

Whiskey Creek Press  
[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Copyright ©2008 by WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

ABRACADABRA  
by  
Rhonda Plummer  
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS  
[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Published by  
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS  
Whiskey Creek Press  
PO Box 51052  
Casper, WY 82605-1052  
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Copyright © 2008 by *Rhonda Plummer*

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 (five) years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-60313-083-7

Credits

Cover Artist: Stella Price

Editor: Melanie Billings

Printed in the United States of America

Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek Press:

**[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)**

*Hocus Pocus*

Taking his father's request to play "I Spy" seriously, Dr. Cole Young sets out to prove that his over-the-hill uncle's sexy, young, vivacious fiancée is using hypnosis to swindle men out of their money. Believing himself too smart to be hypnotized, Cole poses as a client to uncover her scam.

Ginger Prescott, a gifted medium and hypnotherapist is used to clients with problems ranging from serious to sublimely ridiculous. But she has never dealt with a client whose touch sends electrical currents up her arm, has her mind wondering beyond the client/therapist relationship and who obviously isn't who she thought he was.

With help from a three hundred year old spell, a meddling aunt's haphazard approach to magic and a few mischievous spirits, Ginger opens Cole's soul to new wonders as love conquers all.

Dedication

~~To Helen~~

## Chapter 1

Under her hand, the rock hard shaft throbbed with exhilarating energy. Taking pleasure in the intoxicating power, Rosemary's feminine core felt ready to melt from the pure delight of feeling the boy toy's satisfying purr beneath her. Having enjoyed the heady power of pushing him to the limit, she knew it was time to ease back, to slow the tempo, to pace herself and the nicely packaged toy.

Ignoring common sense, she pushed.

Murmuring encouraging words to stroke his ego, she took pleasure in testing his boundaries to the max.

A sudden hissing sound did not bode well with her heightened feelings. As she eased back on the pressure, the driving momentum of unleashed energy relieved itself naturally.

She sighed.

Obviously, he was not prepared to meet her demands.

Before the acceleration of the powerful beast could reach the posted speed limit, the rancid odor of burnt rubber had her full attention.

"Hells bells!" Grinding her teeth together, Rosemary pulled the car onto the shoulder of the narrow two-lane road. Before the Mustang stopped rolling, she popped the hood.

As she lifted the car's hood, puffs of blue gray steam, mixed with air hotter than a furnace stoked full of blistering coal, filled the air. Dots of hot rusty water spitting out several holes in the dead radiator landed on her arms and legs.

A drop of moisture trickled between her breasts as she muttered, "Damn."

Watching a geyser of steam begin to roll out of a long crack in the radiator hose, she would have sworn she heard the clear, calm baritone voice of her father lecturing her on the finer points of car ownership.

While she was mentally listing her options, the hum of a well-tuned engine didn't catch Rosemary's attention until she heard a door slam.

Glancing around the car's hood, she cursed fate and her damnable luck. The five foot eleven, hazel-eyed sidewinder snake slithering towards her had haunted her dreams for weeks. The sleeves on his plaid western shirt were rolled up to his elbows. Faded denim jeans riding low on slim hips emphasized a well-toned body. A smattering of freckles, a lazy smile, a tiny chip on a slightly crooked eyetooth and two dimples gave him boyish charm. The foolish belief that she had blown his magnetism out of proportion instantly shattered when her heart scored a perfect ten doing a triple summersault.

Starting at pink toenails peeking out of frivolous, low-heeled white sandals, Walker scanned long legs, nicely rounded hips, and an inch of smooth as silk skin over a flat belly. By the time he reached the nicely rounded cleavage revealed by a V-necked knit top, he was calculating how long it would take to relieve her of the clothing.

His smooth as molasses Texas drawl purred with seduction. "Morning, ma'am."

When his gaze reached her face, Walker stopped dead in his tracks. "Rosie ... what the hell!" His eyes lost their friendly invitation. The voice lost its lazy Texas drawl. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

Clenching her teeth, Rosemary sent a few creative curses to the universe. Then for good measure, cursed the insistent pitty-pat of her double-crossing heart. "My name is Rosemary. If you call me Rosie one more time, so help me, you will be singing soprano for the rest of your life." When his sexy laugh started doing things to her belly she didn't want to acknowledge, she crossed her arms and impatiently tapped a foot.

"Retract the claws, Kitten; seems to me you got a problem. In case you haven't noticed, I'm the only one around to help. So, why don't we start this conversation all over again?"

"Go to hell."

"It can't be any hotter than standing on this asphalt. You going to tell me why you're here or do I have to find a creative way to pry it out of you?"

Jutting her chin towards the exposed engine, she clipped her answer. "Radiator."

That didn't answer the question, but he let it go. With steam and water still spitting, hissing and rolling out of the radiator cap, he didn't bother with sympathy. Pushing the brim of his sweat stained cowboy hat up a fraction of an inch, he gave a low whistle. "Going to be expensive to fix."

Removing a cell phone from a pocket, he kept his eyes on Rosemary as he punched a number. Looking at the copper colored hair twisted up off her neck, emerald green eyes dancing with fire and rosy pink lips compressed in anger, he wondered for the umpteenth time why he had allowed desire for the five foot six package of trouble to burrow under his skin. She was without a doubt the most unreasonable, stubborn, infuriating, sassy, sexy, tempting, smart, interesting female he'd ever had the misfortune of running into. He hoped to hell he wouldn't live to regret what he was about to do.

Without so much as a hello, he barked: "About thirty miles out of town on highway 29 there's a sweet looking yellow '68 Mach One Mustang with a busted radiator.... Sure, no problem. Key will be under the driver's floor mat. Let me know when you have some answers. Driver of the car will be at my place.... That's what I figured. Thanks."

Lowering the hood, he made sure it was latched before patting a front fender. "Rocky's the best mechanic around. This sweet baby will be in good hands." Walking to the driver's door, he leaned in the open window, grabbed the keys out of the ignition, and popped the trunk of the car without Rosemary saying a word.

When he grabbed her two pieces of luggage she came out of the stupor. "What do you think you're doing? Put those back. I'll wait for the tow truck."

"Sure you will, Kitten. Rocky said it might be over two hours before the car can be towed."

Ignoring common sense, she planted her feet shoulder width apart, crossed her arms, started tapping a finger on her forearm and arched one perfectly plucked brow. "No problem. I'll wait."

He held onto his temper by sheer willpower. "In case you haven't noticed, it is ninety-nine degrees and there's not a speck of shade."

"I'll sit in the car."

"No you won't."

The grip he had on his temper slipped when she didn't budge. "Rosie, stop acting like you don't have a lick of sense. The car's hotter than an oven and, in case you weren't listening to the radio, there's a storm

brewing. Hell knows how long before it unleashes its fury."

Would he believe the broken radio had been blasting out Jan & Dean and Beach Boy tunes all morning?  
"The radio's busted. I'm not going anywhere with you and stop calling me Rosie."

The muscles in Walker's neck and jaw tightened.

"Rosie, I would suggest you take me up on my generous offer and set that nice little ass of yours in my pickup before I throw you over my shoulder and dump you into the back with the sacks of feed." Like her father, the quiet calm of his voice was far more threatening than yelling.

There was no doubt he could and would carry out the threat.

He deposited her bags on the backseat of a late model, dusty, blue, extended cab pickup. After putting the key under the Mustang's floor mat, he rolled up all four windows.

Standing with his arms crossed, he gave her a devilish grin. "The hard way or the easy way, Rosie, it's your choice."

The rational voice of reason fell silent. The devil's advocate that she had named 'She-devil' accepted defeat, but no one said defeat meant gracious. Stopping only long enough to grab her purse and laptop case off the Mustang's back seat, she stomped to the pickup's passenger door.

Lifting his eyebrows in surprise, Walker snickered then smothered his laughter. With the fourth of July weekend upon them, it would be a week before parts for the car would arrive. He must be crazy, because he was looking forward to watching her firecracker temper flare when he shared that information.



## Chapter 2

By the time Walker turned onto a well-kept gravel road heading towards a stretch of rolling hills, a strong wind had dust and grit swirling around the pickup. Texas-size tumbleweeds rolled across the road in front of them as smaller ones twilled and bounced across the rocky ground.

Since climbing into the pickup, both of them had silently stewed in their own thoughts. Replaying the events that had led her here, Rosemary wondered if fate or her Aunt Pesty had masterminded this new twist.

For her twenty-ninth birthday, Ginger, her youngest sister, had painted her a picture. In a paddleboat setting, Rosemary sat at a poker table with three men. One man was her father. Their mother, dressed as a dancehall girl, had her arm draped around his shoulder. The back of a head with a king of spades peeking out of a stiff whitened collar represented the second man. The third gambler looked enough like Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sun Dance Kid* to be his brother. Rosemary's hand rested on his thigh. Under her hand, the corner of the king of hearts was clearly visible between her thumb and index finger.

A week after her birthday, Rosemary had flown to Las Vegas for a few days of serious gambling. When the stranger in the picture materialized on the stool next to her at a blackjack table at Dreamland Casino, common sense had told her to leave immediately. But the she-devil had won that round by convincing her to stick around to see what happened next. In hindsight, it was the wrong choice. In truth she had known it was the wrong choice at the time, but playing with fire had been far more tempting than playing it safe.

For several hours they had played cat and mouse; wherever she scurried, he followed. When she had gotten tired of the game, she decided to call it a night. Heading to Captain Nemo's Restaurant on the second floor of the casino, she was more than a little annoyed when he joined her. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Keeping an eye on you and getting ready to eat dinner. Got a problem with that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Leave or I'm calling security."

His flirtatious smile and the deep rumble of his laughter had grated on her nerves and compressed her lower belly into a warm ball of need. She had marveled at the strange phenomenon the universe had masterminded as she'd fought an internal battle to punch him and kiss him at the same time.

"Name's Walker Owens. You are driving my security team crazy. They will have no sympathy for your problem. Share how you're pulling off your little scam, or I continue being your shadow."

Having no need to cheat, she had laughed in his face. No alliances with casino dealers, no card counting, no sleight of hand, no hidden earpieces, no marked cards or weighted dice masterminded her winnings. Not that she'd been tempted, but it would have been interesting to see how he would have reacted if told she was a psychic intuitive.

"Cheating. You are accusing me of cheating. My, my, Mr. Owens, I am flattered. Just how do you propose I am accomplishing such a masterful feat under the watchful eye of your highly trained security force?"

With laughing eyes, boyish charm and a very slight Texas drawl, he'd calmly replied, "That, Rosemary Prescott from The Land of Oz Kansas is what I intend to find out."

With her temper ruffled and her curiosity stirred, Rosemary accepted the challenge. Keeping Walker guessing became a game as she played hi-low, roulette, craps, poker, twenty-one and keno. Even lowly slot machines did not get overlooked as they paid homage to her intuitive skills.

As promised, Walker had stayed firmly attached to her side from the minute she stepped onto the casino's main floor until she retired for the evening. Like a little boy pulling a girl's pigtail, he had taken delight in pushing her buttons. She loathed the nickname, Rosie; he called her Rosie. Where an arched brow and dismissive look had always kept unwanted advances at bay, Walker had taken a step closer, seduced her with his charm, and opened a longing she didn't want opened.

With practiced ease, she had evaded personal questions and asked none. Laughing at Walker's teasing had come naturally. Subduing her flirtatious nature had been far more difficult.

Rosemary's poker face had been pressed into full time service as she had fought an internal battle to keep her well-armored shield of self-preservation intact. Her underlying fear was if she got to know him she would be vulnerable to fate—she adamantly refused to go there. She was her own woman; no three hundred year old spell was going to control her life.

Seven days into the contest of wills, Walker asked her to dinner. Having anticipated the offer, the rehearsed refusal was on the tip of her tongue. No one could have been more surprised than Rosemary when she accepted.

Getting ready for the evening, she had repeatedly reprimanded the She-devil's streak of recklessness.

When he helped her into a shiny ebony black '60 Corvette convertible with red leather interior, Rosemary felt a tiny ping as interest put a dent in her armor.

The steak house with a piano player filling the air with soft background music and its flickering candles had been far too cozy. From politics, to classic cars, to books, to movies, to music, they shared similar opinions. Her plan to stay disinterested and to feign a headache to end the evening early had dissolved faster than an ice cube in a hot cup of coffee.

Walker's ability to dance the Fox Trot had impressed her. When he took her in his arms and smoothly led her around the dance floor in a Texas two-step, her protective armor developed a crack the length of the Mississippi.

A chaste kiss to the corner of her mouth at the end of the date melted what was left of her armor and blew her fears into mega proportions.

When Walker whispered, “night Rosie,” her sanity had returned along with her temper.

A chuckle and a retort that one day she would beg him to call her Rosie had gained him a “when pigs fly” retort. That comment earned her a smoldering look before Walker strolled away.

Early the next morning, acting more like the Cowardly Lion than she cared to admit, Rosemary left the hotel through a back entrance without checking out.

Without a doubt, that week had been the most stupid thing she had ever done in her life. It had taken hours of self-hypnosis to reconstruct her protective armor.

Now, five weeks later, sitting in Walker's pickup, driving down a graveled road that looked like it dead ended at a line of rolling hills in front of them, she hadn't revised that opinion. Saying a silent prayer, she hoped the gods heard her plea to thicken her hide to that of an armadillo. Anything less substantial would never repel Walker's boyish charm.

Coming out of her reverie, Rosemary asked, "Where are we headed?"

"My place. Any objection?"

*Welcome to my web said the spider to the fly*, She-devil whispered in a seductive purr just before common sense shouted, *Plenty*.

Refusing to show her panic, she said, "What's a security cop who wears custom made Italian suits and drives vintage cars doing posing as a cowboy?"

Walker didn't correct her wrong assumption. No matter what his body craved he wasn't going to let his dick control his head. *Yeah right!* The head still didn't trust her, but it wasn't administering any control over a lower piece of twitching anatomy. "Grew up here."

"It's a long commute to Vegas; how do you manage?"

"Ever heard of the Wright brothers? Airplanes? They have an engine, wings that displace air to cause lift, seats for passengers, and it can get you from one place to another quickly if there isn't a union strike or weather problems."

She crossed her arms. "Cute. Sarcasm is *my* forte—don't push me."

He could think of lots of things he wanted to do; pushing her wasn't on the list. Shoving tempting thoughts out of his mind, Walker squirmed in his seat in a futile effort to reposition the bulging shaft pressing against the zipper on his jeans. "What are you doing here? That wasn't exactly a major highway you were traveling down."

Rosemary shrugged. "Got a lead on the Mustang so I flew to Nashville to check it out. Knew it needed some work, but figured it was safe enough to drive home. When my sister called to say everyone was already headed to her in-laws' ranch in Texas, I changed routes to save some driving time. That is what put me on the back road."

"Who's everyone?"

"Why?"

"Are you always this distrusting? Fact is before you went running off in the middle of the night, I was beginning to think you were some kind of a witch. Never figured witches had families."

"For the record, this witch has two bewitching sisters who are master mind twisters, a witchdoctor bother-in-law, an alchemist aunt, and an uncle who captures souls. And I didn't run off, I stayed well beyond the three days planned. It was past time to leave town and the sun was peaking over the mountains when I pulled out of the parking garage, so it wasn't the middle of the night."

"Touché. I stand corrected."

As they neared the hills, the road gently curved to the right as it followed the bottom edge of a hill. "Close your eyes for a moment," Walker said.

Surprising them both by complying without an argument, Rosemary felt them take a sharp left.

"You can open them."

"It's beautiful."

Rosemary's barely there whisper stroked a memory. Before Walker could examine it, the impression fluttered around his heart then disappeared.

Forty-foot high, lush green poplars bordered a quarter of a mile of road. A sturdy U-shaped two-story house dominated the opening at the other end of the lane. The bottom third of the house was covered in smooth gray river rock. The upper portion was covered in split golden logs. With the roof extending over the center of the U, massive log pillars reaching from the ground to the roof line flanked the adobe red tiled sidewalk and front entrance. Potted evergreens standing guard on either side of the glass double door entrance mirrored the color of the forest green metal roof.

Taking a graveled road around the right side of the house brought them into the center of a twelve-acre horseshoe shaped valley. Three white fenced corrals sectioned off the south side of the fertile green valley floor. Two larger corrals flanked a stone and log barn as big as the house. Before the truck came to a stop in front of the barn a posse of dogs, with tails wagging, were running towards the pickup. A chorus of high-pitched yips and gravelly barks greeted them as they opened the truck's doors.

Jumping down from the truck, Rosemary's shoulders were instantly plastered against the seat as a gray Irish wolfhound, as tall as a small pony, planted his paws on her shoulders and enthusiastically licked her face.

"Wolf, down."

The command was ignored.

Grabbing Wolf's collar, Walker tugged. "Wolf, down." Wolf sat. His bottom squirmed as his tail stirred the dust and gravel under him. His huge front paws were planted on top of Rosemary's passion pink painted toenails.

"Sorry. I should have warned you. He's still an ill mannered pup."

When she stopped laughing, Rosemary said, "Do you think you could get him off my toes?"

As Walker lifted the big dog by his chest, she pulled her feet out from under him and stepped away from the truck.

Except for Wolf and a harlequin Great Dane missing part of one ear, the dog's pedigrees were Heinz 57 variety.

"Are they all yours?"

"Nope. Juanita's. Every homeless or lost animal within a hundred miles of here is bound to hear about her. She used to pretend she was trying to find them good homes. Now she doesn't even bother with the pretense."

*Omigod, Walker is married. The rotten slimy jerk.*

"Young man, where are your manners? You don't bring guests to the back of the house first. I know I taught you better!" Walking towards them was a plump, older woman with short curly salt and pepper hair. She gave Rosemary the once over before giving one sharp nod.

Looking at Walker, she muttered, "Humph, it's about time."

"Rosemary Prescott. Juanita Bates, my aunt." Walker nodded at each of them as he said their names.

*Okay, not a rotten slimy jerk.*

"I'll only warn you once; she runs this place with an iron hand. Also keeps a nasty tasting bar of soap in the kitchen in case someone can't run fast enough after smarting off. Her better half is around here somewhere; name's Joe, also answers to 'henpecked.'" The dishtowel in Juanita's hand smacked Walker's backside as he laughingly retreated into the barn.

Shaking her head, Juanita smiled at Walker's retreating back then scanned the flattened dry grass covering the rolling hillsides. "Way the wind's picking up it won't be long before the dust finds its way into the valley. Come on back to the house; it's too darn hot to stand around outside."

Looking at the back of the house, Rosemary realized the house was built in an H-shape. The center of the H had a double-decked porch with the roofline extending over the upper porch like it had in the front. Three sets of French doors opened to the upper landing.

Entering French doors on the lower level porch, they walked into a blissfully cool combination kitchen and dining area.

Smelling the heavenly aroma of homemade bread, Rosemary heard her stomach grumble loudly.

"There's ice tea in the refrigerator. Lunch won't be for another hour. Think you can wait that long?"

"Thank you, I'm sure I can last an hour." Several of the upper cupboards were open shelves. Spotting glasses, Rosemary helped herself to a tall glass of ice tea.

Taking a cell phone out of her purse, Rosemary walked to an oversized picture window in the dining area as she punched memory, then two. Waiting impatiently for Ginger to answer, she watched the men working.

"Hi, Gin ... Yeah, I'm on my way ... No, not sure when I'll arrive ... Yes, I heard about the tornado watch. I'm about one hundred thirty miles from the ranch."

It hurt her pride to say, "Had a little bit of car trouble ... No, the radiator sprang a few leaks."

As she listened to Ginger, her foot began tapping the floor with impatience. "I know. I don't need your lecture. Dad made his thoughts on the subject perfectly clear ... No, haven't seen him, but I swear I heard his baritone voice chiding my recklessness."

Taking a deep breath for Dutch courage, Rosemary added, "Remember Sun Dance?"

She gave a half-hearted smile at Ginger's response. "Well I ran into him again this morning. Truth is, he came to my rescue. Anyway..."

Rosemary groaned. "I know ... I know ... Yes ... I don't believe in coincidence any more then you do ... No, I haven't had any destiny dreams in awhile ... When I get my hands on Aunt Pesty, I swear I will strangle her until she admits if she had anything to do with this farce."

Her expression softened as she listened. "Gin, I'm not you. And Walker sure as heck isn't Cole. I have no interest in a for all eternity relationship. As soon as I know more I'll let you know ... I promise. I won't leave town if the tornado warnings haven't been lifted ... yes, I'll call when I'm ready to leave ... Love you too, bye."

Remaining at the window, Rosemary watched a small dust devil dance around a corral where half a dozen Thoroughbred horses nervously run back and forth. When the corral's gate was opened, the

horses trotted towards the barn without needing to be prompted. A few minutes later, Walker opened the gate on a corral where a Holstein with a white goose sitting comfortably on her back was bellowing her unhappiness. The cow bolted and the goose flew for the barn without a backward glance or thank you.

Before driving the pickup into the barn and securely locking the barn doors, Walker backed up to the porch. Without glancing her way, he deposited her bags on a weathered wood bench.

As the air grew thick with dust, yard tools, hoses and a wheel barrel were put in the barn. Rosemary chuckled as she watched Walker flap his arms to get a rooster and two Rhode Island Red hens inside a miniature version of the barn.

With the air now too thick with dust to see much of anything, she turned to study the enormous room behind her.

The left side of the room was the kitchen. A six-burner chef's stainless steel range was tucked into a red tile archway on the outside wall. The back of the archway was covered with hand painted tiles. The artist's rendition of an old wooden cart full of ripe pumpkins, goose necked squash, bright red apples, two geese and a tilted water spigot and blue and yellow wild flowers added a touch of the outdoors to the room. Random tiles of brunt orange, dark green, royal blue, mustard yellow and cranberry red brightened the predominantly white tile backsplashes under the cabinets. Open shelving and glass fronted cabinet doors finished off the country hominess of the room.

In the adjoining dining area, white bead board covered the bottom portion of the walls. The remaining wall space was sponged in three shades of yellow. Running along the top of the wainscoting was a narrow plate shelf holding an interesting odds and ends assortment of green, pink and yellow Depression glass. An old scarred pine trestle table with twelve mismatched chairs sat in the center of the room. A green and white enamel wood-burning cook stove sitting in one corner held an attractive array of thriving African Violets and Christmas cactus. An old oak sideboard with a mirrored backsplash on the opposite wall held a tarnished silver tea set.

"The room is lovely. Did you design it?"

Juanita stopped stirring a pot of potato soup as she looked around the kitchen. Her eyes sparkled with pride. "No. When the old ranch house burned down, Walker designed this place. The antiques you see were stored in an old barn. Never had any use for them before; now they make a nice reminder of the past. How did you meet up with Walker?"

Rosemary smiled; curiosity hadn't taken long to bring out the questions. "The radiator on my Mustang sprung a leak on highway 29. Walker pulled up a few minutes later. Someone named Rocky is going to pick up the car. Hopefully by late this afternoon it will be fixed and I will be back on the road."

Optimism was always good. Intuition, however, was playing havoc with her gut. Rosemary was just superstitious enough to believe that if she didn't test the odds everything would turn into her favor, no matter what the universe was dishing out at the moment.

When She-devil whispered, *Not this time*, Rosemary ignored her.

"You met him before that."

"What makes you say that?"

"That boy wouldn't have brought you here otherwise. This is his private place. Not many people outside

the area know about this place, much less been invited to visit."

*Interesting. Scary. Hells bells, what next?* Rosemary's gut twisted into a tighter knot.

A clap of thunder instantly followed by a heavy sheet of rain, had dogs and men running for shelter. Under the protection of the porch, eight male beasts shook off raindrops as a forked flash of lightening lit the dark as night sky.

A rolling furry of thunder rattled the windows as Walker and Joe entered the room carrying her bags. The dogs, whining their protest at being locked out, settled down on overstuffed dog beds scattered around the porch.

Joe was as skinny as a beanpole and just as tall. Deeply etched laugh lines fanning out from the edges of steel gray eyes flashed with curiosity as he studied Rosemary. "That was close. Think we got everything tied down or put in the barn. Need to go up and move the patio furniture inside, won't be a minute."

As the lights flickered, Juanita stopped him. "Already taken care of."

Changing direction, Joe retrieved three lanterns and several fat white candles from a cupboard.

Walker located a twenty-four hour news station on a portable radio in time to hear that severe thunderstorm warnings with the possibility of tornados were posted for several more counties.

As if the announcement was an omen, pea sized hail began hammering the metal roof. Bouncing as they landed, it only took seconds for the hail to turn the ground snow white.

Juanita, putting voice to a brief prayer, turned to the stove as the lights continued sputtering on and off. "Best get lunch out of the way before the electricity goes off for good."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Rosemary asked.

"Get a jar of pears out of the pantry. There's cottage cheese in the right side of the refrigerator. Walker, set the table." Juanita beamed her approval as they both set to work.

By the time they sat down to eat, a howling wind pounded a rain-hail mixer against the house. As the wind danced to its own tune, erratic gusts sprayed the wet mixture onto the sheltered porch. Taking pity on the dogs, Walker let them in the house. With nails clicking on the wide, white pine flooring, the dogs made their way back to the beds that Walker scattered around the dining room floor.

Except for Wolf.

Sitting next to Rosemary, Wolf laid his big head on her lap. Walker looked at Wolf, pointed towards his dog bed and commanded, "Bed." Wolf's tail gave a lazy sweep of the floor.

"Unless you object to his being by the table, he's fine," Rosemary said as she rubbed a spot behind the dog's ear. "Guess I have a new friend."

*Lucky dog.* Damn, she had him totally out of control and Walker had no one to blame for putting temptation in his path but himself. Squirming, Walker ignored the knowing smile on Joe's face.

"How long do storms like this usually last?" Watching the fury of the storm, Rosemary worried her bottom lip.

"Could be a couple of hours, could last until evening," Joe answered.

"Now you see why I refused to let you stay with the car," Walker added as he buttered a slice of warm bread.

The Mustang was just a piece of metal, but Rosemary had been taught to take care of what she owned. Not sure how tight the old rubber seals were around the car doors and windows, she asked, "Do you think Rocky had room in the garage to get my boy out of the storm?"

Three sets of eyes looked at Rosemary questioningly.

She chuckled at their expressions. "Family joke. My dad was out numbered five to one. In desperation he called the vintage cars he collected 'the boys.' He claimed it evened out the female/male ratio in his favor."

"Does it help?" Joe asked.

Rosemary cocked her head. "It did. My folks were killed by a drunk driver when I was sixteen, but I remember Dad using the cars Mom liked as a bribe if he thought it would hedge his advantage."

Joe glanced at Walker before turning his attention back to Rosemary. "Sorry you lost your folks; that's tough on a kid."

Walker came back to her question. "Doubt there was time to get the Mustang. The first tornado warnings included this county. Without the hills to block the view, the storm's approach would have been easy to track."

Rosemary wouldn't wish anyone the hassle of driving in this weather, but the odds were one hundred percent that the car had been picked up. The car being protected from the fury of the storm was coming up with fifty-fifty odds. Pressing the question would seem odd so she dropped the subject.

Finishing her bowl of potato soup, Rosemary declined a second. After buttering a slice of bread, she spread a liberal amount of homemade blackberry jelly over the top.

As they finished putting food away, the lights slowly dimmed before going off for good. Fingers of jagged yellow lightning hit the ground. The foundation of the house shook. As long black shadows streaked across the counters and walls, the kitchen became a black and white abstract of gloom. A second later, the windows and French doors rattled from the repercussion of the thunder.

A dog whimpered. At least Rosemary hoped it had been one of the dogs. She had never been fond of lightning, but she had never let anyone outside the family know about that weakness.

The wind now hit the house from all directions at once. Whining, Wolf buried his big head under a dog bed. Rosemary was thinking she would join him when the radio announcer's voice took on a new urgency. With five positive tornado sightings, he listed the counties involved.

Walker's actions were matter of fact, his voice authoritative. "Rose, help Juanita grab some food."

Grabbing a lantern and a radio, Walker gave a low whistle to get the dogs to follow him. When he opened a door leading to the basement, the dogs didn't need any encouragement to dash down the stairs. Heading to his office, Walker secured files and his computer.

As Rosemary's hands were filled with bread, butter and a gallon of milk, she watched Joe blow out the candles, shut down a propane valve beside the stove and shut off the electrical circuits before picking up the other two lanterns.



Shooing her towards the stairs, Juanita was right behind her carrying a cherry pie and a bag full of yarn and knitting needles.

The whole process hadn't taken forty-five seconds. They weren't halfway down the basement stairs when they heard a window shatter.

Rosemary hesitated.

"Don't stop. The ceiling's reinforced. This the safest place in the house." Walker held the lantern lower so she could easily see the steps.

The basement shelter was obviously equipped for just such emergencies. In a thirty by twenty foot room, a large multi-colored braided rug filled the center of the cement floor. Three sets of basic blue metal bunk beds lined the far wall. A square '50's chrome and red Formica table with four chairs and four leather recliners were the only other furnishings in the room. Heavy duty metal shelves held jars full of fruits and vegetables, eating utensils, candles, batteries, several sizes of flashlights, a small portable camp stove, towels, a large first aid kit and a selection of board games and paperback books. A walled off section in one corner held a bathroom.

Rosemary couldn't repress the shudder that started at the base of her scalp and went clear to her toes. "How often are you forced to use this room?"

"All depends on how the storm cells develop; some years more than others. This room is a heck of a lot more comfortable than the old root cellar we used to use during storms," Joe said as he lit another lantern.

"Has a tornado ever touched down?"

"Not on the property. The hills have always protected us from that actuality. Damage from flying debris is a different matter. Being from Kansas, I bet you're used to tornadoes." Joe's voice was far more casual than the coiled tension in his stance.

"You'd lose the bet. I've seen small funnels skipping high in the sky but I've never been in a storm area."

Everyone winced when something above them crashed.

"Sounds like we'll have plenty to clean up when this one's over." Hoping to get Rosemary's mind off the storm, Joe pulled the table and chairs into the center of the room. "Walker says you're a fair poker player for a female. I've been known to play a pretty good game myself. How about playing a hand or two?"

Rosemary fumed.

Joe's laughter primed the sparks. "You're right, Walker. She's got a temper to go with that red hair. Now, let's check out that cheating theory of yours."

That comment ignited the flames. It was one thing for Walker to accuse her of cheating, but talking about her to strangers was totally unacceptable.

Walker gave her a placating smile as she shot him a murderous glare. Her index finger tapped her forearm in double time.

Walker had hated the temper tantrums his mother had thrown, so why did he feel a tinge of disappointment when she didn't stomp her foot?

Juanita watched the sparks fly with amusement. Winking at Joe, she settled into one of the recliners. In seconds, the steady sound of clicking knitting needles filled the room.

Refusing to be provoked into a verbal sparring match or, for that matter, a mini temper tantrum, Rosemary pulled out a chair and sat down. Casually folding her hands on top of the table, she smiled innocently. "Gentleman, I'm ready to prove to both of you sidewinder, belly crawling, snakes that women are the superior sex."

Walker held up his hands in mock defeat. "Kitten, I never accused you of not being superior. You proved you were more than my match in Vegas."

Still mad, she didn't allow herself the satisfaction of accepting his statement as a pacifying apology. "Five card draw. Opening ante is one dollar, two more to draw. From there bidding is open. Either of you have a problem with that?"

She won the first five hands. Tossed in the next two. Won the next. Tossed in the next three. As the storm raged, chips passed back and forth across the table. Hours later, it came down to Rosemary and Joe facing each other off. He was an excellent poker player, but skill didn't stand a chance against Rosemary's psychic intuition. When Joe pushed all his chips into the pile, she knew he thought she was bluffing or he had a hand he figured couldn't lose. Laying down a straight flush, Queen high, she sat back, crossed her arms and, for the first time since sitting down, smiled.

Astonishment played across Joe's face. An 'I'll be damned smile' spread from ear to ear. "Never seen anything like it. You got yourself one heck of a poker face and the damndest luck I've ever seen." Laying his cards face up on the table, he displayed a straight flush, Jack high.

Before Rosemary could comment, the radio's static cleared enough to hear broken words through the crackle. Several storm cells had converged to make one monster storm. A baker's dozen confirmed tornado touchdowns and hundreds of reports of damage and flooding had spread through sections of five states.

Rosemary groaned with frustration when she heard the storm was expected to last through the night. A night under the same roof as Walker, even with chaperones, was going to test her patience and the emotional shield she had built to ward off fate and magic spells to the max.

With no mention of current tornado sightings in their immediate area, Joe, with Walker one-step behind, headed upstairs.

### Chapter 3

"Do you knit?" Juanita asked.

"Knitting needles are more useful as chopsticks when placed in my hands. My aunt started knitting and quilting a year ago. She enjoys both so much, a quilters hoop, yarn and needles go everywhere she goes."

"I can appreciate that. Most of my knitting gets done while watching television, but a few old gals at church knit during the service. They claim it keeps them awake when the pastor decides to get a little long-winded."

"Does the preacher know that?"

"The first part yes, the last probably. Last year, on Super Bowl Sunday, the men left the service promptly at noon so they wouldn't miss the one o'clock kickoff. Since the women have been more polite, he ignores the sound of the needles clicking."

"Aunt Pesty sold some items at a craft show over Memorial Day weekend, but she didn't feel that most buyers appreciated the hours each item took to make or the quality of her handiwork. What do you do with everything you make?"

"Having someone appreciate and want your handiwork can become a problem. Usually, I have a person, or gift, in mind before I start a project."

Juanita was knitting powder blue yarn with specks of navy and midnight blue into a square of tiny popcorn puffs with a cable design running down two edges. The size was what puzzled Rosemary.

"What are you making?"

"This is part of a layette set. The booties, stocking cap and sweater are finished. This will be a lap blanket to use in the car seat. When this is done I'll make a full size baby blanket to match."

As she watched Juanita knit, she started to calculate the odds on how her bother-in-law's family was doing.

"Your family is fine, there's no need to worry about them," Juanita said.

Hells bells, one person reading her mind was bad enough. She certainly hoped that was solely her mother's expertise. If not, she was in a deep pile of doo-doo, considering the conflicting sexual and murderous thoughts she'd had about Walker since arriving.

Before she could ask any questions, Walker and Joe came bounding down the stairs, soaked to the bone.

Walker, carrying a change of clothing and Rosemary's bags, looked skeptically from her to his aunt.

Rosemary gave him a 'wouldn't you like to know' grin.

After placing his change of clothing and a warmer outfit for Juanita on the table, Joe urged the dogs up the stairs.

"Couldn't you two have used your slickers?" Juanita eyed the growing puddle of water pooling at Walkers feet.

"Believe me, we did. It's more like a hurricane out there than a summer storm. Lost all the windows on the east side of the house. We nailed some plywood over the holes. And we boarded up the kitchen window."

As the dogs came running down the stairs, Walker headed for the bathroom.

Joe ambled down the stairs carrying the container of leftover potato soup, a cantaloupe and a bowl full of eggs. "I'm starving. How about some supper."

"How are the animals?" Juanita asked.

"Don't fret, hon. Horses are skittish. Milked Butterscotch, so she's not complaining. The cats will make sure the milk doesn't go to waste. The geese are settled in their boxes. Visibility's next to nothing between the rain and darkness; don't know what the rest of the property looks like."

Setting up a two-burner propane camp stove, they quickly made a simple tasty meal. As Juanita started cutting generous pieces of cherry pie, Walker made a mad dash up the stairs.

When he came back down, seconds later, holding a carton of vanilla ice cream, his face was sober. "Didn't think it could happen, but the wind is worse. It sounds like a freight train heading straight for us with a strange hissing sound that wasn't there earlier. There's hail the size of the pie cherries covering the ground. What's the radio saying?"

"Static's too bad to pick up anything." Joe's frustration was evident.

Walker, turning towards his aunt, bowed. "Oh, mighty one what do you see in your crystal ball? Any chance of us getting hit by a tornado?"

Only Juanita noticed Rosemary stiffen. The reaction puzzled her and had her longing to use the crystal ball Walker was always teasing her about. A peek at the layer under Rosemary's pretty exterior package wouldn't be a bad idea.

"Doesn't matter if we do. I see all of us living well into old age. Now be a good boy and share that ice cream before it melts all over the floor."

Rosemary had gotten an immediate affirmative to Walker's question. Yet, oddly, it was out of whack. Hit, but not by a tornado, was closer to the truth. Sometimes knowing without being able to share was far worse than ignorance. And what was this about Juanita and crystal balls? Surely, Walker was joking. Or was he? Juanita hadn't looked surprised at the comment or the question.

When Rosemary declined the challenge of a chess game, Joe and Walker played. The sound of glass shattering and occasional thumps were the only noises to interrupt the steady clicking of Juanita's knitting needles and the measured snoring of sleeping dogs. Rosemary, sitting in a recliner, occasionally turned a page of the book in her hand. Not a word she read registered. Fate, the unseen hand dealing cards without revealing the jokers hidden in the mix until you unexpectedly stumbled upon them, had her full attention.

Rosemary steadfastly believed there was more than one man on earth able to meet her needs and be compatible with her talents and desires. Without the threat of losing her psychic abilities, she knew she would have explored a few of those possibilities with more than passing interest. Yet according to her umpteenth whatever Grandmamma, if she opted to marry someone other than the man shown to her in dream visions she would lose her powers. She wasn't willing to go to that extreme for a romp in any man's bed.

Cole, her bother-in-law, logically pointed out that nothing in Grandmama's spell indicated a female had to marry. Her argument had been no one should be forced into a life of sterile virginity in order to keep a gift, especially a hereditary gift. After all, wasn't a gift supposed to be freely given, no strings attached? He had laughed at her outrage, kissed her on the forehead, and bet her that she would sort it all out without having to live that dire of a fate. Having every intention of winning her battle against fate and the three hundred-year-old spell, she didn't believe a word he said.

## Chapter 4

The bunk bed was more comfortable than Rosemary expected. Drifting comfortably into sleep, Wolf briefly pulled her back into reality when he crawled onto the bed and sprawled across her legs. Pulling her legs out from under him, she shifted position. A second later, she drifted into the twilight zone of a dream.

