she had been working on since leaving Los Angeles she gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Pass the kiss onto Nona. Your grandpa says you are a good boy to watch over Nona and your mama, so he makes sure to watch over you. He is also taking his share of credit for our safe journey today. Considering that I could have shown we passed through the bumper of a red pickup I believe him."

His eyes about popped out when he looked at the lifelike drawings of his grandfather. "They look just like him. Nona is going to be reading a ton of tea leaves trying to figure out how I got them."

They heard Ginger mutter "Okay" several times.

"He also says to tell you to dump the bleached blonde hussy. You need to settle down, find a sweet woman, like his Nona and your mama. It is time you become a papa."

"Tell him, I'll do as he says when I turn thirty."

"He hears what you say. He says he will hold you to that. You have two years, not a day more."

Elvis shook his head. "He did it again. How come he's still cornering me into doing things his way?"

"He says when you figure that out you'll be a good papa."

Shaking her head, she rolled her eyes as they heard her say in a tone of voice that left no room for arguing, "No, I absolutely refuse to repeat that."

"Your grandfather's a very funny man. I refuse to repeat his exact words, but please tell Nona that he does not wish her to join him anytime soon. However, he is looking forward to his long-suffering patience being rewarded when the time comes. I get the impression she knows him well enough to know what he really said."

## Chapter 26

With springtime thunderstorms playing havoc throughout the entire Midwest section of the States, flights were delayed and airtime was bumpy.

When the belly of the airplane didn't spit out their luggage, they filled out all the necessary paperwork, were told the suitcases had taken a flight to sunny Miami and wasn't it fortunate that the Disney tote bulging with gifts had been a carry-on.

Relaxing in the front seat of the '65 Mustang, Ginger watched in amusement as Rose and Cinn dumped the contents of the purple tote on the backseat.

"Rose, Cole picked out the Eeyore items for you."

"Good thing I'm growing fond of donkeys."

Ginger gave a full rundown on what had happened during the trip while Cole worked out some of his frustrations by testing the Mustang's power.

"What are the chances Brooks can find out Ginger's name?"

Glancing at Rosemary in the rearview mirror, he was relieved to see she didn't appear to be angry.

"Between flights I talked to Kathy Jordan. She had already taken Gin's cell phone number away from Billy because in his excitement he started pleading with them to call five minutes after we pulled out of their driveway. Everything there is closed down tight. Truth is I don't have an answer to your question. I would say if Brooks is really determined he will find out."

"Cole there's no reason to be beating yourself up. What's done is done," Cinnamon soothed.

"But this whole mess is my fault. I should have remembered how arrogant and aggressive Brooks was during Sally's illness. Getting permission to film Sally's surgeries, treatments and setbacks, he made several documentaries on the perils of childhood heart disease. Fresh out of residency, I was pretty full of myself, and my self-righteous dreams of curing every child under my care. Apparently, I was also naive enough to be impressed by him. It is the only excuse I have for believing his only motive in making the series was to help draw awareness to the problem the families and patients faced on a daily basis."

"Like Cinn said, stop beating yourself up. What's done is done. Everything happens for a reason." Not putting voice to it, Ginger added, *and the reason is probably a meddling aunt.*

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After bidding Cinnamon and Rosemary good night, Cole pulled Ginger into the dark recesses of the backyard.

Holding her firmly within his arms, he temporarily forgot what he was going to say as pleasurable sensations overcame logic. She surprised and pleased him by initiating the kiss.

When he was finally able to catch his breath, he whispered, "Gin, I'm sorry."

She placed her fingers over his lips. "Don't. I'm a big girl. I made the decision to help."

"I pushed you. I should have accepted your first no."



"With Rose and Cinn around, you think I don't know how to ignore pressure? There is a reason for what happened. Stop blaming yourself."

A tired smile countered her solemn expression. "You're right. I take everything back. This *was* your fault."

He kissed her on the forehead. "You are being far too generous, but I'm too damn tired to argue."

## Chapter 27

A small sliver of moonlight penetrating a ground hovering haze cast a weak light on the man poised to do battle. Cole, her Adam, was everything she had hoped for in her youthful fantasies, and so much more. As she reached his side, his protective embrace eased her fears.

*She felt the negative energy of danger surround them like a pack of wolves slowly advancing, waiting for the right moment to pounce. As the stench of evil power gained momentum, blocking the small sliver of moonlight, she instinctively knew there was no way to fight the battle fairly. As Adam, Cole, prepared to fight, she screamed...*

"It's okay. You're safe. It's okay." Cinnamon was rocking Ginger in her arms and rubbing her back as she came back to reality.

After checking the windows and bathroom to make certain there had been no intruder, Rosemary started a pot of coffee, a kettle of water for tea and grabbed their bathrobes.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Ginger finished telling them the details of each consecutive dream.

Even now, after all the talking, the tenseness had not subsided. Rising from the checkered lounge, she headed for the stairs.

"What are you going to do?" Cinnamon asked.

"Go for a run."

"Forget it. Until we know what is going on you are not running by yourself. Yoga or sleep, which is it?"

Seeing identical expressions of determination staring at her, Ginger didn't argue.

\* \* \* \*

*Every muscle in his body ached from tension.*

*When she first appeared as a wispy seductive vision in the fog, his heart missed a beat as he hungrily devoured her with his eyes. Ginger, his dream Goddess, seduced him with a smile as she slowly walked towards him.*

Still on guard for the unseen enemy, his impatience was at the breaking point by the time she was close enough for him to draw her lush, naked body against his own.

*An instant before the small shaft of moonlight was totally blocked, he saw vultures silhouette the sky as their heartless, black beady eyes focused on their prey.*

Drenched in sweat, he threw the damp covers onto the floor. Long purposeful strides took him directly to the master bath's walk-in shower. The first stinging beads of ice-cold water cooled his heated body. When he braced his arms against the tiled shower wall, a steady stream of hot water hit the back of his head and shoulders. He didn't move until the water once again ran cold.

Dum-Dum waited until he had pulled on a pair of sweats before tracing a figure eight around his legs as she purred.

As he picked her up, the purring grew louder. "Thanks for the support. Any suggestions would be

gratefully appreciated."

When the only answer was a raspy tongue against his stubbled chin, he set her on a chair.

Too keyed up to sleep he stripped the bed, started a load of wash and a pot of high-octane coffee.

Forgetting the coffee, he took out his frustrations on the exercise equipment in his uncle's bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

He waited until eight a.m. to walk across the street. Rosemary answered the door, wearing a skimpy hot pink leotard drenched in sweat and an unsociable scowl. Cole pursed his lips to keep from smiling.

A curt nod ungraciously invited him in. Tilting her head, Rosemary placed her hands on her hips and wrinkled her nose as if smelling something distasteful.

"Don't tell me, you had a blissful night of sleep, and a leisurely shower, followed by a liberal application of aftershave. You are now hoping to get lucky with a nice hot breakfast."

He wisely stepped out of her reach.

"And a good morning to you, too, Sunshine."

She snarled.

"You look ravishing in pink. Did you dress up just for me or is it a special occasion?"

She bared her teeth as the snarl turned into a deep throaty growl. "Are you suicidal?"

His chuckle rumbled from his chest. His drawl exaggerated. "Probably, but Sunshine, you know you adore me."

"Bite me."

He crossed his arms across his chest. Tilting his head, he skimmed her body. "Sorry, Sunshine, as tempting as the package is I'm a one woman man. But thanks for the offer."

The battle to keep from smiling was hard fought, but she won. "You are so dead. I will destroy you before the morning is over."

"Bet I can change your mind."

"Not a chance in hell."

"How about I fix hash browns and scrambled eggs while you get your pretty little ass into the shower and scent yourself with roses instead of body d'odor?"

She walked down the hall muttering.

When Ginger walked downstairs, the enticing aroma of spices, onions, bacon and frying potatoes filled the air. Leaning against the doorjamb, she spent several minutes enjoying the sight of Cole comfortably working in her kitchen.

She was mentally stripping off his jeans and shirt when he turned and spotted her unfocused stare.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Not a thing. Understand you have been flirting with my sister."

He kissed the top of her head. "Gin, Honey, in case you don't know it, Rosemary is not a real friendly person early in the morning. I was just trying to save my ass."

Cinnamon, who had just walked into the kitchen, looked him up and down then purred, "Glad to see you saved it. It would have been a real shame to see her take a bite out of such a fine looking specimen. By the way, last time we checked she still hadn't had her rabies shots so do be careful."

He realized with a jolt that he thoroughly enjoyed being included in the easy familiar teasing that the triplets shared. When there was a bite to a comment it was never said in a way to hurt one's feelings. Even the sexual undertones of Cinnamon's last comment were delivered in a way that had him smiling at the joke rather than thinking that she was being suggestive.

"What did you say to her anyway?" Cinnamon asked. "She is actually up there singing in the shower."

"I tried my sweet talking charms—she was not the least bit receptive. So I bribed her with the offer of food."

"Ah, now I'm impressed. Not only are you a handsome cowboy, you are also very smart."

"Not always, but I'm learning."

"The food sure smells good. Need any help?" Cinnamon asked.

After checking the contents of the frying pan, Cole efficiently buttered two slices of toast before dropping two more slices of bread into the toaster. Eyeing the diced onions, red peppers, chopped parsley and crispy bits of bacon he had prepared for the scrambled eggs, he answered, "No, everything's under control here."

Taking him at his word, Ginger and Cinnamon set the table in the kitchen nook before sitting on the bar stools to watch him cook.

Rosemary, dressed in a pink terrycloth warm-up suit, joined them just as he was placing a steaming platter of scrambled eggs on the table. Pulling a chair out, Cole dramatically bowed at the waist. "Madame, may I be permitted to repeat, you look absolutely ravishing in pink."

She smiled sweetly as she patted him on the cheek. "Gin, I do hope you keep him. He is so adorable and entertaining, just like a cute oversized puppy dog. If you housebreak him properly, he might even be fun to have around when he's old, gray and drooling."

"Woof, woof."

"Has Gin told you about some of the more interesting characters that have visited the house?"

"Not yet. Are we talking flesh and blood or vaporous mist?"

"Both. A parrot flew into the house through the open French doors. The parrot would screech, 'The devil made me do it, the devil made me do it,' then hide his face under his wing. A few minutes later he would repeat the show. We tried catching him, but he wouldn't let us near him," Cinnamon said around her laughter.

"By the time I got home, the parrot had been screeching for three hours. Mom was threatening to turn the bird into stew; Dad had locked himself in the office and the ghostly shape of the previous owner had

made himself at home in front of the television."

"Why are you calling him a ghost?"

"Because after hanging around earth for a couple of decades waiting for the parrot to die, he was more than a little testy."

"I'm going to regret playing the fool, but tell me why the guy wouldn't leave the parrot."

"They were partners. The bird would distract a mark while the guy picked him clean. According to the ghost, the parrot had stashed a few pieces of expensive jewelry. The parrot's new owner had come to me as a client then talked to the parrot about the visit. The ghost, thinking I could talk to animals chased him here so I could find out where the jewelry was hidden."

"Why?"

"He believed he could come back in another life, knowing where the jewelry was hidden. It was a matter of financial security."

"I'm not going to list all the holes in that form of logic. What happened?"

"He wasn't real happy when I explained a few of those holes. When he got nasty, Dad decided it was time to intervene. Mom, appearing in a devil's costume, used her ability to read his thoughts. She scared him into agreeing to walk through the veil."

"Any idea what happened to him?"

"None. That is one of those guarded secrets."

Breakfast became a festive affair as they shared memories and prodded Cole for a few personally embarrassing tales. Nothing was sacred, the more embarrassing, the better. There was no room in their lives for division within their ranks. If you wanted to be included in the family circle you had better be able to multiply the love and acceptance by three. Cole was considering himself very lucky to be included in the circle when Ginger started chuckling during a lull in the conversation.

Pointing her empty fork at Ginger, Rosemary said in a scolding tone, "You know, Gin, that is very rude."

"True, but wait until you hear this. Cole, swaggering in the glory of his first love affair decides to win her affection by concocting this elaborate scene where the love of his life opens her lunch sack and screams when she finds a big snake inside. He, being the brave hero, grabs the snake out of the bag and tosses it outside. The cute little brunette then looks at him adoringly, bats her big brown eyes and pledges her undying love."

With all eyes on him, he grinned, then in a smooth as silk drawl went on the defensive. "Give me a break. I was nine. She was an enticing older woman of ten, had a cute button nose and her momma made great double chocolate brownies with icing. Gin, Honey, is Porter still here?"

She nodded her head towards a spot just behind Rosemary.

With his eyes dancing with laughter, Cole looked in the same direction. "Porter, you might want to remember that for every story you tell, I have one to tell on you. You know your momma would still like to know how the glass top on her patio table got busted."

"You don't scare me. My momma worshiped the ground I walked on. You try telling stories on me, she'll

just wash your mouth out with that awful lye soap for telling fibs on her darling son who was led astray by the likes of you and Cody."

Cole shook his head at the absurdity of the whole conversation as all of them laughed at Ginger's attempt to mimic Porter. "He's right. She never would believe he was the instigator behind most of the really daredevil stunts we got in trouble for. Did he tell you the rest of the story?"

"Not yet."

"Preston and Cody spent a whole day helping me find just the right snake. It was a real pretty little racer with bright red strips down its sides. With some fast footed shuffling I made sure I was sitting beside her when she opened her lunch bag. Instead of screaming, she got a huge grin on her face, calmly took the snake out of the sack and held it up for everyone to admire."

"If you had done that to me I would have screamed bloody murder," Rosemary declared.

"A few girls did that, but not Shelly. She calmly walked up to Cody and asked him if he had given her the present. The little sneak had known she had pet snakes. He played me for a sucker to get her attention."

"Did it work?" Ginger asked.

"Yeah, it worked. After Cody took full credit for my gift, she gave him a kiss on the cheek. They held hands every lunch hour for weeks. My heart was truly broken until Tommy Davis came to school with a baby rattlesnake in a mason jar and she coldheartedly dumped Cody."

As Cinnamon and Rosemary talked about what the three of them had done to get even with a neighborhood troublemaker, he noticed Ginger had become very quiet. The look on her face was unreadable as she ran her fingertip over the rim of a lukewarm cup of coffee. "Porter said you had a nightmare last night. Is that true?"

The room grew quiet. He watched three pairs of identical eyes change from merriment, to surprise, to questioning.

Never thinking that his comments would be repeated, Cole had gotten into the habit of talking to Porter after the whiskey incident. "Did Porter give you a reason for sharing that bit of information?"

"He says it's time for a few things to come out into the open," Ginger said.

Somehow Cole couldn't see himself detailing steamy sex scenes or his reactions to them.

"Funny thing happened early this morning. Rose and I got a wake up call from Gin. She was screaming her head off over a nightmare, the two of you were the main characters."

Cinnamon's words sucker punched him. His stomach muscles contracted as the memory of someone screaming pricked through his conscious. Just before he woke up had Ginger screamed, or had he? A million thoughts raced around his mind as he raked his fingers through his hair. How much he should reveal made the number one slot on the top ten list of unanswered questions.

Sitting back in the chair, Cole crossed his arms over his chest and settled more comfortably into the seat. "The night I arrived in town I started having a series of dreams. Each dream has been a little different, as if something or someone has been orchestrating the timing of everything to be revealed. With each subsequent dream, the danger has come from a different direction. Or maybe the danger itself is changing. It's impossible to tell. Frankly, the whole thing has me puzzled."

He studied their faces.

Rosemary's poker face was firmly in place, her eyes unblinking as they waited for him to continue.

Cinnamon did not try to hide her surprise. There was also a slight twinkling in her eyes that for some reason made Cole very uneasy.

Ginger's eyes were dilated, her breathing shallow. He could almost see her brain working as she digested what he had shared and speculated on what he had not revealed.

In truth, she was stunned. The time frame of her first dream coincided closely with his. But his description had been vague enough that she wasn't sure they were actually sharing dreams. Hells bells, she didn't know if she believed people could share dreams.

"Last night I saw a small sliver of light in front of me. Walking towards the light I felt danger lurking around the outer perimeter of a low-lying fog. The danger became so explosive it left behind a rancid stench that reminded me of a mixture of dead fish and really bad breath. When I saw you standing in the center of a weak beam of light, I knew you were waiting for me. I also knew you didn't want me there. After your arm was protectively around me, I thought I saw something big, like a wolf, jump out of the fog. That is when I screamed. Does that sound familiar?"

"Well, Gin, Honey, mixed in with that element of danger this sexy little nymph has been driving me crazy. Until last night the dreams were always surrounded in total darkness so other than touch, scent and some very seductive kisses there was no way to identify the woman who was turning my emotions inside out. Last night during the dream, a beam of light revealed her identity when she threw herself into my waiting arms."

"I did not throw myself!"

He winked at Rosemary and Cinnamon. "Gin, Honey, you tell it your way and I'll tell it mine."

Leaning towards her, he whispered into her ear. "I really liked the little heart tattoo."

"It's not a tattoo. It's a birthmark. All of us have one." *Omigod, when would she learn to keep her mouth shut in front of her sisters?*

Rosemary lifted an eyebrow. The birthmark, the size of a thumbnail, was at the base of their left hipbone. "Gin, did you forget to mention that you were naked or did you think that piece of information unimportant?"

His smile was knowing, sexy and not the least bit apologetic about revealing that piece of information.

"Okay guys, you can give each other lovey-dovey looks later. Right now we need to concentrate on the present."

Knowing Rosemary was right, Ginger broke the spell by starting to stack the breakfast dishes.

"Why do I get the feeling the three of you know more about these dreams than you are letting on?"

Rosemary answered the question with a question. "Do you think Gin was the Dream Goddess in each of your dreams?"