*Gazing through the pungent haze of cigarette and cigar smoke, Rose took stock of the room. The grand sweeping stairway descending down from the third level of the paddleboat, covered in a dusty rose and gray patterned carpet, was empty. Mirrors behind the crystal and brass sconces lining the walls sparkled.*

*The blackjack and faro tables were full, the new roulette wheel crowded. Smiling, she watched elegantly dressed ladies eagerly put their money down in hopes of beating the odds at the wheel of fortune. The well-heeled New Orleans crowd was in an amicable mood. It would be a good night for Rose's Casino.*

*A highly respected citizen of New Orleans, heading for the discreet backrooms with one of her ladies, had Rose shaking her head. If the gossip his actions were fueling reached his wife, currently standing at the roulette wheel, all hell would break loose before the night was over.*

*Stopping a waiter, Rose asked him to open all the windows. The light breeze would rid the room of the cigarette and cigar smoke. Circling the room, she paused at each table. Addressing everyone by name, Rose patted bald heads, ran her hands affectionately across the backs of masculine shoulders and offered sympathy, congratulations or encouragement, depending on the need. Gambling was always in the house's favor, but Rose staked her name and reputation on running honest games.*

*As she approached the last table in the room a handsome sandy haired devil draped a possessive arm around her waist, without taking his eyes off his dark haired opponent.*

*"Call ya', Walker." The opponent's voice was raspy, his eyes watchful.*

*Walker laid down three sevens. The other man threw his cards down in disgust. "Rose, get that man of yours out of my sight before he takes all my money."*

*She laughed. Walker excused himself from the game. Taking her small hand in his, he silently led her down a passage then up a flight of narrow stairs to reach her private quarters.*

*Behind closed doors he wasted no time staking his claim as he captured her against the closed door.*

*If she hadn't been as eager as Walker, she would have thought the assault from his warm whiskey tainted lips a bit excessive. When he started kissing and tickling the sensitive pulse at the hollow of her neck with his tongue, Rose's legs buckled. Working his way towards the generous amount of cleavage her low cut gown revealed, Walker used his teeth to push aside the lacy fabric. Teasing the sensitive bud with his tongue, Rose softly moaned.*

*The scent of leather, tobacco and horseflesh clinging to Walker's clothing was such an intricate part of him that it heightened her senses as much as his kisses. Kneading her bottom with his large hands, he ground his hardened manhood against Rose's lower belly.*

*Muttering something about there being too many layers of clothing between them, Walker started releasing the endless row of button down the back of Rose's dress.*

*The light from the full moon shining through a small window was enough to see the smoldering passion in Walker's eyes when he lifted his head and shifted them into a more comfortable position against the door.*

*"Rosie, did you have to take so long working the room? You've been gone two weeks. You could have allowed me to welcome you home first."*

*That had been the wrong thing to say.*

*Pushing away from him, Rose straightened her clothing as she cried out, "You could have come with me or been here when the boat docked at noon."*

*He didn't move away from the door. "Rosie, Sweetheart, I have responsibilities. This paddleboat is not the only family business that demands my attention. A lot of people depend on me. I can't always up and leave every time the boat pulls out or docks."*

*"What about the responsibility to me? We're married. For three years I've allowed you to sweet talk me into allowing you to keep that fact private. I'm tired of waiting. Do you really think another day is going to make your snooty parents change their opinion of me? Or are you just as ashamed of me? If so, why did you bother marrying me?"*

*In two strides, he was close enough to gather her in his arms. Whispering in her ear, he ran his hands up and down her back in a soothing motion. "Rosie, Sweetheart, I love you. Nothing will ever change that. You know that if my father finds out about our marriage, he will disinherit me. I promise it won't be for much longer."*

*Nuzzling her neck and ear with his lips and tongue, he pleaded, "Please, Rosie, let's not waste time arguing."*

*Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. Using all her physical and emotional strength to push on his chest, she stepped out of his embrace. Stomping one slippered foot, she spit back, "Don't call me Rosie. Until you're ready to announce to the world that we're married, don't ever call me Rosie again. I'm tired of men thinking I'm no different than the girls working for me. Now get out."*

*When he left without argument, it took all her willpower not to run after him. With his footsteps fading down the stairs, she flung herself onto the feather bed, crying.*

*Ginger awoke with the pillow beneath her head wet from a steady flow of tears. Wolf, sitting beside the bed was nudging her hand with his cold nose.*

*As she stroked the dog's big head, her breathing steadied and the tears slowly stopped flowing.*

*The dream held a sorrowful quality of truth that tugged at her heart. Pride in ownership had been strong as she walked through the paddleboat casino.*

*Was it coincidence or something more that had the dream lover carrying the same name as the sidewinder snake currently driving her crazy in more ways than one? One thing for sure, in the dream, her raw sexual hunger for Walker had been wrapped in profound love. The emotional pain caused by his refusal to publicly acknowledge their marriage felt worse than a sharp knife slicing tender skin. The impression of being nothing more than a sexual toy had Rose feeling dirty and ashamed.*

Rolling onto her back, Rosemary continued to stroke Wolf's head. She was half asleep when she felt Wolf lick a salty tear off her cheek before he settled down on the floor beside the bed.

\* \* \* \*

Walker climbed onto the top bunk bed, as far away from Rosemary as he could get. It was past midnight, but he didn't figure he'd get much sleep with her so close yet so damn far away. Tucking his hands behind his head, he stared at the ceiling, without seeing anything in the pitch-black basement.

Now was not the time for him to become involved with anyone. He had come to the ranch for a much-needed break, a breath of fresh air, some privacy, and a little grounding with reality. There was nothing better than holding a pitchfork full of manure or being told to take out the garbage if you wanted dessert to appreciate that he was not the 'Golden God' Las Vegas had dubbed him after taking over his father's casino at the age of twenty-eight.

In the five years since his father's death, Helen, his father's widow, had hired several different law firms in hopes of finding a loophole in his father's will. The will had given Walker Dreamland Casino and the bulk of his father's estate. After the last courtroom circus act, two weeks ago, where Helen lost her final appeal, she had made a threat. At least he thought it was a threat. Her words hadn't made any sense, so there was always the possibility that she had been drunk and was just blowing off steam. But why would she leave a message calling him Satan and say she was going to expose him to the world?

When Walker's eyes drifted closed, he was instantly asleep.

*From his vantage point, Walker scanned the crowd. He knew everyone in the crowded room. He was proud of the fact that the floating casino had a reputation for attracting the wealthy men and woman of society between St. Louis and New Orleans.*

*Disappointed in not spotting the one person he wanted, he sat at his table, and anteed up for a hand of five-card draw.*

*The cards in his hand and the lively mass of people didn't stop Walker's internal radar from knowing when Rose arrived. Searching the room, he spotted her talking to a young black waiter. His fingers twitched with anticipation at the thought of destroying the intricate mass of shiny copper colored curls framing her face. Looking over the red lace and satin dress showcasing her shapely figure to perfection, he instantly hardened with desire.*

*Without openly staring, he kept track of her as she worked her way around the room. Men openly admired her body—woman envied her beauty and grace. Even after four years of watching her dispel both situations, he was amazed and proud of her graciousness. The fact that she was smart and didn't tolerate fools left him more than a little apprehensive about how much longer he could convince her to accept their situation.*

*The riverboat would be docked for the next two evenings then make its last run up the mighty Mississippi before returning to New Orleans for the winter. Most paddleboats ran the river year round. It was a dangerous enterprise due to the unpredictability of the Mississippi's water level, sand bars, rock piles and snags. The increasing volume of paddleboats navigating the river was creating new dangers. Although willing to risk the other riverboats in his fleet as they carried passengers and supplies up and down the river, Walker was not willing to risk Rose's life during winter's harsher conditions. Nor would he admit being jealous of the attention she gave the male customers. But he looked forward to having her undivided attention during the long cold nights of winter.*

*When she finally approached him, he draped a possessive arm around her waist without taking his*



eyes off his dark haired opponent.

"Call ya', Walker."

The gambler shook his head in disgust when Walker placed three sevens on the table. "Rose, get that man of yours out of my sight before he takes all my money."

Her laughter, ringing with merriment, stirred his senses as Walker excused himself from the game, grabbed her hand and headed towards a backset of stairs. He ignored the knowing smiles of the men they passed.

Having been deprived of her company for two weeks, Walker wasn't in the mood to be slow, or gentle. With the door closed, he captured her against the door of her well-appointed cabin. Taking pleasure in her receptive response, he used his teeth to gain access to a rosy peaked nipple. Rose's moan had him wanting to rip the gown from her body. Lifting his head to capture her parted lips, he tasted the sweet mint tea she favored as he started unbuttoning the tiny buttons down the back of her gown.

When she pushed him away to lash out over the secretiveness of their marriage, he was instantly defensive. He knew her frustration—it was an old argument.

He hadn't wanted to get married, but Rose had refused to allow him into her bed without making it legal. Maybe playing the hard to get virgin had clouded his better judgment, but he had found he couldn't resist her temptation. They were married a year after meeting. Three years later, the temptation of her body, unconditional support and unwavering love still gripped him with a fierceness that kept him faithful.

Walker's father knew he warmed Rose's bed. The fact that they were married was a well-guarded secret. In his father's opinion, which was all that mattered since he controlled the purse strings, Rose's reputation as a gambler made her social value as a wife worthless. If the marriage became public knowledge, his father would carry through with the threat to disinherit him. In truth, the threat of disinheritance was made anytime Walker balked at his father's orders. Having invested too much to throw away that inheritance, he kept his mouth shut and hoped his father wouldn't find out about his occasional acts of rebellion.

He had promised Rose that the day he inherited what was rightfully his, he would announce their marriage. He meant to do just that. Until then, she was going to have to settle for the way things were.

When she demanded he leave her stateroom, he allowed pride and a misguided judgment call that she would back down to propel him out of the room.

Now he sat staring at a pair of aces, waiting for the others at the table to place their bets. And wondering what the hell he was going to do if she kept pushing the issue to announce their marriage.

Wolf's low whine woke Walker up. He was getting ready to investigate when he heard the dog settle back down.

Rubbing his hands over his face didn't help clear the cobweb like residue of fear and lust out of his mind. Rolling onto his back, Walker folded his hands behind his head, and once again stared at a ceiling he couldn't see.

The dream had been tangible, resembling a memory rather than disjointed meaningless actions. Feelings, thoughts, desire and fears had been exposed to scrutiny. If the dream had been factual, he'd be ashamed at what a selfish bastard he'd been.

He hadn't known love could be superficial and deeply binding at the same time but, in the dream, Walker's love for Rosie had been both. There was no doubt that if she had not forced his hand, Rose would have been a mistress, not his wife. As it was, Walker still put his feelings, his needs, his wants, before anything Rose wanted.

The situation was close enough to what Walker's mother and father had shared that he shivered as goose bumps rode up his spine. If he believed in ghosts, Walker would agree with what Juanita would say; the past was walking across his grave.

Hell, why was he becoming melancholy over something as trivial as a dream? Rolling onto his side, he ignored his throbbing shaft. Bunching the soft feather pillow into a more comfortable position, Walker pushed the dream out of his mind.

## Chapter 5

"Wake up, Kitten. Time to get up."

Rosemary groaned into her pillow. Rolling onto her back, she slowly opened her eyes. The metal poles supporting the bunk bed above her confirmed yesterday wasn't just a bad dream.

"What time is it?"

"Six. Sun will be coming up shortly."

Rolling away from him, she pulled the covers over her head. "Wake me at nine."

He chuckled. "Figured you weren't a morning person. Too bad, it's time to rise and shine." With that, Walker pulled the covers off the bed.

Rosemary roared with displeasure. "Walker you ... you, snake. That was downright mean."

He had the nerve to laugh. "You need coffee if that's the best retort you can come up with. Besides, mean would have been pulling you off the bed along with the covers."

Rolling to a sitting position, she tugged at the t-shirt and sweats she was wearing. Pushing her hair off her face, she begged, "Coffee. You mentioned coffee."

"Say 'pretty please' and I'll get you a cup."

She snarled. "You are such a low bellied snake. I'll get my own cup."

Sidestepping his laughing bulk, she grabbed a cup of coffee as she headed to the bathroom.

A cold shower didn't help her disposition, but it opened her eyes and cleared the brain of the ghostly shadows the dream had left behind. Throwing on a pair of jeans and a key lime green knit top, Rosemary twisted her wet hair into a knot and secured it with a mother of pearl clip. Running a mascara wand over her lashes was as much primping as she could muster this early in the morning.

As she opened the bathroom door, a masculine hand holding a second mug of steaming coffee greeted her. She took two sips before managing to mumble, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Kitten. Glad to see you retracted the claws."

When she looked at the seductive charm of Walker's smiling face, a sense of premonition prickled the hair on Rosemary's neck as she recalled the dream. Forcibly pushing the thoughts aside, she asked, "Have you been upstairs yet?"

"Didn't bother going past the kitchen. There's too big a risk of getting injured when you're stumbling around in the dark. Go eat something."

"I don't eat..."

"Walker, stop baiting her. Both of you sit, breakfast is ready. Lunch might be a long time coming. Both of you are going to eat your fill." Juanita's tone of voice reminded Rosemary of her mother. It was no wonder Juanita didn't worry about being outnumbered; she had perfected the 'don't you argue with me' tone and stance.

Pulling out a chair, Walker offered it to Rosemary. "I do believe we are eating breakfast."

\* \* \* \*

The mess was worse and better than anticipated. Protected by the porch's roof, only one pane of glass in the kitchen's French doors was cracked. But the porch was knee deep in mud, twigs, leaves and bits and pieces of unidentifiable objects. Excluding the boarded up kitchen window, every window in the house was shattered. The hardwood floors were covered in water. Bits of glass in saturated rag rugs glistened like diamonds in the early morning sunlight. Dirt and bits of grit dotted ceilings and left muddy streaks running down walls.

Gravel and glass crunched beneath their feet as they surveyed the damage. As bad as it looked everyone agreed it would take nothing more than back breaking work and time to repair the inside of the house.

Outside, the storm had left more permanent reminders of its wrath. Lightning had struck the henhouse leaving behind nothing more than shattered river rock and blackened metal roofing material. A few feet away a limbless tree trunk resembled a chimney as wispy puffs of smoke smoldering from its blackened hulk confirmed another lightning strike. A third lightning bolt had split a large maple tree in the middle of a corral in half. The black charred center resembled a giant block of half burnt charcoal. Two forty-foot tall evergreens, lying on their sides beside massive holes where their roots had once been, blocked the gravel barren driveway. Busted corral posts and rails were tossed about the valley floor like a giant game of pick-up sticks.

Picking their way through the sodden mess, the four of them headed to the front of the house. Only one poplar tree was down, but arm size limbs and leaves covered the front drive and yard and floated in large puddles of water dotting the ground.

Back in the house, Rosemary punched speed dial on her cell phone. Cole answered the call.

"Is everyone there all right?" Rosemary asked. "Thank God! ... No damage. Glad to hear it.... Yeah, we're fine ... Yes, Cole, I do realize it is not yet seven ... very funny, you and Walker could make a comedy team ... no, the two of you together only have half a brain ... the coffee was strong enough to grow hair on my chest ... yes, I drank three cups. Listen, as much as I hate to cut the comedy routine short, we could really use some help. How fast can you get here?"

Half an hour later, when Walker came back to the house, he let the dogs out. "Horses, Butterscotch, geese and cats are fine. The roof on the barn and the house are solid. I'm guessing that the road gravel became the shrapnel that busted the windows. Wouldn't bet we found all the rattlesnakes, but it will take too long to check every inch of the property. If you go outdoors, stay alert." His voice was grim and matter of fact.

Hell bells, there was no way she could keep quiet. The minute he had said bet and snakes, the truth flashed before her eyes like a reader board announcing the current price of diesel fuel at a truck stop.

Silence was never an option when it risked putting someone in danger. "Walker, don't ask questions and don't argue. There are four more rattlesnakes. One is coiled in the wood piled against the barn and two are somewhere near the base of the fallen evergreen closest to the house. The last one is on the front porch inside the tipped over potted evergreen."

He stared at her with speculative narrowed eyes for all of ten seconds before walking out the door.

Juanita walked into the kitchen in time to see the stiff set of his shoulders and back as Walker shut the French door. Looking at Rosemary, she recognized the look of resignation but decided not to ask what had happened. Kids needed room to test their wings and if she was guessing right these two were going

to need room to butt heads just to see who was stronger.

"Do you mind if I use your cell phone? I'd like to check on neighbors, but the phone lines are down."

Taking a mop and two buckets from a utility closet, Rosemary headed for the living room. The room was comfortably fashionable with a black baby grand piano dominating one corner. Positioned in front of a large corner fireplace trimmed in river rock were two oversized dark green suede chairs and two antique rockers. A sopping wet sheepskin rug covering the floor between the four chairs showcased a massive set of deer antlers with a broken piece of glass balanced over the top. The testimony to the table's demise was two brass floor lamps forming a V as they lay across the table. Colorful fragments of broken tiffany lampshades winked in the beam of sunlight shining through a window. Another arrangement of overstuffed chairs upholstered in green, rust and white plaid and floral brocades finished off the room.

When she heard the pickup drive out, it never occurred to her to question where it was headed. With one bucket full of water and the other full of broken glass she headed for the kitchen. Juanita was sitting at the kitchen table. Pale and trembling, she glanced up as Rosemary entered the room.

"Men went into town. Rubble is covering a church basement full of people. I ... friends are trapped in the basement."

Rosemary's eyes narrowed. With each question she silently asked the universe, the odds were instantly given. "Juanita, don't ask me how, but I can tell you there are no fatalities." She didn't divulge the odds that told her someone was in trouble.

Rosemary's irises turned into dark pools of green, like the shadows in a thick stand of evergreens. Juanita's mind was racing with questions. Her lips all but formed the words. But something or someone was telling her not to press the point. Getting a bucket, she headed to the living room without saying a word.

Breakfast was a long forgotten memory by the time Rosemary and Juanita heard dogs barking and vehicles pulling into the driveway.

Walking into the kitchen, Juanita was rendered speechless as she came face to face with two carbon copies of Rosemary. Entering the room behind them were two older women. In the yard, she saw five men unloading chainsaws, ladders, generators and wet-dry shop-vacs out the side door of a vintage orange and white Volkswagen bus. A pickup truck full of plywood and another truck full of replacement windows were also parked in the yard.

After giving everyone a hug, Rosemary turned towards Juanita. "Juanita this is the female side of my family. My sister, Ginger has on the emerald green top. She is the baby of the family, trailing me by six minutes. She is also a newlywed. Her husband is a cardiologist and she is a hypnotherapist that specializes in helping people connect with loved ones that have passed over.

"Cinnamon is in the apple green top. As she likes to tell it, she is the misunderstood middle child; don't believe it. She is also a hypnotist, but she prefers to use her talent for entertainment. Her specialty is making people think they are laying a golden egg.

"The pretty brunette is Virginia, Ginger's mother-in-law. She, along with her husband Walt, and her oldest son Cody own a cattle ranch outside Houston.

"The petite redhead with the misleading sweet elfin face is our aunt. Her name is also Ginger. With good reason, she is called Pesty. She too recently married; her husband, Martin, is Walt's bother."

"When Rosemary said she had called for help I didn't realize she'd called up the Calvary. Wish it was happier circumstances, but frankly after what we just went through cleaning the living room, I'm very thankful you are here."

Rosemary had been keeping an eye on the activity outside. "The flies are driving me crazy, so I'm certainly not complaining, but where on earth did you find that many windows plus someone willing to deliver? When you asked for the brand and measurements, I thought you were just going to order them."

Virginia answered, "Brad Conner's, he's the one you see in the gray t-shirt with the beer logo. Don't understand why t-shirts always have to advertise something. He has three of the sweetest little girls you would ever want to meet. You'd think he wouldn't want the first thing they read to be beer advertisements. Married right out of high school. He opened a business back home a few years ago after spending time in the Navy. He went through school with Cole and Cody. Did I tell you his wife is expecting another baby in a few months? Brad says this is the last, no matter what. Married a really sweet gal. Suzy's momma and I have known each other since we were young kids just starting kindergarten..."

Ginger was trying hard to smother a giggle.

Cinnamon was biting the inside of her lip to keep from laughing.

Juanita, who had managed to keep a straight face, jabbed Rosemary in the side with her elbow when she rolled her eyes.

Pesty nodded as she followed the disjointed, rambling conversation.

Mercifully, Brad walked into the room. "Hi, Rose. I doubt you remember, but we met at Ginger's wedding. As I'm sure Virginia was getting around to telling you, I own a siding and window business. Called my supplier in Houston right after Cole told me the problem and they agreed to meet us at a junction with the windows I didn't have in stock. Should have you fixed up in no time at all. Cody wants to know if there is any preference as to where they start stacking the wood."

As the buzzing of saws filled the air, Rosemary realized what had seemed odd when she had glanced outside at the men emptying the van. "Gin, where's Cole?"

"At the clinic in town. The local GP was more than happy to have an extra pair of hands. A man trapped in the basement of a church is complaining about chest pains."

"Friends were in the building. Did you hear any name?" Juanita's voice was anxious.

"No, I'm sorry I didn't. Everyone is accounted for; a few people have already been rescued. So far there have only been minor injuries. From what they are relaying through some cell phones dropped down holes, the only real concern is the man with the chest pains. The problem they are faced with is the stability of the rubble. Two blocks of businesses are gone, another block of houses are flattened and lots of other damage, but so far there are no reports of lives lost," Cinnamon replied.

Possessions could be replaced, business and houses rebuilt. With no lives lost, getting life back to normal would just be a matter of hard work and time. With the tension of uncertainties gone, an insight to the identity of the man with the chest pains became clear to Juanita. Knowing that he would be fine, she had a welcoming smile on her face as she went outside to show the men where they could stack the wood from the fallen trees.

Thanks to six pairs of hands and the generators running the wet-dry shop-vacs, removing the water and

broken glass was easy compared to the backbreaking labor of using sponges and mops.

As large as the house was, Rosemary was pleasantly surprised at the usability of the floor plan. The two story open foyer with a doublewide staircase filled the center of the H design. The kitchen, dining and living room were on one side of the main floor. The other side held a family room with a separate media center and a spacious office with a walk-in safe, its own bathroom and a sitting area. The two wings of the second floor were mirror images: a master suite and two smaller bedrooms, each with their own baths.

With bravado she did not feel, Rosemary braved the Lion's den as she entered Walker's private quarters. The floors had been mopped, the bed stripped, the scatter rugs removed. Softly glazed blue and white walls made a nice backdrop for a king size log bed positioned in the center of one wall. Square antique mahogany lamp tables, used as nightstands, complimented the oversized proportions of the bed. A log coffee table, minus its glass top, stood between two navy blue checkered love seats. The cozy setting was positioned in front of a low set, six-foot high, picture window, overlooking the backyard. Two huge Christmas cactus in blue glazed pots flanked a set of French doors that opened onto the second story, covered patio. The fact that the pots hadn't tipped over during the storm was testimony to the weight of the gnarled log plant stands they sat on. Even stripped of everything but furniture, it was a cozy room.

"Interesting room. Fits the house; does it fit the man?" Cinnamon asked as she entered the room and looked around.

"I don't know. Until yesterday, I couldn't imagine Walker outside a casino much less wearing ratty jeans, cowboy shirts and a sweat stained cowboy hat. He's a puzzle in more ways than one."

"Well, let's get started. This is the last room upstairs that still needs the walls washed and I'm about ready to collapse."

Turning towards the wall behind them, Cinn cried out, "Ohmigod, I don't believe it."

Pivoting, Rosemary saw a large oil painting of a whitewashed four-deck paddleboat with fancy scrollwork edging every available space. The boat was moored alongside a weathered wooden dock. The scene was teeming with activity as men unloaded a wagon full of wooden crates. Other crates had become a makeshift table and chairs where three men played cards. And women in hoop skirts carrying delicate parasols were being escorted about the lower two open decks by men wearing dark suits, string ties and shiny black top hats. A plaque above the boat's open gangplank read 'Rose's' in solid black block letters. The boat's name, *Queen of Hearts*, was clearly visible on the hull.

"You guys want some help?" Walking into the room, Ginger gave a low whistle when she saw the painting. "My, my, what a tangled web we weave. Look at the date and the signature, Herbert Henry, 1848, that's our great-great-grandfather's name."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Rosemary declared.

"The heck you are! I'm not cleaning another floor, so buck up," Ginger shot back. "The guys have three windows left to replace. When they're done, dinner should be ready. If the three of us work on this room together, it won't take too long to finish, so get with it."

"Had a dream last night," Rosemary stated without volunteering more.

Neither sister was surprised by the announcement or the lack of details. Cinnamon finally broke the silence. "Are you going to share, or do we have to find an entertaining form of torture to pry the information out of you?"

"Share. I was just trying to figure out where to start. Maybe the two of you can make more sense of it than I am. Instead of a dream, it felt like déjà vu."

"Like a past life?" Ginger was intrigued.

"That could be an explanation. A part of me knew what was going to happen, but not before it was actually happening. Sorry, that doesn't make sense, even to me. We were on a paddleboat docked in New Orleans."

"Who makes up the 'we'?" Ginger asked.

"Walker and me."

Was it the boat in the picture?" Cinnamon asked.

"Don't know. I didn't see it from the outside. I do know I felt real pride in ownership over the gaming floor. And get this: I was a Madam; ran a high-class bevy of Soiled Doves."

"Considering our heritage and the rules we live by, that sounds almost decadent," Ginger said.

"Did you have powers?" Cinnamon asked.

"Don't know that either. Here's the tricky part: Walker and I were married, but he wouldn't allow me to tell anyone. I was so far beneath his family's status, we had to keep it a secret or he would lose his inheritance. I got pissy and gave him an ultimatum: announce our marriage or don't come back."

"Cinn, you and I are boring. Rose can't even have a good old fashioned hot and heavy sexy dream without making the whole thing as complicated as possible."

"The stalking scenes in your dreams weren't exactly dull," Rose grumbled.

Not wanting to be reminded of that, Ginger asked, "Any sex scenes in this dream?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Rose, believe me it is not in the gutter. There was nothing trashy about the dreams I had before Cole and I were married. So stop evading and answer the question."

"Romp um' heavy against a bedroom door. Didn't get too far. Now are you satisfied?"

Ginger hooted. "Been there. Done that. Dad interrupted us and it wasn't in a dream. Here's a suggestion, next time try the bed, it's a lot more accommodating. Plus, you don't have to worry about falling on your ass."

"Does the last comment have anything to do with the ugly purple bruise on your leg?" Cinnamon asked, oh so innocently.

"Could be. If you want to know more, ask Cole; he thought the whole scene was hilariously funny. If you ask him, I want to be there to see if he blushes."

"That sounds like fun, but let's get back to the subject. Gin or I could hypnotize you to see if this is a past life. If so, hypnosis might reveal what happens without having to wait for a dream to deliver show and tell," Cinnamon said.

"Why not use your 'here Ghosty-Ghosty' skills, and call Mom and Dad. Maybe they know about this?"



Rosemary wondered what Juanita would have said if she had mentioned that when Ginger used hypnosis to unite people with spirits, she was also able to see and converse with the spirits visiting her clients. A nice fringe benefit to that ability was that the sisters could converse with their deceased parents.

Ginger stopped wiping down the wall to look at Cinnamon. "Is she ever going to let me forget about that day?"

Cinnamon chuckled. "Doubt it; it's too funny to forget. She has a point though, why don't you call Mom and Dad?"

"Jeez, you make it sound like I pick up a phone, dial into the other side and hope I don't get a busy signal."

Two identical arched brows and two sets of emerald green eyes glared.

"Okay, I'm telling you right now they won't tell us anything, but it's worth a try. Rose, please close the door. The last thing we need is a witness. I'm so tired if I sit down to meditate I'm going to fall asleep, so let's try your suggestion."

Pretending she was holding a phone, she began. "Hello, operator would you please connect me with one eight hundred heaven ... Yes, that's right, it's a toll free call ... no, I don't know my party's extension.... Hello, heaven, may I please be connected with Herb and Caitlin Prescott? Yes, I can hold ... not there you say? Could you tell me when you expect them back? Oh, never mind, operator; they just arrived ... Thank you. You have a nice day too."

The heavy aroma of gardenias filled the room at the same time flashes of light resembling sparklers blazing on a dark fourth of July evening filled the air. Their mother materialized before them through a swirling wisp of red, white and blue smoke. Her Capris, summer blouse and sandals duplicated the patriotic colors.

As pipe tobacco scented with licorice, rum and vanilla tickled their noses, their father made a far less dramatic entry. Materializing without fanfare, he was lounging against the king size bed's headboard. Seeing his bald as a cue ball head, bare feet, worn jeans, golfing shirt—this one firecracker red—and the bulge in his shirt pocket from a bag of lemon drops was a comforting, familiar sight. "That was very cute, Gin, everyone got a good laugh."

Herb was grinning like a boy who had been given a special present. "Man, that Mustang can fly. Did you feel it take air when you hit that dip in the road? It's been a long time since I experienced the thrill of that sensation. Next time, try hitting it going about ten miles..."

"Herb!" Caitlin glared at her husband. With arms crossed in disapproval she displayed the same ability as her daughters to arch one brow as she impatiently tapped a manicured finger against her forearm.

Failing to fully wipe the grin off his face, he said, "Rose, sweetie, number one brat, I am very disappointed in how you drove that car without fully going through it first. You could have gotten yourself killed. Remember, be responsible, listen to Jan & Dean and drive like the Little Old Lady from Pasadena."

Not knowing if their mother remembered the words to the song, Rosemary smothered a smile. "How do you get car radios, including broken radios, to play all your favorite old songs?"

"Who me? Don't know what you're talking about." Like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar, he glanced at Caitlin before giving Rosemary a wink.

"Mom, Aunt Pesty is still claiming she is not responsible for Rose and me being able to see both of you. Were we wrong in believing the ability to see and hear you was a side effect of the screwy spell Aunt Pesty cast to get Cole and Gin together?"

"We don't know, dear. It's possible the spell had nothing to do with your ability to see us or the spell might not have fully dissipated. Frankly, we were as surprised as Rose when she heard your dad chewing her out yesterday."

"So that wasn't my imagination; you were in the car with me?" Rosemary said.

"Yes. I was riding shotgun and standing beside you on the road. For reasons we don't understand, it looks like Gin has to be in the room for you to be able to see us." Herb's shrug dismissed the unanswered mechanics of the phenomenon.

"Rose, what's this about you dreaming about a riverboat?" Caitlin asked.

No one would have placed a bet on the question being casual.

"Good question. Was it a destiny dream?"

"That, you will have to figure out for yourself," Caitlin replied with a casual shrug.

"Do you know anything about past lives?"

Patting copper colored hair that was a couple of shades darker than her daughters', Caitlin paused before replying. "Maybe, we've all been around the block a time or two."

"Care to share what you know? More precisely, were Walker and I married in a past life?"

"You mean that nice looking young man that calls you Kitten and looks just like the man in your painting? Isn't he the same person you spent a week driving crazy in Vegas?" Caitlin was never able to completely pull off the innocent act, but it never stopped her from trying.

"No, I mean the slithering sidewinder of a snake who calls me Rosie and spent a week driving me crazy in Vegas." Rosemary tapped a foot impatiently.

"Did you hear that, Herb? Mutual admiration. How sweet. Sorry, honey, your dad and I are fresh out of information. You know the rules: no information can be given if it will interfere with choices you will need to make or lessons needing to be learned."

"Dad?"

Rising off the bed, he nonchalantly walked towards the painting. "Oh no you don't, Rose. I got in enough trouble when I talked my way around the rules helping Gin. Between your mother's glares and our supervisor's protests, I thought I was going to vaporize from the mega rays of warnings they kept emitting."

"You have a supervisor?" three identical voices asked in unison.

Herb stuck his hands in his pants pockets. "Warren's a good old boy. He's what is popularly known as a guardian angel. At times he gets a little stuffy and wants everything done by the book. Mainly, he just makes sure we don't step over the line by saying something we shouldn't."

"Warren? Peter, Paul or Michael sounds more like a guardian angel," Cinnamon said.

"Cinnamon sounds more like a spice than a precocious daughter. His name fits him, just like yours fits you." While talking, Herb had been gazing at the painting. "Well, I'll be danged. Look at this, Caitlin, an oil painting by your great grandfather."

Rosemary reverted to her last resort; she looked at her father with the most innocent look she could muster. "Please Daddy, you know I've been really, really good. All the 'boys' have been washed, polished and serviced. I caught up on all my paperwork and the portfolios are updated. Isn't there anything you can tell me about the connection between the dream last night, the picture Gin painted, and this painting?"

Herb's baritone voice boomed with laughter. "Honey, you are so out of practice and far too old for that sweet and innocent coy trick. The answer is: no. But here's a lemon drop for the effort." When she stomped her foot in frustration, he laughed. "The foot stomping is more like the number one brat I love."

"Does it get me any answers?" The words were slurred as she talked around the lemon drop in her mouth.

"No. But it's always nice to know some things haven't changed."

As warm air puff kisses caressed their cheeks their parents disappeared.

"Well that didn't work," Rosemary declared in exasperation.

"No, but it was worth the try just to be able to visit," Cinnamon stated wistfully.

"It worked, Mom ignored the painting. That is so totally not like her. I'm thinking she already knew about it being here. They know what's going on. They might not confess, but you can bet if Aunt Pesty's bag of tricks makes things go too haywire, they will step in to help," Ginger said.

"Do you really think she's brazen enough to cast another spell after what happened last time?"

Two faces, with 'you're kidding' expressions, had Cinnamon backtracking. "You're right, dumb question; put it down to being over tired. Aunt Pesty will never learn!"

## Chapter 6

Exhaustion numbed the body and dulled the mind as Walker climbed out of the dusty pickup. A questioning glance over the hood of the rig, earned him an *I don't know anything* shrug from Joe.

The two downed evergreens that had blocked the driveway when they left that morning were now cut, split and stacked. Tree branches, splintered wood and heaven only knew what else was feeding the flames of a roaring bonfire. The gaping holes left from shattered windows now sparkled as late evening sunlight reflected off pristine glass.

The aroma of barbecuing beef and baked beans had their mouths watering.

A green Austin Healy pulled to a stop next to the pickup. Silently, they watched a tall male slowly unfold himself from the interior.

Spotting the orange and white van, he smiled. "Looks like I found the right place. I'm Cole Young, Rose's brother-in-law."

Cole shook the offered hand. "Walker. This is my Uncle Joe. Saw you in town. Didn't realize you were Rosie's witchdoctor."

"Yeah, well we all have crosses to bear. How's the ass feel?"

When Walker gave him a blank look, he smiled. "Rose usually bites the ass off anyone who dares to call her Rosie. Never been fond of seeing my own blood, so I stick with Sunshine; it gets her riled but her claws aren't near as deadly as her fangs."

Walker could relate. "Kitten, works for me."

"You're both lunatics. Man teases a she-cat, sooner or later he's bound to get bitten. All the work your family's doing?" Joe asked.

"Probably. Like you, I spent the day in town."

After introductions were made, Walker snagged a beer as he headed indoors.

A CD player set up in the upstairs hallway was filling the air with the sounds of Rod Stewart singing "They Can't Take That Away From Me". Walking into his bedroom, he smiled as he watched the sexy backside wiggle as Rose did a fancy two-step in front of a linen closet.

Grabbing her around the waist, Walker planted a kiss at the nape of her neck. "Thanks, Kitten. You didn't have to call your family, but the help is sure appreciated."

Pulling out of his embrace, she turned to face him.

Realization dawned instantly. "You aren't Rosie!"

"You have excellent observation skills for being a lowdown sidewinder snake. I don't see the resemblance, but I'm known for taking an opposing view from Rose just to get a rise out of her."

He blushed like a kid caught poaching someone else's candy. "She didn't tell me she had a double."

Cinnamon chuckled as she looked him over. "Didn't figure she had. Even dead tired, you're a sight for

sore eyes. Should find her in one of the other bedrooms. If I were you, I wouldn't push the Rosie right now. She just might bite you in the ass."

He shook his head at the second warning.

Beating a hasty retreat, he didn't notice Cole leaning against the banister at the top of the stairs.

Spotting movement in the next room, Walker stopped a foot inside the open door. Bent over two sleeping bags she was zipping together, her nicely rounded ass was bopping up and down to the beat of the music.

Before Walker could move further into the room, he was stopped cold by a voice with a steel edge of warning.

"As enticing as I know the picture to be, I'd suggest you find your own female. This one's mine."

The ass stopped its tantalizing movement as Ginger whipped around at the sound of voices. "Cole. Oh, hi, you must be Walker. You okay? You look a little shell shocked."

Having been confronted with the unknown reality of the triplets in a similar manner in the not too distant past, Cole found the situation hilarious. "This one's Ginger. The one you kissed on the back of the neck was Cinnamon. You'll find the one you're cruising for in the first bedroom on the other side of the landing."

"I wouldn't call her Rosie unless your tetanus shots are up to date," Ginger warned.

Walker took his time walking to the indicated room. At the moment, he couldn't decide if he should strangle or kiss her. After three warnings, he'd heed the advice not to call her Rosie—for now.

Standing at the bedroom door, Walker watched Rosemary rub a hand over a piece of furniture. He wasn't sure if Rod Steward, singing "It Had To Be You", was poetic or an omen.

Rosemary was shuffling her feet and wiggling her ass as she rubbed a damp rag over the surface of an end table. Satisfied with the results, she started to dance towards a dresser when she spotted Walker. She stopped in mid step. He looked like hell. So, why did her heart do a little victory dance at the sight of him? Not wanting to go there, she pushed the question aside.

"You made it back? Did they get everyone out safely?"

"Yes and yes."

Closing the door behind him, he took four long strides to capture her. Another step had them tumbling onto a damp mattress. Planting his lips over hers, he tasted the sweet tart taste of a lemon drop as he teased her lips apart with his tongue. Pulling the clip off her topknot, Walker ran Rosemary's copper colored hair through his fingers. A welcome home contentment settled clear to the core of his weary bones.

The kiss was sensuous, demanding, hot. A shiver of excitement awakened every nerve ending in Rosemary's suddenly limp body. Any idea of fighting the attraction was forgotten as her fingers scratched the itch to comb through his hair.

Encouraged by the groan bubbling up from deep within Rosemary, Walker rolled until she draped over him. Playing with fire had never held any appeal. Yet, here he was allowing Rosemary to ignite the match that very well might heat the branding iron that would mark him as hers for life.

Shifting into a comfortable position, Rosemary let her legs straddle his hips. With her weight pressed against his aching shaft, he cupped her bottom with one hand and the back of her head with the other. Then he drowned in the pleasure of more or less having her where he wanted.

In the back of his conscious, the fact that he had felt this body, experienced these emotions, and tasted her sweet nectar during his dreams registered. Not wanting to go there, he shut down his mind.

Heat waves of lust radiated off their bodies as the kiss deepened. The outside world shrank down to the size of a pinhead as they concentrated on the feel and taste of each other.

Cole yelled, "Time's up, dinner's ready," as he tapped on the door. Jumping like guilty teenagers caught on the couch necking, Rosemary and Walker listened to Cole's footsteps fade as he went down the wood stairs.

Hells bells, Walker was good! Too damn good. She'd had no idea a kiss and a back rub could be such a turn on. When the She-devil reminded her that the rock hard anatomy currently pressing against her pelvic wasn't bad either, Rosemary muttered, "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"I wasn't talking to you." Not wanting to disclose the insanity that had her talking to herself, Rosemary rolled to a sitting position. "That should not have happened."

He would have been disappointed if she hadn't said something to that effect. "Can't think of a reason why not. But you're right in the fact that now is not the right time." Grabbing her hand, Walker pulled her to a standing position as he too stood up. "Let's eat. As much as I enjoy them, I'm too tired for a verbal sparring match."

\* \* \* \*

Three faces winced when Rosemary asked about the Mustang. Cole bit the bullet and answered. "With a new windshield, new tires, radiator and paint job it will look good as new."

"Is that *all* or are you trying to make me feel good?" Rosemary asked.

"No, that's about it. The carport it was parked under blew away without doing any damage. If it had been parked inside the garage it would have been totaled when the roof collapsed. You really were lucky. Grit in the wind acted like a sandblaster and striped a lot of the paint. Something ripped apart two of the tires and a wrench is resting in the driver's seat, so that is probably what broke the windshield," Cole said in a matter of fact manner.

"Look at it this way, your boys will have a bigger challenge with their new pet project," Aunt Pesty said.

Walker's eyes narrowed but it was Joe who casually asked, "You have children?"

Rosemary kept a straight face. "Last count was seven, another one's due next week."

"You're hiding the pregnancy well, care to share your secret," Joe countered.

Her shrug was casual, but her stomach muscles had tightened. "It's a pet project my dad started. Since none of us girls wanted to spend all our time with grease under our fingernails, he adopted all the neighborhood boys willing to share his passion for cars with spark plugs, lot's of horse power and real chrome bumpers. After Dad died, I donated most of his tools to a project that teaches kids auto mechanics."

Not wanting to answer any more questions, she changed the subject. "Has anyone mentioned that my sisters have the ability to make you tell your darkest secret in front of a million people?"

Both sisters knew Rosemary's strategy had been to get the focus off the kids, but Cinn wasn't happy about being thrown to the wolves in the process. "Rose, I'd be real careful where you sleep tonight. Tomorrow morning you just might find yourself believing the Dreamcicle is a Red Corvette fastback in mint condition instead of an orange and white Volkswagen bus."

"Before these two come to blows let me explain. Cinn and I are certified hypnotists. Cinn does stage shows where she hypnotizes people from the audience. I have a hypnotherapy practice where I use hypnosis to help people find solutions to their problems."

Walker thought back to the first time she had mentioned her family. Cole, the witchdoctor, was a cardiologist. Ginger and Cinnamon, the bewitching mind twisters, were entertainers and healers. An old superstitious belief that pictures could capture a person's soul explained Martin the photographer. She had called Pesty an alchemist; that hadn't been explained and for some unknown reason, he was reluctant to ask.

With the focus off her, Rosemary absently rubbed a spot behind Wolf's ear. With a sigh, she acknowledged that no matter how fast she ran, fate was determined to present her with life's next challenge. During the kiss in the upstairs bedroom, before Walker had blown all thoughts out of her mind, she had recognized the taste and feel of him from the dream. If she didn't stick to her convictions, she would find herself as hopelessly in love with Walker as she had been in the dream. That was never going to happen if she had any say in the matter.

*Yeah right. Stop kidding yourself. You're half way there already,* She-devil whispered in her ear.

"Liar," she muttered back.

She-devil laughed.

## Chapter 7

Chainsaws were filling the air with an awful racket. Didn't men know a girl needed her beauty sleep? With eyes still closed, Rosemary groped for her watch. Instead, her hand came in contact with a pointed toe boot. As she rolled onto her back, every muscle in her body protested when she tried stretching within the confines of the narrow sleeping bag. Opening one eye, she watched Walker squat down beside her. When he took a sip from the coffee mug in his hand, the devilish smile mocked her glare.

"Morning, Kitten."

"Is that my coffee?"

"Nope. But if you ask nicely, I'll share."

She muttered under her breath. Contemplating how to get her hands on the coffee mug without begging, she asked, "What time is it?"

"Going on seven-thirty. Everyone else is up and the men have eaten. Electricity came on sometime during the night, so there's hot water for a shower. Cinn said to tell you if you're not downstairs in fifteen minutes you get the worst cleanup job."

Walker's voice was a little too cheerful.

"What's the worst job left?"

"The septic tank line broke. Water backed up into the basement during the night."

Rosemary wrinkled her nose. "Gross."

"That pretty much sums it up." Grabbing the sleeping bag, Walker hoisted her into a sitting position. The kiss was lightweight, but the jolt of electricity singing through her veins was more potent than a pot full of high-octane caffeine. Wanting a second helping, she tried untangling herself from the sleeping bag, but Walker was out the door before she found the zipper.

Entering the bathroom, Rosemary smiled when she spotted a steaming mug of coffee sitting on the sink counter.

*He can be a sweetie and my oh my can he kiss.* Not in the mood to have an argument, Rosemary ignored She-devil.

With a minute to spare, she walked outside.

"Perfect timing. There's more coffee in the thermos on the picnic table. Pancakes are just about done." There was no sense telling Virginia she wasn't hungry.

The yard was a beehive of activity, as half of the testosterone driven population attacked the burned out shell of the hen house and the other half used chainsaws on the remaining fallen trees.

The horses and Butterscotch, with a goose on her rump, were contentedly grazing in a makeshift corral as the dogs nosed around to see what type of trouble they could sniff out.

"We fed the guys first so they could get started on the trees before the new fence posts are delivered." It gave Rosemary's ego a positive jolt to see that no one but Virginia looked bright eyed and bushy tailed



this early in the morning.

"We need to make a list of what needs to be done," Ginger said as she licked a drop of apple syrup off her knuckle.

"Please tell me Walker was joking about the septic line busting."

"He wasn't. The good news is the insurance company is sending out a cleaning crew. Other than a ton of wash, the only major project is to hose down the rugs. The yard on the other hand..."

The triplets' groans drowned out the rest of Juanita's plans.

\* \* \* \*

"This is so unfair," Ginger whined as she dug a hole for another marigold plant.

"Stop complaining; I'm the one who just broke another nail." Cinnamon a few feet over was raking gravel out of the flowerbed.

"I'm not complaining about the work. Mom is sitting at the picnic table petting Wolf and looking sad. She would die to have her hands in this dirt. Well, maybe die is the wrong word, but you know what I mean."

Rosemary glanced at their mother. "We know what you mean. Gin, how come Mom isn't talking to us?"

"She's conserving her energy. This way we get her company and she's able to stay visible for a longer period of time. Besides, if she talks, we'll answer. If Juanita or Virginia overheard us talking to Mom, they would have us committed."

"Where's Dad?" Cinnamon asked.

Ginger scanned the yard. "He's standing by Cole and Walker. With the sunshine, it's hard to see him. He certainly seems engrossed in whatever the two of them are talking about."

"Has Walker ever mentioned his folks?" Cinnamon asked.

"Get real. The man accused me of cheating, stalked me for a week and then had the nerve to kiss me and tell me that one day I'd beg him to call me Rosie. The next time I laid eyes on him was when the Mustang's radiator died. We haven't exactly swapped life stories."

"The man's a real scoundrel, calling you a cheat when the truth is as obvious as the nose on your face. And imagine having the nerve to kiss you! Calling you Rosie is just plain suicidal, so maybe we should have his head examined before you bite his ass off or, worse, his head." Cinnamon's smile was as sweet as pie.

"Stop taking so much pleasure in this mess," Rosemary grumbled.

"Who me? Would I be so mean as to gloat over your having man problems? Besides, Mom laughed over my observations, so it was worth your discomfort."

Seeing the murderous look on Rosemary's face, Cinnamon revised what she had been about to say. "So, I'm gloating. You don't seem to be handling the situation with the usual sharp cynicism we're used to hearing. As I recall it sounds something like, I'm never going to marry some lowly male who thinks I'll be happy barefoot and pregnant. I'll lead him a merry chase then dump him flat without so much as a backward glance. No three hundred-year-old spell is going to control my life or pick my husband for me."

Rosemary gritted her teeth. "So help me, one of these days it will be you on the firing line and I will refuse to listen to your complaints as I watch you squirm. Now back off, unless you have some helpful advise."

"Truthfully I wish it were me. I wouldn't be complaining if a handsome guy wanted to kiss me senseless."

"Let's make a deal. You pretend to be me. Let's see how well you handle Walker."

"In case you hadn't noticed, the man is equipped with the same radar system Cole uses on Gin. He could pick you out in a pitch black room full of a dozen clones."

Rosemary had noticed and that was part of the problem, she didn't want to be on his radar. For that matter, she didn't want to be on anybody's psychic scent.

\* \* \* \*

It was amazing what six women could get done in a short period of time. The house was clean and a list of everything needing to be replaced had been made. A ton of laundry had been washed and folded and all the rugs were hanging on makeshift lines drying. And tender new plants dotted the flowerbeds.

After cutting all the downed trees, the men had split and stacked the logs into neat rows so the wood could season. The remains from the chicken house had been hauled to the dump and one corral was finished.

With the Fourth of July the next day, Cole's parents and Brad Conner headed home.

Cody, Cole and Martin volunteered to stay until the corrals were finished.

With the men relaxing outside as they kept an eye on burning debris, the women settled around the dining room table.

A flashing blue light, reminiscent of K-Mart's blue light specials, settled onto a dining room chair. The room filled with the aroma of gardenia perfume as a ghostly figure materialized.

"Oh my. I think I overdid it today or the margaritas Walker made were stronger than I thought." Juanita blinked her eyes a couple of times then rubbed them with her fingers.

"What's wrong?" Ginger asked, as casually as possible.

"I do believe Juanita can see me." Caitlin's face was alight with mischief.

"You're kidding?" Rose said as all eyes looked at Juanita for conformation.

"I see a ghost or at least I think it's a ghost. There's a woman across from me wearing a red dress with shoulder straps of white stars. What do you see?" Juanita asked as she looked around the table.

"Our mother. Juanita, this is Caitlin." Rosemary acted as if introducing her deceased mother to people was as normal as sitting around a table eating pie and gossiping.

"Well I'll be! Nice to meet you, Caitlin. Were you sitting at the picnic table earlier today?"

"Yes. You saw me?"

"I saw something, more like a shimmering in the air than anything."

"Why didn't you say something?" Aunt Pesty asked.

"I can think of several reasons; the most obvious is being thought I was crazy."

"Where's Dad?" Rosemary asked.

"Checking out your young man," Caitlin said.

Rosemary rolled her eyes. "He is not my young man. Mom, if you and Aunt Pesty are plotting something it isn't going to work."

"Whatever you say, dear."

Not even Juanita was fooled by the pacifying remark.

"Mom, what's going on? And please don't say we have to figure it out for ourselves," Ginger said.

When Caitlin put her hand over Ginger's, a warm glow of contentment spread through Ginger's body. "Patience, dear. We'll get there in time. Juanita, I believe you have an idea where this is going, but maybe now would be a good time to tell my daughters about your great-great-whatever Grandmamma."

Juanita hid her surprise by the request well. "Good grief, it's been over forty years since I told the story to my sister Salina, Walker's mom. I'm not sure I remember all the details."

"You remember." Caitlin's voice was gentle, encouraging and, if possible, magical.

"For all of known history, each female descendant on my family tree has inherited the energy to use a mystical *gift*. In the late 1600's, Maria Romano, my many times removed gypsy grandmother, gave birth to her only child, a daughter she named Sophia. Having thought herself past the age of childbearing, she was generous with praise and lenient with reprimands.

"Sophia grew into a shrewd, raven-haired beauty, with a strong desire to pave an easy path of self-indulgence. To that end, she learned how to use her seductive body to entice men into doing her bidding.

"As head of their small gypsy band, Sophia's father admired and encouraged his daughter's sexual powers of seduction. He also ruthlessly designed a ruse to use her beauty and persuasive powers as a bartering tool. His goal was to join his band with another band of gypsies for the sole purpose of getting control of their wealth.

"Sophia, however, was more cunning than her father. Determined to be the manipulator rather than manipulated, she took a lover for the sole purpose of getting him to marry her. The man was not of gypsy heritage, but he had great wealth and influence within the established upper crust of local society.

"Concerned over her daughter's actions, Maria used her dual *gift* of *seer and spell casting* to look into her daughter's future. She saw Sophia married to her lover. She also saw that Sophia had persuaded her husband to tell his family and friends that she descended from a noble bloodline no one would be able to prove or disprove. By disowning her gypsy heritage, Sophia insured for herself adoration from a superficial society that would nourish her ego until her death.

"Gazing further into the future, Maria saw Sophia's future held five children. Three sons would inherit their mother's blue eyes and father's fair looks and astute business sense. Thus insuring for them lives of prosperity.

"Twin daughters born late in Sophia's life would not be that fortunate. Jealous of their youth, beauty and the loving attention her husband and sons bestowed upon them, Sophia ignored her daughters. Having

shunned her mystical *gift*, she never told her daughters about their gypsy heritage. When the daughters received their mystical powers, they were bewildered, ignorant and overwhelmed. Without proper training, the twins faltered, allowed men to take advantage of their wisdom and in the end caused their own unhappiness and deaths.

"Maria tried warning Sophia of the risks and dangers she had foreseen; but in her typical selfish fashion, Sophia refused to listen. Fearing that her mother would cast a spell to prevent her marriage, Sophia ran away with her lover the very night her mother foretold her future.

"Wanting desperately to amend her mistakes, Maria carefully crafted a magical spell to help her granddaughters and all future female descendants. Her hope for the spell was multifaceted. First and foremost, she wanted to save her granddaughters from the tormented lives she saw as their future. The second reason was a matter of pride; if the current fate became reality, her family lineage would stop with Sophia's twins.

"Recognizing how essential proper training was to developing understanding and respect for one's powers, Maria crafted into the spell a series of dreams that would ensure training in the given gift. This training would be given whether or not there was support and guidance from a loving mother or aunt.

"To prevent her granddaughters and future descendants from being exploited by men, she skillfully incorporated a key of accountability that each recipient would have to accept in order to keep their magical powers.

"As had been the case from the beginning, each female descendent would receive the *gift* upon puberty. Matching a child's interests, imagination, talents, temperaments, personal desires and lessons needing to be learned, the universe would select supernatural powers uniquely crafted just for them. The *gift*, as it is usually called, would become known during a dream on the night a female descendant blossomed into womanhood. Dream visions would then continue to guide their path as they learned how to use and control their power. Each female would be free to use the *gift* however she so chose. However, if the powers were used solely for the purpose of self-gain, the *gift* would be rescinded.

"The second part of the spell was the knowledge of unconditional love. At age sixteen, all female descendants who were successfully mastering their supernatural skill would begin a series of dream visions in which they would meet their life-mate. These visions would become more intense and understandable as the time to marry drew near. Maria believed the ability to recognize one's life-mate would prevent unsanctioned relationships or marriage with a person who would love them for what they could do rather than who they were.

"If female descendants decide to give themselves to someone other than their life-mate, they will lose the ability to use their *gift*."

Aunt Pesty stood up, walked around the table and gave Juanita a hug and a kiss on the cheek.  
"Welcome to the family."

Not more than a month ago, Cole had brought up the possibility of other female descendents. Intuition had told Rosemary the probability was one hundred percent. So, the idea was not surprising. With their talk never venturing into the realm of actually meeting one of these descendents, the reality had them in shock.

"I can't believe I'm finally meeting family. Oh, I know you're far removed, but you're still family. Since Salina died, I haven't had anyone to confide in. This is a marvelous dream coming true."

"So you know up front, much to my daughters' dismay, I was given the *gift* of being able to read minds."

Caitlin's smile was mischievous as she looked around the table.

"That could be handy. Can't say the men would have been happy if that had been my *gift*, but there were plenty of times I wished I could have gotten into Walker's head after he came to live with us. My *gift* is vision: past, present and future."

"How does that work?" Cinnamon asked.

"I need to hold a person's hands to see into their past. The present comes in short bursts of visions. But they tend to get muddled if I am emotionally attached to a situation."

Rosemary interrupted, "What about the future, how do you see that?"

"Juanita never sees anything that might change the future if told. Right?" With one brow arched, Caitlin gave a Juanita a pointed look.

Clearly hearing Caitlin's unspoken words, Juanita answered with a nod.

"The future appears as a forked road; some people have several roads to choose from, while others are more limited. Through choices and opportunities, each path offers a different outcome. I can see the possibilities, choices and opportunities."

"That sounds more like a metaphor than a seer's insight." Rosemary cocked her head. "Do you ever see the future like Grandmamma saw Sophia's and her granddaughters?"

She didn't need to look at Caitlin to know this was the minefield of questions she was worried about. "Occasionally. I try to tell the people involved in a manner that doesn't get them suspicious as to how I got my information. Then it's up to them to change something or remain on the same course. Who knows, maybe our choices today are so much more diverse then they were three hundred years ago that Maria's type of insight is now impossible."

"So, if a person was going to take a dangerous path or make life harder than necessary, you could tell them?" Rosemary asked.

Winking at Caitlin and Pesty who were sitting across from her, Juanita bit her lip to keep from smiling. "Sounds logical. Lets see how that works."

Taking both of Rosemary's hands within her own, she turned them palm up as she ran her thumbs over Rose's palms several times. With each thumb stroke a warm sizzling sensation spread up Rosemary's arms. A comfortable warmth spreading from her core outwards made Rosemary feel slightly light headed.

An occasional non-committal muttering sound passed through Juanita's lips as her eyes glazed into a vacant stare.

Several minutes of silence passed before Juanita shifted her eyes to gaze directly into Rosemary's emerald green eyes. Juanita's soft brown eyes had turned warm golden brown. If Rosemary had been in a fanciful mood she would have said the golden hue was branding her soul.

"You have been very fortunate to have the loving support and encouragement of your family during this lifetime; it has not always been so. Because the *gift of intuition* affords a mighty power that is too tempting to bend and shape to one's own selfish desires, it is not often given. The universe was very wise when they chose you for such a *gift*. You are not only beautiful on the outside, under that passionate temper you hide behind you are beautiful on the inside.

"If they have not already done so, your destiny dreams are about to begin. Be careful how you decide to react to the opportunity being presented. In the past, there has been much pain associated with this relationship. The future could hold the same if you choose to close off your heart.

"I only see two paths. One has you swimming against a strong riptide as you try distancing yourself from the destiny dreams. The other has you clawing your way up the steepest mountain possible before discovering your truths."

"What if I don't want to take either path? The path I chose a long time ago is direct, smooth as glass and well thought out. Plain and simply, I am not going to be manipulated by a three hundred year old spell or a good looking slithering snake."

"Don't forget glass can shatter, cut deep, and leave scars. At least you admit Walker's a good-looking snake. Before I allowed Joe to catch me, the name I favored was country bumpkin. What about you, Caitlin?"

"Dipstick."

"Stubborn old coot. For that matter I'm still calling him that," Pesty volunteered.

"You called Dad dipstick? Do you know what a dipstick is?" Cinnamon asked.

"For your information, young lady, once upon a time I could change a tire, flush a radiator, change spark plugs and change the oil in my car."

"Did Dad know that?" Ginger asked.

Caitlin smiled. "I *might* have neglected to mention that before we were married. It made him feel so helpful to keep my car tuned, I didn't have the heart to burst his macho bubble."

"If you didn't like working on a car, why did you learn?" Cinnamon asked.

"For the same reason your Dad made you three learn how to maintain your cars. Your grandfather didn't buy into the helpless female scam."

"She's forgetting to mention how convenient Herb's help was since she hated getting grease under her fingernails."

Fluttering a hand to dismiss Pesty's comment, Caitlin said, "We're digressing. Juanita, have you ever seen spirits before?"

"No. Have a feeling once in awhile that someone is present, but have never had the pleasure of an actual visit."

"Then we can assume your ability to see me right now has something to do with Ginger." Caitlin sighed with frustration. She wasn't unhappy over the ability to be seen by her family. But she was well aware of the fact that with the shift in the universe that had caused this phenomenon, other less pleasant situations could also happen.

Looking at Ginger, Juanita asked, "Do you cast spells?"

"No. My *gift* is the ability to see and talk to spirits. When I started having the vision dreams that brought Cole and me together, a modification in the atmosphere made it possible for family members to see Mom and Dad. But only when I am in the room. There have also been a few times when Mom and Dad could

be heard when I am not around. That is also a new situation."

Looking pointedly at Pesty, Ginger continued, "We believe Aunt Pesty cast a spell that shifted something in the universe, but she is denying all involvement."

Aunt Pesty sighed. "Guess that brings things to me. Like Grandmamma Maria, I can cast spells that can be long or short term. And for the record, I didn't have anything to do with what is happening. I admit I had a hand in getting Cole to Martin's house, but that is all I am guilty of."

Rosemary ignored the lie. "What you have never said is how you knew Cole and Ginger were life-mates."

Rubbing her shin where it had been kicked, Pesty didn't look at Caitlin. "Didn't I? Humph. Must have slipped my mind. Caitlin, are there any other family members we haven't met?"

"There might be, but I'm not at liberty to divulge that type of information."

"If I say I got a one hundred percent hit that there are more, would it make a difference in your answer?" Rosemary asked.

"Good try, Honey; the answer's the same. If you are supposed to know, more the information will be given to you at the proper time."

"Does Walker know about your *gift* or was his comment about you and a crystal ball just a joke?" Rosemary asked.

"No, he has never been told. He understands that I know things beyond logical guesses. When given a strong warning, he has learned to listen. I try not to interfere in his choices. Like you, he needs to learn his own lessons in his own time."

They had never met a male descendent of the family tree. Walker was so far removed, he couldn't even be called a kissin' cousin but Rosemary was coming up with a sixty-forty odds that he had some paranormal abilities. That left a lot of gray area. With Juanita never having told him the family history, Walker was the only person with the answer. Until or unless she was willing to disclose her secret, she knew he wouldn't divulge his.

## Chapter 8

Rosemary tossed and turned within the confines of the sleeping bag rolled out on a bedroom floor.

Why did life have to become complicated? Rosemary didn't want to have any positive feelings towards her great, great, whatever, Grandmamma. She had always interpreted the story her mother told as having a grandmamma who manipulated her descendants as she used her spell casting powers to force marriage upon them if they wanted to keep their metaphysical powers.

Now Juanita had given her a different viewpoint. A Grandmamma who, having accepted her hand in raising a selfish spoiled rotten brat, uses her spell casting power to create a pathway around her daughter's selfishness. Yes, it was self serving, but also a generous gift to future generations of descendants who might have the misfortune of similar fates.

Drifting into sleep, she wished she knew what had become of Grandmama's first granddaughters.

*Walker had taken Rose at her word. After the ultimatum to announce their marriage or leave her alone Rose had not seen him for the remainder of the paddleboat's stay in New Orleans.*

*Two weeks later, Rose regretted the words said in haste and frustration.*

*Stepping over the threshold of her elegant home, Rose was assaulted with memories of her and Walker walking arm in arm up the stairs, sharing meals in the dining room and making love in front of the fireplace in the parlor. She had daydreamed of her and Walker raising children within these walls and growing old together as they shared life's trials and rewards. Now she didn't know if they would have a future.*

*Still thinking about the past, she didn't notice the aroma of a cigar until she saw Walker lounging comfortably against her bed's headboard. The sight of him rumpled and sexy was all it took to make her knees go weak and her body ache with desire.*

*It was hard to say who moved first as they embraced in the center of the room. Murmuring in her ear, Walker's velvet smooth voice sounded like the devil he was. "Do you forgive me?"*

*The feel of his breath against her ear sent new waves of desire blazing through her.*

*"Yes."*

*How could she not? She loved him. Always would. No matter what he did, what he said, or how much he hurt her with his actions, Walker could not destroy that love.*

*Between tiny nips at her earlobe, he added, "Rosie, I can't tell my father. Not now. He took a turn for the worse shortly after the boat left. The doctor doesn't expect him to make it past Christmas. I know you want what I want. Please tell me you will wait."*

*Rose choked back the disappointment at being second or perhaps third or fourth down Walker's list of priorities. Inhaling Walker's scent as she buried her face in his neck, she swallowed her pride. "I'll wait."*

*Using his lips and teeth, Walker sent shivers down her spine as he placed a kiss over every inch of skin he slowly exposed. With the top of the two-piece dress tossed aside, he turned her around and quickly undid the ribbons on the chemise covering her lush breasts. The chaffing from his*



*whiskers went unnoticed as he paid homage to the taut dusty rosebuds.*

*Rose's hands had not been idle. With their sole purpose being how quickly they could touch and taste skin, Walker's clothes were quickly strewn across the floor.*

*With her body trembling with need, he carried her to the bed and joined her as they...*

Rosemary woke up totally disorientated. Her heart was beating hard enough to wake the dead—well at least Wolf. Belly crawling up the side of the sleeping bag until his head rested on her shoulder, hot doggy breath brought her fully back to reality.

Now what? Whether it was fate, destiny or Aunt Pesty stirring the pot, her emotions were playing a mean tug of war. Obviously dream Rose not only wanted Walker, she was willing to overlook his self-centered actions to keep him. She, on the other hand, was willing to admit to a strong sexual attraction, but it would be a cold day in hell before she would allow any male to think her desires and needs came in second to his.

Hells bells. She didn't want or need this. Her life was perfect! It didn't revolve around asking someone else's opinion about what to do, what movie to rent, what to eat or what channel to watch on television. There were no dirty socks lying beside the bed, damp towels thrown on the bathroom floor or dirty dishes left on countertops. She had control of her life and that was just the way she wanted it, thank you very much! So, how come she had started feeling restless for something more since watching Ginger blossom from Cole's loving support?

Bunching the pillow under her neck, Rosemary wished she could get her hands on the crystal ball Walker teased Juanita of owning. She really wanted to see when Aunt Pesty's magic spell would present itself and what havoc it would cause. The odds on her having already interfered were one hundred percent. Not that she would confess or reverse whatever spell she had masterminded, even if confronted; that would be too simple.

It would be best to get out of range before ... before what? Other than being a burr under her skin Walker had only kissed her twice. Hell, she had shared more kisses with casual dates and his teasing wasn't any worse than Cole's.

*But those kisses make your legs go weak, your heart skip a beat, your core get tight and damp and your skin turn so hot from the inside out that you could instantly combust,* She-devil said with merriment.

That was why it was definitely time to run. Although running from Vegas hadn't done much good. Fate had still put her smack dab within Walker's reach by making certain her radiator blew at just the right place and time. Still she was ready to give disappearing from his sight another chance.

\* \* \* \*

Walker awoke with a start, instantly alert and fully awake.

He didn't give any substance to past life crap. It ranked right up there with the ridiculous thoughts he had had about Rosemary reading minds or having Superman's power of x-ray vision. But he couldn't come up with a logical explanation for the pliable warmth of Rosie in his arms, her rose scented perfume lingering on his skin, or the scent of pure sex saturating the twisted sheet covering him.

He understood that a nightmare could plague a person for years. But for a person who never remembered dreaming to have a vivid dream, a sequel to a pre-civil war saga that had no roots in reality, made no sense.

Hell, maybe the lack of blood flowing to his brain caused by a constant state of arousal was causing him to go insane.

At fourteen, the sex education his father had given was short and to the point. "No, means no, not push harder. If you ask nicely, sex is always free. Never forget to wear a raincoat or the sex could cost you every cent you make."

At eighteen, just before he left for college he had given his next pearly words of wisdom. "Don't allow your dick to talk you into giving any dame her MRS. degree. And don't tell anyone the bottom line on your bank statement or every broad on campus will tell you your dick's the hottest pistol on campus."

Ten years later, instead of a booming voice with rapid-fire remarks, drugs subdued his father's expressive tone. With labored breathing and sadness etching his age lined face, he gave his final advise. "It might not have seemed like it at times, but your mother and I loved each other. We were like oil and water, but somehow it worked. If it hadn't, you wouldn't be here. Find yourself a woman you can have fun with in and out of the sack. If she's dumb or complacent, she'll bore you to death. When the sparks fly but you still want to stick around to see what happens next, you'll know you found the right dame."

A few minutes later, Walker had been surprised when his dad's voice roared like his old healthy self. "Dammit, Salina, you didn't have to meet me. I would have found my way to you."

His voice softened with the next words. "You're right; he turned into a man any father would be proud of, even if I do say so."

With the next breath he was gone.

His father had had two wives. Helen stayed safely tucked in a sprawling mansion in Palm Springs, California. She was the perfect hothouse orchid the world saw when he attended special functions. On the few occasions Helen and Walker had shared the same room, she had been icy civil.

Salina, Walker's mother, was a prickly pear, who managed to look innocent, vulnerable and sexy as hell, all at the same time. His parents' marriage contract had not been legally binding, but the threads that had held Salina and Gus together were stronger than any man made contract. Twenty-five years younger than Gus, Salina was the only person who ever dared to talk back to him without living to regret their actions.

Walker was only nine when Salina's vanity killed her. Or that was Walker's feeling. In reality, a blood clot stopped the flow of blood to her heart. The blood clot developed after a tummy tuck for a slight sag left from pregnancy, which was far worse in her mind's eye than in reality.

Gus had been inconsolable.

A few months after Salina's death, Gus sent Walker to Juanita and Joe for the school year. Walker, still grieving for his mother, felt abandoned. It had taken three years to patiently strip away his hostility.

Why was he walking down memory lane? Like the dream, it made no sense.

Giving up on the idea of falling back asleep, Walker untangled himself from the sheet.

Cody, sitting at the kitchen table, was sipping a cup of freshly brewed coffee when Walker walked into the room.

It was five in the morning.

"You look like I feel. Is Cinn playing hard to get or am I barking up the wrong tree?" Walker poured

himself a mug of coffee before straddling a chair across the table from Cody.

"Right yard, wrong tree. Cinn's a sweetheart, but not my type. I'd guess that your state of affairs centers around Rose."

"You could say that. What do you know about her?" Walker took a tentative sip of the hot coffee as he eyed Cody.

"Probably less than you. Close to her sisters and aunt. Respects Cole and Uncle Martin. Likes to gamble and drives like a bat out of hell whenever she gets the chance. Feisty and quick with a smart remark, but not in a demeaning or offensive manner."

"That about sums her up. Do you know anything about her involvement with the kids in that mechanic class?" He would bet his ass there was a lot more to that story.

"Nope. First I'd heard about it was last night."

"Who's the woman that's got you twisted in a knot?"

"Friend of the triplets. Name's Pagan. Owns a nightclub named The Witches Brew. A part of me says run as fast and as far as I can, but I keep having these damn dreams that keep pulling me towards her. I haven't had a decent night's sleep in weeks."

Walker stopped short of saying join the club. "I'm going to jump on a horse and try to clear my head; you're welcome to join me."

From the second floor balcony, Rosemary watched the two men ride off. Sighing, she wished she could escape reality that easily.

## Chapter 9

"You were up early; was the dream that disturbing?" Cinnamon asked as she walked into the kitchen.

"Am I that transparent?" Rosemary asked.

"I heard you go out onto the balcony, then heard you moving around the room sometime later. Figured you were exercising which means your aura should be zapped with yellow energy, but yours is muddy. It reminds me of an Easter egg that's been dropped into color after color until no one color is distinct."

"Thanks, that makes me feel so much better."

"Glad to help. You can ditch the glare; it's a waste of energy. Are you going to share the dream or stew yourself into a snit?"

"Describe a snit?"

"You stew about the problem. When your thoughts stray off the facts, you start to imagine what might happen next. With each rendition the imagination grows more and more outrageous until you blow up over the most trivial thing."

Rosemary raised one well-arched eyebrow, crossed her arms and started tapping her finger. "Describe trivial."

"A chip off the nail polish on your big toe."

"I would never..."

Ginger interrupted as she entered the room. "She's got you on that one, Rose. You did exactly that last week after you stubbed your toe on the kitchen table leg."

Rosemary blew out a puff of air that lifted the hair on her forehead. "Figures you would side with her."

"I'm not siding with anyone. I only heard the last part of the conversation. Cinn described a snit perfectly."

Rosemary lightly pounded her forehead against the table.

"Rose, what on earth are you doing?" Aunt Pesty entered the room wearing what was obviously the top half of Martin's pajamas.

"I'm having a temper tantrum. I watched a kid do this in a restaurant the other day, when he was done his mother gave him a glass of chocolate milk and his dad gave him the piece of pie he'd been eating."

"If you want pie or chocolate milk, all you have to do is ask," Aunt Pesty replied.

For a heartbeat the sisters looked at each other, then they laughed until tears ran down their cheeks.

Pushing the pajamas sleeves above her wrists, Pesty poured two cups of coffee, gawked at the girls in puzzlement and left the room.

"Let's go outside before someone else joins us," Ginger suggested.

Two mugs of coffee and a cup of hot tea were sipped, as they watched the sunrise over the hillside.

Slowly, Rosemary shared the dream.

"It certainly sounds like a past life. I've had clients that described past life events in such detail that they knew what type of wood was burning in a fireplace and what spices were on the food they were eating. If you want, Cinn or I could hypnotize you," Ginger said.

"Thanks, I might take you up on that later, but I'm not ready to go there yet." Hells bells, truth was she didn't ever want to go there. But beyond the daydream of never sleeping, she couldn't come up with any doable idea's that would stop the dreams.

"What are you going to do?" Cinnamon asked.

"Nothing. When everyone's ready to leave, I'm going to squeeze into the van, go home and resume my life."

"If you think ignoring Walker is going to make him go away, think again. And speaking of that handsome snake, it looks like he and Cody made it back in time for breakfast," Cinnamon replied.

With the horses munching contentedly on a freshly opened bale of hay, Walker walked to Rosemary. Taking the coffee mug from her hand, he placed his lips where hers had been and drank what was left in one gulp. "Morning Rosie, did you sleep well?"

In answer, she stormed off towards the house.

"Guess not." Walker was still chuckling when the four of them caught up with her.

It was a good thing there was nothing in the way of their path to the house.

Sandwiched between Walker and Cinnamon, Rosemary's vision clouded.

*Walker wearing knee high brown leather riding boots, tan bitches, a white full sleeved shirt and smelling of horseflesh pulled a laughing Rose into his arms. "Rosie, when we get to the house you will pay for the torture you have put me through for the last hour. I will tie you to the bed and..."*

Cinnamon grabbed Rosemary's arm. "Rose, are you alright? You're white as a sheet."

As everyone stared, Rosemary blinked to bring herself back to the present. Besides the promise of kinky sex, one thing about the scene stood out in her mind: she thought of her residence as their home, Walker had called it the house. "I'm fine. I get dibs on the first stack of pancakes off the griddle."

\* \* \* \*

Walking into the kitchen, Walker took a minute to appreciate the sweet aroma of apple pies cooling on the counter. Grabbing a cup of coffee, he was drawn towards the foyer by the muted feminine laughter floating through the air.

No one paid any attention to him as he leaned against the doorframe to the family room. Juanita, sitting on a couch, was proudly emceeing the home movies Joe had painstaking transferred onto video cartridges.

"Walker was ten when we took these at his first county fair and rodeo."

Walker had changed dramatically from the skinny, freckled-face boy glaring defiantly at the camera. His ramrod straight back, feet spread shoulder width apart and arms folded across his chest was a pose Rosemary well recognized.

"Joe spent all winter trying to teach him how to rope a calf, but Walker wasn't buying into the idea of becoming a cowboy. When Aaron Whitehead won the calf-roping contest at the spring fair, Walker about split a gasket. When he heard Aaron bragging that he was also going to win the greased pig contest, Walker immediately entered."

Walker swallowed the bile blocking his throat at the mention of Aaron Whitehead; the only kid who had dared to call him a bastard to his face. Then watched as he and thirty other nine and ten year olds raced after the quick as lightening greased piglets. To this day he knew that anger had fueled his determination. That same determination kept him holding onto the brown and white squealing greased piglet even after it had kicked him in the mouth hard enough to cut his lip and chip his eyetooth. Not until a judge touched his shoulder and told him he could let the squealing swine go did he realize he had been declared the winner.

Watching his younger dirty, disheveled self proudly accept the blue ribbon, he walked into the room with nonchalance he wasn't feeling. "Are you trying to bore them to death or run them off?"

Looking up, she fluttered her hand as if chasing off an annoying fly. "Neither, I was looking for some pictures of the original homestead. They're in here somewhere."

*Liar.*

But of course he didn't say that. He didn't know what Juanita was up to, but he figured it had something to do with matchmaking. He had caught the calculating gleam in her eye more than once since Rose had arrived at the ranch. Still, he didn't think that seeing him as a defiant snot nosed kid was going to make Rose want to marry him. Hell, where had that thought come from? He didn't want or need marriage. More precisely he didn't need marriage to a prickly female that liked to throw temper tantrums.

*Then why did you bring her home?*

He forcibly pushed the question out of his mind.

"I'm headed to the hardware store; is there anything you need in town?" He winced at the touch of impatience in his voice.

"Eggs, bananas, a bottle of vanilla and blackberries if they look good. Oh, and take Rose with you; she mentioned she wanted to have a look at her car."

He'd been had by a pro! If he refused, he would look like a selfish jerk after all the work she had done.

"I can go later. I'm sure Walker doesn't need me tagging along and holding up the work outside."

"Don't be ridiculous; looking over that car isn't going to take that much time. Besides it's an hour drive roundtrip. I'm sure he'd love the company."

Walker stifled a chuckle as Juanita successfully maneuvered Rose into the same sharp corner he was in.

Rosemary swallowed a moan before it became audible.

The ghostly figure of her mother, who had been visiting with them for the last hour, disappeared.

Cinn had a sudden interest in her new manicure.

Gin picked up a magazine and started flipping through the pages.

Aunt Pesty was smiling like Sylvester the cat after having caught Tweetie bird.

Her family was enjoying her discomfort far too much. Refusing to revert to a two year old and pitch a wall shaking temper tantrum, Rosemary walked upstairs to get her purse.

Wolf tried climbing into the pickup when they went to leave. As much as Rosemary would have liked his soothing presence and the buffer of having him sit between her and Walker, she didn't object when Walker refused to let Wolf tag along.

For the first time in his adult life, Walker wasn't sure what to say. Glib lines and the shallow conversation starters he had perfected with casual dates stuck in his throat. After what seemed like an eternity but in reality wasn't more than ten minutes, he broke the silence with the truth. "I like your family."

Twisting as much as she could within the confines of the seat belt, Rosemary braced her shoulder against the seatback and curled her left leg up onto the bench seat.

Walker wasn't fooled by the casual pose. Her eyes had an edge to them that clearly said she had something on her mind.

"Don't be too hard on Juanita; she means well."

"Never thought she didn't. Juanita said the ranch is your private sanctuary away from the pressures at work; why did you take me there?"

"The storm was coming; you couldn't stay in the car."

"Liar."

Hell, it was half the truth so why shouldn't she believe him? He wasn't about to admit he wanted Joe's opinion of her and more time to see if the attraction was as strong as it had been in Vegas.

"You don't believe I knew a storm was coming or that you couldn't stay in the car?"

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. "I'm not talking about the storm; I'm talking about ulterior motive."

His grip on the steering wheel tightened. "Okay, you tell me what ulterior motive I could have had. Seduction with my aunt and uncle right there to protect you is pretty much impossible. Other than helping out in a bad situation, what else could I have had in mind?"