He shook his head at the slyness of the question. Thinking was a whole lot different than knowing. He had no doubts that she had phrased her questions with that in mind. "No, actually I think the three of you

have been taking turns pulling my chain for the last ten days just to see if I will go totally crazy."

Approaching Rosemary, he surprised her by taking her face in his hands as he gave her a firm kiss. Before anyone could object, he repeated the action with Cinnamon.

Walking over to Ginger he pulled her into his arms and shorted circuited both their brains with a high voltage kiss that would have driven him crazy if he had a brain left. By the time he came up for air, he had almost forgotten they weren't alone. "Ladies, I can assure you that these are the lips and this is the delectable body that has been driving me slowly insane."

Eyeing the shimmering red glow that radiated around their still entwined bodies, Cinnamon juggled a tall glass of cold water in her hand. "Do we need to douse the fire before we continue or do you want to keep smoldering?"

Everyone laughed, but Cole could feel the electric charge of telepathic communication float through the air. He watched in fascination as without a word they came to a collective agreement in what to him looked like nothing more than a look and a nod of the head.

"As the eldest I will take full responsibility for telling you our family story. Because of the dreams and Dad's support, Gin has already trusted you with several family secrets. Now, as the radio program so aptly declares, here's the rest of the story."

Not once did he interrupt. When she finished, Cole excused himself to walk outside.

The idea that a woman over three hundred years ago could cast a spell that would alter the lives of each female descendent of that family for eternity was mind blowing.

He could still feel the chill that had walked up his spine when Rosemary talked about the magic spell. When he thought about the weighty burden of responsibility he had witnessed in Ginger over her *gift*, he acknowledged that he would never want to be put in that position.

The threat of their *gift* being taken away on some unseen person's judgment left him angry. It also made him question if the grandmamma really could control lives from the grave.

As for their powers being taken away if they chose the wrong lover, Cole had never believed that there was only one perfect mate for each person. Did the spell mean that somehow, someone had manipulated his dreams, or had the freedom of choice been mutual?

Rosemary's shadow interrupted his thoughts. Which was just as well since they had started going around in a never-ending circle of questions that were impossible to answer.

Sitting beside him, she plucked soft green blades of grass. "Mom told us the story for the first time when we were ten. Eighteen years later, there are still times I find the story hard to believe. Some days it's like a bitter pill lodged in my throat that has me wanting to gag until I throw it up. Other days I get a rush out of taking some overconfident jerk to the cleaners during a poker game. Most of the time, though, I try not to think about it."

"Don't you feel manipulated?"

"When I was in college, I almost took a lover. The guy really wasn't important. He was just some cute jock who had been making passes at me. It was the fact that other girls had the freedom to sleep with anyone they chose or keep their virginity without someone judging their actions that ticked me off."

"What stopped you?"



"Cinn. She had me list all the pros and cons on a piece of paper of living with and without my abilities. In the end, it didn't seem worth throwing it away just to say screw you to a woman I couldn't face. Without being able to yell at Grandmamma for manipulating my life, I vowed to live on the edge. There are things I could do that would, as Cinn says, be worthy of my talents. Instead I drive fast cars, thumb my nose at security cops and drive Cinn and Dad crazy with worry."

"What about marriage?"

"No thanks. It is one of my ways of defying my umpteenth whatever Grandmamma's idea that women can only find true love and fulfillment inside marriage. But that is not what you really want to know, is it?"

"Thought you couldn't read minds?"

Her smile looked sad.

"You're right, though. Do you think it is possible for someone to manipulate someone's dreams? There is something weird going on, but I can't put my finger on what it is. It started when I got home from England. Small irritating things started disrupting my life. Some of those things brought me here. Now I find out Gin and I are having the same dreams. I can't help thinking someone is manipulating me. Like you, I don't like it."

"No one ever told us that our Adam would be experiencing the same dreams we have. Mom, Dad and Aunt Pesty never mentioned it so I don't have an answer or an educated guess."

He stared at her. "You said 'our Adam'. Why?"

"Just a joke. It's easier to call you Adam than Dream Man or something else just as corny."

So he had heard Ginger correctly. Interesting! That meant she too had used a kiss to identify him from the dreams.

Cole broke the silence. "Would you wish this gift on a child?"

"Ah, the million dollar question. Let me put it this way. I no longer see my ability as a curse or a gift. It is simple part of who I am. But it is a choice I had the opportunity to make. Guess that makes my answer, yes, I would wish this gift on a child if I loved someone and wanted to have a child with them."

She started to rise then paused. "To my way of thinking the question is not whether or not someone manipulated your dreams. It comes down to whether or not you love her. If you love her then the where, why or how of getting there really doesn't matter."

As she walked away she added, "When you figure that out, we'll talk some more."

## Chapter 28

Walking into the house, Cole found Cinnamon stretched out on the couch and Rosemary curled in a ball on the chaise lounge. Both were sound asleep.

Automatically, he walked towards the studio.

Seeing the worry and sadness in Ginger's eyes, Cole chewed himself out for having been the one to put them there. It was stupid to make grand promises, but he vowed that he would try his best to make her happy. Sitting on the stool placed in front of an empty easel, he was grateful that she didn't protest when he gathered her in his arms. Nuzzling her neck, he smelled turpentine, oil paint and acrylics permanently embedded in the fabric of the old shirt.

Lifting his head to press a light kiss by her ear, Cole inhaled the light scent of lavender that for days had been haunting him. With a light kiss to her lips, he tasted the lingering salt from a tear and mentally kicked himself for having made her cry.

"Have you tried contacting your parents lately?"

She found it interesting that he had a way of asking questions she wasn't expecting. "Yes, I did. They didn't answer."

"Can I try?"

She cocked her head as she looked at him. Ginger couldn't imagine what he was up to. "Be my guest. Go for it."

He never took his eyes off Ginger as he spoke. "Mr. and Mrs. Prescott, I acted like a fool today and made Gin cry. For that I hope she will forgive me. I can't promise that it won't happen again, but I swear to both of you that I will never intentionally hurt her. In the measurement of time, Gin and I haven't known each other long. Considering the dreams, I would say we know each other well enough.

"As for the family secrets, let's just say I'd rather live with them than live the rest of my life without Gin. If you will give me your blessings I would like to ask Gin to marry me. I promise I will do my best to make her happy. And I will do everything in my power to protect her, Rosemary and Cinnamon."

The gasp and cry from the doorway was the first indication that they were no longer alone. As they turned their heads towards Rosemary and Cinnamon, a fiery blast of licorice, rum, vanilla and gardenias saturated the static charged air.

Starting at the ceiling the walls came to life as an iridescent shimmering glow filled the room with warmth and light. At the same time, static crackled and danced as gold and silver cupid's arrows shot through the air.

Only Ginger lacked a look of startled amazement when out of the iridescent glow a daisy yellow swirling tornado skipped around the room before settling into the distinct shapes of a tall bald headed man with an arm protectively draped around the shoulders of a striking woman the girls strongly resembled.

In their excitement, Cinnamon and Rosemary almost propelled themselves through their parents as they dashed towards them.

No one spoke for the longest time.

Looking towards Ginger and Cole, everyone heard the deep baritone voice. "I'm Herb." Squeezing the shoulder of the woman beside him he added, "This is Caitlin. As you have guessed we are the parents of these three precocious trouble makers."

"Thank you for appearing. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me." Cole's voice was sober, his expression guarded.

Herb's booming foghorn laugh filled the room. "I like your style. You remind me of me at your age—too damn smart and serious for your own good. Of course Caitlin and the girls changed that in no time at all. If Gin wants you and from the look on her face I'd say she does, you have our blessings. Don't say I didn't warn you; your life will never be the same. This bunch will make sure you remember there is more to life than work."

Tightening his arms around Ginger, who had turned in his arms so she faced her parents, Cole smiled. "I'm looking forward to it, sir."

"Dad, did you and Mom share the same dreams?"

"Now honey, that is a very funny story. I wanted to warn you, but your mother had other ideas."

Caitlin had been fussing around Cinnamon and Rosemary with loving energy as the three of them enjoyed the novelty of the visit. Turning her attention back to the conversation, she said, "Herb, don't you dare! Yes, we shared dreams. End of story."

Herb winked and mouthed, "Later."

"What is happening? I'm not complaining, but why can we suddenly see and hear you?" Cinnamon asked.

"All we know is that it has to do with Gin," Herb answered. "Something is changing, shifting, a modification to the *gift*, we don't know what nor do we know if it will last."

"Why have you made yourselves scarce the last few days, and why didn't you answer when I called you a little while ago?"

"The four of you need to learn your strengths, weaknesses, who to trust, when to rely on each other, when you need to ask for help and when to accept help. If we interfere with that process we are doing you an injustice. I was reminded that I'm too much of a softy when it comes to the three of you, so we are keeping an eye on things but staying out of the way."

Rosemary looked at her mother. "Is Aunt Pesty behind any of this? Because if she is..."

"Rose, do calm down. Pesty has her interesting quirks, but not everything is her fault," Caitlin calmly replied.

Three brows arched in surprise. Once upon a time their mother would never have dismissed their aunt's antics as interesting quirks.

"Okay, I'll agree that not everything that goes haywire around here is her fault, but you have to admit what's going on is strange. You and Dad didn't have problems when you met and you never said anything about Grandma and Grandpa having problems."

Caitlin's deep chuckle vibrated with a sexy undertone. "Honey, the story of our courtship was edited for young ears. Maybe someday we'll tell you the full story, but not now. As for my folks, they never shared

so I don't know if their courtship was smooth or rocky."

Caitlin sashayed towards Cole. She eyed him from head to toe before resting her eyes on his face. "You certainly are handsome. Liked the way you took care of Gin in Seattle. Showed you were a gentleman, above all else. I promise no surprise visits during the honeymoon." Her smile was impish as she winked at him.

With that lingering promise, Caitlin kissed all of them goodbye before fading from view.

Herb kissed each of his daughters. Cole felt a warm comforting pressure on his shoulder before Herb disappeared.

Turning in Cole's arms, Ginger snuggled into his embrace as tears spilled out the corners of her over bright eyes. In silent consent, he opened his arms as two more crying females filled his arms to overflowing capacity.

When the tears had run their course, Rosemary planted a loud mushy kiss on Cole's cheek. "In an hour I'll deny the tears. For now, thanks. Your offer of protection, although unnecessary, means a lot. Now let's celebrate this engagement."

He looked at each of their tear stained faces, knowing the only thing shadowing his happiness was the words of warning his future father-in-law had issued. Obviously danger was still lurking, waiting to pounce if given an opportunity. It would only be a matter of time before the three of them realized the same thing. Instead of waiting for it to strike, he vowed to seek it out. Destroy before being destroyed.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Rosemary looked confused. "What?"

"I got your parents' blessings. You just gave yours." He looked to Cinnamon, who nodded her approval. "There is Cinn's."

To get on bended knee would have meant extracting himself from a tangle of arms. Instead he allowed them to remain an entwined unit as he looked into Gin's eyes. "Gin, Honey, will you please give me the honor of marrying me? Allow me to be a part of your crazy life and that of your sisters. Despite Rose's protests to its necessity, I promise to do everything in my power to protect the three of you. I love you. And I can't wait to make those dreams we've been sharing a reality."

"Yes. Yes. Thank you. I love you, too. And can you wait until the honeymoon?"

Most men would have bolted from the additional onslaught of tears. Cole took it in stride as he soothed, hugged, kissed all three and smiled during the happy chaos that followed.

\* \* \* \*

Succulent, tender steaks had been barbecued and consumed. Champagne toasts had been elegantly given by Pagan, Rosemary and Cinnamon. The original visit from their folks and one made during the celebration to add their voices to the toasts had been talked about until they were now memories to treasure.

Cole and Ginger were finally, blissfully alone.

Drunk in their happiness, sated with rich tasting food, they snuggled on the red checked chaise lounge. With their legs and arms entwined in a comfortable tangle, neither wanted to move or felt inclined to talk.

Dum-Dum's antics brought them slowly back to reality.

With lazy smiles they watched her bat the air several times before racing towards the couch. Lying on her side, she stuck her paw under the couch several times before darting around the back only to return to the spot where she had been a moment before. With ears tilted back, her sharp golden green eyes meticulously searched the room. Satisfied that all was as it should be she stuck her long gray tail straight up, turned and casually walked towards them. Jumping onto the end of the chaise lounge, she proceeded to clean her paws.

"Who was she playing with?"

"A very large white mouse or a rat. Never could tell the difference between the two."

A shiver of foreboding walked up Cole's spine.

## Chapter 29

In a brisk business manner, the feminine voice on the other end of the phone lacked warmth. "Ginger Prescott."

"Yes."

"This is Samantha Jones. I need to make an appointment to work on a personal issue. I want to start today. What time is your earliest opening?"

Cole was spending the morning on business. Without telling them why, he had also been adamant about needing to talk to Hanna's parents as soon as possible.

She had already finished the list of business calls that needed tending. The next project was paying bills and balancing the checkbook. Both being jobs she loathed, she overlooked the woman's rudeness.

"I can see you at eleven."

\* \* \* \*

Five minutes before the hour, a white Lexus pulled into the driveway.

Black stilettos with lethal bone crushing pointed toes hit the ground with force. An expensive black tailored pants suit with a holly green silk blouse revealing just enough cleavage to entice was stylish and flattering to the woman's wafer thin body. A phony smile framed teeth so white they looked like dentures. Finishing off the package was green tinted contacts, enough makeup to last the normal woman a year and a platinum blonde shoulder length bob that wouldn't move under hurricane force wind.

Ginger gritted her teeth as the tips of her fingers were brushed in a wet noodle handshake.

"Hi, I'm Samantha Jones. Thank you so much for allowing me to come on such short notice."

As she glanced around the porch, the woman's gushy voice oozed charm as if squeezing it out of a tube of toothpaste. "What a simply charming Victorian house. I just love yellow houses. They always look so inviting. Oh, look at the wicker furniture, how very quaint and attractive. Have you lived here long?"

The over friendly sweetness was totally out of alignment with the woman's city slick veneer. With the woman's actions causing mega watt warning bells to stimulate her awareness, Ginger shut down her normally friendly open manner.

"A while." Ginger crossed her arms and started tapping a finger on her forearm.

"I stopped at your delightful little store on the way in. Between that and the old-fashioned little park across the street, I bet you and your little family just love living here in these quaint surroundings."

As she walked into the office, her back was to Ginger as she continued pouring on the plastic praise. "Oh my. You should have this room photographed for one of those glossy home magazines. It's just a bit masculine, but I bet that appeases the hubby. Is the rest of the house also full of beautiful antiques and charming homemade pillows?"

The voice registered. Hoping to get a feel for Trent Brooks before their meeting, Ginger had turned on the Channel 12 evening news while getting ready to go to dinner. Samantha had been the anchorwoman that evening. She had only glanced briefly at the TV screen, but she had listened to that phony 'I'm so

sincere' voice during the entire broadcast.

Turning to face Ginger, Samantha tapped her arm with a long, manicured, French tipped nail. "I know this sounds really pushy, but could I please see the rest of the house? I'm sure it's just as charming as this room. I do so adore antiques."

"I'm sorry, that's not possible." Hearing the sharp edge in her voice, Ginger tried to soften the refusal. "Perhaps another time."

Accustomed to having people jump when ordered and accommodate her requests, Samantha let her brittle smile slip a notch. "If you're worried about an unmade bed, really I promise not to notice."

Rather than argue, Ginger made no comment.

Pasting her own phony smile in place, she said, "Please have a seat. I need you to fill out a questionnaire before we begin." Instead of the basic form she normally gave grief-counseling clients, she slipped a full questionnaire onto the clipboard.

As Samantha filled out the form, Ginger gazed out the window. It was obvious from her posture and her clothing that Samantha's gushy girly girl friendliness was out of character. From the overly friendly comments, Ginger had no doubt Samantha thought her purple tie-dyed peasant skirt, simple knit top and bare feet lowered her intelligence by several notches and made her receptive to the gushy praise and a girly chitchat personality. With no time to call in the Calvary or formulate a sound plan, all she could do was hope that some of the ideas that were popping up faster than popcorn over a high heat worked.

Holding out the clipboard, Samantha broke into her thoughts. "Here you go."

As Ginger took hold of the clipboard, Samantha gave a very dramatic sigh as she slumped against the back of the chair without putting so much as a wrinkle in her clothing or musing a single strand of hair.

Biting her tongue to keep from laughing at the theatrics, Ginger crossed her fingers and asked for help with her own acting abilities.

Sitting behind the desk, she presented the Hypnotherapy 101 crash course before glancing over the information form Samantha had filled out. "You're an actress? Why, Sugar, that must be so much fun. Do you know Tom Hanks? I just loved watching him play Forrest Gump."

Samantha caught herself just before she groaned out loud. "Actually the films I've starred in are more artistically inclined. The viewing audience has a more intellectual palate than the average person."

"So you're saying you don't act in movies or commercials. Well that's too bad, Sugar. It would have been fun telling my hubby I met a movie star."

"Well one can always dream. One of these days I'm certain I'll be lucky enough to become a star."

"Sugar, I'm just positive that day is just around the corner."

Figuring everything else was a fabrication of the truth or an outright lie, she scanned down to what had been written as the reason for hypnosis. Hells bells, the woman certainly was gutsy. The threat level went up several degrees. Glancing at the proportions of the black leather purse Samantha had placed on the table between the two recliners, Ginger knew it could easily hold a tape recorder and camcorder.

"You say here you desperately need to talk to a deceased relative. Is this a person from a past life? 'Cause if it is, Sugar, that's a pretty simple process."

Another staged sigh escaped. "Yesterday, a dear sweet friend told me about your extraordinary talent when she realized that my grief had not diminished."

When she didn't elaborate, Ginger was forced to ask, "What is causing the grief?"

Along with another sigh, Samantha lowered her head and daintily dabbed at an eye with a tissue. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just so hard to talk about."