Hells bells. That was the problem, she didn't know and her mind had turned to mush. Every time she tried to figure out why he had involved himself in her problem, she came back to fate which was and wasn't a good answer. Tormenting her could have been the motive but other than calling her Rosie, and talking to Joe about her gambling, he hadn't gone out of his way to push her buttons. And she didn't doubt that he knew a few buttons that would have her temper and her libido skyrocketing.

For something to do, Rosemary punched the radio dial. Instead of country or rock, the cab was filled with the upbeat sound of Louie Armstrong playing, "Hot Five".

She looked at him with one brow arched.

He shrugged. "You found my vice. If you have a problem with it, turn it off."

She didn't change the station. Her foot was bopping up and down to the music. "Pretty tame vice. Figured you more for girly magazines, chewing tobacco or a closet eater of Twinkies."

"You'll never see a ring on my back pocket. I inhale enough second hand smoke at the casino for ten life

times. As for girly magazines, I grew up wandering around back stage at the casino; the topless dancers were far better looking, friendlier and more educational than a glossy piece of paper. And for the record, I prefer Ding-Dongs."

"You're a chocoholic?"

"Damn right I am and proud of it."

She didn't have to ask how he kept in shape, between the hard labor at the ranch and the first class exercise gym and pool at Dreamland Casino that wouldn't be an issue.

"Now it's your turn."

"For what." Gads, she couldn't believe she was flirting with him.

The sound of her sweeter than sugar voice had him wanting to grab her ankle and allow the twitching foot to massage his swollen manhood. "Come on, Kitten, don't be coy, vices, surely you have one or two secret addictions."

"Poker."

"That's not a vice. That's work."

"What makes you think that?"

The tone of her voice hadn't changed, but he had seen the slight tightening of her body and her foot had stopped keeping time to the music. "Addicts have a feverish air of depression and desperation about them. They also tend to be rash in their judgment calls. You, on the other hand, are all business and cool as a cucumber when money is at stake."

"Thanks for the compliment, I think." She wasn't sure she liked the fact that he had analyzed her so correctly. But after the amount of time he had observed her at work, she realized he was bound to have come to a few conclusions.

"Are you going to share your vices or do I find a pleasurable way to extract the information?"

She could think of several pleasurable ways he could extract any information he wanted. She was treading on dangerous, forbidden ground. With self-preservation in mind she turned into Chicken Little. "Opera, I love the opera."

Walker hadn't expected that. He shot a glance her way to see if she was serious. Her smile was innocent, flirtatious and coy as she ducked her head and looked at him through her lashes. Damn, his jeans got tighter. "Never could understand why someone would want to listen to something they couldn't understand."

"Actually I don't have a problem. An elementary understanding of love, divorce, lust, drunkenness, trains, pickups, broken hearts and lost love does it for me."

He took his foot off the accelerator and let the pickup coast to a stop at the side of the road.

"Is something wrong with the rig?"

Walker didn't answer.

He unsnapped his seatbelt then released hers. Grabbing hold of the slim ankle that had been tempting



him, he pulled her towards him. Before Rosemary could protest he had her draped halfway across his lap. Slipping his arms around her, Walker felt a soft breast crush against his chest as he zeroed in on her exposed neck.

The scent of roses clinging to her skin was a subtle reminder of Walker's dreams and the week she had tormented him in Vegas with contradictions of subtly sexy clothing and a cool demeanor.

As Walker's body heated her already warm skin, Rosemary closed her eyes. A vision of slick skin meeting slick skin caused her to suck in air as tiny nips up her neck led his lips towards her ear. With her heart racing out of control, she placed her hand on Walker's chest to push him away. Feeling his heart beating in time to hers, she forgot to push.

When his warm lips reached her ear, he whispered, "You deserve to be punished to within an inch of your life. The Grand Ole Opry is a far cry from *La Bohème*."

He gently tilted her head back with the tip of a finger. Looking into Walker's eyes as he lowered his mouth to hers, Rosemary saw her desire mirrored within the smoldering depth of his eyes.

*Oh God, if this is punishment please let him keep it up for eternity,* She-devil howled.

This could easily become a vice. It already ranked higher than a bag of red licorice or one of her dad's prized lemon drops. She'd had no idea she could go from, don't you dare, to lust, in one point five seconds. As her arms slipped around Walker's neck, his hand cupped one breast and his thumb gently stroked a hard nipple straining against two thin layers of clothing.

The tapping on the driver's door window had their lust-drugged bodies slowly coming back to reality. Opening her eyes, Rosemary stared straight into the leering smile of a county sheriff.

The automatic window wouldn't roll down without the ignition on. The sheriff moved as Walker opened the door.

"Hello Walker. You got a problem or is this just a friendly hello kiss?"

Rosemary groaned and tried to hide her beet red face in Walker's shoulder.

"Hi, Watkins. Would you believe I was punishing her for playing me for a sucker?"

"Humph. Don't that beat all! Never heard what you were doing called punishment. Before you decide to punish her again, try being in one of the bedrooms in that fancy house you built. But before you lock the bedroom door, tell Juanita I found a home for the Holstein."

"Yes, sir."

Walking away, Watkins called over his shoulder, "There's a litter of orphaned puppies at Doc Simmons. I told Doc I'd take them out to your place when I picked up the Holstein. Now it's your job. Picking them up should cool your jets for the next hour."

Now it was Walker's turn to groan.

"Next time I'll bust you for causing bodily harm."

"I wasn't hurting her," he shot back.

"I wasn't talking about her. My old heart can't handle that much visual stimulation anymore." He was laughing so hard as he got into his cruiser they could see his gut jiggling like a bowl full of Jell-O.

Scooting across the seat, Rosemary fastened her seat belt before looking at Walker. As he watched the rear view mirror, she could see a dimple giving away the smile he had to be wearing. "What are you grinning about? Personally, I have never been so embarrassed in my life."

He grabbed her hand and started belly laughing as he pulled it towards his lips.

A horn honked and a finger wagged at them as the cruiser slowly passed.

When he dropped her hand like a hot potato, she slugged him in the arm. He didn't even flinch. "That was not funny."

"Watkins used to pull patrol every Saturday night at the Thunderbird Drive-in. Instead of wasting his breath lecturing us about abstinence, he handed out condoms when asked. I never got lucky enough to ask for one of those prized gold foil pouches. Sorry, Kitten, for me this was hilarious."

Sulking, Rosemary crossed her arms and proceeded to ignore Walker who continued to chuckle off and on until they were parked in front of the hardware store.

"Smile, Kitten, it could have been worse."

"How do you figure?"

"Given a few more minutes he would have seen a whole lot more. Can't you just see the headlines: County Sheriff has heart attack after seeing Rosie Prescott and Walker Owens doing the hoochie koochie in broad daylight on highway 29."

"In your dreams, Walker. It would never have gone that far. And stop calling me Rosie."

"Wanna bet?"

Hells bells, did he have to say that? The odds were stacked so high in his favor she felt the heat of another blush as it crept up her neck and turned her ears pink.

"The grocery store's across the street. I'll meet you back here when I'm done getting the stuff on Juanita's list."

"Chicken."

"You betcha!" Rosemary's voice rang with laughter.

\* \* \* \*

Walker drove past bulldozed piles of cinder block, bricks, building material and destroyed merchandise—all that remained of a small strip mall and some older homes that had been remodeled into business. The bell tower steeple, from the church that had collapsed, was planted on the front lawn of a mortuary a block away. 'Find a matching pair and they're yours,' was spray painted on a tarp hanging across the busted window of what had once been a shoe store.

Arriving at the garage, it was easy to see how the collapsed roof pulled the cinder block walls inward saving the Mustang from body damage. All that was left of the metal awning the Mustang had been parked under was a few twisted yellow and white strips lying in the street gutter.

Greasy stained blue and white-striped bibbed coveralls couldn't hide the fact that the person wearing them was very pregnant. With a cupid bow mouth, black as night eyes and shiny dark sable hair pulled into a lopsided ponytail, the woman didn't fit the grease monkey image.

Walker absently rubbed the back of his neck as he made introductions. "Rose this is Rocky, short for Roxanne, which for some unknown reason she hates as much as you hate Rosie. The two of you should have a lot in common."

Pulling off grease stained surgical gloves, Rocky thrust a hand out. The handshake was firm and friendly. "Wondered how long before you came to check her out."

"Him. I named the Mustang Sidewinder. The hissing sound he made when the radiator died reminds me of a mutual acquaintance."

"I'll be darned, you're perfect."

Looking at Walker she watched him squirm. "Wait till I tell Bob you finally met your match."

There was a part of him that disagreed with that assessment. Another part knew that every time he looked into the depths of Rose's emerald green eyes he fell a little further.

"Who's Bob?" Rosemary asked.

"My husband. Since fourth grade he has been Walker's partner in crime. Still is for that matter."

Before Rocky could reveal anything he didn't want known, Walker interrupted. "I told you I'd come clean out this mess."

"And you're welcome to do just that. I'm kicking around the outer edges of the rubble to see what tools I can find."

"Did you lose your tow truck?" Rosemary asked.

"No. My summer helper changed his route after Walker's call. After dropping off the Mustang, he headed out to pick up a disabled van. By the time he found the van, the storm was kicking up a fuss. So, he drove the tow truck, and the family, to his folks' place where there is an underground shelter."

"Can you tow my boy to Kansas?"

Rubbing a spot on her belly that had jugged out as the baby kicked, she smiled at Rosemary's fascination with the movement. "I'm grounded until this miniature soccer player arrives, but I can make arrangements to have it delivered."

"Big Kid Toys is the garage that works on all my cars. I'll let them know to be expecting a call from you."

\* \* \* \*

Weighing no more than two pounds each, the three black and tan and two solid black puppies were small enough to lie in the palm of a hand.

Doc Simmons was a kind looking gray haired gentleman with a voice so soft Rosemary had to strain to hear him over the sound of barking dogs. "Tell Juanita I appreciate the help. The pups are only two days old. I don't have time to feed them every two hours."

Picking up a solid black male pup, Rosemary stroked the puppy's head with her cheek. "They're adorable. Wait until Cole sees them; his family just lost their cocker spaniel. What happened to the mother?"

"Their mother was too old to breed, but some breeders just don't care. After she had a heart attack, I confiscated the pups. The breeder won't give Juanita any trouble. When they're old enough, I'll help her

find them good homes."

Yeah right! Walker had heard similar comments over the years. He had visions of five more dogs running on the property. But maybe not; they were getting rid of Butterscotch, so maybe there was hope.

Glancing at Rosemary every so often, to watch her mesmerized face as she fussed over the pups, he wondered what it would take to have her eyes shine with the same intensity while looking at him. Ignoring possible repercussions, he vowed that in the not too distant future he was going to find out.

Pulling into the ranch, Walker stopped the truck several feet short of the barn.

"Are those llama?" Rosemary asked in awe.

"Looks like it to me." Not bothering to move the pickup, he cut the engine. Rose carried the box holding the puppies as they headed towards the corral where everyone was congregated. Two tan and white llama with impressively long eyelashes stood regally in the center of the corral.

Pushing his cowboy hat a fraction of an inch up his forehead, Walker looked at Juanita. "They just happen to wander over the south hill and ask for room and board?"

"Actually they came over the north hill. Before you ask, I have no idea who owns them."

It didn't matter; stray animals had been wandering onto the ranch long before he came to live here. These two just happened to be a little more exotic than most. "Guess it was bound to happen since Watkins said to tell you a home has been found for Butterscotch. They'll pick her up sometime this afternoon. And Doc sent you a present."

As the women fussed over the puppies, the men got back to work on the unfinished corrals.

"Are you the female version of Dr. Doolittle?" Cinnamon asked only half jokingly.

Juanita smiled. "Something like that. I can't communicate with animals; but for lost, injured and hungry, I have a radar that brings them straight to me."

"That's pretty cool. Too bad you can't talk to them," Cinnamon said as she cradled a sleeping pup against her chest.

By supertime Walker had spent hours berating himself for allowing temptation to override common sense. Convinced he had his emotions under control, he was sucker punched when he walked into the kitchen and saw Rosemary cradling a puppy as she fed it milk with an eyedropper. For a moment the world went black and he thought he was going to pass out. Quickly walking back outside, he filled his lungs with gulps of air.

"You all right?" Cole asked as he came up behind him.

"Yeah. Fine."

Cole debated about arguing. "When you're ready to talk, come find me." Walking into the house, he left Walker alone.

Walker doubted he would ever tell anyone that for just a moment, after walking into the kitchen, he had seen Rosemary, wearing an old-fashioned white lace nightgown, smiling at a baby suckling her breast.

When Walker joined everyone at the kitchen table, Cinnamon waved a piece of paper under his nose. "Hope you don't mind I booted up your computer to get some information on llamas. William Randolph

Hearst brought llamas to the United States in the 1920's from South American for his personal petting zoo. Being first and foremost pets and companions because of their predictable low-key temperaments, there are now about one hundred thousand llamas across the country. They are intelligent, easy to maintain, generally healthy and require ten to twenty percent less feed than a horse. Llamas carry loads of up to one hundred pounds, are valued for their wool and milk and are never ridden. Although they usually reserve this action for other males trying to poach their hot date, llamas will spit if provoked."

"Great, I'll just make sure not to come between lover boy and the female," Joe remarked.

\* \* \* \*

With the kitchen cleaned, Rosemary headed for the family room to help her sisters feed the puppies. She found them empty handed as they stared at the box on the coffee table. Their mother's distinctive perfume filled the air as her shimmering figure stood behind Ginger with a look of pure rapture on her face.

"What's going on?" Rosemary asked.

"They found a better offer," Cinnamon said.

Curled around the puppies in a protective posture, a big calico barn cat was licking the fat belly of a well-fed puppy. Another puppy contentedly slept and three others continued to pump and suckle at milk-gorged teats.

When Juanita saw what was happening she smirked. "Well I guess that's one way to postpone being spayed. She weaned her kittens last week. I didn't think she had any milk left."

How did she know the puppies were in here?" Cinnamon asked.

"Honey, once a mother always a mother. Instinct brought her here. How do you think I always knew where you three were and who was in trouble?" Caitlin asked.

"You read our minds," Rosemary muttered.

"Most of the time that wasn't necessary. One of these days you'll understand."

Rosemary's snort was very unladylike.

## Chapter 10

The house was as quiet as a graveyard at midnight. As a night person, Rosemary was wide-awake and restless. Afraid that if she started wandering around the house Walker's internal radar would seek her out, she didn't get out of bed. She had worked hard enough finishing up little tasks throughout the day to be comfortably tired, but she wasn't sleepy.

*Yeah, right; more like you're Chicken Little, afraid of dreaming,* She-devil scoffed in her ear.

"You are so w ... right." Hells bells, she hated being afraid of anything.

Rosemary knew better than to ask, *why me, why now*. But hadn't she done everything ever asked of her?

She obeyed the law.

Caitlin's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Ahem."

"Okay, you're right, I have a lead foot. But even you have to admit I haven't had a speeding ticket in five years."

"That just shows that playing the odds on whether or not a patrol car is within five miles of you has stacked the cards in your favor of not being caught."

The tone of her mother's voice defiantly said it was time to change the subject.

"I'm nice to animals."

"True. But you've never actually been responsible for one of your own."

"I don't kill plants."

"That's because the ones in your townhouse are silk."

"I'm considerate of the elderly."

"You're skating on thin ice, young lady, if you're considering Martin, Pesty, Juanita and Joe elderly."

"Are you forgetting that I volunteer one day a week at the community retirement center?"

"Good save."

"I'm loyal."

"True, but so was Lassie."

"I'm a hard worker."

"Honey, you don't work. You play. You are good at what you do, but it isn't work."

"I'm easy to get along with."

"When you want to be, that's true."

"I have an easy going personality."

"Honey, you are too much like me. I refuse to point out the obvious, but you are really pushing the envelope with that one."

"Okay, I give up, is there a reason you seem determined to undermine my self esteem?"

"Your self esteem is more than strong enough to withstand my observations. When are you going to accept that life isn't about checks and balances?"

"Then what is it about?" she whined.

"It's about being you."

"That's it? That's too simple! Besides it doesn't make sense. I'm me no matter what I do or don't do."

"True. But what I'm talking about is living life to the fullest in a manner that compliments your temperament and your talents."

"So I can continue on without making any changes and be perfectly happy?"

"Yes. There's nothing wrong with silk flowers, being independently free of obligation, being loyal to family, considerate of others or even gambling with the stakes always in your favor."

"I hear a capital BUT at the end of that sentence."

"Life is about growth. A silk flower can't die, because it never had the opportunity to live. If you don't take chances, your life is as artificial as the silk flower. And just like a silk flower, you won't blossom into your full potential during this life time."

"What do my dreams have to do with this life time?"

"Compare the Rose of that life to yourself."

"There is no comparison. She was madly in love with a jerk who used that love to manipulate her into doing what he wanted. I would never be that gullible. Besides, I don't want or need a husband or marriage. No spell is going to control my life."

"She was also a good businesswoman who flourished in a predominantly man's field."

"Okay, we have that in common."

"Think about this, is it great Grandmamma's spell you are rebelling against or the vulnerability of loving someone that has you running scared?"

"The spell," Rosemary said with conviction.

"Are you sure?"

Hells bells. Why was her mother pushing the issue?

"I'm pushing the issue to make you think."

Oops. She'd forgotten her mother could read her mind.

Rosemary didn't have to ask if her mother had left. The room felt empty without the warmth of her aura

casting light on the night's dark shadows.

With the exception of her parents' death, Rosemary's life had been sheltered from the harsher realities. The kids at Big Boy Toys had quickly opened her eyes to a side of life she hadn't known existed. Maybe had never wanted to know existed. They had hit her right between the eyes with smartass attitudes and bravado postures that never quite hid their insecurities and fear.

The idea for the garage had grown from an extension of what her father had started. When it became obvious that some of the boys needed more than a place to hang out during the day, Rosemary created a home for them. The home offered boys that wanted and needed an opportunity to be kids, a safe, structured space they could confidently call home.

It had taken six years of wisely investing her gambling winnings to finance a trust fund that would support the program completely off the interest. With that challenge now behind her, she was restless.

As much as she would like to blame Aunt Pesty and her wayward magic for the stupid judgment that had had her taunting Walker with her talent, she knew better. Without a doubt, magic had paved the path to Walker's doorstep, twice, but it had been her choice to stay in Vegas. And having checked out the Mustang before buying it, she had known she was pushing her luck by putting the pedal to the metal to test the engine. Choices. No doubt restlessness had a helping hand in her decision to taunt Walker with her talents and test the car! Life had become too comfortable, too complacent, too predictable, too, too boring.

Bunching the pillow into a more comfortable position, she thought about what her mother had said. She wasn't running from love. She wasn't! She had been surrounded by love all her life. She had no reason to fear being loved. Her mother was wrong.

Besides, what she felt for Walker wasn't love. It was hot, relentless, belly clenching lust. No problem with that if she could scratch the itch, but, thanks to her umpteenth whatever Grandmamma, she wouldn't have that pleasure unless she wanted to give up her powers and that wasn't going to happen. So tomorrow, she would once again become Chicken Little and leave. Even if that meant tying herself to the roof of the old Volkswagen van they had named Dreamcicle.

\* \* \* \*

Walker couldn't sleep. He was tired of having a hard-on. Yeah right. More like he was tired of not being able to relieve the pressure naturally. He was tired of Rosemary entering his thoughts every two seconds. He was tired of ... dammit, he was whining like a little kid who wasn't getting the candy he wanted.

There were times, like now, that Walker wished he smoked. At work, when working through a problem or stressed, he bent and twisted paper clips until they broke then picked up another and started all over again.

With no paper clips in his bedroom, Walker stood at the picture window. The moonlight cast enough light to watch the sleeping llamas. After checking them over, Doc had declared the animals a little thin but healthy. With no identifying marks, they were stuck with the beasts until the owner was found or Doc could find them a new home.

Juanita's record book of the animals that had wandered onto the ranch over the years held more than two thousand entries. The ranch's vet and feed bill always exceeded what it cost to care for the thoroughbreds Joe broke and trained for well paying country club customers whose daughters received the finest equestrian training.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Walker sighed with disgust. Had it been more than two minutes since he



thought of Rosemary?

Never having allowed a female to get under his skin, he couldn't figure out what was different about her. Rosemary was a looker, but Vegas was full of lookers.

A number of females had tried molding themselves into what they thought he wanted. With Rose he knew it wasn't an act. That was appealing.

He had dated women that were as poor as church mice and as rich as Satan. Most had hungered for what he could give them, or greedily wanted more. The fact that Rosemary didn't seem overly impressed by the ranch was in her favor, but she still didn't know he owned Dreamland, so that could make a difference.

There was an innocent charm to her that he found appealing. He didn't need or particularly want a virgin, but he had to admit he was tired of dating woman that crawled all over him on a first date.

Rose's silly tantrums reminded him of Salina and that rubbed him wrong. When his parents fought, his mother's voice would screech as she hurled insults and anything within reach at his father. In turn, his father would stand his ground and laugh as he easily dodged whatever she threw, which only made Salina madder. After throwing the temper tantrum, she would storm into their bedroom and slam the door with enough force to rattle the walls. His father would clean up whatever had been broken before following Salina into the bedroom. After a few more insults were slung, he would hear his mother's throaty laughter float through the closed bedroom door. Another hour would pass before his folks would come out of the bedroom arm in arm and his father would wink at him.

After his mother died, his father had decided he needed grounding in a reality that living in a twenty-four-story casino couldn't provide.

Life at the casino and life at the ranch had been as different as black and white. Angry at not having a say in where he went to school and still hurting over the loss of Salina, Walker became defiant and mouthy. For months he held his breath, waiting for Juanita to copy Salina's temper tantrums. She never did. Juanita and Joe had heated disagreements, but not once did they raise their voice at him or each other. Never had he heard them be disrespectful to each other's feeling or opinions.

He could still hear his father's words when he mentioned the differences between Juanita and Salina. "God broke the mold after making Salina, son. She was as combustible as rocket fuel and as soothing as a spring shower. You're my reason for living, but she put a smile on my face and made me want to meet each day. I don't imagine her actions made her the best of mothers, but don't ever think she didn't love you."

With the images of two totally different role models swimming around in his head, he realized he was drawn to parts of both women. His gut said Rose was feisty like his mother, but caring and stable like Juanita.

With that combination, his father would say grab for the brass ring of happiness, but his head was saying, *Don't trust her. Find out what she's hiding before making any decision.* Besides, until five weeks ago marriage had been the furthest thing from his mind, so where had this need to force her or him into a lasting commitment come from?

Hell, that was a dumb question; the dreams were haunting him day and night. His instincts said the answers were available; all he needed to do was have the courage to follow the dreams to the end of the story.

With his head full of unanswered questions, Walker climbed into his big empty bed. As his manhood twitched, hardened and finally stood at full alert, he replayed every second of the dreams as sleep eluded him.

## Chapter 11

Some things are not meant to be. Leaving someone's home without any big deal being made about it is one of them.

First the Dreamcicle had to be packed. After years of traveling as a professional photographer, Martin had a system to packing. It didn't take anyone long to realize the best action was to leave him alone to do his thing.

With Martin squeezing the last square inch of packing space out of the van, everyone sat down to share one last cup of coffee.

Having satisfied her caffeine craving, Rosemary ran upstairs to check one last time that nothing was left behind. Coming out of the bathroom, she sucked in her breath. Walker was leaning against the bedroom doorframe.

Hells bells. It should be illegal for a guy to look so sexy. The sight of his muscular thighs encased in well-worn black jeans and the ripples of his powerful chest and washboard stomach outlined by a plain one pocket dark blue cotton t-shirt made her mouth go dry. Her hands were itching to once again run their fingers through the sandy blonde hair in need of a haircut. Her body ached in places she didn't know it was possible to ache.

"If you like what you see, why are you running away?"

"Who said anything about like?"

"You. Your pupils are dilated and the cool as ice emerald green just turned three shades darker with smoldering interest."

"Then you had best get your eyes examined or perhaps your head, it's getting a little too big for your shoulders."

Damn him, he laughed at her, not a soft chuckle but a full belly laugh. It was irritating as hell to find herself losing her self-preservation just by looking at him. It was also downright scary to know that she had dropped her guard and allowed him to read those feelings so easily. Irritation, at herself, made her want to lash out, but her mind had suddenly lost its ability to come up with a smart cutting remark.

Walking towards Walker, Rosemary stopped short when he didn't move out of the doorframe.

She arched a brow. "Move it. Or I'll show you some of the moves I learned in kick boxing."

"You can try."

Before she could take a breath her breasts were right where he wanted them—plastered against his rock hard chest. With one hand, he had her hands locked behind her back. Placing his other hand under her chin, he guided her lips to his. The kiss was demanding, sizzling, loaded with possibilities and emotional landmines.

She didn't remember him releasing her hands, or lifting her arms to run her fingers through the rich soft texture of his hair. As she held their heads together, he cupped her bottom, squeezed then ran a hand up her spine.

He was drowning. Shifting his weight so his back was leaning against the door, he spread his legs and settled her between them.

When Walker's hands worked their way under her pink t-shirt, Rosemary stiffened for half a second. When he placed a hand over a well-proportioned breast, she forgot to protest as she moaned deep within her throat with pleasure.

Thanks to the birthday present his Poppa had arranged, he had lost his innocence on his fourteenth birthday. A fair share of women had shared his bed since then. Not once had any female caused him to forget what he had been taught through trial, error and coaching about gentleness, patience and consideration of his partner. Yet right now, all he wanted to do was rip her clothes off and lose himself in her warm softness.

Breaking the kiss, he tasted his way to her ear. His voice was husky with need. "Rosie, tell me you'll stay."

The words were more effective than a cold cup of water being thrown in her face. She jerked, stiffened then jumped back as if his touch had become repulsive.

Ohmigod, where on earth had she lost her mind? Taking several large deep breaths, she tried steadying her frayed sensibilities as she straightened her clothes. If he hadn't called her Rosie, she would have willingly lost more than her clothing.

She started to say something, stopped, closed her mouth, squared her shoulders and walked out the bedroom door.

Still leaning against the door, he heard her say, "Everyone ready to leave?" as she entered the kitchen.

## Chapter 12

When he threw a chunk of broken cinderblock towards the half full dumpster, it landed on the concrete floor and shattered into a million pieces. At least no one was questioning whether he was throwing things out of anger at his own stupid clumsiness in pushing Rosemary too fast or because it was the most expedient way to clear the rubble at Rocky's garage.

Between his thoughts and the dreams, now a nightly occurrence, Walker couldn't get the feel of Rosemary out of his mind or the scent of her off of his skin. He wanted her in his bed, in his life and in his face. Hell, it seemed he had mentally been working towards that realization since shortly after Bob had pointed her out to him.

Bob had called him into the security projection room at the Casino where forty television screens were focused on the action at the tables. Each television was connected to a computer keyboard. With a tap of a key security could scrutinize any one of the gaming tables in the casino. With another tap the camera would zoom in for a closer look at the dealer or the players. Ignoring the table and the dealer, Walker had zoomed in for a better look at the female that had systematically been winning big money.

At first, Rosemary had come to security's attention because one of the guards had a thing for redheads. Her copper colored hair along with her girl next-door beauty had kept the guy coming back to sneak another peek. The fact that Rosemary won steadily didn't go unnoticed, but it didn't raise red flags until four months later when she caught the same guard's attention. When she again slowly built a tidy stack of chips, Bob, Rocky's husband, his closest friend and head of Dreamland's security, got called. Bob tracked every move she made for three hours. When Rosemary left the casino, Bob tailed her across the street to the casino, New York, New York. Using a rotating three-man sting, they sat next to her at the gaming tables posing as fellow gamblers as they tried to figure out her scam. She had been friendly, talkative without being flirtatious and didn't act like she had a care in the world. With no evidence of foul play, they couldn't detain her.

Weeks later, the tapes had been played and replayed in slow motion hundreds of times, but no one could see any sleight of hand, listening device or signals from a partner. With four decks of cards shuffled together before being placed in the shoe, counting cards was almost impossible so they were totally stymied.

Walker slowly shifted his attention from the scam to the woman. Rosemary fascinated him. For months, she haunted his thoughts and, more often than not, his dreams. When she reappeared on Dreamland's doorstep, he decided to meet her.

He couldn't deny that the week he spent dogging Rosemary's footsteps whet his appetite for more. Her laugh and wit captivated him. He had looked forward to each day. He had even baited her just to watch her emerald green eyes cloud with anger or sparkle with laughter and mischief. When she had sneaked out the back door the morning after their one and only date, her taillights had been fading down the exit ramp when he had hit the garage door at a dead run.

Because security had done a general background check he knew where to locate her, but he hadn't gotten quite desperate enough to run after her. Like an answer to an unspoken prayer, she had landed on his doorstep. Then like a randy teenager who didn't know the first thing about wooing a female, he had pushed too hard. But damn, she certainly had acted like she was holding up her end of the negotiations while they swapped tongues and saliva.

"Walker. *Walker!*" Rocky yelled.

He jerked out of the wool gathering. "You don't have to scream."

"Really? You could have fooled me; I've been trying to get your attention for the last five minutes." She had abandoned her usual grease stained dungarees for cropped blue pants and a loose-fitting sleeveless blue and white striped top. With her hands rubbing the bottom of her belly, he realized just how big she had gotten during the last few weeks.

"You okay? You want me to get Bob home?"

She smiled. "I always want Bob home. But no, I'm fine. He'll be home next week and I'm chaining him to the house until this little one pops out. The peanut's just being extra active today so stop changing the subject."

"What subject? We weren't talking."

"In case you haven't noticed, when that pile you're working on is out of here, you've worked your way out of a job. Don't you think it's about time you talked to Rose?"

*Hell no, he didn't think it was time!* He wasn't in the mood to talk. He was in the mood to damn the ports and conquer the enemy. Or maybe it was storm the port and screw the wench. Then again, maybe it was storm the port and damn the consequences. Hell, it didn't matter. Any scenario that had him tumbling Rosemary into bed was bound to get him in trouble, so what was the difference. If he had one more realistic dream revolving around a paddleboat and their making love in every possible place and in positions he had never dreamed possible, he just might voluntarily have himself committed for insanity.

"I haven't come up with a good enough excuse to show up on her doorstep. 'Hi, I was in the neighborhood' would sound highly suspicious. Besides, when she left, she wasn't exactly talking to me."

"Remember when Bob and I weren't speaking?"

How could he forget? Bob about drove everyone at work crazy for the better part of a month before catching a plane home. Three months later, they were married. Two years later, they were ready to have a kid and grinning like happy hyenas.

"Somewhere in my feeble memory there is a recollection of that. What's the point?"

"Did he ever tell you what he did when he got here?"

He gave her a guarded look before saying, "Rocky, in case you didn't know it, Bob is not a kiss and tell kind of guy."

She shook her head in disappointment. "Men! Get your mind out of your pants. For your information, he gave me flowers. In all the years we dated, he never gave me flowers. It's how I knew he was really serious about making it work."

\* \* \* \*

"How you plan on getting past the front door?" Joe asked after Walker told him he was going to plant himself on Rosemary's doorstep.

"What, you don't think Rose will be appreciative of my hauling the Mustang over there for her?" Truthfully, he wasn't sure if she would be or not, but it had been Rocky's idea and he had grabbed hold of the suggestion faster than a drowning man grabbing a life vest. With only three weeks until her due date, the doctor had put a short leash on Rocky, which effectively stopped out of town driving. She was paying a college kid to help out, but she hadn't wanted him to make the round trip alone.

"If it were me, I'd hedge my bet."

"How?"

Instead of answering, Joe concentrated on the horse he was working. After a long silence, his tone of voice was matter of fact. "Take something with you that she can't refuse." Then he startled the horse with his belly laugh when he thought about the double innuendo.

"Any idea what that might be?"

"You'll come up with something."

\* \* \* \*

"It's about time you got some sense in that thick noggin," Juanita said when Walker walked into the kitchen carrying his overnight bag.

"Where do you think I'm headed?"

Juanita shook a wooden spoon coated with blackberry juice and sugar in the air to punctuate every word. "Don't you hurt her. That girl's the best thing that's ever going to come your way."

"Did you ever think I might get hurt?" At times, Juanita's ability to see into his head scared the hell out of him. Come to think of it, the same could be said for Rosemary's ability to touch his soul.

"There's hurt and there's hurting. You're hurting. Your manhood's jerking at the right scent and you want to test the waters. Just make sure what you're doing is for the right reasons this time. Until you put the pieces back together, there isn't going to be any rest for your spirit. If you walk away, you will hurt her. Like I said, don't hurt her."

It was annoying that Juanita's cryptic messages always made sense. Problem was sometimes you didn't figure that out until after the fact. With the dreams plaguing his nights and speculation plaguing his waking hours, he decided to push the issue.

Before he could say a word, Rocky's tow truck rolled into the yard.

"I can't make any promises, but I'll try to be on my best behavior." He kissed Juanita on the cheek before heading out the door.

Three pieces of advice. Give her something meaningful. Take her something she can't refuse. Don't hurt her.

Walking towards the driver's side of the flatbed tow truck, Walker didn't know if he was heading towards his destiny or his downfall.

As for the advice, he had only figured out one riddle.

## Chapter 13

Kevin Adams, Rocky's summer employee, hadn't stopped talking since they left the ranch. The kid was a twenty-year-old computer geek that had earned a full scholarship to the University of Texas. He was working towards a double degree in computer engineering and business management. His agenda for the trip, which Walker would bet had been masterminded by Rocky, was to convince Walker that during his next summer break he would make a perfect intern at Dreamland Casino.

Walker had been sold after the first ten minutes, but he let Kevin talk. It kept the doubts of what he was doing from making him a nervous wreck.

Reaching the edge of town, Walker rewarded Kevin's tenacity. "The internship is yours. Salary, plus meals and a room. When you're ready, call Bob. Between security and payroll, you'll be kept busy."

The garage's address was located in a well-established neighborhood of older homes with well-kept lawns. Big Kid's Toys wasn't what Walker expected. On a corner lot surrounded by an asphalt parking lot was a two story red brick building. The old square structure, with its long narrow windows, looked like it had been originally built as a school.

Slowly driving around to the back of the building, they found the shop. Five bays, with open, industrial size garage doors, were full of newer model cars. Another building, sectioned off with four garage doors, held vintage sports cars in various stages of reconstruction. At least a dozen teenagers stopped what they were doing to stare at the tow truck as Walker pulled it to a stop.

A square built, muscular man, with dark hair shot with gray, came walking out from behind a Volkswagen painted canary yellow. The Bug's license plate read: B NANA.

Walker and Kevin climbed out of the tow truck.

The man offered his hand. "Spence Sanders," the man said as Walker accepted the firm handshake.

"You have to be Kevin," Spence said, shaking Kevin's hand. "Rocky mentioned that you are a computer whiz. If I promise you all the pizza you can eat, would you try untangling the mess I put mine in before I shoot the thing just for the satisfaction of seeing it blow up?"

"If the pizza doesn't have anchovies, you have a deal."

A skinny boy with coal black hair, dusty brown skin, light blue eyes and shiny new braces on his teeth strutted towards them. "Shit, looks like the hustler done brought us a damn piece of crap." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the kid cringed.

"Restructure the sentence, Lance." Spence's no nonsense voice was calm but firm.

Lance sucked in his breath. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. In a voice still breaking into manhood, he said, "Sorry Spence, it was impolite to interrupt. It sure looks like the wheels need a little work, but Copper Top won't be disappointed when we're done."

Pressing his lips together to keep from smiling, Spence nodded. "Lance, this is Walker and Kevin. Kevin is a junior at the University of Texas. Try impressing him with your intelligence and new vocabulary. Please show him where he'll be sleeping tonight, then show him where the computers are located. Supper's in two hours."



Spence wasn't fooled by Walker's casual stance. He would stake his life on Walker's ability to read between the lines.

"My wife and I run the facility. Let me give you the two-bit tour. We do a full range of routine maintenance for all makes and models of cars. We also specialize in rebuilding and maintenance work on vintage cars."

"Does Copper Top own all these cars?"

Spence chuckled. "She tolerates that from the kids, but personally, I wouldn't call her that to her face."

"Bet it's one of the less descriptive names."

"You'd win. The only rig that's hers is the '62 red vette. It's a late wedding gift for Gin and Cole. Because of our reputation, we have a waiting list of people from all over the country wanting us to do work on their cars. We have room to do restoration work on four cars at a time. One slot is always reserved for Rose."

"Why not expand?"

"Quality of personal time."

"You lost me," Walker said when Spence didn't elaborate.

"Eight of the boys live in the renovated school with my wife and me. We can take in two more if necessary. The rest of the kids here are from the neighborhood. Working with the cars keeps the kids off the streets and out of trouble. Whether they live under our roof or not, they all need, deserve and get personal attention."

Walker would wager that Lance was the kid Rose had said she was expecting in a week. The chip on his shoulder was still too big to have seen much TLC.

As they had walked around the surprisingly clean, well-equipped facilities and organized shop, both boys and girls showed respect and curiosity towards Walker's identity and the Mustang that had been taken off the back of the flatbed.

"How many people work here?" Cole asked.

"Myself and two others full time. The high school shop teacher works part time during the school year and full time during the summer."

The dollar signs were adding up; even with paying customers they had to be subsidized. "Do the kids get paid for their work?"

"Depends on how you interpret the word paid. A roof over their head, three square meals a day, clean cloths, medical and dental. Lessons in manners and what we call intelligent vocabulary and ten bucks a week spending money if they haven't broken any house rules. The neighborhood kids get meals and snacks when working."

Walker gave a low whistle, but said nothing. Unless he was wrong, and he seldom was when it came to insight, Rose treating her gambling like a business was beginning to make sense.

\* \* \* \*

Spencer stopped the pickup in front of a row of townhouses. Built to resemble narrow San Francisco

painted ladies, there were enough dormers, bay windows, fancy woodwork and color combinations to intrigue anyone. "The maroon and coral row house with the black door is Rosemary's. The two-tone green and white with the red door is Cinnamons. I don't know if I should wish you luck or give you a lecture, so I'm going to settle for a friendly word of advice, don't hurt her."

"Dually noted. Thanks for the ride and the side trip."

More nervous than he had been the first time he had asked a girl for a date, Walker found himself in the unfamiliar position of being unsure of himself.

Taking a deep breath, Walker knocked on the door.

Opening the door, Rosemary frowned. Think of a snake and what should arrive on her doorstep but the two-legged kind and didn't he look yummy. A blue silk t-shirt was neatly tucked into black jeans with razor sharp creases down the front. Looking down at his feet, she bit her lip to keep from laughing at his expensive black and white snakeskin cowboy boots.

While Rosemary had been checking him out, Walker had done his own assessment. Three-inch high thin-strapped sandals showed off toenails painted bright candy apple red to match her fingernails. A red sleeveless v-necked dress covered in strands of shiny beads stopped just above her knees. Pearl earrings matched a long rope of pearls tied in a loose knot hanging around her neck. Her copper hair shimmered as it framed her face in a wavy pageboy.

She looked like his favorite red lollipop and he was hungry enough to take a big bite.

"May I come in?"

She cocked her head. "Depends. Why are you here?"

Wolf, hearing her voice, stopped watering a rosebush and made a mad dash for the door. She landed on her butt with her dress creeping up her ass. Trying to climb onto her lap, Wolf's wire-haired body wagged from nose to tail as he licked off what little makeup she was wearing. She laughed and hugged him until he decided it was time to check out the house.

Joe's advice: take her something she can't refuse.

As he helped her to her feet, the heady scent of roses resurrected flashbacks from his nightly dreams. With images of her naked body nudging a part of him to full alert, he wanted to carry her off to bed.

Instead, he handed her flowers. Refusing the blood red roses the shop keeper had tried pushing on him, Walker had selected white gardenia's, dusty rose, pink and peach roses and long spikes of red gladiolas. The look of pleasure and surprise on her face said he had made the right choice.

"Thank you, they're beautiful. Come in. I need to put these in water."

If he had tried speculating on her taste in décor, he wouldn't have come close. The walls were the only things white. The small foyer held an antique walnut coat rack with an oval mirror and bench seat. His eyes became speculative when he spotted the man's gray cowboy hat hanging from one hook. Beside the bench, an old dented brass spittoon held dried lavender. The floors were walnut. A Persian area rug done in a burgundy, mauve, pink and blue design filled the center of the living room. Throw pillows and quilts continued the color theme. Above a Paprika red couch was a large painting of four young girls, three with copper colored hair and one with coal black hair. Dressed in their mother's evening gowns, large floppy hats, white anklets and high heels, they were having a tea party in the middle of a flower filled garden.

A Duncan Phaff cherry wood table and matching sideboard filled the dining room. A painting above the sideboard got his full attention. Within a scene that looked suspiciously like the inside of the riverboat that haunted his dreams, a man looking very much like himself was playing poker with two other men and Rosemary. A dance hall girl that looked enough like Rosemary to be her older sister had her arm draped around one of the players. Wisps of smoke curling out of a pipe and from a cigar resembled miniature ghosts. In the painting, Rosemary was wearing the same cat's eye necklace she had worn in Vegas. When he saw that Ginger had signed and dated the picture before he had met Rosemary, the hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle a warning.

When he turned, the look she gave him was questioning. Not wanting to cancel his welcome, he decided not to ask.

The kitchen where she stood efficiently cutting the bottoms off the flower stems before placing them in a cut glass vase was efficient. A boarder of roosters running above the countertops gave the small room a whimsical appeal and a dash of color.

"The flowers are gorgeous, thank you. What made you pick these colors?"

Sliding onto a bar stool, he was eye level with her. Instead of giving a trite offhanded comment, he said, "They reminded me of you."

Her green eyes turned a shade darker. Seeing her off balance for the first time because of his actions was a heady experience. Her shy smile and confusion had him turning rock hard.

"Thank you. That's the nicest thing you could have said."

Rocky's advice: give her something meaningful.

He hadn't lied they did remind him of her. He just hadn't realized it when he handpicked them from the florist refrigeration unit.

"Those gardenias are more fragrant than I thought."

Hells bells. Rosemary had noticed her mother's perfume just before Walker had knocked. The fact that Walker could smell the heady perfume made her want to ask if he was also experiencing the dreams from the past life, if that's what they were. Without using her intuitive powers, she figured the answer was yes from the look on his face after he looked at the painting.

"Again, I ask, what brings you to town?"

*You. Dreams of hot and heavy sex. You. Getting my life back. You. Figuring out your con-game. You.*

"The Mustang, I delivered it to Big Boy Toys."

Damn! That was one place she didn't want him to visit. More importantly Big Boy Toys was not something she wanted to discuss.

"I thought Kevin was driving it here."

"Rocky's becoming an over protective mother hen. She didn't want him driving that far alone."

*Okay, he would drive back tomorrow. One evening. He'll be out of here tomorrow. Piece of cake!*

Rosemary heard her mother snickering.

Grabbing for a safe topic, one that took the focus off her, Rosemary asked, "How's Rocky feeling?"

Walker scowled. "Did you know that pregnant women don't like being told their belly button's being pushed inside out?"

She stopped cutting. With a brow arched, she shook her head. Her scornful expression instantly released some of the pressure against Walker's jeans.

"Really! Did it take a college education to figure that out or did you open your mouth and insert a size ten foot?"

"Don't show too much sympathy, it might go to my head. All I did was point out that her stomach looked like a ski jump right down to the slight lift at her belly button."

"Clue me in here, do men take stupid pills or does it come naturally?"

Engrossed in the conversation, they hadn't heard the front door open.

"On behalf of all men, I wouldn't answer that if I were you." Cole's voice and chuckle could be heard over Wolf's enthusiastic greeting.

Walking into the room, Ginger kissed Walker on the cheek. "You can thank us later for interrupting this friendly conversation. Since this female doesn't take stupid pills, I won't ask what you're doing here."

Finished with the flowers, Rosemary carried the vase to the dining room table. Not accustomed to seeing her parents' ghostly figures pop out of nowhere, she almost dropped the crystal vase when she saw them standing on the other side of the table. Oh, how she wished Walker wasn't here, she really wanted to pump them for information about the dreams.

Caitlin's smile said her thoughts had been clearly read.

Pissy with frustration, Rosemary silently asked, "Is there a purpose for this unexpected pleasure?"

Her father grinned and shook his head in warning as he took a step away from Caitlin.

With her figure now glowing with angry red sparks Caitlin looked murderous. "Because you remind me the most of me, I will overlook the rudeness, but don't let it happen again. As it happens, we stopped by to let you know..."

Walker's head hit the floor with a thud.

\* \* \* \*

When he came to, a pillow from the couch was beneath his head and Cole was pressing a wet dishtowel on his forehead.

"I passed out?"

Concern and fear caused Rosemary to smart off. "Smart deduction, Sherlock."

"Rose, back off. How many fingers do you see?" Cole asked.

"If I say 'one,' can I sit up?"

"It'll do. Let's get you into the living room. Rose, get a glass of ice water. Gin, Honey, maybe you should call Cinn and tell her to meet us over here."

Before they were settled in the living room, Cinnamon was walking through the front door. "What's up; we're going to be late."

Wolf planted his big paws on her shoulders and lavished her with warm, slobbery kisses. "Never mind, I get the picture."

Entering the living room, Cinnamon stopped dead in her tracks. "Holy cow, maybe I don't get the picture. Walker, you look like hell and Rose, you don't look much better." She could smell perfume and pipe tobacco, her parents' calling cards, but looking around the room, she didn't see them. "What happened here?"

Rosemary was void of all patience. "Sit down, shut-up and listen."

Cinnamon, wise enough not to argue at the tone of voice or the words, took a seat next to Rosemary on the Paprika colored couch.

"Tell us what happened?" Rosemary's tone was demanding. Her finger, resting on her forearm, was tapping impatiently.

Walker closed his eyes. It didn't help. Instead of seeing a black space of nothingness, he saw ghosts, at least he thought they were ghosts. Hell they had to be; his folks were long dead. Who in blazes the other two ghosts had been, he had no idea.

Taking a deep breath to steady his senses, he opened his eyes and looked at everyone in the room. Four, normal, sane people were watching him like he was a monkey in a cage and they were waiting to see what trick he would perform. He was going to disappoint them.

"I don't know what happened."

"Liar."

The sultry female voice came out of thin air. A heartbeat later, red sparks flew around the room. When no one else acted surprised by the event, Walker braced himself for whatever was going to happen next.

"Mom, do you have to be so dramatic? You have scared the poor guy half to death already so how about cooling it for now," Ginger said in half jest.

"As some people so aptly like to say: bullshit. We might have startled him, but Salina and Gus followed us and that, my dear daughter, is what scared the hell out of him." With that, she sat in a high backed brocade covered chair with Queen Anne legs and looked for all the world like a queen granting her subjects court time.

"Hells bells. Mom just cussed. Twice," Rosemary said, more to cover her nervousness than to point out the obvious.

Caitlin kept her regal posture as everyone's eyes were drawn back to her. "What? You want me to retract what I said? Forget it. Frankly, Walker, your mother could exasperate a saint and no one on either side has ever accused me of being saintly."

A low rumble; half laugh-half thunder sound rolled across the room.

Walker silently watched the people he had thought were sane talk to this, this hallucination. He didn't know what to make of the weird sound effects. Maybe if he got up and walked outside when he returned he would find out he had somehow dreamed all this.

"Forget it, Walker, this is not a dream and no one is insane. The rumble was Warren, a guardian angel, laughing. Yes, I can read your mind. Heaven help us all, but Salina, perhaps you should explain."

Salina refused to be outdone by Caitlin's grand appearance. Firefly blue lights danced around the room. In a blink of an eye the lights turned into butterflies. Forming a colorful ball of movement, the butterflies burst into golden colored stardust. When the stardust faded Salina and Gus were standing in the center of the room holding hands.

Walker shot out of his seat. Putting the chair he had been sitting in between him and the ghostly aberrations, he looked more than a little shell-shocked.

"Son, I know this is a shock and it wasn't the way I had hoped this would happen, but, well you know Salina."

"What do ya' think kid, do I look pretty damn good for a ghost or what?" The red glittering outfit hugging Salina's ghostly figure would have looked perfect on a Vegas stage full of half naked dancers. In Rosemary's living room, the outfit looked comically out of place.

He didn't know what to say. She looked ridiculous, but then she had always dressed flamboyantly. As a child, he had been embarrassed when men stared at Salina's scantily clad body. Shit. She was probably reading his mind and now knew what he was thinking. Hell, this wasn't real. No matter what he had been told he had to be hallucinating, dead, or both.

"Relax Walker. You're not dead. Not hallucinating. And not crazy. I'm the only one in the room who can read minds," Caitlin said.

*Oh sure, that certainly made him feel better!*

Caitlin's smile held the same impish quality he had seen at one time or another on all three sisters. He took a deep breath, than took another because it felt good to feel his chest expand like a living breathing person.

"Would someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

The plea was ignored as his father turned on the charm. "I apologize for my son's lack of manners." This lovely lady next to me is Salina. I am Gus. As you have already figured out we are Walkers' parents. Which one of you lovely visions is Gin?"

Ginger wiggled the fingers of her right hand at Gus.

"I'm Cinn," was volunteered.

"Ah yes, I believe you bill yourself as the misunderstood middle child."

Turning to Rosemary, he gave her a look that felt like it went straight to her soul. "Perfect," was all Gus said.

"Cole, I'm just getting a handle on this materializing ghost business, but I don't believe we can shake hands. Suffice to say I'm pleased to meet you."

By this point, Walker was gritting his teeth to keep from exploding. He had watched his father work a room and charm his way into everyone's business for years. Obviously, dead or alive, some things didn't change.

"Walker, sit down." Gus's voice was calm but commanding.

Like an obedient child, Walker complied.

"Your mother got a little impatient. I'm sorry we shocked you. Truth is, since Warren didn't think you would be able to see us; Salina didn't think walking through the veil would cause such a ruckus."

Walker refused to ask any questions, but it irritated him that everyone else seemed to know what the hell his father was talking about.

"Baby, I know this is hard to grasp, but you gotta understand how happy I am to be seen by living souls. Don't get me wrong, I'm not really complaining." She glanced towards the ceiling as if expecting to be struck with lightening for lying. "But they don't appreciate good clothes sense on that side." Strutting around the middle of the room, she beamed at each of them. "It's so nice to have what I'm wearing appreciated. Now that you can see us, I'll get to show off the fantastic duds I've been designing."

Caitlin rolled her eyes then winked at Ginger and Cinnamon when she caught them suppressing laughter.

"Dad?" Lifting a brow Rosemary impatiently tapped a finger on her forearm.

Gus shrugged. "Guess we're not very good at this yet. Herb, could you please help me out?"

Herb, standing behind Caitlin, took an unlit pipe out of his mouth and stuck it in his pants pocket.

"Let's jump ahead for a moment. No one in this room is crazy or delusional. Get used to the idea of family gatherings. If you expect the unexpected, you won't be caught with your pants down." Only Ginger and Cole grinned at the joke.

"Herb, get to the point," Caitlin said.

"Salina, Juanita, Caitlin, Pesty and the girls are very distant relatives. The girls can relate the details, but about three hundred years ago a Grandmamma created a magic spell that guaranteed the inheritance of supernatural powers to each of her female descendants."

With effort, Walker kept silent. He glanced at Rosemary. Ignoring everyone in the room, she was watching Wolf as she scratched a spot behind the big dog's ear.

"Rose, listen closely, for this goes for you, too." Her body stiffened, but she didn't stop showering Wolf with attention.

"The dreams you and Walker have both been experiencing relate to lessons you need to learn. If you fail to learn the lesson the next time it is presented, it will become more difficult," Herb said.

A low rumble vibrated off the walls. Salina looked worried. Gus and Caitlin merely grinned.

"Relax, Warren, I'm not going to say any more." Herb's smirk clearly said he wasn't worried about the warning. "Do you have any questions?"

Walker's mind was frantically trying to comprehend what was happening. When he opened his mouth, not one sound formed. It was as if he had forgotten how to form even the simplest of words. Shutting his mouth, Walker shook his head 'no'.

"Why can all of us see Gus and Salina? When you visited the ranch, Joe wasn't able to see you and Dad," Rosemary asked.

Walker went a little paler.

"We don't have a logical answer. Like Gus said, the ability for you to see them was not expected," Herb answered.

"You said that if a lesson isn't learned we face it again and it becomes harder. Are the dreams part of a past life or a metaphor to teach a lesson?" Rosemary pointedly asked.

The rumble that vibrated through the room was louder.

Salina stepped closer to Gus.

"Gus and Salina are losing their energy." It was a lie, but Salina took Caitlin's comment seriously. Gus placed a warm hand on Walker's shoulder just before he and Salina faded.

"Before Warren adds a few bolts of lightning to his not so subtle warnings, we will also leave." Caitlin kissed everyone on the cheek. When she got to Walker she smiled and whispered in his ear, "Welcome to the family. To answer an unspoken question, the cowboy hat in the foyer belonged to Herb."

Walker felt a whisper soft breath of air on his forehead as she disappeared.

Herb kissed his daughters goodbye and squeezed both men on the shoulder. A lemon drop appeared in each of their hands as he disappeared.



## Chapter 14

No one said anything for all of ten seconds.

"Hells bells, we're late." Cinnamon yelped when a grandfather clock chimed the hour.

Three females made mad dashes in different directions.

Cole ignored the pandemonium around him as he watched Walker stare vacantly at the spot where Gus had disappeared.

"Get the lead out, guys, we're late." Thrusting a homemade lemon meringue pie in a Tupperware container at Cole, Cinnamon spit out commands: "Take this with you. The presents are already in the trunk of the GTO; Wolf and Walker can ride with us."

"Wolf won't be allowed in the club," Cole replied calmly.

"He just became part of the act. Get going."

Knowing better than to argue, Cole headed out the door with Walker automatically following. It wasn't until they pulled up in front of a building with a neon sign reading, The Witches Brew, that Walker mentally pulled himself together.

"Thank God you finally arrived. I was about to send a cop after you." The harassed woman easily stood six foot barefooted. In four-inch stilettos sharp enough to be registered as lethal weapons, she towered over everyone but Cole. A streak of white hair starting at her forehead made a dramatic effect as it wove its way through a thick rope of braided black hair hung over one bare shoulder. The halter style black gown that flowed freely to her ankles nicely emphasized her well-packed figure.

If this was the woman Cole's brother was dreaming about, Walker understood the attraction.

"Who's that?"

Walker started to take offence until he realized Pagan wasn't looking at him.

"Wolf, he's part of the act, so don't bother with the health inspector lecture." Turning to Walker, Cinn added, "Pagan this is Walker; the sidewinder Rose has been mooning over."

That certainly hitched his ego up a notch. At least he knew she had thought enough about him to mention his name; he'd have to work on the snake part.

From what Cody had told him, he had expected to see a Halloween theme of witchcraft. Instead the room looked more like the back parlor in a 1920's gangster movie.

Dealers in white puffed sleeve shirts with black garter belts on a forearm and shiny black handguns tucked into shoulder holsters stood behind a roulette wheel, craps table, spinning wheel of fortune and three twenty-one tables located at the far end of the room.

Surrounded by a small dance floor, an old upright piano stood in the center of a small stage. Rimming the dance floor were round tables draped in black tablecloths. A red rose in a bud vase and small votive candle topped each table.

Spotting a beefy man sitting at the bar with a machine gun resting on his thigh, Walker's back stiffened.

He didn't have to be told the gun was real.

"Relax; it's empty. Let's get a drink and I'll explain," Cole said.

"Make it a double; you're buying."

Cole smiled. The first time he had come face to face with talking ghosts, he had downed three double shots of whiskey.

"It's a deal."

The square hulk holding the machine gun was wearing a very authentic looking badge that read: Deputy Sheriff Cook County, Rosette. After thirty years on the force, he was good at reading faces. "The badge is real. Your reaction to the machine gun was worth the six months of headaches Pagan has given me over this party."

While the bartender poured their drinks, Cole explained. "Pagan's brother, Rumor, is the Deputy Sheriff in town. His fortieth birthday was a few days ago. He thinks he got by with nothing more than a lap dance preformed by a very large lady."

This sure beat black hats, balloons and walking cane gag gifts sold by the gross each month at the casino's gift shop. "Pretty elaborate surprise. Where did she find the authentic looking props?"

Rosette had a cocky smile as he looked proudly around the room. "There's not a prop in the room. All this stuff has been confiscated from illegal gambling operations. It's all on loan from the police academy museum."

The double shot of whiskey burned his throat and hit Walker's empty stomach with a jolt. Wanting to keep his wits about him, he declined a second. But he was thankful for the mellow feeling that dulled the sharp edges of pain that had been hammering at his temples since he had gotten the first glimpse of Salina. Not wanting to go there, he pushed the thought aside and concentrated on the room.

"It's illegal to gamble in this state. What are you going to do with the tables?" Walker asked.

"Gamble. The money will go into the local teddy bears for tots program." Rosette's confidence said he wasn't concerned about the law.

Standing at the bar, Walker and Cole watched the room fill. Most of the partygoers had gotten into the spirit of the evening with some very clever roaring '20's style costumes.

When a scantily clad woman calling out, "cigars, cigarettes, gambling chips," walked by, Cole and Walker purchased rich dark chocolate cigars, boxes of candy cigarettes and bags full of gold foiled, chocolate coin gambling chips.

Walking the room, they found Ginger dressed in a gold floor length gown hypnotizing a ruddy-faced older gentleman. Much to the delight of the others at the table, within minutes he happily handed over his badge, wallet, keys, handgun and a bottle labeled bootlegged liquor while reciting the Miranda rights.

Cinnamon, dressed in an emerald green vintage flapper dress, was mesmerizing another group as she told a dour looking woman that she was the town drunk and the man next to her had a bottle of Jim Beam hidden on his person. To get it, she had to convince him that she was in love with his body.

Rosemary, standing behind a twenty-one table was playing the crowd with style. Giving the man standing in front of the table a seductive pout, she batted eyes rimmed in long false eyelashes. "Now, honeybunch,

you can do better than that; just try one more time.” She winked at Cole and Walker as the man ogled her cleavage as she purposely bent forward to begin the shell game.

When the man lost again, he good-naturedly demanded she reveal the pea. “Why, honeybunch, it's right here. If you'd kept your eyes on the shells I'm sure you would have guessed right this time.” Before he could place another bet, his not too happy wife dragged him away.

Expertly shuffling a deck of cards, she addressed the crowd around the table as she placed the neatly stacked deck on the green felt. “Who among you is willing to chance losing one thin gold coin? Just one gold coin will buy you the opportunity to test my powers of intuition. Split the deck, and allow me to guess if the next card is higher or lower before you reveal what card you picked?”

Looking at Walker, she cooed: “Surly a big, brave, handsome man like you isn't afraid to place a coin on the table. Just one coin from that bag you're holding will pit my knowledge against your luck.”

She was good. Too good. There wasn't a man within hearing range that wasn't wishing he were in Walker's boots.

Grinning, he laid a coin on the table. He didn't look at the bottom card after splitting the deck. “What's your guess Rosie?”

The air smoldered. A sizzle of electrical current buzzed in Rosemary's ears. They had played this game before. Man, woman, sizzling attraction, seductive charm, teasing foreplay. All the ingredients for body heat dampening cotton sheets were there. She blinked, then swallowed the lump in her throat.

*Say yes, and all of that can be yours again,* She-devil whispered.

*Not going to happen,* Rosemary silently shot back.

“The next card is higher.” Rosemary's voice wobbled.

Turning his hand over Walker revealed the King of Diamonds. “That's going to be hard to beat Rosie.”

“You think?” With a ‘you don't know anything smile’ she looked at the crowd that had gathered. Then addressed the woman standing next to Walker. “Ma'am would you please turn over the next card?”

The woman looked from Walker to Rosemary. She didn't know what type of game they were playing, but you'd have to be blind not to know that more was at stake than who won the card game.

Rosemary smiled at the crowd's gasp when the woman revealed the ace of hearts.

“That was just dumb luck,” the woman said as she placed a coin on the table.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Rosemary said with a grin.

The shell game, Walker understood; it was impossible to concentrate on her hands when her seductive purr, sexy smile and enticing cleavage addled the brain of every red blooded male around the table.

The card game was a different matter. Guessing right along with Rose, he had only been right three out of eight times. Rose had been right every time. Like the winning streak in Vegas, it didn't make sense.

By the time Pagan joined them, Rosemary had won the high/low game a dozen more times and dazzled a few more men out of their money with the shell game. “Would you two do me a favor? Rumor is supposed to be here in about five minutes and a couple of the dealers need to get ready for his arrival. Could you guys relieve them for awhile?”

"Sure," Cole said as Walker nodded his agreement.

Walker felt like a kid again. Standing beside the wheel of fortune, he located the illegal lever that would stop or push the wheel further before he began the carnie spiel he had learned working one summer at Circus Circus. "Step right up folks. Take a chance. Risk only one thin coin for a golden opportunity." Spotting the first mark, he went for the kill. "Lovely lady, does your husband know you sneaked off with this shady character?"

When the popping sound of fake gunfire ricocheted off the walls, the crowd was too thick to see the action by the front door. Finally, Rosette, with the machine gun cradled under his arm jumped on top of the bar. "Ladies and Gentleman, although it took a little persuasion," patting the machine gun under his arm everyone laughed, "the sheriff has agreed to cooperate. Drinks are on the house. Let's party."

When Rosemary told Walker it was time for a break, he was surprised to realize that he was enjoying himself. "Who had the brainstorm for this party?"

"Don't know that any one person is responsible. Rumor has always been fascinated with Al Capone and prohibition. Pagan doesn't like to do anything that even remotely resembles traditional." She shrugged one shoulder to emphasize the point. "One idea led to another and this was the final result."

"What about you, do you like traditional?" Walker asked.

If there was a hidden meaning to the question she couldn't think what it would be. "Pretty much, why?"

"Retract the claws, Kitten. It was just a question. Are you done playing with the last of that food?"

When she nodded, he took her hand and led her onto the dance floor where he staked out a small section. Holding her, he gloried in the scent and feel of her against him. He would kick himself from here to doomsday tomorrow for his stupidity and vulnerability, but for now he tightened the hold around her waist and snuggled closer as they shuffled in an increasingly smaller circle.

Hells bells, she didn't want to feel anything for him. This was supposed to be a 'love um an' leave um' situation. She had known for eighteen years that he was out there and for the same time frame had adamantly vowed that she was never going to be trapped into a relationship by the stupid spell. So where was her backbone when she needed it?

There was no doubt Walker had to be churning with unanswered questions after the way their parents had dropped in on them. But instead of demanding answers, he had put his questions aside and affably helped at the party.

She smiled at the memory of the act he adlibbed through when a cop calling himself Fast Draw accused him of using the illegal lever. He had conned his way out of being shot by the, 'gangster,' with sleight of hand card tricks that stumped and impressed everyone.

Sighing in self-disgust at her loss of self-preservation, Rosemary pushed her concerns to the back of her mind as she allowed him to pull her closer.

## Chapter 15

Without knowing exactly how it happened, Walker found himself safely tucked into Rosemary's bed at the family home.

Wolf, the lucky dog, got to stay with Rosemary at the townhouse.

During their second slow dance, he had felt the softening in her demeanor. With that, he had calculated that with the right words and a few moves he would have her buck naked beneath him, beside him, on top of him and any other position they could maneuver into before the night was over.

Somehow he had managed to overlook Cole's protective attitude until it was too late to change the situation.

Walker fell asleep with the scent of roses tickling his subconscious.

*With purposeful strides, Walker was walking towards the docks.*

*Despite the doctor's predictions, winter had passed and his father was still very much alive.*

*He didn't hate his father, but he was sick and tired of his life being run by him. Although he was solely responsible for running their various businesses, his income was controlled by a monthly allowance his father begrudgingly doled out.*

*Less than an hour ago, his father had informed him that a bride had been picked out for him. The washed out shell of a woman had a pedigree as long as her narrow plain Jane face and as much personality as a brick wall. According to his father, all that mattered was the fact that her father, a judge, would make sure that some of their less than reputable business practices were overlooked."*

*"Marry her, bed her until she's ripe with child then go back to the fancy whore who keeps you happy," had been his father's exact words.*

*Walker had toyed with the idea of telling the old man the fancy whore was his daughter-in-law, but without a guarantee that the shock would kill him he kept quiet.*

*Until a bad heart had curtailed his father's activities, the old man had had a mistress tucked securely in a house just off Bourbon Street. Unbeknownst to his father, Walker still paid the woman's upkeep. She was an insecure wisp of a thing, with no common sense, but she had given his father her youth and her love. For that she deserved compensation.*

*Unlike his mother who barely concealed her contempt for him, his father's mistress had always been kind to him. He clearly remembered many a night when she had tucked him into a small narrow cot set up in a small room off the kitchen. Brushing his hair off his forehead, she always kissed him goodnight before joining his father upstairs in her feather bed.*

*Walker's business expertise, not his father's had tripled their bottom line in the last ten years. Still, Walker knew if he were disinherited, his mother would give everything to charity before bestowing him with what was rightfully his.*

*He looked the paddleboat over as he boarded. With luck, they would have another good year and he could add another paddleboat to the fleet next year.*

*Two identical scrawny, half grown black boys were polishing brass railings when he entered the passageway to Rose's quarters.*

*"Miss Rose ain't here, sir," the braver of the two offered.*

*"Any idea where I'll find her?"*

*"She and the girls are in town getting the last fittings for their dresses, sir."*

*They whooped with glee when he flipped them each a penny before walking back into the saloon.*

*Killing time, he checked supplies, talked to the captain and generally made a nuisance of himself. He hadn't had to hear the high-pitched excited voices floating through the air to know when Rose arrived, something that started clear down in his bones had always been able to sense her presence. Having been deprived of her pleasures for three days heightened the awareness to a feverous pitch.*

*Walker beat her to her office. When she walked in, he was sitting in the chair in front of her rolled top desk. As always, the sight of her took his breath away.*

*She pulled off white kid leather gloves without saying a word. Unbuttoning her day coat, she carefully hung it on a wooden peg before walking towards him.*

*With one hand, Walker lifted the hem of her full skirt. At the same time, he put enough pressure on Rose's waist to have her straddling his lap.*

*She ran her fingers through his sandy blonde hair. "Welcome home. Did you have a profitable trip?"*

*"I did, but I'm not in the mood to talk about work."*

*A throaty chuckle vibrated from deep within her belly. "Let me guess, you want to talk about the weather."*

*Having successfully unbuttoned all the tiny buttons running down the front of her blouse, Walker pushed the material off her shoulders and down long smooth arms before loosening the ties on her white lace chemise. "The Captain told me about a range of mountains out west that an explorer named the Tetons; the French word for breasts. He said they are so tall that snow is on their peaks year round."*

*Tracing a nipple with a work roughened finger, he smiled when she moaned. "Sure glad to see that these Teton's are as warm and rosy as the last time I saw them." Slowly suckling each breast it was his turn to moan as the nipples puckered and the breasts swelled.*

*Lifting his head, he was satisfied with the look of turbulent lust in her eyes. "Heard there's supposed to be stormy weather coming in from the gulf later on today. Seems to me the storms already arrived. Aren't you glad I know just how to calm the restless waters."*

*Nibbling a delicate ear lobe he whispered, "The captain also said they are having a dry spell north of Baton Rouge." As his hands slid up silk clad thighs then past lacy garters to meet at the apex of her womanly core, she arched her back and gasped. "I don't believe that is going to be a problem where we're headed."*

*Hours later, naked and satisfied, Rose lay propped on one elbow as she idly traced circles around*

*a male nipple surrounded by a light smattering of chest hair. "Are you going to come?"*

*"I believe I have no less than three times since you walked through the door."*

*Rose playfully swatted his chest. "You know what I mean. Are you going to come on the first run?"*

*"Only as far as Baton Rouge, then I will have to get off and tend to business."*

*Handing her a small box that had been sitting on the lamp table, he said nothing as she opened it. The oval golden brown cat's eye was about the size of a silver dollar. Set in a round, cobwebbed disk of white gold, a delicate chain with interlocking balls of cat's eye finished off the necklace. "It's beautiful."*

*Wearing nothing but the necklace and a smile after a very satisfying thank you, Rose laid her head on his chest and fell asleep.*

*With Rose asleep, Walker's mind wandered to the business taking him to Baton Rouge. Judge Jacobs had a second home just outside of town. He was to be their guest for a week. If only...*

Walker woke up with a start. Moonlight outlined the unfamiliar room. With the sheets kicked off his overheated body, his heart was beating a hundred miles a minute. He wiped his hand down his face and tried to think rationally.

Rational was on vacation, so he thought about his last trip to New Orleans.

Although he loved Dixieland Jazz, he wasn't fond of New Orleans. At least he hadn't been since a dark skinned old lady with a heavy French accent blocked his path while he was walking down Bourbon Street. He would never forget the look of pity on her face or her words. "You won't find your heart in New Orleans in this lifetime."

When he had told her she had mistaken him for someone else, she had wagged her finger in his face. "You are Walker. I'm not mistaking you for anyone but the low down scoundrel you were, maybe still are. You broke dear Rose's heart and as good as killed her and your child. Get it right this time around or you'll kiss any chance of happiness goodbye."

After that encounter, Walker hadn't been able to get out of town fast enough. He had avoided New Orleans since then.

Rubbing his face Walker pushed the memory away.

\* \* \* \*

Rosemary climbed in and out of bed half a dozen times. By the time she fell asleep the first sheep she counted were jumping over the fence a second time.

*Gossip spread faster than summer humidity in New Orleans. When the rumors didn't concern Walker or the paddleboat, Rose seldom listened. The latest gossip had zeroed in on Walker—more precisely, his father's plans for him.*

*Rose thought it funny that he was trying to force Walker into marriage with a judge's daughter. With their marriage license safely hidden behind a loose brick beside the fireplace at home, she wasn't worried about that coming to pass.*

*She had never told Walker, but she had befriended Patsy, his father's former mistress. The woman*

*didn't have a lick of common sense, but she was handy with a needle and thread. Rose made sure she was kept busy and paid well.*

*Not long after they met, Patsy told her about her pregnancy and being forced to give Walker to his father.*

*Rose had tried to tell Walker the truth without telling him the source of the information. A few days later he had calmly informed her that he knew for fact that the 'rumor' she had heard was a lie.*

*Rose had bought her home with her own hard earned money. There was also a healthy bank account that could build her a business anywhere she chose to live. The paddleboat made a great backdrop for her casino, but she clung to no illusions when it came to the town's feelings towards her. She was accepted by the upper echelons of society only because of Walker. If his protection was lost, so was her position.*

*It had been a long difficult winter with Walker preoccupied much of the time. With the water to lull her to sleep and gamblers hoping to best her next winning hand, she was looking forward to the paddleboat pushing away from the dock to float along the lazy Mississippi River.*

*While she was walking up the narrow stairway to her private quarters, the lingering scent of Walker's bay rum cologne clearly shouted, here I am, long before Rose opened the door.*

*Expecting to see Walker in her bed, naked as a newborn baby, she was surprised to see him casually sitting in the chair in the connecting office.*

*Smiling coyly, she contemplated doing a slow strip tease, but the sight of him had her too antsy to do anything slowly. Tossing her hat on the desk, Rose used her teeth to help strip her soft as butter leather gloves off. Hanging her coat on a peg, she sashayed towards him. When Walker pushed her skirt up and pulled her forward, Rose willingly tumbled into his lap.*

*While Walker worked on freeing the tiny row of buttons down the front of her blouse she blindly made quick work of undoing the buttons on his trousers. Freeing her prize from confinement she stroked it hello.*

*When he compared her body to comments about the weather, it turned her inside out with hot and heavy longing faster than you could say 'hot diggity damn'.*

*Panting, with her forehead resting on his shoulder, Rose prayed that he hadn't come to tell her he wouldn't be back until her next stop in town.*

*Pushing the unpleasant worry aside, she lifted her head just enough to whisper in his ear. "Bet you can't do that again and live to tell about it."*

*He proved her wrong, twice.*

*Running her hand over a light smattering of springy chest hair, she smiled at how a small act could create such perverse pleasure. There was a soothing possessiveness to the knowledge that what she saw was hers, hers alone. One thing she knew for certain, Walker didn't cheat on her like so many men who had a sweet wife waiting at home while they screwed a fancy mistress.*

*"Are you going to come?"*

*"I believe I have no less than three times since you walked through the door."*



*She playfully swatted his chest, but she wasn't fooled by the way he sidestepped an answer.*

*"Bought you a little something to remind you of me."*

*"As if I need to be reminded."*

*Opening the box she gasped. "Oh my. That's the largest Cat's eye I have ever seen. It's beautiful."*

*Rather than worry that the gift was given in guilt for not telling her the true nature of his business in Baton Rouge, Rose sent out a silent heartfelt prayer that someday they would have a chance to live as husband and wife with a passel of kids.*

## Chapter 16

Walker was on his second cup of coffee when Cole joined him at the kitchen table.

"You must not have gotten much sleep, you look like hell," Cole cheerfully announced.

"Yeah, well we aren't all lucky enough to sleep with their dream dates."

"There is that, but I'd guess your problem has more to do with dreams rather than dream dates."

Walker looked at Cole suspiciously. "What do you know about my dreams?"

"Nothing. Having had my own series of dreams to deal with before Gin and I married, I can only imagine. Care to share a G-rated version of what you're experiencing?"

"If all you want is a G-rating, it won't take more than half a sentence to repeat," he said grumpily.

"You have my heartfelt sympathy."

"Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?" Sipping his coffee, Walker stared at Cole with impatience.

"Can't. There was a message on the answer machine when we got home. Your aunt and uncle are on their way here. Until they arrive, we are under a strict gag order."

"Who called them?"

"Aunt Pesty."

"Who told her I was here?"

"My bet is on Caitlin. Did you know Pesty and Juanita have been talking on the phone every day?"

No, he hadn't known.

Having firsthand knowledge of how it felt to be at the mercy of what someone else was willing to share, Cole relented an inch. "No one said I couldn't tell you how Gin and I met. After yesterday, I wouldn't think that would be divulging any secrets you haven't already seen for yourself."

Cole half chuckled when he caught a whiff of pipe tobacco. "Morning, Herb. Sorry, we can't see you, but glad you could join us."

Walker choked on his coffee.

"Do you smell anything unusual?" Cole asked Walker as he watched him use a napkin to mop up drops of coffee on the table.

Like a bloodhound sniffing the air, Walker took his time before answering. "There's lavender, mixed with licorice and rum. If I didn't know better I'd say there was a hint of a Havana cigar mixed in."

"The lavender's from the plants blooming in the backyard. Herb's favorite pipe tobacco is a blend of licorice, rum and vanilla. As far as I know he never smoked cigars."

"My dad smoked one every evening after dinner."

"Then I'd say your dad is here with Herb. Caitlin's calling card is gardenias, her favorite perfume."

If Walker didn't know better, he'd say they were drunk and this was all a hallucination. "Do they drop by often?"

"Not really. And Caitlin kept her promise not to visit during our honeymoon for which I have thanked Herb several times."

"You were going to tell me about your dreams," Walker prompted as he refilled his mug with vanilla hazelnut coffee.

"On April first, my orderly world unraveled. It started innocently enough when a baby threw-up on my pants at JFK. Shortly after that, my wallet and passport were stolen and sold. Without a good lawyer and a buddy on the police department, I'd still be wading through the red tape of the fall out. A week later, a close encounter with a rattlesnake got me some cracked bones, broken toes and a concussion. That same day, Martin called to say he had proposed to Ginger."

Walker frowned. "Isn't he a little old for her?"

Cole nodded. "That plus the idea that Ginger was a money hungry gold digger got me elected to check out the situation. Medical mysteries are more my reading style, so I had no idea how to execute a stake out. Out of frustration, I decided to introduce myself; Gin mistook me for a new client and as they say the rest is history."

"No, you don't, when a level headed doctor marries a ghost busting hypnotherapist weeks after meeting her, there's got to be more to the story. It took me longer than that to pick out my last car. Spit out the rest of the story."

Cole settled more comfortably into the chair and finished the tale.

"These dreams you had, did they ever seem like a ... I don't know how to put this because it sounds too preposterous to be true, but like you were stepping into a previous life?" Walker asked.

Cole absently ran his fingers through his hair. "Never. Our dreams dealt with the future rather than the past. Past lives are not something I have studied but, considering what's happening maybe I should," Cole mused.

"You believe in this abracadabra sleight of hands?"

Cole studied Walker over the rim of his coffee mug. "Four months ago, if something hadn't been scientifically proven it didn't exist in my world. It took some powerful magic to dissolve my defenses. Don't ridicule what you don't understand; it might destroy you in the end."

"Fair enough. After yesterday, I can appreciate that reasoning."

Cole glanced at his watch. "Knowing this crew, they will expect to be fed when they arrive and that should be shortly."

By the time Ginger joined them, the aroma of baking cranberry muffins filled the room, pancake batter was waiting to be poured onto a hot griddle and a pound of bacon was frying.

"Thanks for letting me sleep in. Did you two have a nice chat?"

Both men grinned at her not so subtle inquiry.

"Cole told me how you two met. I liked the 'here Ghosty, Ghosty' part."

"You wouldn't? Of course you would, otherwise he wouldn't have said what he did. One of these days."

Cole was shaking his head and laughing as he dropped a quick kiss on her nose. "I know paybacks are a bitch."

"What is that cat doing?" Walker asked.

Turning to look into the living room, they watched Dum-Dum, a large charcoal gray cat wearing a pink rhinestone studded collar race across the back of the couch, jump into the air, land on all fours, growl, hiss, arch her back and bat a paw several times at thin air.