"Yes, I'm sure it is, Sugar. You just take your time." She was betting that Samantha wouldn't chance having tears remove the false eyelashes or smear the caterpillar thick mascara.

"My dear sweet mother recently passed away. With our relationship having been more like best friends, we talked daily. I still find myself picking up the phone to call her. Each time it happens, my heart just breaks when I realize I will never be able to hear her sweet voice again. If I could just have one last conversation with her, I would be at peace with her passing." Even though she delicately dabbed at the corner of both eyes, not one tear had fallen.

"I'm sorry about your mother, Sugar. Who's the friend that gave you my name?"

"Becky Salmon."

"I can't rightly say I remember her, Sugar." With one brow arched, Ginger tapped her finger on her bottom lip and counted to twenty. Samantha didn't bat an eye at the scrutiny. "Is she the woman whose husband was abducted by aliens?"

"No."

Ginger snapped her fingers. "I know, she's the one whose husband died in her arms after, well let's just say, after being intimate?"

"Actually she has a friend who has a friend who told her who told me. You know how it goes."

Cocking her head, Ginger arched a brow. "Actually, no, I don't know how it goes, Sugar. But it doesn't really matter. What makes you so certain I can help?"

"My friend, Becky, told me how you helped this unfortunate lady get in touch with her poor son after he was killed in a car accident. It was all so very tragic. She swears that without you she would have just withered up and died."

"Really? Well that sure is nice, Sugar. Are you sure I was the person who hypnotized her? Her story sure isn't ringing any bells in my little ol' head." Playing dumb was far more difficult than Ginger had anticipated. She kept frantically searching for just the right words.

Samantha's eyes narrowed before she pulled herself together. "Yes. I'm positive. She gave me your name and phone number."

"Well, I'll be danged. I really don't remember. Now I had a person in here a while back who wanted to talk to a cat that was hit by a car. Don't suppose a woman could mistake a son for a cat."

Samantha straightened her back, adjusted the razor-edged crease in her slacks and crossed her feet at the ankles. "She mentioned that after the hypnosis session you talked directly to her and her son. She was thrilled that you could not only see the boy, you acted as the go between so they could communicate. She also told me about the amazingly accurate sketches you drew of the boy. I will pay you anything, absolutely anything you ask if you will do the same thing for me."



If Rosemary were here she would call this the crucial moment of truth. Call or fold. The ace in the hole had been dealt.

"I'll tell you what, Sugar, we'll get you all nice and comfy on the massage table then I'll hypnotize you and we'll see what happens. As for my seeing ghosts, why the last time I remember seeing one of them I'd had a little too much of a friend's homemade brew, if you know what I mean. A few clients have claimed to see ghosts and one client says she talks to a pink elephant every Wednesday morning. But Lord have mercy, I don't remember what you're talking about."

Shrugging both shoulders, she almost laughed at the look of irritation that fleetingly crossed Samantha's face.

"Still if you say I talked to a ghost, well who knows, maybe I need to try again. After all, Sugar, stranger things have happened. Why the stories I could tell you would curl your hair. As for paying me, well, let's just see what happens."

As she set up the massage table in front of the desk, she kept an eye on one of the two spirits that had entered the room since Samantha arrived. The mouse or rat had been sitting under the office table. Now it scurried across the floor, climbed up Samantha's leg and settled on her lap. That confirmed it; it had to be a rat. After all they were two of a kind.

Insisting Samantha take off her jacket and shoes before she settled on the massage table, Ginger watched her bunch the pillow under her neck so her hair wouldn't get mussed.

Taking great pleasure in the act, Ginger covered her with an afghan that would leave a liberal amount of white lint on the black slacks.

Sitting in the recliner Samantha had vacated, Ginger started the session. "As you breathe..." Samantha was hypnotized in less than two minutes. In four, Ginger was satisfied that she was in a very deep trance and her subconscious was occupied.

Removing the black silk scarf covering the open style top on the purse Samantha had carried in, she whispered, "Bingo!" The camera was securely nestled within a foam rubber cradle. Rewinding the film to just after she had covered Samantha with the afghan, she carefully placed the camera back in its holder. Removing the tape recorder she repeated the process.

Retrieving her tape recorder from a drawer in the file cabinet, she put a new tape in the recorder before placing the recorder on the table with the mike close to Samantha's head.

"Samantha is your mother alive?"

"No."

"How old were you the last time you talked to her?"

"Seventeen."

"Is that when she passed over?"

"No. Died five years ago. The stupid bitch had her lawyer call me. Told me I'd inherit my share only if I went to the funeral. As if I needed or wanted her fake pearls! I hung up on him."

The dark shadow that had been hovering behind the desk vanished.

"Samantha, can you travel back in time to the beginning of what brought you here and tell me what you see, sense or feel?"

"Don't call me Samantha. Hate that name."

Interesting!

"What would you like to be called?"

"Christy. My name is Christy. Picked it out myself the day I left home."

"Christy, can you tell me what you see, sense or feel?"

"Bright room. Lots of light. People watching me."

Samantha had taken the words, to the beginning, literally. Deciding to see if it was important to what was currently happening, she asked, "Would you like to move on or stay here?"

"Stay. He's going to make me a movie star. He says I'm a natural."

"That's nice. Can you tell me who is telling you this?"

"Alder."

"Are you making a movie?"

She giggled. "I'm making the producer. Got a camera hidden in my purse. Won't he be surprised?"

"Christy, how old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Do you ever make a movie?"

"Sure. Told you, I'm star material. Sandy Meets Big Boy, Kitten Tames Tiger Man, Daddy Kn..."

*Prone, artistically intellectual!*

"Christy, please move forward to the time when you stop making movies. How old are you?"

Samantha giggled. "Still make them."

*Oops, reword.*

"Please move forward to the time when you stopped getting paid to make movies. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

In a sick way, it might prove entertaining. But other than proving a pattern of greed and self-motivating actions she didn't think it was imperative to the current situation.

Knowing clients would automatically correct or have no response to a wrong question, she added two years to the age written on the information form. "Christy, move forward in time to age twenty eight. Tell me what you see sense or feel."

"Have an interview with Channel 12 news."

"Do you get the job?"

"Of course. Found out a little about the guy doing the interview before hand. I'm not stupid. Know how to get a job I really want."

"Christy, please move forward to age twenty nine. Can you tell me what you see, sense or feel?"

"Just got promoted to anchor of the noon news. Really pissed off a few people since I have only been there a year."

"What is the name of the person that works the news hour with you?"

"Brad Summers."

"Are you happy with the job?"

"Won't be happy until I have the evening slot."

"Christy, please move forward to age thirty. Can you tell me what you see, sense or feel?"

"Everyone is wishing me Happy Birthday."

"Can you tell me what happens next?"

Samantha's chuckle had a deep husky quality. "Having sex in guest bathroom."

*Oh goody. Just what I don't need to hear about!* "Christy, moving forward, what is the next thing that happens?"

"He is giving me a diamond bracelet. Men are so predictable. Stupid fool doesn't remember he bought me a diamond bracelet last year. I'll check the stones later; if they are as good as they look I'll take it to my pawn broker."

An indefinable gut feeling prompted the next question. "After the birthday gift do you have time to talk about anything?"

"Tells me he has a big story about a medium. Wants me to get details any way I can. Open expense account. Promises me my own show after story breaks."

"Who is telling you this?"

"Brooks."

*Halleluiah.*

"Brooks who?"

"Not Brooks who, Trent Brooks."

*Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

"Can you tell me how he plans to reveal the story?"

"Prime time evening news using the tape I get today."

"Can you tell me what makes this story different then any other story about mediums?"

"Woman has full fledged conversations with ghosts. Not just images that can be inaccurately translated."

"Can you tell me what difference that would make?"

"Brooks thinks she can be persuaded to get information about future. Worth billions if true! He could control everything."

*Damn!*

"Does he plan on abducting her?"

"If the story turns out to be true, yes."

"When?"

"Not sure. Would all depend on what happens."

"Can you tell me how she would be abducted?"

"We talked about making it look like she dies in a car accident. Burn a body beyond recognition."

*Double damn!*

"Do you trust Brooks not to double cross you?"

There was a long pause. "No."

Sensing that admitting that truth had stirred her conscious, Ginger went back to the relaxation technique as she watched the rat sniff around the massage table legs before disappearing.

"Christy, just relax. Totally relax. Going deeper, deeper, down, totally relaxed ... You don't trust Brooks. Can you tell me your backup plan?"

"Wife has big money, lots of connections. Brooks can't afford to lose her. It would cost him position and life style. Have several interesting tapes to give to her if he reneges on promise."

"Can you tell me if you have a backup plan if the station refuses to broadcast the story?"

"Brooks thinks he fixed it. Alder owns a small production studio. Doesn't know we, umm, screw. Alder has crew ready. When I leave here will meet crew. They will make copies of the tape before I give original to Brooks. If Brooks screws me over I can go live with Alder anytime."

"Can you tell me what happens if you don't get a story today?"

"Alder, checking out a doctor's other patients, doing research. Some greedy fool will want to claim fifteen minutes of fame. If not, there are ways to persuade the doctor to see things our way."

"Can you tell me what made you come here today?"

"Alder traced doctor's flight to Seattle. Did some research. Found out uncle lives here. Did address directory search on everyone in community. Found name of hypnotist. She fit the profile."

"Can you tell me if her name came up on the flight to Seattle?"

"Don't know."

She couldn't think of anything else to ask. "Christy, when asked about your hypnosis session you will tell everyone you could not be hypnotized. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Christy, what happened during your hypnosis session?"

"Nothing. Too smart to be hypnotized! It's a fool's folly."

She smiled. Wait till Cole hears that. Glancing at the Kit-Cat Klock, she was pleased to see that only twenty minutes had passed since Samantha had been hypnotized.

"Christy, until July fourth of this year, every time someone says action or you see the blinking light on any camera showing that the camera is running you will start singing, 'I'm a little teapot short and stout, tip me over and pour me out.' Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Action."

In a childish voice she sang, "I'm a little tea pot short and stout. Tip me over and pour me out. Can I dance, too?"

*Oh, by all means dance.*

"Yes, of course you can dance along with singing the song."

Christy smiled the first and undoubtedly only genuine smile of her adult life.

"Every time someone says, cut, or the camera's light goes off you will stop singing and dancing. You will not remember singing or dancing. You will think the camera had just started rolling. You will have a temper tantrum as you demand to know why you were stopped. This will happen every time you hear the word cut until July fourth of this year. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

*Perfect.* It really was perfect and she wasn't going to waste more time testing the dance or temper tantrum.

"Christy you are now floating on a big fat white cloud. Until you hear my voice you will not move."

Leaving her tape recorder running, she hastily hid it under the pillows on the window seat.

"Christy, you will forget everything that has been said since you laid down on the massage table. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Samantha, since you laid down on the massage table has anything happened?"

"No. Just lying here. Have pretty lights swirling around my head."

*Good!*

"From this point forward you will go no deeper than a light trance as I talk to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Light trance. No more swirling lights."

After lifting her up to a light daydream state of hypnosis, Ginger quickly turned the camcorder and tape recorder back on and placed the scarf back over them.

Keeping an eye on the clock, she went through the process of repeating the relaxation technique for several minutes before bringing Samantha fully awake.

Sitting with her legs crossed at the ankles, Samantha was not smiling as she picked small bits of white lint off the black slacks. "Really, there's no need to apologize. It really is disappointing. However, you must understand I was truly afraid it was too much to hope for. Strong minded, intelligent people are clearly not susceptible to such primitive mind altering practices."

*Oh, if you only knew.*

"Well, I really do apologize, Sugar. Really, I just don't understand. This has never happened before."

Samantha gave an over emphasized shrug. "It's fine. Now about the pictures you draw and the ghosts that visit and talk to you. It would make the disappointment of not being able to actually see my dear, sweet mother so much less if you could call her into the room."

"You know, Sugar, I'm truly willing to try, but like I said earlier I really can't remember talking to any ghosts. Talk to my cat, Dum-Dum, though. Don't mind her name none. She's really pretty smart. Want me to bring her in the room? She's just about stopped shedding."

A disgusted sigh escaped Samantha's painted lips before she caught herself. "No. I really don't think you need to do that."

"Okay. Whatever, Sugar. Well, let's just see if I can get the ghost of your dearly departed mother to come visit with us for a spell."

Going to the bookcase, she gathered a vanilla scented candle and a small table chime. Placing them on the desk directly behind the massage table, she lit the candle before using a small wooden mallet to tap the chime. Allowing the chime to fully fade before tapping the chime again, she repeated the process two more times.

Gracefully settling onto the massage table, she modestly covered her legs with her flowing skirt as she positioned herself in the lotus position for yoga. Closing her eyes, Ginger started a repetitive deep hum. When she got tired of humming, she stood up, walked to the bookcase and randomly grabbed a book off a shelf. Saying a quick prayer for inspiration, she walked back to stand in front of the massage table. Glancing at the book, she almost swallowed her tongue to keep from laughing out loud at the universe's subtle humor. The book's title was: *Witch Crafting*. Opening the book, she pretended to read.

Oh, Goddess of good

And all that is righteous

We call upon your spirit

Your kindness and brightness

Do as you may

Do as you might

Send us the mother ghost

Let her talk to us when rightful.

Mentally crossing her fingers for luck, Ginger repeated the poorly versed rhyme three times without flubbing the words. Still standing, she closed her eyes and began humming. After what seemed like an eternity, she dramatically gazed around the room. Shrugging her shoulders as if to say, sorry no luck, she once again started humming.

Samantha was sitting on the edge of the chair mesmerized. As much as Ginger would have loved to witness the reaction if she did conjured up a ghost or two, she knew the resulting publicity would be disastrous.

Still standing in front of the massage table, she started swaying from one foot to the other. Looking around the room she called out, "Here Ghosty, Ghosty. Come here Ghosty, Ghosty. Come out, come out wherever you are."

Hoping she had taken enough time to make it look like her actions were serious, she stopped swaying and looked at Samantha. "Sorry, Sugar, I don't see nothing but a few dust bunnies in the corners. Do you want me to draw a picture? I'm real good at doing that. 'Course the ghosts are just my imagination, but if ya have a picture of your sweet momma, I would be happy to draw her looking like a ghost."

It was too bad the camera wasn't aimed at Samantha. It would not have liked the pinched anger around the collagen enhanced lips or the murderous expression darting from her eyes. Nonetheless, Ginger gave her credit for holding onto her temper.

"No, don't bother. You have wasted ... I have taken up enough of your time. How much do I owe you?"

"Well Sugar, I wasn't able to get your dear sweet momma to visit so I don't see how I could possible charge you anything. Besides you never were hypnotized and that's what people pay me for."

## Chapter 30

"Rose, I'm calling an emergency family meeting. Do you want to pick up Cinn? Try not to break the sound barrier on your way over." Before she could say bye, the phone went dead.

Hitting speed dial, she didn't give Cinnamon time to say hello. "Family meeting, Rose will be sitting on the cars horn if you're not at the curb in less than five minutes. I'll explain everything when you get here. Try to keep her from getting a speeding ticket. Bye."

Walking across the street, she let herself into Martin's house without knocking. Following the noise, she found Cole using a smoothie blender to mix something that was an interesting shade of bluish purple. Dum-Dum was crouched at his feet lapping up what was left in a tub of plain yogurt.

Without saying a word, he scooped up a spoonful of the colorful mixture and aimed for her mouth. As the fruity flavor enticed the taste buds, she thought, *not bad*. Before she could comment, he bent down and half kissed, half licked some of the concoction off her lips. *Yeah, not bad at all!*

"Which one do I get for lunch? Kisses or that, whatever it is?"

"That is blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, yogurt, strawberries and ground flax seed mixed with a healthy dose of vanilla ice cream."

He pulled her towards him, until she was snuggled between his legs with her body comfortably pressed against his. Light teasing kisses covered her face as he zeroed in on her mouth. Reaching the designated target, the mixture of fruits, the smoothness of the yogurt and ice cream mixed with Gin's own sweet nectar had him hungering for more. "How about we share? I'll share my drink if you'll share a few more kisses."

Giving him a quick peck, she murmured, "Tempting, very, very tempting, but I cannot be enticed or bribed. I came to ask your presence at a family meeting that will be called to order in about ten minutes."

His lightheartedness dissolved. "Care to share some of what's on the agenda, now?"

"Trent Brooks." As she felt his body stiffen, Ginger regretted telling him even that much. Giving him a peck on the chin, she smiled. "Relax. Everything's fine." At least she hoped it would be! When he didn't respond, she pulled out of the embrace and tried her own brand of bribery.

"How about we take all the fixings for this masterpiece over to the house? Cinn will love it. She will also argue the merits of the ice cream. Rosemary will drink it and ask for more unless you mention the flax seed. If she knows that, she'll refuse to drink one drop."

He gave in because it was easier than wasting time arguing.

As they crossed the street with a sack full of ingredients, the red Thunderbird was pulling into the driveway. Knowing everyone wanted answers, Ginger started the story as they walked into the house.

Cole was furious. "Why didn't you call me?"

"There wasn't time."

"Gin, for Christ's sake, I was right across the street."

She held her ground and her temper, barely. "The phone was in the kitchen. I had a woman hypnotized



on the massage table in the office. Hypnosis is not a disciplined science. There are always variables that cannot be controlled. I couldn't risk leaving her alone."

Seeing the blaze of tension ready to erupt into full-blown anger, Cinnamon interrupted. "Cole what would you have done? You couldn't very well confront her. She would have lied. Besides, if you had rushed over she would have known Gin was the person they were looking for. Let Gin tell us the rest."

He raked fingers through his hair as he pulled his temper in. "I'm, sorry. Its just ... dammit, this pisses me off."

By the time enough smoothies were mixed for generous helpings, Dum-Dum had snagged another helping of yogurt and a spoonful of vanilla ice cream. Ginger had set the tape recorder on the kitchen table and told them everything that had happened prior to starting the tape, twice.

The first time they listened to the tape, there were enough snickering comments made that the tape had to be played a second time to make sure they heard everything.

"Gin, that was totally against the rules of ethical conduct for a hypnotherapist. It was also brilliant. I love it. You did us proud." Cinnamon patted her on the head as she went to see if she could scrape one or two more drops of smoothie into her empty glass.

Walking into the living room, Rosemary came back to the table carrying the *TV Guide*. "Guess what? We're in luck. All those channels you pay for and never watch are finally going to pay off. All we need to do is pop some popcorn and watch the show at nine."

Cinnamon sat back down empty handed. "The woman has certainly led an interesting life."

"Cinn, *we* lead interesting lives," Rosemary retorted. "She is just a repulsive parasite living off the blood of anyone she can suck dry as she manipulates her way through life."

"How very poetic and appropriate. Which reminds me, I can understand the candle, the chime, even the yoga mantra. But, 'Oh, Goddess of love let her talk to us when rightful.' Where on earth did you come up with that?" Cinnamon asked.

"Haven't a clue, it was pure universal inspiration."

"Personally," said Rosemary, "I would willingly pay to see that tape. I can just see your chanting, 'come here Ghosty, Ghosty. Come out, come out, wherever you are.' For me, that tape would be priceless."

"Well, if it ever becomes public, I'm claiming it was one of you two on the tape."

Cole joined in the general laughter before settling down to business.

"I apologize for doubting your ability to handle the situation. Obviously you have some hidden talents that I will carefully try not to trigger in the future. How long do you think the camcorder was off?"

"Twenty minutes. Give or take, Sugar."

The 'Sugar' made him smile, but it didn't lessen his serious demeanor.

"The video is going to show that time difference. We can only hope she didn't pay close attention to the time when she left. Unless she had an exact meeting time scheduled with the film crew there shouldn't be any reason for someone to ask what time she left here."

"When she starts singing tonight..." Rosemary burst out laughing. "Jeez, Gin, I am really impressed. I

didn't know you were that creative. It was inspirational, but when she starts singing they are going to know she was hypnotized. You realize they aren't going to be too happy about being duped."

Ginger looked at Cinnamon. "You want to explain or shall I."

"Every so often when I do a show, a person in the audience unknowingly becomes hypnotized. When it happens, the individual will pick up on something said by someone else after the show and start acting the scenario out. That is when I get a frantic call. I make arrangements for the person to meet me at a local restaurant. With a snap of my fingers and a couple of words, the trance is broken. Who's to say she didn't leave here just relaxed and open enough to suggestion to pick up on something she hears on the radio. It's a perfectly honest explanation and cover."

Looking from one to the other, Cole shook his head in amazement. "You two are scary."

Ginger batted her eyelashes at him. "Why, thank you, kind sir. We do try to please."

"I will probably regret thinking this at some later point in time, but exactly when is Aunt Pesty due home?" Rosemary asked.

Ginger nodded her agreement at the sentiment. "Three days. I think. You remember how vague and odd she was acting before leaving. One time she would say Tuesday, the next, Wednesday. Do you really think we should risk setting her loose on them?"

Rosemary lifted a brow. "Gin, think about this. I'm getting a ninety two percent hit that she is the force behind this happening."

"No, I don't believe that. I absolutely do not think she can do anything to alter the dreams. That was Grandmamma's creation. No one could tamper with them unless they could go back in time to discover the exact wording to the spell."

"Gin, think. I agree she can't alter the basic course the universe had already set in motion. But the odds are in favor of her having figured out how to successfully create a spell that would push events forward so they happened sooner rather than later. Think about it. If the timing was wrong, even by as little as an hour, she could have inadvertently unleashed the furor of everything that is happening."

Wearing identical looks of horror, Cinnamon verbalized what Ginger was thinking. "You know, as much as it pains me to admit it, Rose might be right."

"When it comes to your aunt, you have talked around me, through me, and above me, ever since we met. Obviously, the woman can cast spells, magic charms, hexes or whatever else you want to call them. Now would someone please tell me about Aunt Pesty?"

Ginger started the story. "Aunt Pesty is our mother's sister. Where Mom has the ability to hear people's thoughts, Aunt Pesty was given the ability to cast spells. During the first few years that they were learning how to use and control their skills, they caused some very minor havoc. When Mom got mad at someone, she would have her sister cast a spell to punish the unsuspecting recipient."

"Didn't their mother stop them?" Cole was horrified at the idea of power being used that way.

"No. From what we were told, she probably never knew it was happening."

"Surely she heard about strange events that had her suspecting something?"

"Our grandmother was given the *gift of healing*. She became obsessed with using the ability for good.

After finishing medical school, she became an overworked general practitioner in a rural community with only one other doctor. Sadly, for everyone involved, between a demanding practice and a closeness she shared with our grandfather that bordered on obsessive, she didn't have any time for Mom or Aunt Pesty."

"What about their father?"

"He was a self-employed architect and artist, who ran his business around his daughters' schedules. Aunt Pesty once said he was so proud of them that she doubted he ever considered that they would use their powers for anything but good."

Rosemary injected, "And from the stories we have been told, none of the spells cast were harmful."

Considering what little he had heard about the aunt, Cole folded his arms across his chest and looked at the three of them with total skepticism.

"Really, it was minor little things—a zit on the nose, an embarrassing gaffe in front of a boy or girl you really liked, a spell that made a person speak their true thoughts for an hour or a day, or maybe a snake in a lunch sack," Ginger said, lifting a brow.

"That was low. I did that out of pure unadulterated love, not revenge. But I get the point."

Ginger continued. "Because their mother was so obsessed with her *gift*, Aunt Pesty went the opposite route. Spells can be broken down into categories. Love potions, healing, finding lost objects, turning one object into a different object—are just a few, but that gives you the general idea. The main component of a spell stays the same within each category no matter what you are trying to create. But within each spell, there are key words that have to be changed to make the spell work the way you want it to work. Aunt Pesty was very lax when it came to memorizing the key words. When we were about five, a spell to create three apples for us to eat created an apple tree in the middle of Bloomingdale's. A spell to create coral colored shoes to match a prom dress produced a coral reef in my bedroom."

"Remember the year Dad ran out of whiskey during a New Year's Eve party?" Rose asked. "In stepped Aunt Pesty to the rescue. Everyone had whiskers until she was able to reverse the spell along with a short term memory loss spell to ensure they forgot it had happened."

"About two years ago, she decided she was tired of her short hair. Casting a spell that was supposed to have her hair growing a modest half-inch a week her hair grew a half-inch every hour. It took her days to remember what she had said so she could cast a correction spell," Ginger added.

"She always told the best bedtime stories. Using a spell, the storybook characters would come alive at the foot of the bed. We would then be entertained with a six inch high stage production of the story," Cinnamon said.

Seeing their gleeful smiles, Cole knew they weren't going to finish the story unless he asked. "Okay, I'll bite, how did that go wrong?"

"Dad was not too keen on Aunt Pesty's magic charms, so the stage productions were a highly guarded secret between the four of us. One night, Dad unexpectedly walked into the room just as Aunt Pesty cast the spell. Somehow he became one of the dwarfs in Snow White."

His eyes narrowed. "Which dwarf?"

"Dopey, the bald one."

He didn't like the feeling he was getting on how this little story was going to end.

"Aunt Pesty became flustered. When she frantically tried reversing the spell, her thoughts became so incoherent Mom couldn't even use her abilities to sort out what had been said during the original spell and the subsequent reversal spells."

"Are you telling me your dad's baldness is courtesy of your aunt casting a bad spell?"

"Afraid so. It is the only spell she was never able to reverse. Needless to say, our bedtime stories were never the same," Cinnamon said.

"Frankly, I am surprised your father allowed her in the house, much less allowed her to tell another bedtime story."

"Dad stormed around the house for a few weeks, but Mom's a pretty savvy lady. It wasn't too long before she had him thinking it wasn't such a bad thing to be bald. Still every time Aunt Pesty and spells are mentioned in the same sentence, Dad will rub his bald head and Mom will wink at him," Ginger said.

"Okay, I get the picture; a nice, eccentric old aunt who somehow bumbles her way through life. If she is that bad, how could she plan something like this?"

The three of them laughed until tears were running down their cheeks.

Cinnamon, the first to get her laughter under control, grabbed a box of tissue off the bar top. "Sorry, nothing is further from the truth. Aunt Pesty is only fifty-two, so forget the old. As for bumbles her way through life, she has a Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering. Until she gave up her career to take care of us, she worked at the Kennedy Space Center.

"When we left for college she started a hand cream and body lotion company. Maybe you have heard of Magic Potions Soothing Lotions."

"My mom has a bottle of the hand cream by the sink in the kitchen. Didn't the company go public a few years ago?"

"Yes, six years ago. Right after Martin moved in, she was made a very handsome offer for the company. Within a month, she sold the business and took up quilting, bridge and golf. We have never seen her happier. As for eccentric, soften that to unconventional," Cinnamon said.

Now it was their turn to watch Cole laugh. Although his laughter seemed to be directed at an inside joke that was on him rather than anything they had said.

"Aunt Pesty, would her given name happen to be Ginger?"

"Yes." He heard in triplicate.

"Do you happen to know where she is right now?"

They looked at each other. When all three looked back at him, they were shaking their heads no.

"Around the first of April she started acting strange. One minute she would be nervous, the next flushed and excited. Every time we asked if something was wrong she would babble out some nonsense about the side affects of menopause. Out of the blue, she booked herself into a two-week meditative retreat claiming it would help her hot flashes. We never could pin her down on where the retreat was," Ginger said.

"Did Martin leave before or after Pesty?"

"He drove her to the airport, so it had to be after," Ginger replied.

"Did he drive her to the airport or did they take a shuttle service?"

"I don't know. I had an appointment away from the house that morning, so I wasn't here when they left. But come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him after Aunt Pesty left. Why?"

He weighed his options. If he told the whole story on how he landed up on Ginger's doorstep, he was liable to have three very pissed off ladies. Yet, he didn't doubt for a minute that the truth would eventually be revealed.

"Before I begin, you have to promise to hear all I have to say before you jump to conclusions or get angry. If all three of you don't agree to that, I will keep my suspicions to myself."

Cinnamon and Ginger looked annoyed.

Rosemary pounced. "Are you blackmailing us?"

"If that is what it takes to preserve my hide until this complicated mess is fully unraveled then, yes, I guess I'm blackmailing you."

"You have a deal, but so help me you had better talk fast."

He went over what had happened from the minute he landed in New York to the moment he came face to face with the rattlesnake.

"That same day I talked to Martin. He gave high praise to and I quote his words, the young, beautiful, smart, talented, woman named Ginger, who lived across the street from him. He not only said when he got back from his trip they would be visiting the ranch, Martin also said he had proposed, but Ginger hadn't given him an answer."

"Hells bells, I knew they were spending time together, but I never saw it coming," Ginger said.

"Why those sneaky little rats," Rosemary murmured.

"I think it's sweet, but why keep it a secret?" was Cinnamon's more sentimental response.

Ginger started to reply, "I wonder..."

Rosemary cut her off. "There is more to this story so spit it out, cowboy."

"Did you ever think about becoming a prosecuting attorney?" He chuckled at her glare.

"Uncle Martin inherited fifty percent of the ranch. Since he never worked the ranch except on layovers between photo shoots, he refused all claims to the profits. After college, Cody started slowly buying Martin out. Martin still owns twenty percent."

He paused to select his words carefully. "If Martin were to marry a young woman, who was interested in his portfolio rather than him, the ranch would be a valuable asset in a divorce or a death when it came to a settlement."

Rosemary smiled demurely. She knew her sisters were getting the gist of where this was going, but she wasn't about to let him off the hook. "You're doing just fine, cowboy. Now tell us the rest."

"Cody had a run in once with a woman who saw the ranch as a way to make herself wealthy. I know that's no excuse, but he was convinced Uncle Martin was making the same mistake. For some reason that I still haven't figured out, my father decided to agree with Cody's idea that someone needed to check out the situation. I was elected as the someone."

Cinnamon interrupted. "Let's try to untangle this much of the story first. Let's presume that Aunt Pesty created a spell that would be unleashed April first. The date would certainly appeal to her sense of humor."

"The first phase has your calm, orderly existence being totally disrupted. She meant for that to happen to get you thinking about something other than work, then as usually happens with her spells, things got a little out of hand."

She would never purposely harm anyone, so I have to believe the rattlesnake was just a chance encounter."

"Martin knows your brother's history. I would also bet your mother has let her thoughts on wanting to see both her boys happily married known."

Cole's solemn nod gave a stamp of approval on that thought.

"Let's assume your father's actions are part of the spell, since they are out of character. Okay, go on with the story."

"I was offered the use of the house and told to pick up the key from Ginger. Not having the full story lead us to believe that she was not going with him. I arrived the day he left and instead of getting a key from Ginger, used the key he had given my folks in case of an emergency. I had the first dream the night I arrived."

He looked straight at Ginger as he continued. "The morning after I arrived, I went for a walk. About half way around the golf course, I had the pleasure of watching this sexy lady jog past me. Imagine my surprise when I saw the same sexy lady standing outside a door with a plaque that read: Ginger Prescott, Hypnotherapist and Life Counselor."

"Don't get me wrong, Martin is great, but somehow I just couldn't see my uncle and the hot chick together. I decided right then and there to get to the bottom of what was going on. I watched the front of the house for two days. Then Cody called in a panic. Mom was humming that wedding march music and had commented on eloping being romantic."

"Obviously, I was not meant to be a detective. Since Ginger was here, I wasn't the least bit concerned. Anyway, I decided to come over, introduce myself and see what happened next. When you mistook me for someone else, I played along without ever thinking about where the game would lead. You now know the rest of the story."

He felt a flood of relief when Ginger didn't storm out of the room.

"I wondered how you knew what cars we drove. That has been bugging me for days. What's funny is the only person that calls Aunt Pesty, Ginger, is Martin. Even if you had asked questions around the neighborhood everyone would have thought you were talking about me."

"Rosemary, are Aunt Pesty and Martin together on a cruise liner right now?" Cinnamon asked.

"I got a 99.9 percent possibility. I'd certainly bet on it with those odds."

"Well that obviously makes Martin part of this scheme. There are a few years difference in their age, but it sounds to me like he was deliberately using Cody's experience to their advantage when he emphasized the 'young' Ginger," Cinnamon said.

"It also means that Mom and Dad know what's going on. Do you think they approve? Can't do anything about it? Or is it possible they are part of it?" Ginger asked.

"The folks know what is happening. Mom was an active accomplice, but Dad definitely wasn't at the beginning. Dad can't stop what has been put into motion so he is watching over everything," Rosemary answered.

Rosemary stood and went into the kitchen. "I'm starving. What's in the house to eat?"

Cinnamon joined Rosemary as Cole walked outside with Ginger close behind him.

Sitting in a chair overlooking the pond, he was pleasantly surprised when she sat in his lap. He studied her face. "You aren't mad at me?"

"For what? Spying on me? Thinking I was a gold-digging hussy? Caring enough for your uncle to try to protect him and your parents' ranch? Calling me a sexy nymph? Not telling me that I was mistaking you for someone else when you came to the office? Driving me crazy with your kisses or both of us being manipulated by my aunt and your uncle?"

"Good recall, but you forgot the dreams."

"No, I haven't, the dreams are fate. No one can manipulate them. I believe Cinnamon is right about Aunt Pesty being behind a lot of this, but no matter what else she has done I refuse to believe she can control the dreams."

"Still, you aren't mad."

She kissed him. If they had been alone the kiss would have led to a whole lot more. As it was, they were both breathless when it ended.

"How can I be mad if that is the result of Aunt Pesty giving fate a push forward? I love you. Nothing is going to change that. Lord knows, I haven't always agreed with her. This time however, I am willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, at least until she comes home and we can confront her."

During a meal of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Cinnamon brought up the dreams. "In the first few dreams, the beginning always started with Ginger being stalked. If we assume it was you watching her, that would explain why the dreams started shifting after you two met. From there, the dreams had the fear lingering in the background as the two of you got acquainted and recognized each other in the dreams as well as in the present. Correct?"

"That sounds about right," Ginger said.

Cole nodded in agreement.

"That brings us to the present. Thanks to some quick thinking on Gin's part we have firsthand knowledge of what Brooks is planning. Now all we need to do is figure out how to stop him and his partners."

"Rose, what are the odds that if Aunt Pesty had not interfered, this situation would have happened?" Ginger asked.

The answer was instantaneous. "None, which means her interference changed the timetable of something that has to do with the Brooks."

"What are the odds of finding out what that something was?" Cole asked.

"Fifty, fifty at this point. Whatever changed has put the entire family in danger of being exposed."

"Who knows, with this happening maybe we will get lucky and Aunt Pesty will stop meddling with the future," Cinnamon said.

"Cinn, get realistic. That's a fool's bet. She will never stop meddling."

"If push comes to shove we might have to get her to try a memory loss spell. Rose, would that work?" Ginger asked.

"Ninety percent. Too many people involved and she would need the names of all the players. That will never happen. Still as a last ditch option it might help narrow the field of trouble makers."

The soft playing of "Talk To Me" interrupted them.



## Chapter 31

The name on the caller ID had Cole holding up his hand for silence.

"Hi, Robinson ... I left a message for you at your office earlier today. Haven't heard from you in awhile. How are Betty Jo and Robert? Glad to hear it."

Cole made grunting noises as he listened, nodded his head and looked angrier by the minute.

"Yeah, people are crazy. You know, this cell phone is dying. Why don't I call you back later? Gotcha."

Without a word, he walked to the wall phone and punched in the number on the cell phone's caller ID. When the phone began to ring, he hit the intercom button.