"There's a skunk visiting. Dum-Dum isn't happy about it being here. Did either of you have a pet skunk as a kid?"

"You want me to believe there's a ghost of a skunk in the living room and a cat named Dum-Dum can see it?"

"That sums it up nicely."

Walker looked at Cole. He shrugged his shoulders. "I never had a pet skunk so don't look at me."

"Oh, the poor thing is missing a paw."

"Shit."

Ginger wrinkled her nose. "Actually, what I'm smelling doesn't remotely resemble that."

Walker muttered a few more descriptive nouns. "Daisy Mae was an unthankful, cantankerous skunk Juanita nursed back to health after its paw was trapped in a spring loaded trap. Daisy Mae sprayed every cat that crossed her path. Why would a dead skunk come here?"

"Welcome committee?"

If Cole had laughed, Walker would have thought Ginger was pulling his leg. With all the unanswered questions swirling around in his head, he didn't know which one to pick out of the hat to ask first.

It didn't matter, time had run out. A knock and the door flying open happened simultaneously. Juanita, Joe, and Pesty entered the house laughing at something Martin was telling them.

By the time brunch was eaten and the kitchen cleaned, Walker was ready to kill someone. Trying hard not to judge the situation or the people involved, after all, two of the participants had helped raise him, he was coming dangerously close to exploding.

Placing a fresh pot of coffee within easy reach, everyone settled around the dining room table.

"Walker, I want to apologize. When I look back, I know I should have shared a few things with you. Hindsight isn't going to change anything so I'll just say that if you're mad at anyone let it be me," Juanita said.

In Walker's experience, whenever someone started out with an apology, things only went downhill.

"To begin with, I am going to tell you a little about our family ancestry, which includes the girls and Pesty. We had a great Grandmamma that through her gypsy heritage inherited mystical powers..."

When Juanita finished telling the story Walker looked around the table.

"You're telling me that you're all fortune tellers?"

Cinnamon half chuckled before muttering into her fresh mug of warm mint tea. "If it were only that simple!"

"No one in this room is a fortune teller. Least wise not in the manner you are using the phrase," Juanita said.

"Okay, then explain it in terms my feeble brain can understand." Walker pushed back his chair and crossed his arms.

Juanita sighed. This was turning out to be far more difficult than she had thought it was going to be. "You've understood for years that I had a sixth sense when it came to the warnings I passed out. What you didn't know is I am a seer."

"Let me get this straight. You can tell me what is going to happen to me next week, month or year?"

Juanita massaged her forehead. Three days ago, Pesty had created a spell that made it possible for a three-way conversation. With Pesty and Juanita sitting in their kitchens talking on the phone, Caitlin's voice had vibrated out of nowhere in each of their kitchens much like a phone call put on a speaker. With Caitlin's warning about divulging too much information ringing in her ears Juanita answered cautiously. "Yes and no. When it comes to warning you about possibilities, then yes, I can see the future. But what I see is never concrete, because you have free choice to make decisions and change your actions."

"What about the rest of you?" The words didn't sound friendly, but then he wasn't feeling friendly.

"Like our great Grandmamma I am able to cast spells," Pesty offered.

"And you do what with this ability?" Walker asked as he recalled Rosemary calling her an alchemist.

Three nieces and Cole hung their heads trying to hide smiles. They were also all ears for the creative answer they were sure was coming.

"A little of this, a little of that. What matters is that over the years I have used the ability to prevent mistakes from happening and help people improve their lives by helping them discover their full potentials."

*Way to go Aunt Pesty*, Ginger cheered. Aside from anything she would have prevented, helped or improved during her years working as a Chemical Engineer at the Kennedy Space Center, it was a clever way of saying, "I meddle in people's lives."

"You can thank me for your ability to see spirits or at least those that are directly related to us. Cole told you how we met so you pretty much know my abilities," Ginger said.

"Why should your being a medium make it possible for us to be able to see ghosts?" Walker congratulated himself on his calmness.

"Spirits, they are spirits. The only difference between them and us is what side of the veil we reside."

"As far as I can see that's a fairly big difference, but I'll restate my question. Why the hell am I suddenly able to see and talk to dead people?" Okay, so maybe he wasn't as calm as he thought.

It was hard not to look pointedly at Aunt Pesty. "We have no idea. Until I met Cole, family members

could detect Mom and Dad's presence by the scent of perfume and tobacco, but I was the only one able to see and talk to them or other spirits."

"Why aren't they here now?" Walker demanded.

"They can't reveal lessons we need to learn for ourselves is the best answer I can offer," Ginger stated.

Looking at Rosemary, Walker watched her squirm. "Are you going to tell me that you have x-ray vision and worry about someone bringing kryptonite into the room."

"No, I'm going to tell you you're acting like a sidewinder yellow bellied snake." With that said, Rosemary stormed out of the house.

Caitlin and Herb were watching the meeting from a safe distance. One that insured their presence wouldn't be detected.

"Well, that went well." Caitlin sighed.

"It certainly lasted longer than I expected. I was betting on Pesty finding a way out of disclosing her abilities. Guess I should have figured that Rosemary would be the one to call a halt since right now she has the most to lose."

"Yes, she has a lot to lose, but think of all she has to gain," Caitlin delivered with another sigh.

"Honey, she hasn't figured that one out yet. Give her time, the end hasn't been written yet."

"True, a lot can still happen, but what if the ending is the same as last time?"

"Stop fretting."

"Guess we should see if Gus or Salina have any ideas," Herb said.

The look Caitlin gave him left no doubts on her thought of that idea.

"Be gracious, Caitlin," Herb warned.

"I'm trying, but my word, that woman is driving me crazy. Did you see that dress, or maybe I should say her lack of dress this morning?"

Wiggling his eyebrows brought the first real smile to Caitlin's lips since Pesty's plan had gone haywire with the kids' first meeting in Vegas. "I might be dead, Honey, but I'm not blind."

## Chapter 17

Running his fingers through his hair, Cole looked around the table. "I think we need a break. I'm heading out back if any of you men want to join me."

That was pointed enough to have Cinnamon and Ginger heading out the front door.

When they didn't find Rosemary on the front stoop, they headed for the park.

Their father had designed the community in the early '70's with the idea of allowing people the opportunity to live in the residential charm of old fashioned streets lit by natural gas lamps and the beauty of architecturally charming homes. At the entrance to the community stood an old-fashioned general store, post office, and park.

They found Wolf sitting outside the double glass doors to the general store. Rosemary was sitting on a stool at the old fashioned soda fountain that dominated one wall of the general store.

Miss Liddy, who had worked the soda fountain for as long as the girls could remember, was smothering three large waffle cones with chocolate syrup and whipped cream. Before they could slide onto green vinyl-covered stools, she handed each of them a cone. "It's better than booze for what ails ya'. It's on the house and so is the advice: it'll all work out in the end."

"You sound like Mom," Ginger said.

"Best compliment I've had all week." Handing Rosemary one plain vanilla ice cream cone, she looked pointedly at all three of them. "Skedaddle, that pup has waited long enough for his treat."

Walking across the street to the park, they removed their sandals to walk through a wading pool with a cascading fountain. Then they skirted a large white gazebo as they headed for their favorite swings. Until Wolf was contentedly eating his cone and they were comfortably seated on their favorite swings, no one said a word.

"How many hours you figure we've spent on these swings?" Cinnamon asked offhandedly as she wiped whipped cream off her nose.

"Too many to count would be my guess," Ginger answered before taking another bite of the calorie-laden tranquilizer.

"Why couldn't he have been reasonable?" Rosemary spit out.

Ginger and Cinnamon grinned. It hadn't taken near the amount of trivial chitchat they had expected before Rose was willing to talk.

"Well, we could chalk it up to male machismo, but I don't really think that's the problem," Cinnamon said.

"Cole didn't react like a jerk," Rosemary muttered.

"Your memory's faulty. He called what I did hocus-pocus and made a promise while under hypnosis that had him trying to bribe me with money. If he hadn't thought I was a Black Widow out to strip Martin of his money, he would have hightailed it back to Texas faster than you could say, I'm out of here."

"But..."

"Rose, did you think that maybe his reaction has very little to do with you?" Cinnamon asked.

No one said anything as they fortified themselves with more chocolate chip ice cream. Perhaps it came from being the middle child, a byproduct of her *gift* or simply that Cinnamon had inherited the ability from their father, but Cinnamon had the ability to weed through the nonessentials quickly.

"Okay, I'm listening," Rosemary said.

"Maybe he feels betrayed," Cinnamon said.

"I didn't betray him," Rosemary wailed.

"No, you didn't. But because he was male, his aunt and mother didn't think it necessary to share a major feature in their life with him. We don't know Salina's story, but the woman didn't display a lot of motherly qualities during her first visible visit this side of the veil. This surprise, sprung the way it was, has got to be a hard blow to his trust factor."

"Hells bells!" Ginger said for all three of them.

"You're saying you think his reaction has to do with him finding out he is the offspring of some sort of witch?" Rosemary asked as her emerald eyes darkened with rage.

"You said it, not me. But you're right," Cinnamon replied.

When Rose started to speak, Cinnamon cut her off. "Think about it, without taking into consideration our diverse abilities, how would the world label us if they knew that our abilities were hereditary? *Harry Potter* is embraced as a great story, but if it were announced that a form of wizards were already thriving amongst the muggles, the Salem witch hunts would look tame in comparison to how many people would react."

"I really hate it when you're logical. And right," Rosemary muttered, just loud enough to have her sisters smiling in triumph.

"Rose, what are the odds that Walker has some form of psychic ability?" Cinnamon asked.

"Sixty-forty." Staring at her dusty toes, she said, "Your point is?"

"Well, if I had experienced psychic abilities without any idea that there were people who could give me answers to what was happening, I wouldn't be too happy," Cinnamon said.

"But the spell was only cast to pass down to female descendants," Rosemary wailed.

"Don't be dense. Pagan is a perfect example of people who have successfully tapped into their psychic abilities without any help from heredity. What if heredity gave him a psychic edge or an ability like Rose's that hasn't been documented?" Ginger replied.

"What makes you think this?"

She shrugged. "Since meeting Walker, Cole and I have been talking. We know our daughters will inherit a gift, but what about our sons? Think about it, our maternal family tree is conspicuously void of male descendants."

"True. Cole has been pretty adaptable to all the paranormal thrown at him, but he has had us to guide him through the experiences. Without that, I would imagine it would be pretty scary," Rosemary said thoughtfully.



"You two are forgetting how often it is scary even when you know in advance," Cinnamon said quietly.

"Damn! I guess because my abilities don't create scary situations, I sometimes forget. I'm sorry; I was not only being dense, I was insensitive."

Since Rosemary wasn't in the habit of apologizing, Cinnamon reached over and squeezed her arm. "No problem. Have you had any more dreams?"

"Last night. Why?"

"Because if what Cole experienced is normal, every time you have a dream, Walker has a similar dream," Cinnamon responded.

"And like Cole, he wouldn't have any idea what was happening," Ginger added.

"Life would have been so damn much easier if I'd just screwed that boy in college!"

"I doubt it. Look at it this way, now you get to put into practice your love um and leave um plan," Cinnamon said with impish goading.

"Are you saying I won't?" Rosemary challenged. Using the tip of her toe, she stopped the swing to glare at Cinnamon.

"What, you think I'm suicidal? I wouldn't dream of challenging your implementing a plan that has created so many creative daydreams. All I'm asking is after having experienced a more tangible set of dreams that show what life could be like with your soul mate, are you sure you want to give it up," Cinnamon said.

"Before you jump to happy ever after conclusions, let me share the next installment of the dream. Happy homemaker it is not." Rosemary's voice dripped with sarcasm.

\* \* \* \*

"When you said you can't predict the future, were you being totally honest?" Pesty asked to break the silence in the kitchen.

"About as honest as you when you told the girls you had nothing to do with the destiny dreams starting," Juanita answered.

Pesty chuckled. "Well that certainly says a lot. How much do you know?"

"I know Caitlin originally agreed to help you play matchmaker without telling Herb. Fate had already cast Gin and Cole's destinies into the wind so your spell changed the timing of a few events that created some major problems. Thanks to some quick thinking on Gin's part and a second spell cast by you, things have settled down, but the problem is not totally dissolved. You cast a spell to bring Rosemary and Walker together, which has also gone haywire. And you still haven't figured out what you did wrong. How am I doing so far?"

"To quote the girls, Hells Bells. Any idea what is going to happen next?" Pesty's hazel eyes showed her worry as she chewed off what was left of her lipstick.

"Wish I did but no I don't."

"So you can't see everything in the future?" Pesty said with a disappointed sigh.

"If I am not related to someone, I can see the highlights of their future very clearly. Like steppingstones, I see the major events that are going to force them to make decisions. I see what choices will be offered,

the scenario that will follow each choice and more often than not know which path they will follow."

"And family?" Pesty asked anxiously.

"Bits and pieces, but not the same as someone I have no emotional attachment with. For years now when I touch Walker, I've had a vision of a woman nursing a redheaded baby girl while a young boy runs around her riding a stick horse. I knew Rose was that woman the moment I saw her."

"What if you were seeing Gin or Cinn through Walker because of their hereditary link?"

She shrugged. "It's Rose I see. When I was holding her hands, I got a rerun of a past life they shared. They have a lot of negative karma to wade through before they can make it work this time around. Considering the way they're alternately spitting and sniffing at each other, they're working on it slowly but surely."

"Lord, I hope you are right. Ever since Caitlin's and Herb's deaths, I've worried more over Rose than the other two put together. She makes a good show of being tough and independent, but it hurt her far more than she's willing to admit when she lost them."

\* \* \* \*

Walker stood with his feet firmly planted shoulder width apart and his hands stuck in the back pockets of his jeans. Staring at golden orange Koi lazily swimming around a rock-rimmed fishpond beside the large deck in the backyard, he tried calming his temper. Bees buzzing around fragrant flowers, Dum-Dum chasing a butterfly and the sound of a neighbor's lawn mower went unnoticed. "Are we out here because you have something to say without the women around?"

"Not necessarily. We talked about dreams earlier this morning. Seeing as I have no idea what Joe and Martin experienced, I thought some privacy might expedite their true confessions."

Settling into one of the chairs at a glass-topped table, Joe rubbed the back of his neck as a broad grin and a twinkle in the eye lit up his face. "Mind you, it's been forty years since I had those dreams, but memory says they were pretty much about pure sweet sex."

There wasn't anything before or after?" Cole asked.

"Not really. The moment I laid eyes on her I knew I was going to marry her. Convincing her of that matter took a few months longer."

"I can't imagine the two of you not together. If she was having these so called destiny dreams, why did she hesitate?" Walker asked as he joined the rest of them at the table.

With reflection, Joe's face sobered. "I met Juanita during a party her friends threw for her twentieth birthday. Like I said, for me it was love at first sight. Didn't matter one bit to me that the package included a ten-year-old sister. Salina was already an independent spitfire, but I reckoned my steady influence would help ease the pain of losing their parents within months of each other. Juanita didn't go along with my way of thinking."

"Had the dreams started before you met?" Walker asked.

"No, they started a few months later. Damn fool dreams about drove me insane; couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't concentrate on anything but touching her creamy smooth skin and burying my..." When he realized what he had admitted, he cleared his throat. "You tell Juanita I said that last part, I'll cut your tongue out."

"Your thoughts are safe," Martin replied soberly. "Finish your story."

"Damn dreams kept getting more explicit by the week. After two months of going slowly insane, I stormed into the cottage she was renting, told her I would do anything she asked if she would just agree to marry me. By the time we got done ... talking ... I told her we were getting married, because I wasn't having any kid I fathered called a bastard. She hemmed and hawed and finally spit out the family secret. When I told her I didn't give a rat's ass about some fool magic spell, damned if she didn't smile and ask if we could set a date with the preacher for the next day."

"You found out only a day before marrying her! Weren't you worried about her being insane or what your kids would be when they grew up?" Walker knew he had overstepped common courtesy when the silence around him deepened.

Joe's sigh was deeply etched disappointment. "I thought Gus and I raised you better than that. Can't say I didn't think about it a few times, especially after Salina reached puberty and started raising hell, but living without Juanita scared me a hell of a lot more than living with her psychic abilities."

Martin nodded his head slowly. "I can relate to that. My dreams started a few months before I bought the house. I was cleaning out stacks of old magazines that had published my pictures when I came across an article about this community. The house pictured on the front page started haunting my dreams. Finally out of curiosity, and probably desperation, I drove up here to check out the house. When I saw the for sale sign stuck in the front yard, I looked up the realtor and bought the place without setting foot inside. Dreams starring Pesty started the night I moved in."

"Had you met her yet?" Joe asked.

"Nope. It was another two weeks before she returned from a trip and I was able to have that pleasure," Martin grumbled good-naturedly.

"Maybe the damn house is haunted. My dreams also started the first night I slept there. Why did you wait a year to marry?" Cole asked.

Martin ignored the question. "Joe, did Juanita's dreams start at the same time yours did?"

"Looking back, we never could figure out exact dates, but the time frame was really close. Why?"

Martin muttered to himself for a moment. "Those damn fool dreams haunted me for nine months before Pesty had the first of her dreams."

Walker watched the three of them silently commiserate with each other. He really didn't know what to think. Martin and Cole were newlyweds; they were still in the honeymoon stage of getting acquainted. Hearing Joe's thoughts was different. They had made it through forty years of marriage, despite Juanita's abilities. Hell, why was his mind once again going in that direction? There wasn't any reason to be thinking marriage to Rose or anyone else for that matter. His life was full enough just the way it was.

*And pigs fly!* A taunting female voice whispered in his ear. Sniffing the air, he didn't smell gardenias, but he'd bet money it was Caitlin talking to him.

"Any ideas on why the time difference?" Cole asked as he shuddered at the thought of nine months of cold showers.

"Only a theory. After the girls left for college, Pesty developed a line of body lotions and face creams. The company grew far beyond her wildest imagination. Shortly after I bought the house, she had an unexpected offer to sell out. She agonized over the decision for weeks before finally agreeing to sell.

Suddenly she found herself without a business; no hobbies, no outside interests and three girls who didn't need even part-time supervision. It was a big adjustment."

"You think she had to discover herself before fate handed her the next opportunity," Cole said.

"That's a fancy way of saying she needed to get a life, but it sums it up nicely," Martin answered.

"With all I've read, it also makes sense. The first step in healing or change is to know yourself," Cole said.

"How did you figure out you were both having the dreams?" Joe asked with interest.

Martin chuckled. "I'd been telling her for months she was haunting me day and night. Since she hadn't had any of the damn fool dreams, she thought it was just a well-rehearsed line. A couple of weeks after she had the first dream, she made up one of her magic spells to get me to talk."

"You're joking!" Cole voice held the horror he felt.

"I kid you not. The woman is a walking time bomb when it comes to crafting spells."

"You still have most of your hair, so she didn't turn you into Dopey the dwarf from Sleeping Beauty like she did Herb," Cole said soberly.

Martin smoothed his hand over the bald spot on the back of his head as he looked at Cole in astonishment. "So that's the story behind Herb's baldness. I wondered. I asked her the other day, but she changed the subject."

"What happened to you?" Joe asked.

"She told me she wanted to read me a poem she had written. It started off, Let all men speaketh the truth and ended with, the mind becomes as blank as a clean slate."

"Good grief. Did it work?" Cole asked.

"Depends on what you call success. I remember thinking it was the worst poem I had ever heard, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings. When I tried to speak, I had forgotten how to form words."

"And you still married her! I would have run for cover and never looked back," Walker muttered.

"I doubt it. It took several hours for her to figure out what she had done wrong. The whole time she was muttering to herself, confessing the whole family history, apologizing and swearing she had never made a mistake before. By the time I was able to talk, her witchcraft didn't matter."

"When did you figure out she lied about other mishaps?" Cole asked.

Martin smiled. "On our honeymoon, when she chanted a spell to turn out the stateroom lights and killed the ship's generators."

Cole and Joe groaned.

Walker thought he was plain crazy to voluntarily marry into trouble with a capital T.

"Well, Walker, now it's your turn," Joe said as he grinned like a little boy waiting to hear a scary midnight ghost story.

The look on Walker's face effectively said, 'Do I have to?'

"About eight years ago, I was walking past an antique store in New Orleans when a painting in the window caught my eye. From the night I hung the painting on the wall in my bedroom at Dreamland, it sparked my imagination, or at least that's what I thought was inspiring the dreams. Now I'm not so sure."

"Are you talking about the painting in your bedroom at the ranch with the paddleboat scene and the sign over the gang blank that reads Rose's Casino?" Cole asked.

Walker nodded. "Bluntly, until I met Rose, the dreams were always centered around gambling and sex. From the neck up my partner was featureless."

"Sounds like the dreams with Gin. It about drove me crazy. It wasn't until after I accepted that I was going to do everything in my power to marry her that I was able to see her face in a dream," Cole said.

Walker smirked. "I could be noble and say it mattered, but truthfully it didn't. All I cared about during the dreams was satisfying the lust. Although I did realize that the female who continually turned me on was always the same."

Joe cocked his head as he studied his nephew. "If the person didn't matter, and you couldn't see her face, how do you know it was the same body?"

His sly smiled had them chuckling. "She had a birthmark that fascinated me."

The laughter abruptly stopped as three sets of eyes took a sharper interest. "What type of birthmark?" Joe asked. It wasn't a demanding question but the tone of his voice had certainly changed.

"Heart shaped by her right pelvic bone."

"Holy shit! Juanita has a birthmark just like that."

"So does Pesty," Martin admitted.

"Guess this rounds it out. All three triplets have the same birthmark. And something else, that painting you mentioned, their great-great grandfather on their mother's side painted it."

No one spoke as the information sunk in.

Finally Joe stood up. "I'm not a big one on drinking to dull the senses, but have you got a cold beer? I could certainly use one right now."

Walker wasn't taking comfort in the fact that all their situations were a little different. Obviously there was no set pattern or timetable, which left him no closer to answering the questions he had about his dreams.

Joe hadn't made any comments on Juanita's abilities, but he had mentioned the negative impact of dealing with Salina's. He wondered what bag of magic tricks his mother had inherited. And for that matter, was Gus her supposed soul mate? And what actually constituted a soul mate? Gus never divorced his first wife so, according to the spell, Salina should have lost her powers. But considering everything he'd been told, nothing would surprise him.

Taking a couple of large swigs from the ice cold beer set in front of him, Walker waited until everyone was seated.

"After meeting Rose, the dreams shifted. Instead of centering only on sex, other scenes developed. The dreams became more three dimensional."

"Describe three dimensional?" Joe said.

"The first dreams consisted of touch and lust, now they include sound, smell, thoughts, memories, feeling. It's like every sense is accelerated, amped up to the highest degree possible."

"That sounds right," Cole said as the others nodded their heads in agreement.

"What about the new scenes?" Cole prompted.

"Arguments with a man I know to be my father. Everyday details of running a business, formal dinners, buggies and horses in streets, pretty much scenes of everyday life in the mid 1800's. It's like being thrust into a movie where you're the star without any control of what you think or say."

"Besides a lover, what's Rose's role in the dreams?"

"Gambler, madam, secret wife."

Gambler certainly went along with the picture Gin had painted for Rose. Madam, well, who knew? But marriage seemed odd. "If you're married what's the problem?"

"Don't know as it's a problem to anyone but Rose. The story line has me being disinherited if I marry someone my father deems as inappropriate. Needless to say, a casino owner that runs a stable of girls isn't invited into respectable homes for Sunday dinner. My father's sick but won't die. In the meantime, Rose is getting impatient."

Joe looked at Walker with a steady gaze. There was a lot he could say, but he wasn't sure Walker was ready to hear it. "Let me help you out. Women don't like being placed second to anyone or anything."

"How long you been talking her into keeping the marriage a secret?" Martin asked.

"It's not me. It's a dream," Walker protested.

"Keep it up and you might even convince yourself. Now how long have you been keeping that marriage a secret?" Joe said.

"Known her four years. Been married three years," Walker admitted reluctantly.

"Seems to me, Rose has shown great restraint in not strangling you if that's the case. Anything else about the dreams you care to share?" Joe asked.

Walker sighed. "That's pretty much it."

The look on Walker's face clearly said something else was troubling him. "Spit it out. Doesn't do us any good if we don't know everything," Joe said.

"It's nothing, just something caused by being over tired."

"Indulge us," Joe said.

"Shortly after meeting Rose, the paddleboat painting came to life or hypnotized me into daydreams." Pausing, he rubbed the back of his neck. "Hell, just forget I said that, it sounds too stupid to be believable."

"You're saying the picture hypnotized you?" The trace of doubt in Cole's voice contradicted the spark of interest in his blue eyes.

Again Walker rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know what I'm saying. All I know is every time I looked at the painting it came to life. For a few minutes different scenes would play out. It got so bad I stuck the painting in the closet, then hauled it to the ranch. I hung it on the wall the day before Rose arrived."

"When the girls were young, Pesty used to make their storybooks come to life. What if she cast one of her wayward spells and it somehow has parts of the dreams coming to life through the picture?" Cole said.

"For what purpose?" Martin asked. He didn't have to voice his hope that they were wrong; the worried look on his face said it all.

Cole shrugged. "Same purpose as the dreams would be my guess."

"From what Juanita has shared over the years, the past strongly influences our present. With the girls' great-great grandfather having painted the picture, if she did cast a spell maybe something she said attached to the painting because of a family connection," Joe said.

"You're grasping at straws. I should never have mentioned it; besides, it was probably nothing more than my being over tired or a flashback to the dreams that have been plaguing me day and night. Look, can we change the subject? I've had it with this one," Walker said.

Before anyone could ask another question Walker's cell phone rang.

"I'm having contractions." The shout had Walker holding the phone away from his ear.

"Have you called the doctor?" Walker calmly asked.

"No, I called you. Get Bob home now." Everyone at the table clearly heard the demand before the phone was abruptly disconnected.

Punching speed dial, Walker counted the rings until the phone was answered. "Hi Joan. Charter a plane for Bob ASAP ... Rocky had a cramp and is coming unglued ... No, she called me instead and broke my eardrum ... I'll be there by this evening."

\* \* \* \*

Everyone was clustered on the front porch saying goodbyes' as Walker coaxed Wolf to get into the car.

"Come on, Wolf, Pesty gave you a nice big ham bone. Come on, jump in the car, we need to leave." Walker couldn't believe he was trying to bribe a dog as if he understood everything being said.

Wolf, doing his part to make his thoughts on the matter understood, whimpered and whined before resorting to a short, deep bark.

Walker tugged on his collar. Wolf collapsed at Rosemary's feet as if he didn't have a bone in his body.

Juanita smiled but didn't offer to help.

"Petting him isn't helping," he said to Rosemary.

"What, you want me to kick him?"

"No," was said very slowly. "Do me a favor. Go into the house. If he doesn't see you he'll get into the car."

She rolled her eyes. The minute she was out of Wolf's sight, he started howling. The long mournful wail would have made a great sound track for a horror movie.

When Rosemary came back out, Wolf sat on her feet and leaned his body against her legs as she rubbed behind his ear. "You poor baby, it's all right. You can stay here with me."

If dogs could smile, Wolf would have been grinning from ear to ear. As the car rolled out of the driveway, he licked Rosemary's hand.



## Chapter 18

Since the day Walker left, his name had not been mentioned. If it weren't for Wolf, Rosemary could almost pretend that Walker had been a dream.

If she discounted the number of times thoughts of Walker tiptoed through her mind, life had almost reversed to the status quo of life before Walker. And if she kept thinking that, maybe she would eventually convince herself it was true.

She had picked up the phone at least a dozen times to call. The ready excuse being she wanted to know how Rocky was doing. As excuses went, it was as transparent as a sheet of glass.

Except for Wolf, over the last week everyone had deserted her. Cole and Gin were in Seattle for three weeks of work and pleasure. Cinn was on a two-week whirlwind tour of State and County Fairs where she was dazzling audiences with her hypnosis show. Aunt Pesty and Martin had packed up the Dreamcicle and headed to Niagara Falls for what they were calling an old fashioned honeymoon.

Pagan had gone to a weeklong family reunion. Although she had been invited, having accompanied Pagan to a similar event in the past, Rosemary had used Wolf as an excuse to decline.

Even the whispered words from her parents had stopped.

With nothing better to do and no one to interrupt, she had organized her closets, cleaned the kitchen cupboards, sorted through clothing and hauled an odd assortment of items to Big Boy Toys for a tag sale the kids had decided to hold.

Now with an obligation free, endless afternoon ahead, she was lying on the couch in the living room feeling sorry for herself. For a new experience, it was not an enjoyable one. Wolf, lying on the floor beside her, nudged her hand with his wet nose when she stopped scratching his belly. Absently rubbing her fingernails down his ribcage, Rosemary wondered if this was what was in store for the rest of her life? If so, she didn't like the picture. She had never felt so useless, unloved, unwanted or bored in her life.

Maybe like the old maids of yesteryear, she should take up embroidery and needlepoint. If it didn't bore her to tears, she would at least have stuff to sell at the summer craft shows along with all the other single, lonely old ladies.

Then again, she was the one who didn't want a long-term relationship. So why were the words—old maid, spinster, single, wall flower, lonely, lonesome, unwanted, unloved, unfulfilled, frustrated and virgin—floating in on the soft breeze coming through the open window. Getting tired of the recording, she closed the window. But by then the words were permanently imprinted on her subconscious. Unlike catchy jingles or songs like “Jingle Bells” and “Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer”, she couldn't sing the words to have them instantly erase. She knew because she had tried several times.

Wolf lifted his head. Sniffing the air, he whimpered before burying his head under his big paws. A minute later, when all hell broke loose, he didn't change positions.

The shattering of an empty coffee mug that had been sitting on the end table by Rosemary's head got her full attention as she sprang into a sitting position.

The scent of gardenias filling the air left no doubt as to who had caused the mug to fly off the table. Having heard Cinn's comments on the colors associated with energy for most of her life, she knew that the fiery slashes of red flying around the room were not conducive to a ‘hi Mom, I missed you’ kind of

greeting.

Biting her bottom lip, Rosemary braced herself for the full wrath of her mother's fury. What she wasn't prepared for was seeing her mother without Ginger present.

Caitlin's dress was as blood red as her rage.

"Hi Mom."

"Don't you 'hi Mom' me, Rosemary Caitlin Prescott. You have made me so mad even Warren stepped out of my way when I said I was coming down to have a little talk."

Hells bells, her mother had addressed her by her full name. This was not good. It was *really not good!*

"You're right, this is not good. Young lady, you are acting like an ungrateful brat and I will not silently stand by and tolerate such nonsense."

"But..."

"Don't you *but* me! I can't believe you have the audacity to feel useless, unloved, unwanted and bored."

"But..."

"Unloved. How dare you! You have been showered with more love than most people see in a lifetime. Do you honestly think that just because everyone else is busy and their plans do not include you that you are not loved?"

It was a good thing she didn't need to breathe, because Caitlin wasn't coming up for air as she continued the fiery lecture. "The fact that Pesty and Gin spend more time with their mates is a natural cycle of life revolving and changing. Get used to it; nothing will ever be the way it was again. When Cinn and Pagan's turns come, they will do the same thing."

"But..."

Caitlin, pacing back and forth in front of Rosemary, ignored the scent of pipe tobacco that invaded the room as she glared at Rosemary. "Just remember, young lady, you are the one that always scoffed at the idea of having a mate. I'm not saying you need a man to make you happy, but when everyone else has a foot warmer during long winter nights and you don't, you have no one to blame but yourself."

"But..."

"As for being useless and bored, I've never heard such drivel. If you're bored it's because you're boring. Get off that ass Walker liked admiring so much and recreate yourself."

*When had she watched Walker checking out my backside?*

"Obviously when your back was to him. Walker is not what I came here to discuss, so stop trying to side track me with your thoughts."

"Mom..."

Neither of them noticed that Herb had materialized. Sitting in the high back chair facing Rosemary, he cleared his throat. "Honey, why don't you give Rose a chance to talk. You might just discover that you were a tad too quick with your reaction."

Caitlin didn't say a word. Still raging with anger, she stomped her foot in frustration before sitting in a second chair facing the couch. Crossing her arms, she started tapping a finger on her arm as she lifted one brow and waited.

As she watched her mother's actions, it suddenly struck Rosemary that her own temperament and mannerisms mirrored her mother. She had been too young when they had passed over to make that connection before. From the look on her mother's face, she was definitely reading her mind and at the moment didn't find the comparison flattering.

"Thanks, Dad." Her smile was a little shaky, but his approving nod had her graining strength.

"Mom, you're absolutely right. I know I'm loved and I am sorry if what you were reading made it sound differently. I'm just in a funk."

"Is a funk anything like a snit?" Herb asked with a straight face and a wink.

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Don't encourage her."

Rose couldn't stop the spread of the grin. "Sort of. Truthfully, a snit's more rewarding because you get to rant and rave until the angers gone. A funk is mental and really depressing after awhile."

"Okay. If you're ready to let go of the funk so we can talk logically, we are staying; otherwise we are leaving." Herb looked pointedly at Caitlin.

Taking great care to smooth out the material of her dress where it draped over her knees, Caitlin made no comment.

Rosemary took a deep breath for courage. "Ever since I got out of college I've been working towards making Big Boy Toys financially secure. Now that the goal has been reached I don't know what I want to do next to use my *gift* to help others."

"What about a financial planning business?" Herb said.

Both Caitlin and Rosemary arched a brow and looked at him as if he had just grown two heads.

"What did I say that was so wrong?"

"Boring!" they answered in unison.

"You have never complained about taking care of the family's finances. And don't forget Pagan and Rumor." Herb knew he was losing the battle from the look on Rose's face, but he wasn't ready to stop defending his stance. "And what about Jack Cutter, that FBI agent who helped Cole and Ginger. You're still handling his portfolio."

"They are family and friends." Waving a hand as if to clear the dreary idea from the air, she added, "Besides, it only takes a few hours a week to keep the portfolio's running smoothly."

"What if you only worked four hours a day like Gin does with the hypnotherapy practice?"

"Dad, why didn't you become the president of the family banking business like Grandpa Prescott expected you to do?"

He opened his mouth then closed it without saying a word. She not only had him cornered, he was sounding just like his father. Which was something he had sworn he would never do. He had lasted exactly three months at the bank before knowing the job was sucking out his soul inch by painful inch.

Convincing the bank's board of directors to open a financial investment division had taken every ounce of salesmanship he had. He then used his financial knowledge to invest in property, build, sell, and start all over again. Except for quarterly meetings, he never had to step foot in the bank or wear a suit and tie again. The business had thrived, he had thrived, his marriage had thrived and most importantly, he had been around to watch the girls thrive which was something his father could never say. "Okay, I concede. What ideas do you have?"

Rosemary made a face as she wrinkled her nose and pressed her lips together. "That's the problem, I can't think of anything I enjoy doing more than gambling. It's interesting to watch people, read their body language, and yes, I admit it I love thumbing my nose at the good old boy attitude some of them have."

"Honey, you know you can't become a professional gambler. The fact that you never lost would become obvious very quickly," Caitlin said.

"I know. Besides I don't want to make it a career. If I did, it wouldn't be fun anymore."

"Than what do you want to do?" Caitlin couldn't hide her exasperation.

"That's the problem, I don't know." Rosemary's tone conveyed her own mounting frustration.

"What about something in the automotive industry. You know a lot about cars," Caitlin said.

"That's a great idea. I'll become a race car driver," Rosemary threw out, just to relieve the pressure of feeling like a ten year old being asked what they want to be when they grow up when they didn't want to think beyond the next recess, slumber party or ball game.

"Over my dead body," Caitlin said.

When Herb looked stunned, Caitlin stood up and tried stretching her five foot six figure a little taller. "I stand corrected. This ghostly figure adamantly refuses to allow you to risk your life in such a fashion. It's bad enough the two of you think every open straight away is a drag strip. You do that and I swear I *will* haunt your dreams."

"Can you do that?"

"I really don't know; but if it's possible, I will certainly let you know so don't push me. Which reminds me, what's happening with the destiny dreams?"

"They have gone into reruns."

"You're kidding." Caitlin didn't try to hide her surprise.

"No. They keep going over the same scenes with a larger emphasis on the sex."

"Did I need to know that?" Herb grumbled.

"Mom asked."

"Next time, let her read your thoughts."

"What fun is that?"

"You, number one brat, are too much like your mother."

"Thank you."

"Have you talked to Walker since he left?" Caitlin asked to change the subject.

"No. Were you expecting him to call me?"

"I had no idea if he would or wouldn't. It was just a motherly question."

If she believed that, the next thing she knew someone would be selling her ocean front property in Arizona.

Seeing the look of annoyance on Caitlin's face, Herb correctly surmised that Rosemary's thoughts had hit their mark. Deciding it was best to defuse the situation and leave before Caitlin zeroed in on the dreams, he put his arm around Caitlin's shoulder as he looked at Rosemary. "It's time for us to leave. I have faith in the fact that you will figure out what will make you happy."

As he kissed her cheek, a lemon drop magically appeared in her hand.

"I'm not sorry for what I said, but I will apologize for not waiting a little longer to see where your thoughts were headed. If you need us, call."

Rosemary cocked her head and stared at her as if she had forgotten an important fact. "I'm not Gin. I can't pick up a phone and dial heaven, so how do I call?"

Caitlin smiled for the first time since arriving. "You'll figure it out. Love you, sweetheart." With a warm air kiss she was gone.

It was the longest conversation Rosemary had had with her parents since their passing. Watching her mother express her feelings, and feeling her father's calming, rational presence had made her forget, for the moment, that they were dead. Cinnamon, who had experienced a similar situation a few months earlier had been right when she said that it was emotionally gratifying to have their undivided attention. If it was anger that had caused the phenomenon, maybe she should make her mother angry more often.

Rosemary chuckled when, "Don't push your luck," echoed around the room.

## Chapter 19

Walker juggled the loose change in his pocket as he paced back and forth in front of the picture window in his office. The panoramic view of the strip, lit up brighter than a Christmas tree, went unnoticed.

Since arriving back in Vegas, everything that could go wrong had promptly happened in triplicate. If he wasn't dealing with a problem within the casino, he was dealing with personal demons that should have been buried with his father.

Until his father's death, he had thought Helen, his father's widow, was a class act. In her prime, she had been a cool brunette with a lean body that showed off the latest high fashions to perfection. They hadn't often shared the same space, but when they had he'd been impressed with her composed presence and the respect she received from men and women alike.

What a gullible young fool he'd been.

His father's will had left her a house in Palm Springs and a very generous monthly allowance. The remainder of his estate had been left to Walker. The venom in Helen's rage, not only of the will, but in the fact that her husband's bastard child existed, had taken him by surprise.

Over the last five years, Helen had gone through an expensive string of lawyers trying to break the will, destroy his reputation, the casino's reputation and generally make certain she was a constant thorn in his side.

Jerry Marks, the corporation and family lawyer and his Godfather, had not been surprised or unprepared for the outburst. Thanks to his expertise, no lawyer had found wiggle room much less a magical loophole that would break the will.

Since his father's funeral, he had only seen Helen when forced by a judge to appear in court. All that had changed two days ago when she showed up at Dreamland with a recent face and body lift that had to have removed enough skin to create another Frankenstein.

The dark haired gigolo with her was young enough to be her grandson. Hell, Lamont, or Monty as Helen kept cooing in a raspy smoke damaged voice, was young enough to be her great grandson.

Since their arrival, his staff had been inundated with a slew of petty exaggerated grievances. When nothing she or Monty demanded enticed Walker to their suite, she demanded a private meeting.

Now she was fashionably late. He was assuming this meeting had something to do with the vague threat she had made right after her last appeal had put an end to any possibility of breaking the will.

Hearing the door open, he stopped pacing and tried to brace himself for what was coming.

His secretary who had insisted she was staying until the meeting was over gave him an encouraging smile and a thumbs-up as she ceremoniously ushered Helen into the room.

The black floor length dress Helen was wearing was overkill for a meeting, but being floor length at least he didn't have to look at her chicken bone thin legs. In fact if the dress had come anywhere close to covering the cleavage that reminded him of two overcooked poached eggs, it would have looked spectacular on her. Unlike the light scent of roses that now haunted him day and night, the perfume she had liberally used was heavy, spicy and cloying. A hammer at his right temple began to pound with each breath of the sickly scent.

With impatience, he watched her pose in a chair facing a large expanse of polished teakwood balanced on top of two brass mermaids. "I see you haven't changed Gus's office."

Walker had no desire for small talk. When he planted his feet shoulder width apart, his posture was ramrod straight as he crossed his arms. It was a pose he had watched his father use hundreds of times when he wanted to intimidate someone. "What do you want, Helen?"

"You're as rude as Gus. Sit down."

He didn't move. "I'll take that as a compliment. Now what do you want?"

"A glass of champagne would be nice. Be a good boy and pour me a glass of Krug Clos du Mesnil." The fact that the champagne she mentioned cost close to four hundred dollars a bottle set his teeth on edge. He hated to think of the bill she would most certainly leave behind unpaid.

"Sorry, some things have changed." Pressing a button on a remote control sitting on his desk, he watched two wall panels silently slide open. "As you can see, I had the bar removed and converted the space into a computer station."

Although she huffed with indignation, with her recent facelift, the only outward sign of irritation was the storm brewing within her contact-enhanced green eyes. The smile her collagen plumped, rust tinted lips tried pulling off looked more like two fat earthworms being forcibly stretched into a straight line.

"In the last five years we have had our differences, but don't you think it's time we bury the hatchet? Surely Gus told you that if he'd had his way I would have raised you as my own child. Knowing how Gus felt, it seems silly for us to be fighting each other now."

"I don't recall being the one swinging the hatchet. And for the record, Gus never told boldfaced lies." He was amazed that his voice hadn't disclosed the rage he was feeling.

"You don't know everything. If Salina hadn't threatened to go public with the scandal, you would have been raised in a proper home with two loving parents instead of a woman who was mentally unstable on her better days."

He knew that Salina had a lot of faults, being mentally unstable had never been one of them. Walker thought he knew where this was going. Salina, nineteen when she got pregnant with him, had wanted to have an abortion. He had also heard through the casino grapevine of gossip that Gus offered her anything she wanted, except marriage, if she would not go through with the threat.

Knowing better then to show his cards before the last one was dealt, he didn't so much as bat an eye. "What scandal would that have been?"

"The secret of Salina being a witch and your being half witch or warlock or Satan's son, whatever the hell you call yourself."

Stunned by her words, his mind went momentarily blank. When it started functioning, his thoughts were so chaotic he had to forcibly shut down the turmoil before he could speak calmly. "Let me get this straight. You think I'm a warlock." The half attempt at a chuckle belied the stiffness between his shoulder blades and the dread that there was worse to come. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or insulted. Where the hell did you get such a ludicrous idea?"

He watched her slowly release her balled fists and flex her fingers. "From Salina, after Gus convinced her not to abort you, she paid me a visit. The stupid slut thought she could convince me to divorce Gus. When her childish pleas didn't work she made threats."

"What type of threats?"

"She threatened to turn me into an ugly old hag if I didn't give in to her demands."

"You surprise me, I never thought of you as a gullible fool."

The hands once again balled into tight fists. This time she didn't bother to relax them. "I'm not gullible, nor am I a fool. She told me all about the *gift* that made it possible for her to change things into anything she wanted."

*He felt like he was sweating bullets. Lord he wished Salina would appear. Just to have the satisfaction of strangling her. Scratch that. Caitlin, if you are listening, do not, I repeat do not allow Salina to enter this room.*

"You believed her?"

"Of course not. I demanded she show me what the hell she was talking about. She pointed her index finger at a lamp and the bulb exploded. Then she pointed to a Ming vase that had cost a small fortune; it exploded."

"Parlor tricks, Helen. Any good magician can do the same thing. You're wasting my time so unless you have something else to say I'd suggest you leave."

With effort, she contorted her mouth into a smirk. "I said similar words to Salina. She laughed in my face, snapped her fingers three times and mumbled something I couldn't understand."

"That's it?" Walker asked. If that was the worst of what happened, he could relax.

"You wish! By the next morning all my hair had fallen out. Every hour, my condition deteriorated. Within a week, I was the most grotesque creature you could imagine. After two weeks, I gave in and called Salina. Before I hung up the phone, I was beautiful again."

Beauty was obviously in the eye of the beholder. The second glances Helen had received from admiring males had been due more to her attitude and the flattering way cloths draped her body than real beauty. Her first facelifts along with a strict diet had guaranteed that she looked ten years younger than she actually was. Now after years of smoking, a steady flow of alcohol and a starvation diet, the facelifts had become an enemy rather than a friend.

"That's a great fairytale, Helen. Your time's up."

She didn't budge. "I don't think so. You see, during the time that bitch tortured me, I used a movie camera to record what was happening. I also recorded our conversations. Those tapes are my bargaining tools. It kept Gus from divorcing me and now it's going to get me Dreamland."

"Helen, if I believed you, which I don't, you would have used those tapes to get rid of Salina."

"Why? Long before your mother, Gus was carrying on with cheap whores. At least with Salina all it took to keep them both in line was a threat from time to time."

"If such a tape existed, you would have used it as a bargaining tool after Gus died instead of wasting money on lawyers." He hoped he sounded confident because he certainly wasn't feeling it. With the gist of some of Salina's temper tantrums beginning to make sense, his gut was twisted in a hot knot twice the size of the Mohave Desert.



"You would think that. For me, revenge would have been so much sweeter to take control of the casino after successfully kicking the bastard son out. Besides, if it hadn't been for my trust fund, Gus would never have been able to go into business. My only mistake was underestimating Jerry's ability to create the perfect will."

"Gus's name is on my birth certificate; so technically, I'm not a bastard. As for Dad using your money, he paid you back within a year with fifteen percent interest. I'd say that was more than a fair exchange. I'll make sure to pass the compliment on to Jerry." The bulging veins on the sides of his neck were the only indication that she had hit a very sore nerve.

She dismissed the truth with a shrug. "The point is, I've been playing the patient but wronged wife since long before you were born. I'm no longer willing to allow you to control what is rightfully mine."

"Why stay married if you hated him?"

"Divorce from a powerful figure gets you money, but not invitations to the White House, film premiers or into the dining rooms of the most powerful people in the world."

The disgust in his voice was evident. "This blackmail threat is about being invited to parties? Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

Pulling open a drawer, he threw a handful of invitations onto the polished teakwood desk. They slid to a stop just before falling into her lap. "Take your pick. I have no intention of attending any of them."

Her eyes narrowed with hatred when she saw that the top invitation was to a private charity ball hosted by a so-called friend. "I don't need your charity."

Taking a CD out of her handbag, she carefully placed it on the teakwood table a good foot from the invitations, mocking the impotency of her wealthy status. "You're not the only one using modern technology. Besides knowing just how to tickle my fancy, Monty knows his way around electronics. There are two-dozen copies of this ready to be sent to major network news stations and the tabloids. Before you turn me down, watch that and think of the damage it will do to Dreamland, Juanita and you. Mark my words, if you don't agree to my demands, I *will* destroy you."

He'd be damned before he'd allow her to see the fear her words created. Casually he leaned against the windowsill. Buying time to control his mounting temper, he leisurely straightened the crease in his navy blue slacks before nonchalantly crossing one ankle over the other. "With your contacts and money, I've no doubt you could create any type of movie you wanted. But just for conversation's sake, why don't you tell me exactly what it is you want."

"Dreamland. Everything else you inherited and all the money the stocks have earned since Gus died. Consider it your dues for my not having you killed."

Standing, she gracefully walked towards the intricately carved double office doors. Pausing as she placed a thin age spotted hand on a brass doorknob, she turned her head to look at him. "You have one month to give me an answer. If I don't hear from Jerry before midnight thirty days from today, the copies of that tape will become headline news within the next twenty-four hours."

Walking into the room after escorting Helen to the elevator, Joan found Walker standing at the well stocked bar tucked inside a painted cabinet depicting the story of Pinocchio.

"She walked out of here with what I think was supposed to be a smile on her face. And you're pouring a double shot of whiskey into a cut glass tumbler. I gather it was not good news."

With the ink on high school diplomas barely dry, seventeen-year old runaways Joan Patterson and Salina Howard became fast friends during a long boring Greyhound bus ride they were certain was taking them towards fame and fortune. With the flashy lights and allure of easy money in Vegas tempting the two naïve small town girls, neither made it past Sin City.

Her blonde hair was a few shades lighter, her dancer body not as limber or as thin but at fifty-one, Joan still had her girl next-door charm. As much as her ability to run his office was valued, she was also his Godmother, and had been a surrogate mother even when Salina had been alive.

In one large gulp, the finely aged whiskey burned its way down to his empty belly. After a quick shake of his head, Walker sucked air into his lungs before pouring Joan a glass of wine and himself another double.

Settling into his chair, he took a sip of whiskey for courage. "How well did you know my mother? Before you say anything, I'm asking about the person under the female on the prowl, self absorbed bimbo image she loved to project." Hell, after seeing her at Rose's, he knew she still liked projecting that image.

A lifetime of happy memories, worries, fears and laughter flashed through Joan's thoughts. *Where do you begin when you know what he is really asking and you've been sworn to secrecy?*

The first time she had watched Salina cast a spell it had terrified her. No, that was wrong. The two burly guys that had grabbed them from behind and dragged them into an alley during a late night bus stop on the second day of their journey had terrified her. Watching the big hairy brute groping her turn into a little gray mouse had stunned her. When the dirty thug holding Salina loosened his grip she had turned her pistol shaped hand towards him. Seconds later he went scurrying after his buddy as fast as his short hairy white legs could move.

Quickly returning to the bus, they had barely sat down before it pulled out of the station. During the night, they didn't speak a word to each other. With each passing hour, Joan's fears had escalated as her imagination took a flight of fancy that would have done a Steven Spielberg movie proud. As the bus's big tires rolled down rain slicked roads, she would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that they were chanting, *"She's a witch, she's a witch, she's the wicked witch from Oz."*

Walker silently watched the play of emotions cross Joan's face. Knowing her loyalty went beyond the grave, he took all decisions away from her as he slid the CD into the player.

The beginning of the CD showed a picture of Salina as a tape recording of her voice begged Helen to divorce Gus before bragging about her powers than making a threat to slowly turn Helen into an old hag. Next, a series of slates stating the date and time was held in front of the camera. The destructive progression of an old hag in the making was quick and ugly. Frankly Walker was amazed that Helen had let Salina live after what she had done.

When the tape came to an end, Joan picked up his glass of whiskey and chugged it down. When she was done coughing and sucking in air she picked up the phone on his desk.

"Alec, we're working late. Would you please send up two dinners ... Surprise us ... Thanks."

Sitting back down, she stared at Walker in hopes that he would say something that would disclose his feelings or thoughts.

He didn't bat an eye or speak, nor did he pour himself another glass of whiskey. She took that as a good omen.

"How did you learn about her *gift*?" The question didn't give her any wiggle room.

"When she turned two would-be rapists into mice. It was a couple of days into our bus ride out here. It scared the geebies out me and fascinated me at the same time."

"Was that her *gift*, turning people into..." At a loss for words he finally said, "Into whatever?" The bite of sarcasm to the idea that such a *gift* would be given to anyone did not go unnoticed.

"You said *gift*, when did you learn about the family spell?"

"Six weeks ago."

"Here's the plan. You share, I share. You clam up on me you learn nothing."

Before he could reply, their dinners arrived. By the time the over eager new busboy was assured that they were happy with the stuffed pork chops, steamed squash, cranberries and salad, Walker's roller coaster ride of thoughts had settled into resignation that all he could hope for was a workable plan for damage control.

"The night I left home, my only goal was to get as far away from my dad and humiliation as possible. Truthfully, if Salina hadn't sat next to me on that bus, I'm not sure I wouldn't have gotten off and gone back home at the next stop. I was dumb as a stick, naïve as a newborn babe and so scared I was shaking with fear."

"Naïve I'll buy. Scared makes sense. Dumb would be impossible. You're a walking encyclopedia. No one has a better memory than you."

Her smile was sad. Her unfocused eyes said she had traveled back in time to not so pleasant memories. "From the time I started talking I stuttered. In fifth grade, I was unable to read anything beyond second grade material. In high school, I was tested for dyslexia but by that time it didn't matter. In our small town, I was known as the class idiot. The only reason I graduated was because my daddy was the mayor and he put the fear of God into anyone who dared to give me poor marks."

Walker poured them both a glass of wine.

"There were several empty seats on that bus, but Salina marched right down the aisle and sat next to me. She was as pretty as a shiny new penny with her strawberry blonde hair, smattering of freckles and sexy 'look at me, world' clothing.

"A few hours later when the bus stopped, we hadn't spoken a word to each other. When Salina got off, I figured she had arrived at her destination. But a few minutes later, she marched down the aisle as if she owned the bus, sat next to me and divided a bag full of donuts, cartons of milk and bananas between us.

"By dinnertime, we pretty much knew each other's life histories. After the first few times of painfully stuttering through short sentences, the stuttering stopped. At the time I chalked it up to feeling comfortable around her. Your turn, who told you about the *gift*?"

"Juanita. I promise I'll tell you everything, but finish your story first."

"Not much more to tell. After she turned the men into mice she told me the family secret."

"Besides the ability to cast magic spells what *gift* did she possess?"

"What makes you think she had more than one *gift*?" Her head was cocked, her eyes bright with

surprise.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Gut instinct. I remember how she would know things no one else knew, like she was walking in someone else's footsteps."

"That was perceptive for as young as you were. At times she saw flashes of events shortly before they happened. She said it was like skipping pages in a book, than being forced to read the skipped pages without being able to change what was about to happen."

"Did she always have that *gift* as well as the spell casting?"

"Walker, where are these questions coming from?"

"Damned if I know. Look I'm sorry, finish the story."

Before Joan could say anything, a warm blanket of air cocooned her body. For the second time that day, she thought she could smell Salina's favorite perfume.

"By the time we reached Vegas, we were sick and tired of the bus. We had joked about becoming movie stars, but neither of us was serious. The only thing I was good at was dancing. For me, Vegas was the land of opportunity.

"Beyond leaving life in a small town behind, Salina had no plans; so Vegas was as good as any place to figure out what she wanted to do next.

"It's impossible to get a job when you're seventeen, look thirteen and are trying to pass for twenty one. After a week of rejections, Salina made certain the pesky little problem of age and experience disappeared when I auditioned. I got hired at Caesar's Palace the same day Salina turned eighteen. To celebrate, we checked out of the dump of a hotel we were at and checked into Dreamland. Her destiny dreams started that night."

He had thought he was beyond being surprised, obviously that wasn't true. "You mean she and Poppa were destined for each other?"

"I never fully understood the dynamics, but yes, they both had dreams that brought them together. Salina didn't let the fact that Gus was married bother her until she got pregnant. If you believe nothing else believe this, when she told Gus she wanted an abortion it was nothing more than a ploy to get him to divorce Helen. She wanted you from the moment she knew you were growing within her."

With a lump in his throat making it impossible to talk, a nod of his head thanked her for that information.

"Gus asked her to be patient. He said he was working on getting a divorce but when he wouldn't tell her his plans, she got mad and confronted Helen. Her temper got in her way and you just witnessed the result."

"How did Poppa react when he found out?"

"He never said a negative word about the situation. Salina became her own worst enemy as she punished herself."

"How did Helen confront them?"

"She came here with a copy of the tape. Gus willingly agreed to her demands to protect Salina and you. Salina was never able to accept the situation. She lashed out at Gus every time Helen made a demand for

his presence at some function."

"Why didn't she use her powers to stop Helen?"

"She couldn't. I had gotten so used to seeing her point her imaginary handgun at people that I stopped paying close attention. When..."

"Wait a minute. Why would she do that?"

"Her *gift* back to the universe was granting people's wishes. She really got a kick out of people having special wishes come true. After she cast the spell on Helen her powers diminished. She was able to do an occasional good luck charm and she still had the fast forward insights but, because she had never had any control over them, she would have been happy if they had gone away. As for spell casting, the day she used the power to hurt someone who was not physically harming anyone marked the end of her supernatural powers."

He thought about Juanita, Rose, Cinn, Gin, and Pesty. He didn't know all their stories, but he was willing to bet none of them would be happy to lose their *gifts* and none of them had the 'in your face' over the edge personality of Salina.

"How did she react to that event?"

"Not like you would expect. I think because she was still able to grant the occasional wish, she was content."

Glancing at her watch, Joan grimaced. "You're not getting off the hook, but the first one home and in the hot tub gets a foot rub. Jerry won the last two; I'm not going to lose tonight." As she walked towards the doors she added, "You can tell me the rest of the story tomorrow."

"Joan. When did she cast the spell for you?"

"Smart boy. We'd been here a little over a year when I shattered my ankle. With my dancing career dead, I had no means of supporting myself. Gus needed a secretary he could trust. Salina decided I fit the bill. When I reminded her that I couldn't read she pointed her imaginary gun at me and said, 'Bang, bang, you can now.' I got lucky with a double whammy. Gus hired me the next morning and I met Jerry that afternoon. Try to get some sleep; we'll finish this conversation in the morning."

Twenty minutes later, he reached Jerry on his cell phone. "How close to home are you? How about doing us both a favor? Drive around the block a few times or better yet go buy Joan a dozen red roses and charge them to me. If she beats you into that hot tub, you'll both be smiling in the morning and I won't be on her shit list.... Yeah, I thought you'd see it my way. Is the ten o'clock meeting still on? Good, see you then."

## Chapter 20

"A box of Ding Dongs, a double mocha latte and a kiss. What did I do right?"

"You're a sweetie."

"True, but since when has that warranted recognition at the office?"

"Flowers and a foot rub."

Lifting his brows, he looked innocently at Joan. "I don't remember doing that?"

"Cute. I was a couple of cars behind Jerry last night. I saw him two-wheel it into the grocery store parking lot. Half an hour later I have a pretty bouquet of flowers and I'm getting a foot rub. This is my thanks for your part in my lovely evening."

Jerry, watching the whole proceedings from the open door to the office, wore a smug smile of satisfaction. "Do I take the fifth on this or just say thanks and you're welcome?"

"Thanks and you're welcome works. She knows both of us too well."

"I filled Jerry in on last night's situation with Helen. I'll leave the two of you to talk while I get everything ready for the meeting."

"What did you and Dad do to try to stop the blackmail?" Walker asked as the office door closed.

"We had the tape analyzed by the best graphic artist at MGM. He said there was no technology available to reproduce the quality of the illusion on the tape. Without the ability to declare the tape a hoax, Gus and Salina were totally at Helen's mercy."

"Short of murder, which I did contemplate for a good hour at three this morning, what do you suggest?"

"Gus came up with the idea to marry her off. Not one suitor he found stuck out the courtship past six months. The woman is not only a total bitch, she is into S & M."

Walker tossed the Ding Dong he'd been eating down in disgust. "Thanks. I could have gone without that image for a lifetime. There has got to be a weak link in her control, but damned if I can think of what it is."

Before Jerry could comment, Joan opened the office door. "Bob called. He needs you in security, says it's an emergency."

Bob and three security techs were staring at a monitor when they walked into the room. The shimmering fall of copper colored hair filling the monitor made Walker's heart skip several beats.

"She arrived half an hour ago. The pit boss alerted me, but knowing you had the meeting this morning, I figured I would keep an eye on her. Everything was normal until ten minutes ago. Watch this."

Changing the angle of the camera, they watched the dealer deal the first two cards around the table. The first player took a hit. The card was a three. With that he stayed. The second player stayed with her original two cards. Rosemary took a hit. The card was a jack. Turning her cards over, the total was twenty-six. Instead of picking up the cards and the money, the dealer tapped the table indicating a firm bet. Turning his two cards over, the house showed eighteen. At seventeen or over he was to stay firm.

Instead, he dealt another card. The seven gave him a total of twenty-three. Paying all three players, the dealer dealt the next hand. No one said a word. For five more hands, the dealer continued to pay all three players whether they busted or not.

"Bob, pull the camera back; I want to watch Rosemary."

As Walker muttered, "Shit," pinching the bridge of his nose didn't stop the pressure headache he could feel building up behind his eyes.

Bob added his own string of explicit words. "The pit boss at station three just hit the panic button."

"Saints alive, there's two of them," Jerry muttered as a security tech focused in on a redhead at table nineteen.

"Pull the camera back. I want to watch the whole table," Walker said.

Silently, they watched the dealer expertly pull a card from the bottom of the deck before placing it in front of a ten high stack of thousand dollar chips.

At that moment the woman tilted her smiling face towards the camera and winked.

"Paul, come with me. Jason, call the police and have them come to the back door," Bob said as he headed for the door.

"Everybody stop. Don't call anyone. Bob, Jerry, come with me."

To everyone's amazement, Walker was chuckling as he walked out the door.

In the elevator Frank Sinatra crooned, "It had to be you".

Walker looked at Bob. "Since when do we have elevator music?"

"We don't. What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," Walker mumbled as they exited the elevator.

"Cinn, are you having fun?" Walker asked as he half sat on the stool next to her.

Turning, she gave the three men a dazzling smile before planting a friendly hello kiss on Walker's cheek. "Took you long enough. I was beginning to think your security team was sleeping. Your eyes are blood shot; are you okay?"

"Couldn't be better." What was odd about the statement was he meant every word.

The dealer wore a big puppy dog grin, as he gazed adoringly at Cinnamon. The two players sharing the table sat statue still. "Cinn, what have you done to the dealer and these two patrons?"

"Hypnotized them. You know, Walker, the right person could walk right in here and rob your boss blind in a matter of minutes."

Bob and Jerry looked horrified.

Walker pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. Damn, but he had missed their sense of humor.

"Did you also hypnotize my pit boss?"

"Actually, I hypnotized him first. It was a little tricky, so it took me longer than expected."

"I'm sorry he wasn't more accommodating, we'll have to work on that for your next act. Would you please do whatever you have to do to snap them out of ... whatever it is you have done."

He wasn't sure what he had expected, but somehow snapping her fingers and saying sunshine didn't seem dramatic enough for the situation.

The couple blinked, took one look at the neat stacks of chips sitting in front of them then turned their heads to look at the two men standing behind them. Jerry was six foot, had steel gray hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. His matching gray eyes were not smiling as he glared at them. With a three-inch scar running down Bob's jaw and a casino t-shirt that nicely emphasized the well defined muscles in his crossed arms, the couple didn't dally as they collected their chips and left the table.

"Mr. Owens." Jackson, the pit boss, looked decidedly uncomfortable that he had not seen the three men approach.

"Jackson, I want you and Smith to take a break. Don't come back onto the floor until I have had a chance to talk to both of you," Bob ordered.

After tipping the dealer and pit boss, Cinnamon left the stack of chips where they were. Sliding off the stool, she slipped her arm through Walker's and started to lead him to the next set of tables. Before they took two steps, red strobe lights flashed and sirens squealed at a large oval display of slot machines to the left of them.

Turning to face them, a red headed siren winked at Walker. A mischievous grin lit up her face.

A carbon copy of Cinnamon in black slacks, a fire engine red sleeveless blouse and a casually styled flip, she was drawing a lot of attention from the red blooded males within shouting distance and the curious who wanted to know what she had won.

Slipping her arms around his waist, Ginger planted a lipstick kiss next to the one Cinnamon had left. "Walker, isn't this fun? What did I win?"

Like soldiers standing at attention, five Dreamland castles were lined up across the face of the machine. As Bob slipped a key into a slot, a security camera recorded the moment.

"Place a dollar in the machine and pull the lever please," Bob said.

Instead of slipping one coin down the slot, she did what Rosemary had drilled into her head when it came to gambling. Feeding the maximum bet of three silver chips into the slot, she pulled the lever. Mercifully the noise abruptly stopped. One by one the wheels stopped on the hologram castles. With all five castles once again in a row the sirens wailed.

Bob looked at Walker before slipping his security card into the machine. When Bob started to put a coin in the machine, Walker stopped him.

"Gin, feed three more into the machine, please."

Shrugging a shoulder at the questioning look on Cinnamon's face, she ignored the glares from the man standing behind Walker as she followed instructions.

By the time the sirens blared and the lights flashed for a third time, a large crowd had gathered to watch the action.



Bob put a stop to the show by slipping a key into the machine and opening its face. Calling for a mechanic, he told an attendant not to let anyone touch the machine before it was hauled off to maintenance.

"Congratulations, you just won three Vipers," Walker said as he tried to figure out if a ghost busting medium could make a machine malfunction. Or could a ghost tamper with a machine? Or could his mother ... he shut off the thought before he could jump to a stupid conclusion.

"You're kidding? I was playing for a car?"

"Gin, what did you think you were doing?" Walker asked, giving in to the urge to smile.

"I don't know; I just liked the look of the machine. All those holograms winking on and off reminded me of the haunted house in Disneyland. Cole and I..." Glancing towards the stern faced men with Walker stopped her short. "Maybe now isn't the time to go into that. Let's just say the machine stirred up fond memories so I stopped to play."

The fact that the machine was in direct line to watch the action where Rosemary sat helped cement the decision to drop a few coins in the machine, but, looking at the scowls Walker's buddies were wearing, she decided not to mention that.

As a mechanic and Bob lifted the one armed bandit onto a cart, Walker asked, "Where's Rosemary?"

"Trying to break into the owner's office," Cinnamon said as Ginger shook her head no. Walker didn't miss the byplay.

"What? Is she trying to get arrested? If she wanted to talk, why didn't she call me? For that matter, why didn't you two call me?"

"We did. Several times. We were told in no uncertain terms that Walker Owens was not head of security. When we asked to talk to the owner, we were told to make an appointment, but no one would put us through to his office, tell us his name or allow us to leave a message on a voice mail."

Walker pinched the bridge of his nose. With Helen on the premises, they had heightened security. Obviously the switchboard was taking the security warning to the max. "Who came up with this elaborate scheme?"

"All of us. We knew you were in the building; looks to me like our idea worked like a charm," Cinnamon said.

"How did you know I was here?"

When both of them lifted one perfected arched brow and looked down their noses at him, he back peddled. "Never mind, I get the picture. Gin, where is Rose right now?"

Ginger nodded at a point behind his shoulder.

At nine thirty in the morning, the five hundred dollar blackjack table was not a popular spot. The lone female dressed in black slacks and a fire engine red top gave Bob and Jerry a start.

"Morning, Rosie." Walker placed a possessive arm around her shoulder. She felt good. Hell, she smelled good enough to eat and having been deprived of her company for six long weeks, he was starving. When she didn't push him away, he relaxed. Giving an 'it's okay' nod to Geraldine, the pit boss, he pulled the stool next to Rosemary a little closer before sitting down.

She glanced at her sisters and the men flanking them before concentrating on Walker. "All that racket a few minutes ago made it really hard to concentrate on my game. You really should try staggering big wins out. It's not healthy to your bottom line to give away high ticket items regularly."

He had called her Rosie and she hadn't bit him in the ass; maybe there was hope for this relationship after all. "I'll take that under advisement. Looking at those neat rows of chips, I'd say it didn't hurt your concentration too much."

Nodding his head towards the dealer, he didn't take his eyes off Rosemary. "How did you accomplish that?"

"Not my doing. That is Gin handiwork."

"I will have you know Linda, the dealer, was a challenge. That woman talks faster and breathes less than anyone I have met. What did Geraldine do to finally get your attention?" Ginger wore a devilish grin he had learned the hard way meant she was ready to have some more fun at his expense.

Looking to Geraldine for an answer, Walker couldn't stop the laughter that erupted from deep within his belly. "Did you have to put her under, too?"

"What can I say, it was a challenge. Besides I wasn't sure how long it would take to get her to figure out that something wasn't quite right or exactly what she would do when she did figure it out. This way I had control by asking her to call you in security."

"Why would you think..." Bob stopped short when Walker glanced his way and gave a slight shake to his head.

"Ginger, why don't you wake up Geraldine and Linda so they can take a break."

"Linda, do you play peek-a-boo with your granddaughter?"

If Linda was surprised to see Walker and Bob standing at her table, she didn't show it. Without missing a beat, she said, "All the time. The little sweetie loves to play that game."

Looking at Geraldine, Ginger said, "I'd like to increase my bet to a million dollars."

Geraldine blinked as she gave a slight shake to her head. "I'm sorry, Miss, that would be impossible. Mr. Owens, Bob. Is something wrong?"

"No. Everything is just dandy," Bob replied with a strong bite of sarcasm between clinched teeth.

Walker gave Rosemary a calculating look. "How much money do you have there?"

"Yours or ours?" Rosemary answered with a seductive smile.

"Both."

"Ginger started with a five hundred dollar chip. You, on the other hand, have two hundred thousand on the table."

"How lucky do you feel?"

If Walker only knew! "Extremely."

"Linda, deal the cards," Walker said.

When Rosemary lifted the two cards dealt, Cinnamon and Ginger whooped with glee.

Jerry and Bob groaned.

Laying the ace of spades and the ace of hearts face up, Rosemary split them. With a nod of approval from Walker, Linda placed one card face down in front of each ace. Flipping her two cards over, she saw the dealer's hand held a jack and a five. She had to draw. The next card, a five gave the house twenty. With the odds in favor of the house, Jerry and Bob smiled with relief.

Using the tips of two red lacquered fingernails to turn over the first card, the king of spades winked at its matching ace. Jerry and Bob gasped as one, the dealer was speechless, the pit boss a little pale. Walker didn't bat an eye.

Rosemary smiled seductively at Walker as she turned over the last card. The queen of hearts kissed the ace of hearts hello.

"I'll be damned. I've never seen anything like it," Jerry muttered.

"Cinn said you wanted to talk to the owner. Tell Geraldine what you want done with your winnings, then I'll introduce you to the owner."

Taking three five hundred dollar chips off the stack, Rosemary slipped off the stool. Handing one chip to Geraldine, one to Linda and slipping the third into a pocket in her slacks, she gave him a dazzling smile. "I'm ready. Let's go."

"What about the rest of the chips?" Geraldine asked.

"They don't belong to me. The house just shared them so we could have a little fun," Rosemary stated.

Bob didn't know what game Walker was playing, but he was looking forward to telling Rocky about this latest development.

No one said a word as they walked towards a single elevator located behind a security desk, ascended upward in an elevator void of music, and entered a large square, lushly decorated foyer. A friendly looking blonde smiled as they walked through clear double glass doors that gave her a full view of the foyer and hallway.

"Joan, would you please order coffee, a pot of tea and something for everyone to eat. And see if we can postpone the meeting until two," Walker said.

"The meeting is already postponed until tomorrow. Plane problems prevented them from leaving Atlantic City. I called for refreshments when I saw you headed for the elevator, but I'll call and add a pot of tea to the order."

A nice side benefit of Joan's portable phone system was her ability to leave the office without missing any important calls. Walker knew that the only way she could have known they had left the gambling floor was if she had been watching the monitors in the security booth.

"Since you watched the show you might as well join us so Jerry doesn't have to tax his memory to repeat everything later. I'm sure this is going to be entertaining as hell." Ginger and Cinnamon smiled like Cheshire cats at Walker's dry irony.

"Oh, look at these doors. Aren't they gorgeous?" Ginger studied the scene on the doors to Walkers office.

Under a radiant sun, a man and woman flew across a blue cloudless sky as they headed towards a soaring fairy castle nestled amongst tall pine trees. As trees gave way to large slabs of rock and water, a mermaid with long flowing hair sunned herself on a boulder as she gazed at her reflection in a small hand held mirror.

Facing the inside of the office, the carved doors held a large whale spewing water, a submarine floating amongst seaweed was caught in the tentacles of a giant squid and under another sun drenched sky, a hot air balloon danced between white puffy clouds.

"Dad claimed his happiest times as a kid were when he had his nose stuck in a book. *Moby Dick*, *Peter Pan*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *Camelot* were his favorite stories. He built Dreamland's décor around those childhood fantasies."

Lowering her voice, but still mindful that someone might overhear, Cinnamon carefully worded her comment. "I would have liked your dad. You should never outgrow the fun of enjoying fantasies. I won't ask why you didn't correct Rose's assumption that you were the head of security, but even without your being able to see the red aura filling this room, I think you're smart enough to know she is just a tad pissed at you right now."

He knew! Looking at the way she was holding her coffee cup, he decided to stay out of dumping distance until she calmed down, if she calmed down.

"I'll make introductions short and simple. Joan is my lifeline. What she doesn't know about this place isn't worth knowing. Jerry is my lawyer, the company lawyer and Joan's husband. Bob is head of security. Rose, you met his wife Rocky. Ginger is wearing the emerald necklace. Cinnamon is wearing the smoky quartz necklace. Rosemary is wearing the cat's eye necklace."

If possible, Rosemary's eyes narrowed another degree. "You are not only a lowdown sidewinder of a snake who forgot to mention you owned this joint, you made Bob leave Rocky all alone when his baby can't be more than a few weeks old. What type of scrooge are you?"

"Wow. Time out." Pulling a stack of pictures out of his pocket, he was grinning from ear to ear as he handed them to Rosemary. "Robert Walker is five weeks old today. He and Rocky are comfortably settled in my apartment upstairs."

With that good bone to gnaw taken away, Rosemary's anger began dissolving. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that a good-looking male specimen with deep pockets would be a target for every money hungry female in the universe. Still it wounded her pride that he hadn't trusted her enough to admit the truth.

"Ginger, where is Cole?" Walker asked.

"At the hospital. He has a week of surgeries and seminars scheduled. I expect him here around six."

"Have you checked in?"

"No and yes. We got a room for our luggage and Wolf," Cinnamon said.

"You brought Wolf with you?"

"In case you have forgotten, Wolf thinks he owns me. He also howls when he isn't happy. I tried leaving him with Aunt Pesty, but before we reached the highway, she called and demanded we pick him up," Rosemary shot back.

"I'll take care of everything."

Joan got up to leave, but Walker stopped her. "Sit back down, it can wait. I want to hear what brought about the charade downstairs."

"That's simple. I wanted to talk to you and your closed mouth staff refused to call you. We knew you were here so we started contemplating different ways to get security's attention. One idea led to another idea. You saw the final result. Frankly, it worked like a charm." Rosemary gave a smug look of satisfaction.

"Calling Juanita and getting my private cell phone number would have been a whole lot easier."

The three of them burst out laughing. "Would you believe we never thought about Juanita?" Cinnamon said after wiping a tear off her cheek.

He wasn't quite buying it, but he didn't dispute the comment.

"Well, you certainly got everyone's attention, young ladies. Cheating, jeopardizing the safety of our staff, tampering with a slot machine are just a few of the charges we could file," Jerry said.

"You could try, but you won't. The staff was never in jeopardy of being harmed. If for a few minutes they believed that except for the house hand all hands added up to twenty-one, who are you going to prosecute, them or us? We didn't keep the winnings, so we can't be charged with stealing. And in case you hadn't noticed, we aren't carrying purses; our arms are bare, our ears unadorned and except for small pockets in snug fitting pants, we have no place to hide wires or fancy 007 devices. So that blows your cheating theory. Nor did we tamper with any machinery. Your surveillance tapes will verify that accusation. We used nothing but brains and skill to get your attention. I'm thinking that making your security look inadequate is not something you want advertised to the general public," Rosemary said.

Before Jerry could blow a million holes in Rosemary's comments, Walker changed the subject. "Why was it so important for you to play out this whole elaborate charade?"

"The charade, as you call it, was pure inspiration because it ticked me off that everyone was lying to us about knowing you. I thought if I asked nicely you would introduce me to the owner."

"Why?"

Rosemary knew from the look on his face she had pushed as far as she dared without repercussions.

"I need advice on how to open a riverboat casino."

"The Mississippi River and riverboat casinos are about eighteen hundred miles east of here. They run under a whole set of different rules," Walker said.

"You know about the set of rules ... how?" Rosemary countered.

"I checked out the situation a few weeks ago."

At least he hadn't lied by trying to claim he had prior knowledge. It also meant she wasn't the only one still being haunted by the dreams. "What about opening a small casino in Vegas?"

"It takes years to get through all the legal paperwork, clearances and background checks for all the licenses required. Besides, nothing in Vegas is small. You would also need a handful of deep pocket investors. It is virtually impossible for a single individual to build a casino today."

One of the side benefits of high stake gambling and collecting and selling high-end vintage cars was the people she met. Investors wouldn't be a problem. "How deep of a background check?"

"By the time they are finished, they will know whether you were breast fed or bottle fed," Jerry said in a tone that left no doubt that he'd be happy to do the investigation himself.

Hells bells. She blew out a breath that ruffled wisps of hair framing her face. It wasn't going to work. The last thing she needed was someone looking over her investments. Insider trading would take on a new meaning if she ever had to reveal how she always managed to sell stock just before it tumbled and buy stock the week before it split. "How about leasing me a few hundred square feet of Dreamland?"

"Rose, why would I want to do that?"

"Because I asked nicely and I'm family."

Hell. Rubbing the back of his neck, he could think of far more enjoyable ways of spending their time together than this back and forth volley that was gaining him nothing but a major tension headache.

Seeing Walker squirm got Joan's attention. Taking a closer look at Rosemary, she concealed a pleased smile before taking pity on him. "What did you mean by you're family?"

"It's more like kissing cousins. We share a very distant grandmother with Walker and Juanita," Cinnamon said.

The delicate china teacup Joan had been holding shattered as it hit the floor.

"Are you all right?" Cinnamon asked right before she saw the look of shock on both Joan and Jerry's faces.

"Yes, I'm fine. Don't try picking up those pieces. I'll go get a broom," Joan answered.

Bob's sharp eyes hadn't missed anything. Walker wanted the women out of the room before he asked any questions.

"Why don't the four of you go rescue Wolf and get checked in? If he decides to start howling, there will be complaints. I'll take care of the broken glass."

No one argued.