"Robinson, I have you on a speaker. There are three people in the room involved in what is going on. Would you please start from the beginning?" Cole asked.

"About an hour ago, I received a call from Trent Brooks, Los Angeles, California. Claimed to be a big shot newsman before offering a million dollars if I could find out the name of a female medium associated with a Doctor Cole Young. When pressed on why the information was so valuable, he told me that information was on a need to know basis and I didn't need to know.

"Checking my office voice mail I got your message. Checked some sources and found out Brooks has an over-inflated ego. Found out a few others things too. Don't want to call attention to any unexpected trip, so I've put out word that Betty Jo and I are making a visit to our son in Omaha. We make the trip several times a year, so if we just happen to stop along the way in Kansas no one will be the wiser? Have a problem with that?"

"No problem at all. No need to get a room. There's plenty of space at my uncle's house. Before you hang up, I'd appreciate it if you'd introduce yourself, we seemed to have overlooked that and I have three ladies looking at me like I have gone plum loco."

"Agent Terry Robinson, ladies. Nice to make your acquaintances. I look forward to meeting you tomorrow."

With that the phone went dead.

Dryly, Rosemary muttered, "You have real interesting friends Cole. FBI? Suppose they want to dig a little deeper than the surface?"

"Trust, Rose. I might not have been able to save Hanna's life, but their son had the same hereditary heart condition. By the time Robert needed surgery I had developed a tool that was able to help with the tricky procedure. Two years ago I preformed the surgery."

\* \* \* \*

By show time, they were giddy with anticipation.

Samantha sat in a chair scanning notes as the camera slowly zoomed in for a headshot. When she looked at the camera her face lost its controlled expression of professional indifference. She stood up and before an audience of millions she sang and danced her way through, "I'm a little teapot short and stout, tip me over and pour me out," before the cameraman cut to a commercial.

"Oh my, that was better than I had dared to hope," Ginger said in awe.

"Did you see the skirt ride up her ass when she tipped over? It was priceless," Rosemary said.

"Shhhhh, They're back on the air," Cinnamon said.

Flushed with anger, Samantha flashed a defiant smile towards the camera. She was through the first verse before the station went black. Thirty seconds later, the cameraman cut to another commercial as soon as she started to stand.

When the news resumed, the co-anchorman failed miserably as he tried to create some form of professionalism until the next commercial break.

Ginger answered the ringing phone. "Hello. Yes, this is Ginger Prescott." She pressed the intercom button at the same time Cole started the tape recorder.

"Samantha Jones, why what a pleasant surprise. How ya doing, Sugar?"

The faceless voice vibrated with anger. "A few minutes ago, I started singing and dancing on the air. Would you know anything about that?"

"Why, Sugar, that's just great. You got yourself a new job. You said you were a great actress, guess Hollywood finally figured that out."

"I was not acting. This happened during my nightly news broadcast. What did you do to me when I was hypnotized?"

"Whatda'ya mean, Sugar? You said on the questionnaire that you were an actress. Why, Sugar, I do believe your exact words were, I star in artistically intellectual roles. Was a news program what you meant when you used those fancy words? 'Cause if so, Sugar, that's really great. Guess I met an actress today after all."

"Don't pull that dumb hick shit with me. Tell me what you did, or I'll make your life a living hell."

"Why I declare! There's no sense in getting nasty, Sugar. Besides, you know you weren't hypnotized. Why, I felt so bad about that I didn't even charge you for my time."

The phone was slammed down.

"Why, Sugar, I do believe you pissed her off," drawled Rosemary.

## Chapter 32

Three adults and two spirits stood on her doorstep.

An attractive, tiny woman with soft golden brown eyes and light brown hair worn in a casual chin length bob held the hand of a man built like a solid block of well defined muscles. His short hair was ebony black, skin dusty brown, eyes rich dark chocolate. A firm set mouth and unsmiling eyes said, "Mess with me, you'll be sorry."

The third adult, male, would never be called conventionally handsome. Instead, his features compelled you to take a second and then a third look. His rich auburn hair needed a good trim; his eyes were either steel gray or a gray blue. Ginger watched them change color twice in a matter of seconds. His features were sharp angles, stubborn square chin, cheekbones a woman would kill for, straight nose, and a mouth that was worth watching for the smiles that wouldn't come often. She didn't doubt he could match Cole in sheer strength, but his six-foot frame was leaner, more compact, finely tuned for combat rather than hard labor.

As the men appraised Ginger, the woman spoke. "Hi, I'm Betty Jo Robinson. We saw the plaque on your office door. We're looking for Cole Young. When he didn't answer the door across the street we thought we would try here next."

There was nothing not to like about the open friendly woman. Her charm put some of Ginger's doubts to rest. "Good guess, please come in. We weren't expecting you this early."

"Good tail wind gave us an extra push," Betty Jo said.

"Push or shove? The first flight from San Antonio isn't due in for another two hours."

Stalling any forthcoming answer, Ginger continued. "Cole and my sisters are out back; head towards the open doors. I'm sure they will want to hear this, too."

Following in the Robinson's wake, she watched them take in every detail as they walked towards the French doors. Sensing the keen awareness of the man behind her, she wished he could see the dark curly haired spirit hovering beside him.

Warm hugs and manly slaps on the back told a story of solid friendships as greetings and introductions were made.

When the general surprise at meeting identical triplets subsided, Terry turned to the quiet man standing with his arms crossed against his chest. Not having ventured into the melee, he stood just outside the French doors. "This is Agent Jack Cutter. To answer how we got here so quickly, Jack and I are pilots. Last year, we bought a small jet confiscated from a drug ring working the Texas, Mexico border. Since it's privately owned, we can easily deviate from our filed flight plan.

"Hope you don't mind my having Cutter join us. When Brooks was in Texas, he got involved in a few things that came to the department's attention. Cutter works the cases when he gets a new lead. Without knowing exactly what was going on, I thought it would be smart to have him listen to your story."

"No problem. I trust your judgment," Cole said.

"Why don't we go back inside? Looks like that tail wind pushed more than your plane. Those clouds are getting pretty dark," Ginger said.

Settling in the living room, Cole started the story with his initial hypnosis session. Excluding the supernatural history of the family, the trip to Disneyland and the blossoming relationship, the story unfolded clear through Samantha's visit.

Ginger finished by going over the basic facts of what she was capable of doing. If the men thought there was more behind the story they didn't voice their opinions.

Because of the situation and friendship, Terry was far more generous than normal with information. "Brooks has a reputation for destroying peoples' careers and lives. According to a few sources, he has fabricated whole stories and enhanced others when it would expedite promoting himself. As you know he married money. The wife's family also has considerable power within the media field. Without that backing, the stations wouldn't put up with his actions."

"How much danger is Ginger in?" Rosemary asked.

Jack spoke for the first time. "All three of you are in danger. With three identical peas in a pod, don't think they would take the time to politely ask for names before abducting any one of you. Truth is, they probably won't dig deep enough to find out Ginger is a triplet if they positively identify her."

Raking fingers through his hair, Cole silently cursed a blue streak for putting them in this situation. "Guess this would be a good time for you to listen to the tape of what was said when the Jones woman was here yesterday."

\* \* \* \*

"I'm impressed. You think fast under pressure. I can't think of much more I would have asked," Terry said.

"From now on, all calls will be recorded. We passed the security patrol by the park. How often do they drive down the street?" Jack asked.

"They drive down every street and alley once an hour, around the clock. Dad backed a friend to start the business. His son runs it now. If you want something changed he'll be happy to help."

Jack's suspicious nature went into overdrive. "Why would your dad do that?"

"He built the community; a neighborhood where kids could safely walk the streets was a major issue with him."

Terry and Jack shared a glance. Instead of pressing the issue, Terry changed the subject. "How many people know about your talents?"

She started to answer then hesitated. "I don't know. A list of grief management clients is in the computer. Even with the recent positive publicity, most people are reluctant to admit they ever visited a medium. I seldom get more than two calls a month."

"Mind if I go over your files?" Jack asked.

"No. I don't see a problem with that. Other than names and addresses, I don't keep notes on those sessions."

"We taped the news broadcast. It's ready to play," Cole said.

Before they could watch, the phone rang. Terry nodded to Ginger as he put the call on the speaker and started the tape recorder.

"Hello."

"Ginger, this is Billy. Mom's letting me call early. Is that okay?" In his excitement he was shouting.

Cole hadn't mentioned the arrangement with Billy. Looking at Terry, she waited until he nodded approval before responding. "Billy, this is perfect. Did you have a nice week?"

"Yeah, it was really cool. Dad and I took the sailboat out. He even let me steer. I had us racing across the water faster than the wind. I got a B+ on my math test an' I hit a homerun today. That's what I want to tell Grandpa."

"I'm sure he is going to want to hear all about that."

"Ginger, do you know why a volcano erupts?"

"No. Why does a volcano erupt?"

"Cause it has the hiccups."

She chuckled.

"That's a good one. Your Grandpa has one for you. How do you repair an Orchestra?"

"I don't know how do you repair an orchestra?"

"With a band-aid."

"Hey that's a cool one. He's really there? Can he hear me?"

Looking at the rapt attention and curiosity on their guest's faces, she smiled as she thought: *lights, camera, action, let the show begin*. "Yes, Billy he can hear you. I have you on the speaker. Talk to him directly. I will repeat his answers just like we did the other night."

"Cool. Mom did the same thing here. Everyone's sitting around the kitchen table listening.

How ironic that the same scenario held true in her dining room.

"Grandpa, guess what, I held the baseball bat just like you taught me an' I remembered not to close my eyes just before I swung. It was so cool. Everyone said they heard the bat and ball go smack when they collided. That ball went sailing so high it went flying over the fence like a big ol' seagull. It was so cool I almost forgot to run. We had two other guys on base so we scored three runs. Know what else? It was the last inning. We won by one run 'cause of my homerun. I wish you could have seen it."

"He and your grandma were there. You did a great job hitting the ball and they are both really proud of you. He wants to know if you wore a hole in the seat of your pants? He says, 'Was it necessary to slide into every base or was that just to impress the little redhead sitting in the stands cheering you on?'"

In his excitement, Billy's voice rose by two octaves. "He was there, he really did see it. Wow, Mom, Dad did ya hear that? Did ya?"

For another hour the conversation went back and forth, eventually including the entire family and all the spirits who had visited in Seattle.

"What did Mary eat for dinner?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know; what did Mary eat for dinner?" Ginger said.

"Mary had a little lamb." Billy was still laughing at his own joke as he said goodnight.

"Glen, don't hang up. But please take the phone off the speaker."

"Cole, is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything's fine. Listen, I'm really sorry Brooks came down on you guys. He's trying to dig up some more information so be careful. As an incentive, he's offering a very large sum of money to anyone willing to tell him Gin's name."

"Don't worry about this end. What Ginger has given us can never be bought. If we hear anything, you will get a call immediately."

The minute the phone was disconnected, Betty Jo said, "How did you do that? I've watched the mediums on TV. They don't even come close to what you just accomplished."

The awe in her voice was clear.

Ginger shrugged, but did not stop drawing as she continually glanced at a spot by the chaise lounge. "I don't know how I do it. It just happens. I was twelve when I started seeing spirits. No head injury. No trauma. No major illness."

"Either of you see spirits?" Terry asked.

"No, just Gin. We figure one medium in the family is enough," Rosemary said.

Jack's eyes narrowed in speculation. He was willing to bet his last dollar there was more to the story when it came to Cinnamon and Rosemary. "What were you seeing when Billy's grandfather was talking?"

"Him or more precisely, a transparent version of his earthly self. When he appears, he arrives very suddenly. He has a solid form; his energy does not waver as if it is weak."

Ripping two pages off the sketchpad, she turned them around as she laid them on the table. "These are the two spirits still with us. They arrived at the same time you did."

One picture was of a female. In her late forties, her shoulder length hair was a mass of natural curls. With eyes sparkling with mischief, a deep dimple accented her left cheek. In the corner of the paper was the name Maria.

Jack couldn't hide the sound of his indrawn breath. "My mother. That's just what she looked like before she got sick." Nodding towards the pictures, he said, "May I?"

"It's yours," Ginger said as she gave him a reassuring smile.

The other drawing showed a young girl, favoring her father in looks. Hanna was about thirteen. Her face was round, lips plump. Dark eyes were heavily fringed with dark lashes. Her hair hung straight and thick from a ponytail on the side of her head. A slightly tipped up nose came from her mother. Betty Jo gently picked up the sketch as tears spilled over her lashes. Hugging Betty Jo, Terry won his personal battle to stay composed.

Giving them time to collect their emotions, Ginger addressed Jack. "By the way, your mother says you didn't lose all the family pictures or the ring. They are in the bottom of the trunk you gave your Aunt Ruth for safe keeping."

"How did she know I thought they were lost?"

"Spirits. Just like Billy's grandfather, she watches over you. She says you might be a super smart agent, but you are down right lousy at recognizing her little tricks to make you smile."

"You're making that up."

"Really? Then explain why the lamp beside your recliner turns itself on and off. Maria says, don't try claiming it's a faulty lamp. You've replaced it twice. She's also taking credit for moving a little metal car on your nightstand."

"I ... Okay, hell."

"She's been patiently waiting for me to share that bit of information. Now she's clapping her hands together as she laughs at your sneering..."

"I am not..." He watched triple images flash before him as three brows lifted, three sets of arms crossed and three sets of emerald green eyes stared him down. Groaning, he revised what he had started to say. "Cole, I admire your courage. When these three unite, you don't stand a fighting chance in hell of winning." With that, he presented them with a priceless smile.

\* \* \* \*

Dinner was an easy affair. Potato salad, a platter of fresh vegetables, homemade baked beans and bread had all been prepared earlier in the day. Now all the women had to do was set the table and pull the food out of the refrigerator.

The men, huddled under umbrellas as rain battered the ground, impressed them with their culinary skills by not burning the hamburgers on the grill.

"How often do you have spirits appear unannounced?" Betty Jo asked.

Not wanting to lie, but not willing to reveal more than necessary, Ginger picked her words carefully. "Not very. At times an over eager relative will pop in before the client arrives, usually when that happens it is a child."

"How many earthbound ghosts do you encounter?" Betty Jo asked as she chewed off what was left of her lipstick.

Cole leaned back in his chair and grinned as he watched a sparkle of mischief light up Ginger's eyes.

"It would be impossible to keep count. They hover everywhere. The worst places, of course, are the graveyards. Spirits love to communicate with other spirits. During the New Moon, when it is pitch black, they like to have parties on the cemetery lawns. They don't purposely scare humans, but they don't appreciate having earthly visitors interrupting their dances."

Betty Jo shuddered.

"Abandoned buildings and old battle fields are also favorite spots for them to congregate. Then there are the haunted houses. The best time for me to run into ghosts is during a full moon, why you wouldn't believe..."

"Ginger." The slow warning drawl stopped her cold.

"That was downright scary. Except for the Texas drawl, you sounded just like Mom shutting Dad down

simply by saying: 'Herb,'" Rosemary said.

"Spoil sport."

Cole just shook his head and chuckled.

"Okay as dull as the truth is, here goes. Earthbound ghosts are few and far between. When souls leave their body, they might hover to make sure loved ones are all right, but once the funeral is over they never stay. Like Bobby's grandparents, spirits keep watch over family and friends and try to reach out with moral support when needed. I have only seen a handful of angry earthbound ghosts. With a little helping hand they quickly left."

"What do you consider a little helping hand?" Jack asked.

*Hells bells, she certainly didn't want to admit she had run out of one house and one office building frantically yelling for her parents' help.* Trying for casual, she shrugged both shoulders. "There were other spirits in the area. They were able to communicate with the ghosts. By demonstrating how they could disappear and reappear the ghosts were willing to pass through the veil to the other side."

Jack nodded his head in acceptance, but his eyes now reminded Ginger of chips of frozen blue glaciers. There was far more to him than met the eye. He wasn't denying or buying.



## Chapter 33

"If Terry agrees, I would really like to try being hypnotized so we can visit with Hanna together."

Terry narrowed his eyes but made no comment.

"That sounds good. When would you like to start?"

"Before I talk myself out of it. If it's not too late, right now! If it works we could do it again at a different time with Robert present."

Ginger was tired, but she was not willing to disappoint Betty Jo. "Sure, why don't we do the session in the living room?"

Not wanting to intrude on the privacy of the session and knowing how boring hypnosis sessions were for those not participating, Cinnamon and Rosemary said their goodnights before going upstairs to their childhood bedrooms where they had agreed to spend their nights until everything was back to normal.

Neither Jack nor Cole offered to leave the room.

Terry and Betty Jo snuggled together on the couch.

"I've been thinking about where to have us meet since you explained how the session worked with Billy's family. Hanna loved visiting Padre Island so I think that would be a perfect spot. What do you think, Terry?"

"Humph," was the noncommittal, skeptical answer.

Trained to be the ever alert, watchful, on duty agent, it took a nod from Jack before Terry allowed himself the luxury of totally relaxing.

"As you close your eyes, you will see a line of soft white sand dunes gently sloping down, deep, deep down as they disappear into the gentle lapping water of the Gulf. Above you a golden full moon is slipping down towards the horizon. As the moon slips down, you will go deeper, deeper down. Slipping, down, the moon is slipping beneath the horizon as you go deeper, deeper down..."

Satisfied that they were hypnotized, Ginger concentrated on sketching.

Cole monitored Terry and Betty Jo.

Jack monitored Cole and Ginger.

Over an hour later, Terry indicated they were ready to return to reality.

Mindful that it was approaching bedtime and every hour of hypnosis was equal to three hours of restful sleep, Ginger modified the awakening. "Coming back into the present, you will remember all you need to remember. Fully alert, completely relaxed, when you decide to go to bed you will be able to sleep deeply and restfully through the night."

As Terry sat forward with forearms braced on his thighs, his stiff lipped silence was in total contrast to the cheerful enthusiasm of Betty Jo.

"By the time Terry appeared, Hanna and I were settling down on the sand. We could see him popping in

and out. Does that make sense?"

"Our souls are made of energy. You were seeing the essence of his energy as he tried to fight the hypnosis. Yes, it makes sense."

Grinning and nodding, she accepted the explanation. Patting Terry on the arm, she continued. "Well, he finally gave in and joined us. We talked about everything under the sun. She told us how happy she is. As much as that makes me happy, it also makes me a little sad. Sorry, guess that sounds weird or selfish or both."

"No, not weird or selfish. I had the same experience," Cole offered.

Hugging Terry's arm, she continued. "Of course, Terry had an agenda. My lord, I don't know how many times he asked about the future. We'd talk for a while then he'd try slipping in the same questions, just worded a little differently. She kept laughing at him and, saying, 'good try, Dad,' then once again say she couldn't tell. It became a game between them."

"You know it wasn't a game. With what Jones said on the tape about using a medium to find out about the future, I had to determine the truth. I didn't figure Hanna would lie to us, but I had to know for sure," Terry said.

When he felt Betty Jo's body stiffen, he patted her hand. "Don't get all upset. I know this session was personal, but Hanna understood that the questions were important. She always was one step ahead of me."

Looking at Cole, he asked, "You said there were five families. Who are the other two and have they contacted you?"

"Rodriguez left a message earlier today. He's a cardiologist in Houston. I went through school and residency with him. I decided not to return the call until after you arrived. I haven't heard anything from the Jacksons. They are both teachers, also living in the Houston area."

Terry nodded. "Give Cutter their full names and addresses. He'll run a check. Could mean they need money and are waiting for you to call them like instructed."

"What about Rodriquez?"

Glancing at his watch, Terry replied. "It's too late to call tonight. You can call first thing in the morning to see what he has to say."

Ginger stifled a yawn. "Why didn't you list the possibility that the Jacksons haven't been contacted?"

"Logic." With all eyes on Jack, he continued. "Brooks would have the names of all the families at once. Why wait to see if one person is going to help before involving the next one on the list. With the Jacksons being teachers, it isn't likely that they are on vacation this time of year."

"It is bedtime for you." Pulling Ginger to her feet, Cole tilted her face up as he studied her face.

"But I want to know what you are planning to do next."

"Tomorrow. Your eyes are dull and you've got dark circles under them and don't try denying you have the start of a headache. You've been massaging your temples off and on for the last half hour."

"Are you always this bossy?"

"Only the doctor half. Unless you want the cowboy half to put you over my shoulder like a sack of horse feed and carry you up the stairs, I would suggest you say your goodnights." He successfully fought the grin that threatened to dissolve his stern expression when she pouted.

Giving him a fleeting kiss that tingled clear to his toes, she whispered, "Goodnight, cowboy."

She watched Betty Jo stand and repeat the fleeting kiss with her husband. "I'll go up with you. Let the men hash out the details and lock up."

Terry got right to the point after he was certain Ginger was out of hearing range. "Is there more to the story then what Ginger revealed?"

"No, you experienced the whole shooting match." Cole didn't feel a moment's remorse about not revealing her parents' friendly visits or the fact that he, Cinnamon and Rosemary had also had the pleasure of visiting with them.

"After talking to Hanna, I'm satisfied that no one could use Ginger to get information about the future. However, one thing Hanna said caught my attention. She was talking about Robert and his three roommates. She knew quite a bit about all four of them, including where they hide their valuables. Seems there is a theft problem in the dorm Robert has neglected to tell me about."

"I was not good at I Spy, so give me a break and spit it out. I have no idea where you're going with this."

"I spy? That's a kid's game, isn't it?" Jack asked.

He half laughed as he raked his fingers through his hair. "Forget I mentioned it. It's not important right now."

"Has Ginger ever tried to call a spirit that was not connected to a client?"

"She doesn't call them. They visit because they want to talk to the person with her. I never gave it a thought, nor has she ever mentioned it. I would say, no. Why?" He rationalized the half-truth with the thought that when she called her parents they were connected to her.

"It is far fetched. Possibly impossible. The only other sinister use of Ginger's abilities that I can see would be calling on spirits to get them to reveal information from the past. Something that has already happened or is currently happening, like where my son and his buddies are hiding their money."

"Sorry, I'm still not following."

"Don't feel bad about not following. If you had, I'd be worried about your motives. Think greed, control, power, blackmail. It could be a spouse needing more information for a big settlement in a divorce. A businessman needing information to screw his partner. A politician wanting to know the skeletons in the closet of his opponent. A password to computer programs holding a corporation's confidential information. How to bypass security to banks, museums, and jewelry stores, the list is endless. I'm thinking if someone was able to force Ginger to call on spirits, a person could contract out. Anyone willing to pay the going rate gets the requested information within a certain period of time," Terry said.

"You mean connect with a spirit that had access to the information needed."

"Exactly."

"Shit," Cole muttered. "Anyone besides me need a drink?"

While fixing three scotch on the rocks, Cole realized that he owed the old grandmamma an apology. It wasn't her descendants she was afraid would use their *gifts* unwisely. It was mankind. If a man had knowledge of the *gift* and was able to disguise his true purpose long enough to pass himself off as 'Adam,' the second fail safe would destroy the *gift* as she gave herself to a man not worthy of her love. Even over three hundred years ago, the cunning old lady had shown a shrewd awareness of human nature.

"What now?" Cole asked after each had appreciated the soothing taste of the scotch.

"You know the saying, let sleeping dogs lie? Personally, that sounds good to me. In this case, what we don't know can't hurt Ginger. In testing the theory, we could unintentionally create knowledge that could get into the wrong hands. After today, I'll never think about just what side of heaven those hands could be in, in quite the same way," Terry said.

"What we need to do is find a way to discredit Brooks and Alder before they gain any more ammunition. If we can eliminate them, I don't think the Jones woman will be a threat after the 'I'm a little teapot' fiasco. With what she said under hypnosis, she has perfected her own method of blackmail that has served her well over the years. When the dust settles, she'll go back to using her old bag of tricks," Jack said.

\* \* \* \*

"How long before you make it legal for the cowboy to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off to bed?" Jack asked as he and Cole walked across the street to his uncle's house.

"If I have my way, the day after this mess is cleared up."

"Humph. Thought you might say something like that! Cinnamon, is she seeing anyone?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Mind if I ask her out?"

"What makes you think you need my permission?"

"Despite my mother's earlier comments, I'm no fool nor am I blind. I saw the way Cinnamon and Rosemary treated you with the respect of a beloved big brother. I need your permission all right or she'll be turning me down flat."

There wasn't much to think about. He'd been impressed by the respect Jack and Terry had for each other as well as the way Betty Jo affectionately treated Jack like a younger brother. He was quiet, watchful, and careful to hide his thoughts and knowledge. In this family, those were highly commendable traits to possess. After the initial shock, he hadn't acted like Ginger's abilities impressed or scared him, although he also hadn't asked to be hypnotized. Then again he didn't know about the rest of the family. For that matter, except for seeing auras, he still didn't know if Cinnamon had any other talents.

"I won't stand in your way."

Jack nodded his thanks. "See you in the morning," he said as he headed towards the bedroom Cole had shown him earlier in the day.

"Gin and I jog at sunrise if you're interested," Cole yelled just before closing his own bedroom door.

## Chapter 34

*Ginger clung to him, as they stood spotlighted within a dreary thin mist of yellow fog. Just beyond the circle of light, the unseen stalkers silently watched and waited. Now that they had the two in sight, they allowed them to squirm as they methodically prepared the next attack.*

*Just as Cole decided to demand a confrontation, the stalkers retreated. However, they did not fully disappear. That would be too lucky. The reprieve bought them time. Time, which might grant them enough space, to gather strength and power that would protect the group as a whole.*

As the dream faded, he rolled onto his back. His sleep-drugged mind tried figuring out the latest warning.

As Dum-Dum jumped on the bed and pushed her cold nose against his cheek, Cole ran his hand down her back. Within minutes, her purring lulled them both to sleep.

In the morning, he could remember nothing about the dream except the feeling of being surrounded by watchful eyes.

\* \* \* \*

After the back-to-back session with Billy and the Robinsons, Ginger fell into a deep dreamless sleep. It was only after someone's prowling footsteps awakened her that restless slumber carried her into the dream.

*The vulnerability of nakedness was the first sensation she felt—not physical nakedness. Emotional nakedness.*

*She could feel the pulsating negative energy of stalkers hovering just outside the small pool of light illuminating their precarious position.*

*In the far distance, she sensed a faint heartbeat of positive energy. Something or someone was telling her there were souls ready to help, able to help, willing to help. On which side of the veil they existed, she did not question. She prayed they would not be too late.*

Her inner clock woke her up. Ginger lay perfectly still as she tried to remember the dream. Like wispy fingers of fog, the details teased her conscious. A thought here, a memory there, nothing jelled, made sense or triggered more than the elusive, fleeting feeling that help was being offered.

\* \* \* \*

Opening her bedroom door, Ginger was surprised to come face to face with Cinnamon.

Eyeing the dark green jogging shorts and lime green t-shirt showing off an inch of toned midriff, Ginger looked at her questioningly.

"Don't look at me like that. I do jog, you know!" she whispered in a hiss as they made their way downstairs.

"Did I say so much as one word? I would never boorishly remark on the fact that I have never seen you willingly up this early in the morning, much less dressed to jog in a 'hey boys, look at me' t-shirt. Nor would I be so coarse as to wonder aloud if this has anything to do with the interested glances you kept giving one Agent Jack Cutter. And it would be totally vulgar of me to mention you actually put mascara and lip-gloss on to go jogging."

Her mouth curved with mirth. "And here I thought I was being subtle."

"Only to a blind man, and with those sharp gray blue eyes I don't think Jack misses much."

By the time they reached the sidewalk, both men were trotting across the street in long easy strides. Cole in blue and white, and Jack in green and white, were wearing almost identical running gear. Practical, boxer style running shorts with coordinating muscle man t-shirts that emphasized well-toned bodies.

Without saying a word, Jack gave a flicker of a nod as a curt hello.

"Morning, Gin, Honey. Morning, Gorgeous Cinn. Where is Rosie Sunshine?"

"If we are lucky, still sound asleep. By the way, don't let her hear you call her Rosie unless you're prepared to have your tongue cut out," Ginger said in a cheery response.

"Thanks for the warning. Why don't you two set the pace? Jack and I will happily follow you lovely ladies anywhere."

By the halfway mark, Jack and Cole's eyes were glassy with desire as their oxygen-deprived minds fought the natural response of their testosterone driven anatomy. By the time they reached the marker to head home, they were sucking in air like greenhorn joggers being pushed beyond their limits.

By the time the men parted company to take showers, Jack had finally gotten a second wind. "Do me a favor. Next time I agree to participate in that type of self inflicted torture, just shoot me. It would hurt a hell of a lot less."

\* \* \* \*

Jack had commandeered Ginger's office and computer.

Terry set up the tape recorder on the kitchen bar before giving Cole permission to call the Rodriguezes.

"Jose, this is Cole. Sorry, I didn't return your call yesterday. What's up?"

"I was going to ask you that same question. Mary got a call yesterday from a guy in California. The guy said something about needing to know the name of a woman you're associated with. He seemed to think you would be calling us."

"Did he say why I would be calling?"

"Nope, but he offered her a million bucks for the name of the woman."

"Did she get a phone number?"

"Of course, I've got it here in front of me along with the name, Brad Alder. Now tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Sorry, about the threat, Jose. Before I explain, I need to know if there was any more to the conversation?"

"Before or after she tore into him?" When provoked, Mary had a legendary temper.

"Let's try before."

"According to Mary, he sidestepped every one of her questions. Related him to a shady politician who thinks he's successfully converted another chump."

"What did he say that upset her?"

"Said if she wanted the money, she wasn't to call you about the offer. And then made some vague warning that strange accidents happen all the time and how sad it was when children suddenly became orphans."

Cole raked his fingers through his hair. "What did Mary say?"

"You know Mary. When she gets really upset she reverts to Spanish. Seems he understood at least some of what she was saying. She said he muttered a few choice words then hung up on her."

After reading a scribbled note from Terry, he answered, "Jose, I am really sorry. Until this is settled I can't tell you anything. Suffice to say, I will tell you the story after the lady is safe."

"Fair enough. In the meantime, I'll twist your arm with a little blackmail."

Collectively every person in the room drew in their breath.

"And that would be what?" The hard edge in Cole's voice was obvious.

"The situation must be worse than I thought. No harm meant. I have a one-month old patient, male, born with the same heart condition as Peter. I want you on the team. I will beg if necessary."

"No need to beg. When?" The anger had dissolved as quickly as it flared.

"He took a turn for the worse yesterday. Needs to stabilize. Wouldn't be unhappy if he gained a few ounces. Projected surgery date is a week from today."

"Count me in. Keep me posted. Anything changes I can be there in a few hours and Jose, thanks, I appreciate the call."

"No problem. Talk to you later."

"Now what?" Cole asked as he poured himself a cup of vanilla cream coffee.

Before Terry could respond, Jack walked into the kitchen and held out his empty coffee mug for a refill.

"Susan and Robert Jackson are in the middle of a divorce with nasty accusations being thrown back and forth. Bottom line, the husband is claiming the living daughter isn't his. Another teacher is claiming Jackson fathered the baby boy she just delivered. She's asking the courts for child support. DNA tests are pending on both. Both are pointing fingers and screaming adultery. With all the lawyers' fees, one or both of them might be tempted."

"And they all lived happily ever after," Rosemary muttered in disgust.

Terry chuckled at the comment. "Let's assume they were given a similar warning about not calling you. If they get antsy and decide to call anyway, claim ignorance. With no information it becomes a dead end."

"No problem."

"There isn't anything we can do here right now, so Betty Jo and I are going to fly up to see Robert. Do you mind if Jack stays here?"

"Not at all," Cole said.

"Ginger, I don't think you need to be told, but don't take on any new clients," Terry said.

"Okay. I'm free of appointments for another week."

Looking at Rosemary and Cinnamon he said, "What about you two? Any obligations that can't be taken care of from the house or with a chaperone?"

Rosemary shrugged. "Not me. My houseplants are housebroken. As long as I have my laptop, I'm free as a bird to come and go as I please."

Cinnamon licked her bottom lip as she scanned her day-timer. The action had Jack's full attention. "Have a show Friday night for a local business, about two hundred employees and spouses. That's being held at a private club about ten miles from here. Saturday afternoon I have a private birthday party scheduled, about a hundred guests. After that I am free for two weeks."

\* \* \* \*

Ginger found it amazing that a house full of people could be so quiet. After returning some phone calls, completing phone consultations with two life-counseling clients and generally clearing up paperwork, she spent the afternoon finishing the last of the paintings.

Leaving the studio, she found Jack in her office scanning the Internet.

"Your answer service called. The woman sounded upset. She asked that you contact Mark Stephens. Said his calls are upsetting the operators. Is he a client?"

"No. Why?" Something in his tone said it was more than a casual question.

"Just curious."

She half chuckled as she shook her head in disbelief. "Curious like a cat ready to pounce on a cornered mouse is more like it. From what I have heard, he's a conman opportunist. Wants me to hypnotize a man who claims to be a werewolf so a bunch of perverts can watch him make whoopee, while in wolf form, with a self proclaimed witch during the next full moon."

"Are calls like that common?" The voice dripped with disgust.

"No. Thank God! The guy's a local celebrity. I thought if I ignored him he would stop calling. Guess I was wrong. I'll call a friend at the sheriff's department and let him handle it."

"Who's the friend?"

"Deputy Sheriff Rumor Phoenix. He grew up in the two story painted lady across the street."

"If you don't mind, I'll call him."

Seeing her cell phone by his elbow, she said, "No problem, just hit four on speed dial."

She shut the doors as she left the room.

In the living room, Cinnamon was stretched out on the couch reading the suspense novel Cole had taken on the trip.

Dum-Dum, curled in a ball with a paw covering her eyes, was asleep on Cinnamon's stomach.

Cole, hair sticking on end and papers scattered around the chaise lounge was concentrating on



transferring figures from a calculator to a sheet of graph paper.

Neither noticed her, so Ginger continued into the kitchen to make a pot of tea.

Sitting at the kitchen's bar, she found Rosemary. Having plugged her laptop into the house phone line, she was working on the Internet as she absently sipped mint iced tea from a tall, moisture beaded glass.

There was a distinct gleam in her eyes when she glanced at Ginger. "Found you the perfect car!"

So much had happened, she had totally forgotten the request. "What, let me see."

"Not on the site. It will be here day after tomorrow. Until then you'll just have to wait."

Knowing there was no point in arguing, she started pulling the makings for dinner out of the refrigerator as water for tea heated.

"Finished the last of the pictures. Shelby asked for fifty paintings. Have forty acrylics, and eight oils. Several of them are oversized. Figure that should make her happy. What do you think?"

"I'm sure she will be thrilled. When we talked last week, she said Pete was getting antsy to get started on the frames. Once the car arrives we'll fill it up and haul them over." The reply had been punctuated with the sound of her typing.

"What are you doing that's got you so happily engrossed?"

"Overhauling Cole's portfolios. Seems he's been handling the investments for his folks, his brother and himself. After a little arm wrestling, I got the passwords to the accounts. He didn't do too bad a job, but I'm making a few changes."

When Ginger didn't say anything, she glanced at her. Seeing the arched brow, she grinned. "Okay, so I made a lot of changes. Bottom line, in a few months, the portfolio will be a lot healthier. Truthfully, I think he was happy to hand over the responsibility to me; he just didn't want to ask."

Not until the homemade sauce for the country spareribs had simmered on the stove long enough to have the spicy aroma of tomatoes, basil and garlic tempting the palate did Cole, Cinnamon and Jack wander into the kitchen to offer their help.

"Your timing was perfect. The potatoes are peeled. The green beans cleaned and snapped and the vegetables and dip are ready to munch on. You are all off the hook until cleanup duty."

"Talked to Rumor; Stephens won't be calling again," Jack said.

"Thank you. Any chance you can satisfy our curiosity?"

"None. Which reminds me, Rumor mentioned the three of you and his sister, Pagan, like to go skinny dipping."

"He's got a big mouth. Did he mention where and when this took place?" Cinnamon asked.

"The Phoenix River and Waterfalls. Never heard of them before. Didn't say when."

"You'll find them in his parents' backyard along with a town, mountain range, farmland and miles of railroad track. His father is a railroad buff. We were two and three when we did the infamous strip tease acts and skinny dipping."

"Too bad," Cole muttered.

"My sentiments exactly," Jack agreed.

As Rosemary discussed the changes she had made to Cole's investments and why she had made them, Jack paid close attention. Before Rosemary could turn the computer off, he pulled the laptop away from her, two-finger pecked at a few keys, then pushed the laptop back in front of her.

"Tell me your honest opinion."

Everyone but Rosemary winced at his choice of words. She smiled like a cat given a bowl of sweet cream.

Jack took it like a man with an ice-cold beer to swallow the bitter reality that she took his words literally. He kept his mouth shut as she ruthlessly dissected, examined and berated him for not paying closer attention to where he was losing money.

By the time they sat down to dinner, his portfolio had been found in need of a total overhaul with Rosemary being awarded the satisfying job of mechanic. Of course, Jack was the only one in the room that didn't know about Rosemary's abilities. Still, even her sisters had been impressed by her knowledge that far surpassed the Eenie, Meenie, Meinie, Moe selection method she had always told them she used.

As they took a break during a bloodthirsty Monopoly game to listen to the Channel Twelve news in Los Angeles, shouts of gaiety filled the air when it was announced that Samantha Jones was on a foreign assignment that would have her out of the country indefinitely.

"Why did you pick July fourth as the day to have the suggestion broken?" Cinnamon asked.

"Cinn, think about it, July fourth is Independence Day."

Everyone groaned at the subtle humor.

"What I would pay to see is her going into the song and dance routine just as she has some guy on the hook."

"Okay, once again, I will play the fool by admitting I don't follow you," Cinnamon said.

"When I turned her camcorder back on, a light lit up to indicate it was running. And I would bet you it is the same camera and purse she uses for her extra curricular activities."

Gathering Ginger in his arms, Cole looked at her with adoration. "That is frightening. And to think some people call females the weaker sex." After kissing the tip of her nose, he headed to the kitchen as he called over his shoulder, "Game starts again in five minutes, anyone want another beer before I succeed in taking all your money and property?"

\* \* \* \*

Still in running gear, Jack answered the door.

"My, my! And here I was feeling sorry for Gin leading such a dull life. Hello, Lover Boy." The coy, sexy voice floated though the foyer.

Jack didn't think he had ever seen a woman with quite that shade of pink hair. Her smile and gestures reminded him of the actress May West from old black and white movie fame.

"Janie, what a surprise. Is everything all right?" Ginger asked.

Stepping into the house, she spotted Cole. Patting her hair with one hand, she fluttered the other hand in front of her face. "Hello! Hello! Hello, Lover Boy." With that, she gracefully collapsed.

Kneeling beside her, Cole checked Janie over. "Her vitals are steady. She didn't hit her head. I don't see any signs of injury. Jack, help me get her to the couch."

"Cole, leave her there." All eyes were on Ginger. Stopping the bubble of laughter that wanted to erupt was difficult. "Cole, she's fine. She just self-hypnotized herself."

"What?"

"You heard me. 'Hello, Lover Boy' is the mantra she picked for self-hypnosis. You two sexy hunks fit right into the theme of her fantasy boudoir."

Jack looked horrified.

Cole was shocked. "You're telling us she can hypnotize herself that quickly?"

Janie moaned. Not totally coherent, she still managed to stretch her ample body into a pinup poster pose.

"The more you practice, the easier it becomes. My guess is she's been practicing a lot. Why don't you two lover boys move out of her line of vision and I'll bring her back up. Cinnamon, give me a hand."

"Janie, are you ready to come back?"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you do."

"Oh, all right."

Ginger counted her up. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful. Hi, Cinn. Help me up."

As Cinnamon and Ginger helped her to her feet Ginger asked, "How often are you using the mantra?"

"Humm, several times a day. That's why I stopped by. Wanted to let you know how well it's working. Doc says to keep it up. I've lost five pounds and my blood sugar level hasn't been off since my last hypnosis session."

When she spotted the men, Janie's green clad form strutted into the room as she patted her pink hair. "Gin, dear, introduce me to these two handsome hunks."

"Janie, this is Cole, Martin's nephew.

"Cole, Martin bought his house from Janie when she decided to move into one of the patio homes on the other side of the golf course."

"Hello, ma'am."

"And this is Jack Cutter."

Jack nodded his head. "Ma'am."

She patted her ample chest. "Oh my, how delightful, they both have sexy Texas drawls. Either one of you

boys know how to play bridge?"

Afraid to have her swooning at their feet, they shook their heads 'no' rather than speak.

She sighed. "What a pity. Gin, dear, can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure, let's go into the office."

Janie eyed the running gear Ginger was wearing.

"You know, Gin, if you ever want to get a man you should dress a little more like Cinnamon when in the company of such good looking hunks. Your mom's been gone awhile. If there's anything you need to know, you just come by the house and we'll have a little talk."

*If she only knew!* "Thank you, Janie. I promise I'll remember that. Now let's talk about how often you are using the self-hypnosis."

\* \* \* \*

"You sure you want to wear *that* outfit?" Rosemary asked.

Looking at the turquoise, mid calf length dress in the mirror, Cinnamon sighed. "Why, what's wrong with it?"

"Nothing is wrong with it; you look great. Rose is giving you a hard time. After all, that has got to be the tenth outfit you have tried on in the last half hour. Put on the shoes I bought to match the dress, grab your purse and go knock Jack's socks off."

"Are you sure you guys don't want to come with us? It's just dinner and a movie."

"Yes, we're sure. Now go before Jack thinks you stood him up," Rosemary and Ginger replied in unison.

\* \* \* \*

Cole was grinning as he watched Jack. "Last I heard it takes nine months to make a baby. Far as I know, you haven't even kissed her. So stop pacing the damn floor like an expectant father."

About two feet away from Cole, Jack stopped in his tracks. With nervousness, his soft Texas drawl was more pronounced. "Hell, I still can't believe she agreed to go out with me. Guess I figure one of them is going to come down any minute and tell me she changed her mind."

"Won't happen. Look behind you."

Entering the room, Cinnamon looked as nervous as Jack.

One of the rare smiles spread across Jack's face when he turned and saw the lovely vision standing before him. For a fleeting moment, he wished he had a bouquet of flowers to give her. She was beautiful, and so out of his depth he wondered again why he was putting himself through this living hell. Which was a stupid question. He had been as drawn to her as a moth to a golden light since the moment he first saw her. For years he had made a point of staying clear of women like her, for good reason. With what he was, what he had done and seen, he didn't figure he was good marriage material and marriage was what someone like Cinnamon deserved.

Well he would have his one evening with this special lady. The memories would have to last a lifetime, so he better make the night a memorable one.

## Chapter 35

The front door flew open as Aunt Pesty came flying into the house early the next morning. At a more sedate pace, a smiling, tanned, slimmer Martin followed.

Following in Martin's wake were Betty Jo and Terry.

'Vivacious' was the word that popped into Cole's head as he watched Aunt Pesty. With rich dark auburn curls dancing around her head, her slim figure and sharp green eyes had her looking ten years younger than her age.

What surprised Cole was her petiteness. With all he had heard, he expected a taller version of her nieces with a personality more along the line of Rosemary's directness. Instead, without the high heels she was wearing, she was hardly more than five foot tall. The laugh lines fanning out from her eyes indicated she enjoyed life, saw most situations as funny and wanted everyone to join in the amusement.

She gave the triplets hugs and mushy-sounding kisses. "Oh, my beautiful girls, have I got a surprise for you. But first tell me how is everything here."

"Same old, same old. Nothing new to report," Ginger said with a straight face.

"Nothing? Oh my. Oh well. I was hoping ... Oh, well, never mind." The bright smile dimmed a few degrees.

Rosemary tilted her head. "What were you hoping, Aunt Pesty?"

"Oh, nothing really, it was nothing." The shrug was not as casual as she had hoped.

Turning to Cole, she tried to hide her disappointment. "You have got to be Cole. Martin showed me some family pictures. You are even more handsome in person. When did you arrive?"

"A few days ago." In spite of the evasive answer, the smile was genuinely friendly.

"Well, then, maybe there is still hope," she murmured.

Eyeing Jack, she got a calculating gleam as she sized up his potential.

"Jack Cutter. Ma'am, I'm a friend of Cole and Terry.

No one batted an eye at the slight deception.

"Betty Jo mentioned that you were here visiting. Seems she forgot to mention you were another very attractive Texan."

"Why, thank you, Ma'am." His lips twitched into a grin. At least she hadn't called him 'lover boy'.

"I could really use a cup of tea. In fact, I brought back some of the most marvelous tasting tea from Panama. It's in my overnight bag. Maybe one of you boys would be kind enough to fetch the small green bag from the trunk of the car."

As Cole left to get the bag, Cinnamon stepped in for the next act. "Panama, really? It seems you forgot to mention your meditative retreat was in Panama."

"Aunt Pesty, I thought you mentioned Florida," Ginger added.

"No, she distinctly said Maine, to me," Rosemary declared.

Flustered, Pesty sighed, than shrugged both shoulders. "Let's go into the living room and get comfortable; Martin and I have a lot to tell you."

Not one to let anything keep her down for long, Pesty cheerfully informed them as they walked into the room, "We ran into Betty Jo and Terry at the car rental agency. When we discovered they were headed here, we shared the car."

After Cole returned, he purposely sat at Rosemary's feet. Casually patting one bare foot, he left his hand there. Ginger curled up on the chaise lounge with Jack comfortably slouched at her feet.

Pesty, shaking her head as if trying to clear an out of focus image, looked at the arrangement as if something wasn't right, but she didn't know what to do about it.

After Cinnamon placed a pot of tea and a pot of coffee on the coffee table along with enough mugs to go around, Pesty spoke.

"I know I was vague before I left on the trip. But you see, Martin and I felt that we needed to have some time to ourselves without anyone knowing we were together."

Gently taking one of Pesty's fluttering hands into his much larger one, Martin interrupted. "Bottom line, a week ago Ginger and I were married by the Chaplain on the cruise ship."

After the general pandemonium of congratulations subsided and pictures of the smiling bride and groom during the ceremony and subsequent party given by the ship's Captain had been admired, Martin changed the subject. "I've been around long enough to know when I'm being conned."

He looked first at Terry then at Jack. "I can see 'cop' stamped all over you two. Now who's going to tell me what's going on?"

As the story unfolded, Pesty and Martin's complexions turned ashen. As she clung to his arm, he absently patted her hand.

"What are you doing to protect Gin?" Martin demanded when everything had been explained.

"There isn't much we can do," Terry said.

"What do you mean nothing you can do, arrest them?"

"Under what pretense? No one has broken the law."

"Surely sending that woman here and what she said they were planning, you can come up with some charges."

"Jones coming here under false pretenses was not a crime. If everyone that ever talked about committing a crime was arrested, there would be far more people in jail then out. Alder or Brooks digging into Cole or Ginger's background isn't illegal. All the information is on the Internet if you know where to look."

"What about the bribery?"

"Offering money for information is not bribery. Nor is it an unusual business practice in their line of work. You can argue ethics, but it isn't against the law. There is absolutely nothing we can do unless someone

tries to abduct one of the girls."

Pesty looked ready to burst into tears. Grasping Martin's hand, her knuckles were white.

While they absorbed the reality of what the others had already accepted, Terry rubbed the back of his neck. "Over the years, Alder and Brooks have both come to the attention of law enforcement officials. We will keep an eye on them. That's the best I can promise. In the meantime all of you need to be more observant of who is around you. Also pay attention to the seemingly innocent questions strangers ask, and I would suggest that for the time being, Ginger not accept any new clients asking to talk to dead relatives."

\* \* \* \*

After a quick lunch of cold cuts and chips, Cinnamon ceremoniously placed a cake onto the center of the table. In fancy red script was written: *Congratulations Forever and Always.*

Pesty looked at the cake then at her nieces in surprise. "This is for us? How, how did you find out?"

Cinnamon smiled. "Actually the cake is to celebrate the engagement of Rosemary and Cole."

"Rosemary and Cole? That's not right. No, no, no, that is all wrong." Realizing she had spoken her thoughts aloud, she pressed her lips together as she leaned into Martin, seeking protection.

Rosemary went for the kill. "Aunt Pesty, Martin, is there something the two of you need to confess? Or perhaps you would rather hear a little story about a pesty aunt with three nieces. The aunt having spent years perfecting her meddling skills sweet-talks a nice unsuspecting uncle with two single nephews into helping her set the stage for a play called matchmaking. Does the story sound familiar?"

Pesty laughed. "Okay, I confess. You girls know me too well. With everything else, my mind's too tired to keep a step ahead of you. Cole, I talked Martin into letting your family believe they had reason to be concerned about his involvement with a, younger women. Must say though I ... well never mind, what's done is done."

Looking around the table, she stopped when she got to Cole. "Why do you have your arm around Ginger?"

"Do I? Funny, they all look alike. Must be confused. Then again..." Drawing her to him, he placed a soft peck upon her lips. Craving more, he tucked her closer to him as he deepened the kiss for a heart-stopping minute. Pulling back, Cole was pleased to see the passion that had flared in her eyes.

"Ah, Rose, do you mind if I change my mind? Gin sure is a mighty fine kisser."

The game was more than worth the stunned surprise on Pesty's and Martin's faces at having been deceived. A few tears were shed, kisses were freely given and the men beamed as they shook hands and patted each other on the back.

From the moment Pesty and Martin had arrived, the scent of gardenias mixed with licorice had lingered in the air. When the cake had appeared, so had Herb and Caitlin. Cole turned his head towards the shimmering spirit standing behind Ginger. *Thank you both for helping to make this moment happen.* He knew Caitlin had heard his thoughts when he felt the pressure of a hand on his shoulder and the brush of a kiss to his cheek.

## Chapter 36

Promising to be at the wedding, Terry drove the rental car out of the driveway. A flatbed tow truck immediately pulled into the spot where the rental car had been parked.

"What on earth is that?" Ginger demanded.

"That is the vehicle you asked for."

"Rose, I never..."

"Oh yes, you did. Your exact words, and I quote: 'at the moment I need something that will hold more than me and my purse. Preferably red, has air conditioning, four doors, a back seat that folds down and decent gas mileage would be a nice bonus. I need to be able to transport paintings to the gallery. Also, Aunt Pesty promised Adele Simmons that she would sell some of her quilts and afghans at the summer craft shows which will mean hauling tables, chairs, an awning and who knows what else'."

*Hells bells!* "Okay. You got me; I did say that. But this? You have got to be kidding! I can't drive that all summer. Make that, I won't drive that, that, thing all summer. Besides I asked for red. That thing is orange and white! It looks like a Dreamcicle."

"That thing, as you keep calling it, is a classic, mint condition, 1962, Volkswagen Bus, with less than thirty thousand miles on the original engine. It has the required cargo space, nice wide door for loading, and it is air conditioned if you roll the windows down. As for gas mileage, well it has got to be better than the GTO and orange is in the red color spectrum, so stop whining."

As they had been talking, the driver of the tow truck had unloaded the car, had Rosemary sign his delivery voucher, checked out Cinnamon, and driven off before anyone had a chance to change their minds and tell him to drive it back up onto the flatbed of the truck.

As Cole and Martin opened doors, kicked the tires and generally checked it out, Martin got a dreamy look on his face. "Always did want to own one of these. All kinds of space in the back for doing some serious necking." Wiggling his eyebrows at Pesty, he said, "Come on, let's take her for a spin."

Just like that, she climbed in beside him. Smiling and waving, they drove off.

Ginger had a devilish sparkle in her eyes as she watched the van. "I have an idea. Let's give it to them as a wedding present, then they will feel obligated to keep it forever."

\* \* \* \*

Snuggled within Cole's embrace while sitting on the couch, Ginger asked everyone at large, "Is everyone in agreement that Aunt Pesty cast a spell before she left?"

Cole voiced the perfect reply. "Having never met her, I could still see the guilt written all over her face."

"Fair enough. What do you think the chances are Martin knew about the spell Aunt Pesty cast before today?"

"Not a hint," Rosemary said with authority.

"None," Cinnamon said.

"After today, I would be really surprised if he didn't have suspicions. Without proof, would she willingly



confess, if not to us, to Martin?" Cole asked.

"In the past, she has only admitted her guilt when caught red handed, so chances are slim to none," Rosemary stated firmly.

"Do you think dreams led them to each other?" Cinnamon asked.

"Absolutely, besides she only acts like she doesn't take her *gift* seriously. She would never willingly give it up," Rosemary declared.

\* \* \* \*

With Rosemary and Cinnamon back to sleeping at their own condos, the house seemed unusually quiet.

Cole was keeping in touch with Jose as to his young patient's condition. He had also scheduled a few consultations for the following week and buried himself in her office as he spent hours on the phone tending to business.

It had taken two days to help move Aunt Pesty's clothing and personal belongings across the street. It would be years before she stopped laughing at the shell-shocked look on Martin's face as he saw his personal space invaded then taken over with female paraphernalia.

The neighborhood women were planning a surprise reception for the newlyweds for Saturday night. Since it wasn't often the older ladies in the community had control over such an event, they were making the most of it. Ginger had been politely but firmly told her help was not wanted.

The canvases had been safely delivered. Shelby had been enthusiastic. Pete, after looking at the dramatic array of colors and scenery, had said it was a good thing he had a few extra days to make the perfect frame for each one.

The three military buddies had spent the previous afternoon swapping insults, asking questions and generally having a good time with Fart and another friend that had passed over.

Cole had scheduled time for Ginger to talk to Peter's parents the evening after the baby's surgery. He had also done another hypnosis session where he visited with the two children still waiting to talk to their parents. The kids had received the information Cole told them with knowing, sad smiles and agreed that when the timing was right they would have their meetings.

Now here Ginger sat feeling out of sorts, and a little bored. Which was a word her mother had always said didn't exist except for the lazy; there was always something to do, all you had to do was look.

Truth was, she couldn't remember ever having time to burn. There always seemed to be something that could use her attention, needed to be done, or was just waiting for her to have some extra time. Still, after the marathon painting sessions, Ginger was burned out on painting so she had shelved that idea.

The nursery service had been there that morning. Walking around the yard, she hadn't found even one flower to deadhead.

Business calls had slacked off to the point of being nonexistent. Not knowing if it was a natural slow down due to the nice spring weather or if her aunt had done something after Terry's warning about new clients, she had decided not to worry about it unless it lasted more than a few weeks.

To no avail, she had tried to get her aunt to admit that she had cast a spell. Pesty had firmly denied doing anything more than scheme with Martin to get Cole to come check things out. She claimed intuition had her believing Ginger and Cole were meant for each other. When Ginger logically asked how she was so

certain it would be Cole who came to visit and not Cody, Aunt Pesty had gotten flustered. After that, she had refused to discuss the situation.

The dreams had stopped as abruptly as they had started. Although she certainly didn't want to experience the nightmares, Ginger wasn't above admitting that she missed the kissyface parts.

As she closed her eyes trying to recreate the dance, she dozed off.

His tongue teased her lips as it gently explored. When her lips parted, their tongues dueled as they tasted, retreated, then tasted again. A gentle hand ran down the length of her arm then slowly worked its way under her top to explore the soft skin of her midriff then slowly upward until he cupped an already aching breast. As he used finger and thumb to lightly pinch her nipple, she moaned in pleasure.

When she shifted into a more comfortable position, a slender leg draped over his solid thigh. Feeling his hardness press against her, she quivered with pleasure. He rained tiny kisses across her face down the exposed side of her neck then worked his way back to her ear where he whispered words of endearment as he nipped her ear lobe and tickled her as he used his tongue to outline its soft outer shell.

Her own hands were not still. Tugging at the snaps on his western cut shirt, she wasn't satisfied until she was able to use her hands and lips to explore his massive chest. When she suckled a small hard nipple, he moaned her name.

Enjoying the power, she moved her hand downward as she rubbed the hardened shaft straining against his denim jeans.

The cell phone in his pocket vibrated.

Ginger jumped. Her eyes flew open at the same time she started laughing.

Cole muttered as he checked the caller ID before throwing the phone on the floor.

"Care to tell me what is so funny?"

"I was just bemoaning the fact that I had been missing one aspect of the dreams. I guess I dozed off. At first, I thought I was dreaming. Sure glad I wasn't."

"Why?"

She purred. "The real thing's a whole lot more fun and powerful than a dream." She kissed the corner of his mouth. "Care to play around a little more?"

"How about we make a date for a week from Saturday in my parent's backyard, your backyard, I don't really care where, but please don't keep me waiting. Like yours, my nights are too lonely. For me, the dreams never came close to being satisfactory. I want the real thing in my bed every night as soon as possible, or your daddy isn't going to be real happy with me."

Since she felt the same way, she grinned. "Who's going to scream louder, Aunt Pesty, or your mom?"

"Bet it's a match." In many respects the two women were very much alike. Behind scatter minded personas, they hid the power of smart, astute minds.

Rolling off the couch, Cole grabbed the phone.

"Who called?"

"Terry. Guess I better call him back."

Ginger studied his face as he listened. Except for grunts, "you're kidding", "thank God", and a few other indistinct sounds, he didn't add anything to the conversation until just before he hung up.

"Wedding's going to be a week from Saturday. I'll let you know where by tomorrow. Thanks, it's a hell of a wedding gift."

"It won't make the news until this evening, but he wanted us to know. Alder and Brooks are cousins. Alder's family had big money and high-powered connections. Brooks had looks and charisma, but no money.

"Over the last fifteen years, or so, they have been involved in blackmail, embezzlement, porn, drugs and heaven only knows what else. At least two people they have been involved with have mysteriously disappeared."

Raking fingers through his hair at the thought of what could have very easily happened, he took a deep breath before continuing. "The authorities have never been able to gather enough evidence to arrest either of them. There was a whole lot of circumstantial evidence, but nothing that would stick in a court of law until today.

"This morning, Kimberly Brooks, her father and two lawyers made a visit to the FBI headquarters in LA. They presented them with enough evidence to put Brooks and Alder behind bars for the rest of their lives and then some."

"I thought a wife couldn't testify against a husband?"

"Kimberly can't. Her father can. From what Terry just said I don't think even that will be necessary. Kimberly has been collecting information for several years. Had their phone on a system that recorded all calls. Even had a voice activated tape recorder hidden in her husband's office. She didn't know if she would ever have the nerve to use the information, but she wanted to make sure that if she ever did she had the ammunition needed to get a divorce without his being able to get his hands on her money.

"Terry wasn't sure what happened, but Kimberly decided to take the information and incriminating paperwork she had locked in a safe to her father. He called their lawyers. Due to what was in some of the material, they thought it would be wise to sidestep the local police department. One of the lawyers has a good friend that works for the FBI, end of story."

Ginger chewed on her bottom lip as she thought about how all of this could have happened.

Cole didn't need to be a mind reader to know what she was thinking. "Gin, Honey, drop it. We may never know if or how Pesty created a spell to make this happen. Frankly, I don't care, as long as it is over. Bottom line, that's all that matters."

"One question. What about Samantha and the people on the film crew?"

"I have no idea. I would bet she didn't know Alder and Brooks were related, which would mean they have been playing her for a fool. That might have her running scared. Let's not borrow trouble. How about just being thankful for this miracle and start planning that wedding. Deal?"

After giving him a toe-curling kiss, she smiled and answered. "Deal. Let's go see how loud Aunt Pesty can scream."

## Chapter 37

Ginger and Cole were both wrong. Neither Aunt Pesty nor Virginia Young screamed. They, unbeknownst to Cole and Ginger, had already decided the wedding would take place in Texas. In the same spot where another wedding and square dance had taken place right after the barn had been built in the 1800s.

\* \* \* \*

A wedding specialty company had set up chairs for two hundred guests.

With an open invitation having been sent throughout the close knit ranching community by an impressive calling system, the unexpected had to be taken with stride. By the time the wedding started, every chair was full. At least another hundred guests stood around the perimeter of the large backyard.

Rosemary wore a tea length, dark rose, silk, halter-top dress. Carrying a simple bouquet of white gardenias and pale pink baby roses, she hesitated as she started to walk down the aisle of lush green grass. As Gardenia perfume filled the air and the scent of licorice teased her senses, multiple colors of pink shimmering iridescent lights swirled in front of her.

As her father appeared beside her, their mother appeared in the aisle beside the empty seats reserved for the parents of the bride. After a kiss from her father, she walked down the aisle wearing a radiant smile. Until taking her place across from Cody, her eyes never left her mother's face.

Cinnamon, wearing an identical dress in baby pink was next. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she, too, looked only at her mother. Standing beside Rosemary, she winked at Sheriff Don Crammer directly across from her.

The pale rose petal pink of Pagan's matching dress complimented her dusty skin and ebony black hair. Marveling at the fact that she could see three shimmering spirits, she didn't notice that Cody watched her every move. Taking her place, she couldn't take her eyes off the shimmering form of Porter directly across from her. A spirit, that for this one magical day everyone in the immediate wedding party could see.

The simple lines of Ginger's white lace wedding dress with delicate thin straps, low cut back, and graceful draped front showed off her figure to perfection. As the music swelled, her father gently took her arm. In the tradition of weddings for hundreds of years, he walked her down the aisle.

Ginger radiated happiness as she looked from her father to her mother, to her sisters, Pagan, Aunt Pesty, Cody and Porter. Finally locking eyes with Cole, she never looked away.

After the service, several people swore they heard a deep male voice say, "her mother and father," when the preacher forgot to skip the part in the ceremony when he asked who was giving the bride away.

When it came time for them to exchange rings, Cole slipped an emerald cut diamond, surrounded by kelly green emeralds the color of her eyes when filled with passion, on Ginger's finger.

Cole's gold band held three small emeralds. One darker green stone to represent his promise to love, cherish and protect his wife forever and two lighter green emeralds for the sisters he had come to cherish, respect and promised to protect.

Hours later, Ginger marveled at the perfection of a wedding that had been so hastily put together. The potluck meal with the largest assortment of salads, potato and vegetable dishes she had ever seen, were lined up on long linen covered tables that had been put up as soon as the ceremony was over. Two huge,

barrel drum barbeques, manned by the friendly ranch hands served a steady supply of succulent steaks or hotdogs for the younger crowd. Even with the unexpected amount of people, there was food left over.

After the cake had been cut, a large portable wooden dance floor was assembled.

Ginger cried when Cole surprised her by flying Elvis, their LA limo driver, to the ranch for the wedding. As he sang "Love Me Tender" they danced their first dance as man and wife.

Cole interrupted her thoughts as he guided a gray haired woman to where she was standing. "Gin, I'd like you to meet Porter's mother. She said you were in such a state of shock at the lingerie shower that she decided not to try talking to you right then."

As she grabbed both of Ginger's hands in a firm grip, her voice was thick with emotion. "I can't believe one of my Coles is married. Now, if you two will make Virginia and me grandmas, we'd be real happy."

Cole smiled and wiggled his eyebrows at Ginger.

Ginger didn't hear the statement about grandchildren. "Did you say one of my Coles? I thought your son's name was Porter."

"It is, Cole Porter Brown. With both Cole and his daddy being a Cole, everyone except me called him Porter. Are you all right, honey? You look like you saw a ghost?"

"No, I'm fine. Mrs. Brown, someday when there aren't so many people around, I need to tell you a story about Porter."

"Anytime, honey. I'm always happy to talk about my Coles. You two go on and dance now. It's not a night for you to be talking to sentimental old ladies."

They didn't argue. Drawing her onto the dance floor, Cole pulled her into his arms. "Want to tell me what that was about?"

"You sure you're ready for this?"

"Gin, honey, after the last few weeks you think anything could totally shock me?"

"This might. Remember the person who never showed up for his appointment the day we met?"

"Of course. Why?"

"His name was Cole Brown. He had a slight Texas drawl. When he called, he said he had heard that I helped someone overcome the grief of losing a loved one. Funny thing though, he never said it was him who had lost the loved one. Only that he was counting on me being able to help him."

Cole beamed. "I will admit it was a shock to both Cody and me when Porter appeared in the bedroom this morning. Is he still here? I haven't seen him since we cut the cake. I owe him my everlasting thanks for being so deviously clever."

"No, he and my folks left when the sun went down."

Gathering her closer, he whispered, "That's fine. We'll talk to him later. The night we met, you talked to Porter just before you walked out of Martin's house. What did he say to you?"

He watched as a sweet smile lit up her face. "He told me you were a one in a million type of guy. Said I should give you a second chance." Her kiss was slow and tender. "He was right. Guess I owe him, too."

"What did he say that had you laughing?"

"He told me he really appreciated what I had done for you that afternoon. Said he would do anything he could to help me, all I had to do was ask. That is when I laughed and told him my momma says all men claim that, when they want something. He thought that was pretty funny."

Burying his face in her hair, he inhaled the sweet scent of lavender. The golden globe of the full moon spotlighted them as they danced under a canopy of a billion sparkling stars. A kiss, a touch, a sigh, a taste, a moan, each sensation was instantly imprinted to memory as they swayed to the music.

If Ginger's eyes had been open, she would have seen a mist settle near the dance floor. As her many times removed Grandmama materialized, Ginger's parents joined her.

As they watched the newlyweds dance, Elvis, now sounding exactly like Frank Sinatra, crooned his way through "All The Way."

One full cycle of the moon had passed.

From the full moon to the blue moon on their wedding day, love had conquered.

## Epilogue

They were late arriving for the opening of Ginger's show. Not that it mattered; Shelby had everything under control.

Strolling around the gallery reacquainting herself with her work, Ginger knew the minute Cinnamon and Rosemary found the paintings meant for them. Their screeches were loud enough to turn heads even in a room full of murmuring voices.

Slowly threading her way through the crowd, she found her way to her sisters' sides. Handing a tissue to Cinnamon, she gently smiled as she admonished, "Next time buy waterproof mascara."

Rosemary, having already seen the painting meant for her, was devouring the previously missed finer details. "Who's the man?"

"Dad with hair. Had him bald at first, but he reminded me that at the age he is portrayed he still had his hair," was the straight-faced answer.

Rosemary was too happy to snip too loudly. "Funny. That I knew. As you well know I am talking about the one in profile. The one that looks like Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sun Dance Kid*. The one who also has my hand resting on his thigh."

"Hadn't noticed that? You're right, though, he does resemble Redford. As for the hand, I painted it as I saw it."

Rosemary's eyes narrowed as she glanced at her, but she made no comment because she caught Cinnamon's rapt expression. Looking at her sister's gift, she could see why Cinnamon was mesmerized.

The background of the painting was a mass of soft pastels. Even in the painting the aura pulsed with life energy. Large gold hoop earrings complimented Cinnamon's copper hair styled in a French braid. Her lips were painted a deep rusty red. A white, off the shoulder peasant blouse showcased creamy smooth shoulders and a large emerald cut smoky quartz necklace was nestled against ample cleavage. Her ring-laden hands cupped the sides of a large crystal ball as she gazed into its misty depth. Within the crystal ball, the hazy figure of a dark haired man could be seen. Off to the side was a double-row bench. Cheering her on, Ginger sat next to Cole. Rosemary sat next to the vaporous stranger in her own painting. Aunt Pesty and Martin, who had been added after their marriage, and their parents shared the upper bench.

At that moment, Cole, along with his mother, walked up to join them. Looking at the painting, Cole reached into the breast pocket of his suit and pulled out two jeweler boxes.

Looking at Cinnamon, he kissed her on the tip of her nose. "Happy Birthday, Gorgeous."

Taking the offered box, she quickly slipped off the red ribbon. "Oh, it's gorgeous." Inside the jeweler's box was the exact emerald cut smoky quartz necklace from the painting.

With another kiss to the tip of a nose, he murmured, "Happy Birthday, Sunshine."

"Cat's eye, it's huge. How beautiful. Thank you." Looking at the painting, Rosemary, too, discovered the same necklace around her neck.

Looking at Ginger, Rosemary and Cinnamon saw a Kelly green emerald surrounded by sparkling

diamonds around her slender neck. Smiling brightly, she said, "Cole gave me mine earlier today."

"I swear when I bought those necklaces I had no idea they were in the paintings. When I bought Gin's rings, the necklaces kept calling to me. There was no way they were going to let me walk out of the store without purchasing them."

Since stranger things had happened since Cole had come into their lives, no one thought the experience odd.

Virginia, Cole's mother, interrupted. "Cole, Ginger, look at this." She handed them a snapshot someone had taken from one of the many cameras placed on the tables during the wedding reception. They dutifully looked at the picture. Smiling, they looked at the third painting on the wall. It was an exact copy of the snapshot; only it had been painted weeks before the event.

Two lovers, seemingly alone, embraced as they gazed into each other's eyes as a full golden moon and a billion sparkling stars smiled down on them.

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In a dreamy voice filled with love, pride and happiness Caitlin said, "We made a good team, Pesty."

"We did! We did good, Caitlin. I will admit it got a little dicey there at the end. Don't know what I did wrong. Guess it doesn't matter, it all worked out all right. Is Herb still mad at us for interfering?"

Pesty felt a warmth by her head just before she heard, "How could I be mad, just look at the love that surrounds them. You did fine, Pesty, after you straightened out the trouble. It was time for her to settle down. But when will you learn to cast a spell without making a mess of something?"

"Didn't mess up the one that has us able to talk, did I?"

"No, you didn't Pesty. I give you a passing mark on that one."

"Honestly, Herb, I really worked hard on that spell for Gin. I'm not sure it was entirely my fault. Maybe the universe was getting ready to introduce fate and my spell to push things along confused it. Who knows? By the way, that was a nice touch having Porter call Gin."

"We didn't do that; we thought you did," Herb stated.

"No, not my doing. See, that's what I mean. Maybe the universe had its own ideas."

"Are you going to tell Martin what you did?"

"Caitlin, Herb is joking, right?"

"No, he's not. He's right you know. Just like I had to admit my part in the scheme to him, one day you will have to tell Martin everything."

"Maybe. I'll think about it. If I do, it won't be until after giving Cinn and Rose's fate dreams a nudge. Have you found out the identity of their life mates this time around?"

"Yes, I was able to find both men. Is next week too soon to start the next spell?" Caitlin asked hopefully.

"No, I've been doing some research; I should be ready by then."

"Okay, we'll talk to you later. 'Night, Pesty."



"Night, Caitlin. 'Night, Herb."

"Ginger, what are you doing over here by yourself? And who were you talking to?"

"Just saying a prayer of thanks, Martin." As she tucked her arm around his, she kissed him on the cheek.  
"Let's go join our happy family."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhonda Plummer, a certified Hypnotherapist and mediator, has found that writing paranormal romance novels is a natural extension of blending her career with her interest in the supernatural. She lives in the Pacific Northwest.

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