## Chapter 21

Before the door to the room was halfway open, Wolf was enthusiastically greeting them.

"Why did Juanita give you Wolf?" Joan asked.

"A few weeks ago, Walker brought Wolf with him when he helped Rocky out by towing my disabled Mustang to Kansas. Juanita and Joe drove over the next day. When Rocky called to say she was having contractions, Wolf refused to get into Joe's car. Rather than force him, Juanita agreed to leave him with me," Rosemary said.

Joan's antenna was doing a good job of adding words to the story that she was positive had a whole lot of words missing. As soon as she had five minutes alone, she was calling Juanita. Between the two of them they had pushed more than a few nice marriageable females in Walker's path. Maybe now they could relax, watch the sparks fly and then if they were lucky, the grandbabies would start arriving.

No matter what they thought, Jerry could come up with at least half a dozen charges that could have the three of them sitting in jail while the legal system slowly worked its way through the truth behind their unorthodox and highly illegal actions.

With Walker treating the morning show with a sense of humor that was totally unlike his inflexible policy of zero tolerance towards cheating and thieves, Joan wished they had finished the previous evening's conversation. Then again, knowing Walker, he wouldn't have mentioned the girls at all.

"We can take Wolf out the back door for a run. The staff has a small fenced-in area that has grass and a few trees that should make him happy," Joan said.

"Do you want us to take the bags with us?" Ginger asked.

"No. I'll have a bellhop move them upstairs."

Something was up. The scent of their mother's perfume had been tantalizing the air since they had left the office.

"Can you see Mom?" Cinnamon whispered as they walked down the hallway behind Joan and Rosemary.

"No. Haven't seen her since yesterday afternoon when she popped in while I was packing. Can you identify that other odor? It reminds me of something, but I can't remember what."

"Opium. How could you forget? The stench lingered for months after we used Mom's new bottle of perfume to make Uncle Gus's beagle smell nice."

She wrinkled her nose. "How could I have forgotten that? I still think it stinks worse than the dog did."

"Do you think it could be Salina?" Cinnamon asked.

"Probably. Since we invaded her territory, it would seem logical that she would want to watch what is happening in the matchmaking department."

"Do you think she and Mom are helping this along?"

"Not directly. But I do believe they are giving Aunt Pesty information to help her cast spells."

"Are they crazy?" Cinnamon hissed.

Two sizzling lines of red, much like lit dynamite fuses, ran down the ceiling towards them before making popping noises above Cinnamon and Ginger's heads.

"What was that?" Joan asked as she looked up at the ceiling then down the long hallway.

"Don't have a clue," Cinnamon said as she shrugged both shoulders and forced a smile.

"I think one of the florescent lights blew out," Ginger offered.

Rosemary rolled her eyes in warning before continuing towards the exit.

"Calling Mom and Salina crazy wasn't the smartest thing you could have done. Next time, they might not let the comment go with just a warning," Ginger whispered.

"It was an observation based on fact, not a criticism of anyone," Cinnamon hissed.

"Well, obviously they didn't take it that way, so think before you speak. Okay?"

"Yeah, right. Do I turn off my thoughts, too, so Mom can't read them?"

A red glow shimmered down the wall beside Cinnamon.

"What is with you, are you suddenly suicidal?"

"No." Cinnamon bit off whatever else she was about to say when the hallway began to glow with a mixture of menacing auras.

Noticing for the first time the smudges of darkness not completely hidden under artfully applied makeup, Ginger became protective. "Bad dream last night?"

"Last several nights actually. They don't make any sense and no they aren't destiny dreams so forget I mentioned them," Cinnamon said as they entered the small courtyard a few steps behind Joan.

\* \* \* \*

"Are you going to press charges?" Bob asked as if he didn't already know the answer.

"If I did, tomorrow's tabloids would be telling everyone how to use hypnosis to win thousands of dollars at the tables. Within days, every wacko in the world would flock through our doors."

"Sounds like job security for me," Bob said as he bit into a donut. Walking to the VCR, he slipped a tape one of his men had just delivered into the machine. "I had the tapes from the two tables pulled, but since we know they used hypnosis let's study the tape of Ginger at the slot machine."

They watched Ginger hand a ten dollar bill to a change dealer a few feet away from the slot machines. With ten Dreamland silver coins in hand she walked up to the machine and slipped three coins into the slot machine's belly. Rather than use the spin button she pulled the lever that had given the machine the name, one arm bandit. A random display of icons paid out nothing. Feeding the machine three more coins she hit two red cherries, the payback was two dollars. Retrieving the two credits, she fed them and one more into the machine. With that pull all hell broke loose.

"I have to admit she looks bewildered by all the commotion, but then again, she could be a damn good actress," Jerry said.



Playing the events two more times in slow motion, they could detect nothing that would indicate Ginger had tampered with the machine.

"I'm out of here," Bob finally said. "I'll go down and see if Smitty has come up with an explanation for the machine's malfunction."

"What if it's not a malfunction?" Walker asked.

"You know as well as I do it had to be. No machine is set to pay back to back, much less three times in a row on a big ticket win. Don't play with my head; I'm not getting enough sleep to wrap my mind around one of your mind twisters."

"What do you know about the family?" Jerry asked as soon as they were alone.

"Parents were killed by a drunk driver when the girls were sixteen. Ginger, the youngest, married Cole Young, a cardiologist, a few months ago. They live in the family home. Aunt who raised them after the parents died married Cole's uncle. They live in a house across the street from Gin. Rosemary is the oldest. She and Cinnamon own townhouses a few doors away from each other. Gin is a hypnotherapist, Cinn does hypnosis stage shows, and Rose buys and sells vintage cars."

The rest of what he thought and knew was going to stay private for the time being.

"You left out the fact that Rosemary likes to gamble and is a steady winner," Jerry said as he stared Walker down.

"Didn't leave it out. Didn't figure I needed to repeat what you already knew."

"If you're going to force me to ask, I will. Do the three young ladies have abilities similar to Salina and Juanita?"

"What do you know about Juanita?"

"Only what Salina told us in regards to her leaving home."

"Which was?"

"Damned if you don't sound just like Gus when he grilled someone. Salina claimed that Juanita stifled her creative energy. Translate that to mean Juanita is stable, rational, practical and comfortable living in a small town. She had no problem with Juanita caring for the animals as a way to give back to the universe, but she felt Juanita wasted her ability as a seer by using her *gift* sparingly."

Walker didn't like the idea that Salina had discussed Juanita's abilities, but there wasn't a thing he could do to change the situation.

"A hell of a lot of good Salina's creative energy did her. Not only did she brag about her powers, that stupid stunt she pulled with Helen caused the loss of most of her *gift* and destroyed any chance she and Dad had of being happy together."

"For the record they were happy. The situation caused a few rough edges, but even without Helen stirring the pot Salina would never have been a Donna Reed type of mother or wife. If she had been less volatile, less dramatic or less in your face sexy, she and Gus would have been bored out of their minds with each other within a month. You still haven't answered my question, do they have supernatural powers?"

Walker massaged the back of his neck; it didn't do a thing to relieve the tension. He had suspicions on

Rose's gift but a hunch and a dollar wouldn't buy a cup of coffee. Except for what was general knowledge, he didn't feel their talents were open for discussion unless they chose to do the telling. "Hell if I know. I have no idea if or where Rosemary and Cinnamon's talents lay, but Ginger is a medium."

"She sees ghosts?"

"You got it."

"That's it?"

"She uses her ability as an artist to draw pictures of the ghosts. At the same time she connects clients with deceased loved ones using hypnosis. For the record, I have not asked nor do I plan to ask for a demonstration."

Encountering Salina and Gus once had been freaky; the idea of ghosts popping in and out of his life was unnerving. He could only hope that Jerry and Joan would never discover the full truth. The fact that they had never breathed a word about what they did know said a lot about their integrity, but he figured the fewer people that knew anything the better.

"Those girls have powers," Joan said without preamble as she walked into the room and plopped in the chair next to her husband.

Walker closed his eyes for a heartbeat of a second and said a silent prayer. "What happened?"

"When we were walking down the hall towards the employee's yard, two red lines of light raced down the ceiling before making a popping noise. Everyone played dumb. In the elevator on the way up, I would have sworn I smelled Opium."

Walker sat up straighter. "You think they're doing drugs?"

Joan chuckled at the look on both men's faces. "Opium was a top selling perfume in the '70's. It was also Salina's favorite. I swear I also smelled Gardenias. All three denied smelling anything but I saw the looks they were giving each other. Added to that, when we got to the suite, the painting of Salina winked at me."

"Are you sure?"

"Wouldn't have mentioned it if I wasn't."

Walker twisted a paper clip in two. What control he had over his life had been shot dead. Knowing Salina, it would never be revived. Could Salina make a picture come to life? Surely, Gus would stop her from doing something that stupid. Who was he kidding, no one controlled Salina.

"You put them in my place? Are we experiencing a room shortage I don't know about?"

"Do you want Wolf disturbing paying guests if he decides to start howling?" Patting herself on the back for coming up with the perfect excuse for putting Rose and Walker under the same roof, she smiled innocently.

"Hell," he muttered. He hated being boxed into a corner and Joan was as good at it as Juanita.

"Do you know what their plans are for the rest of the day?"

"They said they would be staying in the suite. Rocky and the baby are with them. They were discussing the pros and cons of breastfeeding when I left." The look on her face was innocent, but Walker knew

she was baiting him and damn her to hell it was working. He squirmed into a more comfortable position as he annihilated another paper clip.

## Chapter 22

Ginger wiggled her fingers at Walker. With a dreamy smile on her face and a sleeping baby covered in the shawl Juanita had made on her chest, she was using her toes to push a knotty pine rocker. Cinnamon, reading a book, never looked up. Rocky was nowhere to be seen.

Following the scent of freshly baked cookies, Walker bypassed the spacious living room done in earth tones and navy blue he had personally picked out to rid the room of Salina's stark Danish modern décor that had been popular in the '70's.

Rounding the corner into the kitchen, he stopped dead in his tracks. Lord have mercy, the woman had a fine looking ass. Right now it was stuck in the air as she rooted through a bottom cupboard in his kitchen. His kitchen! He'd daydreamed about her making him home cooked meals, but right now his mind was coming up with a more creative use for the butcher block counter in the center of the room.

"Need some help?"

*Thunk.*

"Hells bells." Backing out of the cupboard, she sat on the floor rubbing the back of her head and glared at him.

"You could have warned me you were here."

"I did. I asked if you needed help."

Grabbing a still warm chocolate chip cookie off a plate, he closed his eyes for a moment of ecstasy as the combination of melted chocolate, brown sugar, vanilla and walnuts kissed his taste buds.

"These are great, but I would have sworn there was nothing more elaborate than eggs, bacon and bread in the refrigerator. I know for a fact there were no bags of chocolate chips lying around, so how did you make them?"

"I read off the list of ingredients needed, twitched my nose like a rabbit and pointed a finger towards the counter. Presto, just like that the ingredients appeared."

The look on his face said he believed her.

"Get a grip on reality. I tagged along with Rocky when she went to the grocery store."

"Which brings us to: where is Rocky now?"

"Sleeping, then again maybe not. Bob dropped by a couple of hours ago. We kidnapped Bobby to give them some alone time."

He visualized the last time he had seen the bottomless pit demanding to be fed. He hadn't known anything that small could scream so loud. "What are you going to do when he wakes up hungry?"

"Rocky pumped her breast. The milk is in the refrigerator."

Walker closed his eyes, trying to shut down the picture. It turned out not to be a wise move. The image of Rosemary with a baby suckling her breast came back in full Technicolor to haunt him.

Sinking to the floor beside Rose, he leaned his head against a cabinet and closed his eyes. His body felt slick with sweat.

"Are you all right? You look a little pale."

"Just dandy. What were you trying to reach?" With any luck, changing the subject would center his off kilter equilibrium and relieve his hardening manhood.

"A box of brown sugar. It's clear back in the corner."

Pulling boxes off the bottom tier of the corner cupboard's lazy susan, Walker started making room for his larger frame to squeeze into in the opening without knocking anything else off.

"You do realize that Coco Puffs, Fruit Loops, Tony the Tiger's Frosted Flakes, Lucky Charms and Captain Crunch do not make healthy breakfasts."

"Do I get brownie points for the shredded wheat?" he asked as he handed her the box.

"You might have, but it's never been opened."

"What can I say, I have a sweet tooth. Besides I seldom eat cereal for breakfast. It's snack food usually consumed at two in the morning while staring at the computer screen." He didn't add that lately the early morning computer session had been after being awakened from explicate dreams that had his knowing her body as well as his own.

Extracting himself from the cupboard, he handed her the box of brown sugar.

After placing the cereal boxes back on the shelf, he closed the cupboard then watched her reopen the cupboard and place the box of brown sugar on the top shelf.

"I thought you needed that."

"No. I heard it fall off the shelf after I put it away."

"Then why ... never mind."

They sat on the floor looking at each other. Pulling her into his lap was as natural and unplanned as breathing.

Minutes, hours, weeks, months, years, a lifetime, lifetimes of yearning were packed into the physical punch that exploded through them as lips met. How or when she ended up straddling him, neither knew.

They didn't come up for air until Wolf started trying to nudge his wet, cold nose between their torsos.

The kitchen floor certainly wasn't on his list of romantic settings, but damn he wanted her. Here, now, hard and quick. Thinking to carry her into the bedroom, he was stopped short by the sound of the front door opening.

Lifting her forehead from the crook of his neck, she gave him a weak smile. His dilated eyes, now ringed with dark blue, stared back at her. "Saved by the bell or, in this case, the key. Sounds like Cole just arrived and I think that other sound is a baby stirring."

With legs that felt boneless, it was difficult to stand. Somehow she managed the feat. Buttoning the top two buttons on her blouse, she tucked the tails back into her pants.

Turning towards Walker, she smiled at the sight of him standing in front of the open freezer. Wondering if the cold air would work as well as a cold shower, she got her answer when he turned around.

Not even close.

The can of frozen orange juice in his hand gave her pause for speculation.

"One way or another I'm going to get..." He took a calming breath. "Let me rephrase that, would you like a screwdriver?"

As a tension breaker, it instantly went to the top of Rosemary's list of all time greats. Once she started laughing, she couldn't stop. By the time Cole followed by Cinnamon and Ginger walked into the kitchen, Walker was chuckling.

"Care to share?" Ginger asked as she rocked a wide-awake Bobby in her arms.

"Depends. You going to share the story behind that bruise you had on your thigh?" Rosemary asked sweetly.

"What, she hasn't caved in and told you already?" Cole countered only half jokingly.

"Not a chance. I told them they had to ask you," Ginger said before batting her eyes at him and smacking her puckered lips together to make kissy noises.

"Then I'd say their story is safe from prying minds, because I'm not talking." Taking a chocolate chip cookie off the plate, Cole took a bite as he gave them a smug look of satisfaction.

"Do they share everything?" Walker asked.

"Obviously there are some sacred areas, but for the record, what they don't share they commute through osmosis." Snatching another cookie, he sidestepped a jab to his ribs from Cinnamon as he lifted the now fussing baby out of Ginger's arms. "This little guy and I are going to get acquainted while you warm up that bottle. It's been a lousy day. Sunshine might turn down that screwdriver, but I won't."

With that parting shot, Rosemary started laughing again. Cole had effectively told them what he knew without blabbing details.

\* \* \* \*

Dinner was across the hall in Bob's apartment. The aroma of Lasagna and liberally spiced garlic bread whetted their appetites as soon as the suite's door was opened.

The two-bedroom suite had a modestly sized great room. With earth tones from tan to rich dark chocolate brown, broken with splashes of pumpkin and mustard yellow, the room was comfortably welcoming.

"We owe you big time. The uninterrupted sleep was like a gift from heaven." Bob took Bobby out of Cole's arms and showered them with a Texas size smile.

"If that grin comes only from sleep, give me a sleeping pill and a pillow," Walker grumbled.

"Dinner's ready," Rocky said with a cheerful smile and a pat on Walker's back as she stage whispered in his ear. "Poor baby. Stop pouting or I'll tell Rose some of your and Bob's more notorious escapades."

"You will anyway. If you tell me there's ice cream to go with those double chocolate brownies I see on the counter, I'll be nice and change the bottomless pits diaper before we eat."

"Your choices are chocolate chip, vanilla and strawberry. For my being so nice, you can change the next two diapers."

Dinner was history when Cole asked, "Besides watching Bobby, what did the three of you do today to entertain yourselves?"

Bob choked on the water he had just swallowed. Watching Rocky pat Bob on the back as he sputtered, Cole tried figuring out if he was coughing or laughing.

Walker picked up his glass of red wine, relaxed into his seat and waited to see how Cole would react to this morning's show.

"We wandered around downstairs and had a little fun," Ginger said.

"How little?" Cole wasn't fooled by their innocent smiles.

"I think I might have won a Viper."

"You think?"

"Well, it's possible the machine malfunctioned."

"How so?" Cole said as his mind took a flight of fancy at possible scenarios all revolving around unfriendly ghosts.

"The machine landed on five hologram castles. Which means I won a Viper, but then it did it two more times."

With Rose and Cinn unnaturally quiet, Cole got suspicious. Running his fingers through his hair, he braced himself. "Tell me the rest."

"How about I do one better. I have a video," Bob said.

Several tapes had been edited together so the story unfolded from several different angles. With Rocky sitting in a rocker nursing Bobby, the only sounds in the room were an occasional groan from Cole and slurping sighs from Bobby as he greedily enjoyed his meal.

"Walker, you should have had them arrested for that stunt."

"True. But between Juanita and Pesty, I didn't figure my life would be worth a plug nickel if I'd done that."

Cole shuddered at the thought of what trouble Pesty would create given half an incentive to protect her nieces.

"For the record, the slot machine has been dismantled and put back together. Smitty could not find anything wrong with it."

"Are you saying I actually won those cars?"

"No, it means you had your fun and Walker graciously isn't going to press charges." Cole looked at all three females with a 'don't press your luck' glare. None of them doubted that they would hear more on the subject later.

"Do I want to know why you created this elaborate scheme?" Cole asked.

"No one would let us talk to Walker and we didn't have a number to call him. We figured this was a sure bet to get his attention," Ginger said.

"Why didn't you call Juanita?" Cole asked.

"Would you believe, the three of us never thought to be that logical?" Rosemary said.

No, as a matter of fact, he wasn't buying that one; but with Bob and Rocky in the room, he didn't argue the point.

"Of course, if someone had bothered to mention that he owned this place, we might not have had to go to such dire extremes to get his attention."

Looking at the skepticism on Cole and Walker's faces, Rosemary added, "Then again, that might have made the challenge that much more fun."



## Chapter 23

Two weeks after dropping Walker off in Baton Rouge, she stood at the window in her bedroom and watched him board the paddleboat.

"Was the trip successful?" Rose asked an hour later as they lay on top of sweat soaked sheets.

"Not to my way of thinking. Forget about the last two weeks. Nothing worth mentioning happened."

Like pages being ripped off a daily calendar, spring turned into summer on the Mississippi. The casino was busier than ever as the river carried them back and forth between the ports of call.

As the days became hot and muggy, Walker's temper became short, his touch indifferent. There were no arguments, no confrontation, no clue as to why, but one day he simply stopped visiting the paddleboat. The only reminder she had of happier times was the cat's eye necklace she always wore.

Sitting on the paddleboat's veranda, in a chair made wide enough to accommodate the many layers of petticoats style dictated a woman wear, Rose worried her bottom lip. She had a clear view of the dock and the mud filled street. Despite the pain he had caused, her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him leading his horse around the worst of the puddles as he headed for the paddleboat.

It had been eight long weeks since they had seen each other. In the four years they had been married, this was the first time they had been separated for more than two weeks. On the boat's previous three stops in New Orleans, rumor was that Walker had been out of town. He had left no letter and surprisingly, the rumor mill had no idea where he was.

The look on his face as he walked up the gangplank was grim.

"Rose, we need to talk. In private." No hello. No how are you. No kiss. No hug.

Walking in front of him towards her stateroom, she felt an unexpected heavy heartedness.

Closing the door firmly behind him, Walker bushed her aside when she tried giving him a hug.

Walking the few paces to the window, he turned to face her. "I married Judge Jacob's daughter three months ago."

The laugh was brittle, but she tried to pull it off. "Seeing as we're married, that isn't funny."

"I'm not joking. My father and the judge agreed to a small private ceremony. The marriage will be announced next week."

She collapsed onto the edge of the bed. Their marriage bed. Oh God, she couldn't think about that right now. Too stunned to say anything, she stared vacantly at a knothole in the wood floor.

Kneeling before her, he took her small hands in his. "Rosie, please you have to understand. My father had me backed into a corner. If I didn't marry her and produce an heir before Christmas he was going to disown me."

"You committed bigamy to get your hands on your inheritance?" Rose whispered.

Unable to look her in the eye, he stood up and walked back to the window. "The judge had our marriage annulled."

She didn't bother arguing; she knew a judge as crooked as Jacob was rumored to be could do whatever he wanted.

"You were right, you know; during an argument, the old man admitted the damning truth to my parentage. If I hadn't agreed to his demands, he was going to announce the truth and disown me."

"And that makes what you just did morally right?"

"Hell, yes, it was right. I've worked too damn hard to have everything taken from me." Watching Rose flinch, he mistook the action as coming from his burst of anger rather than the cruelty of his words.

"Rosie, sweetheart; please, you have to understand what I've been going through. I had to sleep with that homely bag of bones to ensure our future. Now that she's definitely pregnant, I can walk away. After the ball that announces our romantic secret marriage, I can wash my hands of her. It will be just like old times. Just you and me, I promise."

"What if she has a girl child?" It didn't make sense, but she could feel a part of herself standing outside her body watching the scene unfold and marveling at the emotional control she was exhibiting.

*Walker paled. He had never given that possibility a thought. Besides it had to be a boy, he was too virile to produce girls.*

*Pulling her unresisting body into his arms, he nuzzled her neck. When his hands spanned her waist, he stopped. Putting his hands on her arms to steady her he took a step backwards and looked down.*

*"I'm two and a half months along." It was all she could manage to get past the lump in her throat.*

*A baby. No, two babies due at about the same time. Instead of asking how she felt, he became angry.*

*"Why the hell am I just hearing about this?"*

*With the demanding words, her backbone returned. "What was I supposed to do, send you a telegram? I haven't seen you for two months."*

*"Why didn't you abort it? Surely one of the girls could have helped you."*

*She could have pointed out that they were married. That it was their child. A child made in love not out of greed. She could have pushed the point, after all, she had the marriage license, but she didn't.*

*Stepping away from him, Rose walked to the door. Once the door was open, she looked at him. "I will keep the casino open until the end of the season. After that you'll need to find someone else to run it. Your share of the profits will be sent to your office or you can have someone pick them up. Now get out and don't come back."*

As Walker walked out the door, Rosemary woke up. Tears were streaming down her face.

She had been pregnant. Laying a hand on her flat stomach, she marveled at the idea of having a child growing within her.

Not able to fall back to sleep, she dressed and silently left the suite. At four in the morning, she had

expected to be the only occupant in the gym. Instead, she found Walker slick with sweat on a treadmill. Following her movements in the wall of mirrors, he didn't say a word when she started the machine next to him. Two hours later with muscles screaming, they slid up to their chins into a hot tub. Stretching her legs out on the bench, Rose rested her neck on the side of the tub as she faced Walker.

Walker broke the comfortable silence that had engulfed them during the strenuous workout. "Are you ready to tell me why you're really here?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Funny. Now tell me why you're in Vegas."

"You don't believe I want to open a casino?"

"Oh, I believe that, but you could have found out most of the information you needed on the Internet. So, I don't believe that's the whole story."

"What other possible motive could I have?"

"Me."

Her laugh stuck in her throat. He had hit too close to home. "Stick your ego up your ass; it needs a touch of reality. You are so wrong."

"Am I? I think the dreams are getting to you as much as they are me."

Sliding a few inches down the hot tub's bench, he drew her feet onto his lap and began absently massaging her soles, toes and ankles. Refusing to admit that his touch was unnerving her, Rosemary bit her bottom lip to keep from purring with pleasure.

"Stay here with me. Maybe we can figure out what's behind the dreams and explore our options." He couldn't believe he was making the offer. With Helen's threat hanging over him and a purchase offer looming, the timing to play patty cake with Rose was totally wrong. But now that she was here, he was damned if he was going to let the opportunity pass him by.

She pulled her feet off his lap. Water slouched as she sat up. With one perfectly arched brow raised, she looked at him as if he were an insect she was about to squish. "You want a mistress? At least, you gave Rose a wedding band and four years before condensing the marriage down to nothing more than a convenient way to bed a virgin before throwing her away like unwanted trash."

Refusing to be provoked into saying something he would regret, he locked his jaw as he rubbed the back off his neck. "It sounds like our dreams are coinciding. Can you explain how the cat's eye necklace from the dreams is in your possession now?"

"Cole bought Gin's wedding rings and matching necklace at an estate jewelers. He swears the cat's eye along with Cinn's smoky quartz necklace talked to him. He gave us the necklaces the same night Gin gave us paintings of us wearing them."

He remembered the painting hanging in Rosemary's condo, but he didn't remember the necklace. Then again that was the night he came face to face with living ghosts. What an oxymoron! Bottom line, without the context from the dream, the necklace would have been insignificant, living ghosts or not.

"You're saying Cinn was wearing the smoky quartz in the painting given to her?"

"You got it. Until this last dream, the only thing I thought was significant about the painting and the dreams was you, gambling, and me. Now it's just one more bizarre piece to the puzzle."

Puzzle was a good word to describe what he still was unwilling to believe was a past life. "Frankly, I can't say as I like the way the dreams are portraying me."

"What, you don't think chauvinistic prick is your style?"

"Do you?"

She didn't have to look at his expression to know this wasn't the time to tease. "No. I've met a fair share of them and you don't fit the mold."

In the dream, the woman he called mother resembled Helen in looks and temperament far too closely. Salina and Patsy, the woman who gave birth to him in the dreams, also had similar characteristics and personality traits. The only comparables between Gus and the man he called Father in the dream was the fact that both had used their wives' money to finance their first business ventures. Still the dreams and the realities of his life paralleled each other too closely for him to be comfortable with the situation. "Look, I don't understand what the hell the dreams mean, so if you do, please enlighten me."

With his words effectively washing away the battle line she had drawn, Rosemary sank back into the water. When Walker drew her feet back onto his lap, she didn't protest.

"I don't know any more than you. My dad had an extensive library full of books on religions, spirituality, and metaphysical beliefs and theories. Gin has kept the library updated. From everything I have read in the last few weeks, the dreams have all the earmarks of a past life."

"I've been doing my own share of reading. Before I say something I may regret, are you religious?"

"I think of myself as spiritual. My beliefs are based on what I have seen and learned through both the mystical gifts given to my family and my folks since their death."

"Before seeing Dad and Salina I never really put much thought into what was or wasn't, but organized religion always seemed too manipulative. Trying to categorize my beliefs now would be like trying to hammer a square block in a round hole."

She almost lost her train of thought as Walker rubbed a particularly sensitive spot by her big toe. "Discarding specific religious beliefs, there are three reasons to the general theme for a soul's reincarnation. Conquering issues not learned or created in past lives is karma related. The second is a willingness to help other souls work through their karma. And the third is a matter of furthering a soul's personal growth as they evolve into a higher spiritual being."

Using his thumb, he zeroed in on the spot that had made her catch her breath. "What are the chances spiritual and sexual growth go hand in hand?" The look on his face was playfully baiting as he continued to massage the sensitive spot.

"A few self-purposing religions would tell you they are one and the same. You will also find they were dreamed up by men proclaiming males as the superior gender and females as the weak and subservient."

Having her weak with longing and submissive to his ministrations as he stoked her fires sounded perfect, but with the heel of her foot mere inches from his crotch he kept the thought to himself.

With a well-aimed flick of her finger, she playfully sprayed his face with water. "You can be hung for thoughts as well as words, so wipe that smirk off your face."

"You have no idea what I was thinking."

She arched a brow. "Wanna bet?"

"Yes."

"Mom."

"You wouldn't, she wouldn't. Please tell me she isn't here," he begged as he looked around the room.

Pulling her feet out of his grasp, she sat up. "No, she isn't, but I made my point. You asked me to stick around for a month; give me a serious reason to agree to the offer."

Sex could be serious.

If she were younger he might get her to buy the line about sexual frustration causing insanity, sterility and acne.

As it was, he tried a version of the truth.

"I don't think the dreams are going to stop until we figure out what we are supposed to learn from them and I don't think that is going to happen if we aren't together."

"Okay, I'll buy that."

He couldn't believe his good fortune. That was almost too simple. A voice he didn't want to hear, his father's, whispered in his ear, *"Pull your brains out of your balls, she hasn't agreed to stay yet."*

"The dreams also gave both of us the idea of recreating part or all of the glamorous days of the paddleboat casinos."

She nodded in agreement.

"Work beside me for the next month. Give these destiny dreams our grandmamma stuck us with an opportunity to reveal all their secrets."

"They will do that eventually anyway. You'll have to give me a better reason to play with fire for a month."

"You asked for space in the casino. No matter what happens, I will give you the space if you stay the month."

"How about we cut a deck of cards. If I hold the high card I get the space I want?"

"Good try, but you're forgetting I've watched you operate. Until I figure out how you're cheating I'm not playing cards with you. Staying thirty days is the best offer you'll get."

She knew he was right. "I'll stay. When do I start?"

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Walker was surprised at how much time had passed. "Eight thirty, this morning."

With a softly muttered, "Hells bells," she made a mad dash to the dressing rooms.

## Chapter 24

An hour later, Walker was casually leaning against the bar in the kitchen, waiting for her. In a charcoal gray suit, pale pink dress shirt and two-tone gray tie with paper-thin stripes of pink, he was all business, then he smiled. With dimples that tugged at her heart, Rosemary reminded herself that the suave businessman looked just as handsome and in control in faded jeans, broken in boots, and a sweat stained cowboy hat. If she expected to keep her independence, she would have to guard her heart from both sides of him for the next month.

"Do I get sued for sexual harassment if I comment on how nice you look?"

Cinnamon's black pencil skirt and matching short princess seam jacket along with her own poinsettia red silk shell was the best she could do for business attire on short notice. The black three-inch heels were going to be killing her by the end of the day, but the gleam in Walker's eyes had been worth the effort.

"If that cup of coffee in your hand is mine, I'll overlook the infraction."

Reaching for another steaming mug sitting on the bar behind him, he handed it to her. "Let's go."

Instead of walking towards the elevators, he opened the door leading to the stairs. As they walked down one floor he said, "With your degrees in financial management and communication, for the next month you will pose as a financial adviser. That will give you access to all departments and explain your presence without undue questions."

"Someone would question my presence?"

"The first thing you will learn is that a casino is its own little world. There are very few true secrets and everybody has an opinion on everything. More affairs and melodramas are played out within these walls everyday than on any TV soap in a month. Rumors spread faster than a hot rod eating pavement on a quarter mile drag and they get more distorted with each telling. Don't be surprised at what will be said about your presence."

Joan heard the last comment as they entered the office. "The odds are seven to one that you are having an affair with both Cinn and Rose, because you can't tell them apart. There is also a betting pool on which one kept pace with you during two hours of exercises and which one spent the next hour with you in the hot tub."

"How do they know about the hot tub?"

"Surveillance cameras. Get used to it. How much did you bet?" Walker asked as he chuckled at the look of disbelief on Rose's face.

"Twenty that it was Rosemary during both."

"What are the odds?" Rosemary asked.

"Twenty to one against only you being there."

Pulling a twenty out of her purse, she handed it to Joan. "I'm in. How will they figure out the truth?"

"That is one of the few well kept secrets. Don't you think it's a little odd to place a bet when you're the object of the bets?" Walker asked.

"No, it's poetic justice. With no way to lose, I pay them back for talking about me by taking their money."

He shook his head at the convoluted logic.

"Rose needs a security badge and a key to the private elevator," Walker said as he headed to his office.

\* \* \* \*

Rosemary didn't like Sidney Lutz. The first mark against him had been his limp handshake given with a damp doughy soft hand. The second was when he undressed her with his eyes before dismissing her as arm candy. The third mark was drawn; she just couldn't put a finger on the what for yet.

When he and his six-man entourage had been ushered into a large meeting room with a mahogany table large enough to comfortably seat thirty and an eye-popping view of the strip, she had expected to be dismissed. Instead, Walker had introduced her to the group before helping her into the chair to his right. Jerry had sat at his left with Joan sitting beside him ready to take notes. Facing them, the six clones wearing black pinstripe suits, starched white shirts and black ties draped over fleshy bodies and identical slicked back dark hair had divided up as they flanked their boss. Combined, they didn't have a pinhead's worth of humor.

Sidney, the owner of Jokers Wild, a casino in Atlantic City, wore a summer weight black raw silk suit with a black shirt left unbuttoned at his thick, short neck. The perfectly fitted suit did little to disguise his wide girth and skinny legs.

By the time the two-hour meeting was over, Rosemary had made several pages of mental notes.

"What were your impressions?" Walker asked.

"I don't know the first thing about buying and selling casinos," Rosemary said.

"Didn't figure you did but you're damn good at reading people."

"Soft. Needs to get off his butt or his diabetes is going to kill him."

"How do you know that?" Joan asked.

"He was drinking his coffee black. When his hand started trembling, he added two heaping teaspoons of sugar and drank it down in one gulp. A few minutes later, the tremors stopped."

"Go on," Walker said.

"Despite his smooth charm, he has no respect for females. I don't think I need to state the obvious there.

"Except for his son, he doesn't trust anyone and that includes the men he brought with him.

"He's a smooth liar. The man gets an A plus for looking you straight in the eye and telling a story that makes you want to believe he's your new best friend while he's robbing you blind."

"When do you think he was lying?" Walker asked.

"Before or after the meeting started?" Rosemary refilled her coffee cup, then reached over and topped Jerry's coffee mug.

"After."

"Every time his lips moved."

The comment catching Jerry off guard had him spewing coffee across the table as the liquid went down the wrong pipe.

"Play the tape and I'll prove my point."

No one asked how she knew the meeting had been taped.

Joan handed her the remote control after the tape had been rewound. Stopping the tape a few minutes later, Rose said, "Remember this smile with the two little dimples just above the corners of his lips." A few minutes later she stopped the tape again. "The dimples are gone, but from his comment you would think he would still be as relaxed and open as when he was talking about his grandson."

Rewinding the tape, she said, "Listen to what he's saying and watch his left hand. Tell me when you figure it out."

Joan broke the silence. "I'll be darned! He gestures so much with his right hand I never noticed that finger twitch every time he talked about the two casinos joining forces?"

"I didn't catch it either," Jerry admitted.

"I noticed it after he added the sugar to his coffee. Knowing he had diabetes, I contributed it to that." Walker's voice was full of self-disgust.

"I'm sure you'll want to analyze the whole tape, but I think you'll notice that during any comments not related to business the pinky does not twitch. It twitches a little faster when he talks about profits and loss."

Jerry didn't need to remind any of them that with or without a handful of government agencies breathing down a casino's neck, numbers could be tweaked to show whatever profit or loss was wanted.

\* \* \* \*

"Where have you been hiding all afternoon?" Walker asked when Rosemary sank into the chair opposite him in his office. Sliding her feet out of the three-inch high torture chambers, she winced.

"Bob introduced me to each of the department managers. Did you know that each tomato slice costs you two cents?"

Instead of answering Walker relaxed into his seat and waited.

"Greg Strong is not only an excellent chef, he knows the cost of every serving down to the penny. Before I could get out of the kitchen, he made sure I knew every last one; my head is swimming in numbers."

"Welcome to my world."

"What did you do this afternoon?"

"Reviewed the tape and requested some different financial reports."

"Bet Sidney wasn't happy about that."

"Sucker's bet."

Before he could say more, Bob walked into the office. "I'm under strict orders to have all three of our



butts up stairs within the next five minutes. Dinner is being served."

Rosemary groaned. Not only did she not want to put her shoes back on, Greg had plied her with enough food samples to produce two meals.

Before she could move, Walker walked around the table. Picking up her shoes with one hand, he helped her to her feet. "Want me to carry you?"

Visions of being carried into a bedroom dressed in nothing more than a chemise and lace trimmed bloomers flashed before her eyes. Feeling herself flush, she attached, "I'm quite capable of walking." With as much dignity as she could muster with a slight limp and barefoot, she walked out the door.

Holding her head high, she ignored their chuckles.

\* \* \* \*

When Walker went with Bob to security to oversee a theft problem that had finally been solved, Rocky sat on Rosemary's bed nursing Bobby. Rosemary, soaking her aching feet in a warm pan of Epsom salt, watched Ginger and Cinnamon start opening boxes with logos from a half dozen different shops.

"Please tell me you bought me some comfortable shoes," she begged after they had laid out a dazzling array of mix and match pants, jackets, skirts and an eye popping array of tops and shells they had bought her for work."

"We have sling backs, opened toed, slides, chunky heels, pointed, round and squared off toes. Nothing has a heel higher than two inches. And we found a cute opened toed brushed suede slide with cushioned soles at Hush Puppies. We bought a pair in every color," Ginger said as she placed four more bags on the bed.

"Bless you, I can't believe you accomplished all this in one day and had time to fix dinner."

"Incentive. The thought of your reporting to work every morning like the rest of the adult world was more than enough motivation. Behind that, 'I only wear jeans,' mantra, Rocky has a sharp eye for style. She pulled stuff off the racks and we modeled them. It worked like a charm," Cinnamon said.

"I won't ask if you'll make it the month. You're too stubborn not to, but how did the first day really go?" Ginger asked.

"Interesting. Walker's thinking about buying a casino in Atlantic City. He met with the owner for the first time this morning."

A slight change in her aura told Cinnamon the way her vote swayed. "Why are you against the idea?"

"I've been in the casino; it needs some updating, but there's lots of potential."

"You didn't answer the question," Cinnamon said.

She sighed. "I don't know, something didn't seem right, but other than the guy lying about some financial figures, I can't put my finger on what turned me off."

"How do you know he was lying?" Rocky asked as she lightly patted Bobby's back to get him to burp.

"Poker tricks. You watch the body language. His are real subtle, but they were there."

"Was he a big guy wearing a black raw silk suit?" Cinnamon asked.

"Yes. Why?"

Cinnamon wrinkled her nose. "Nothing. I saw him in the lobby. I didn't like his aura."

With enough scientific proof to prove physical energy did in fact produce color, few people questioned Cinnamon's comments about a person's aura. Her sisters also knew she wouldn't have made a comment without good reason.

"What was different about his?" Rosemary asked.

"Dark and muddy. Reminded me of a stream after a heavy rain stirs up the mud. There's a few pockets of pure green but for the most part his thoughts are tainted with half truths and he tends to accept his lies as truths after he's repeated them a few times."

## Chapter 25

Walker left the casino early without saying where he was going. By the time he walked through the apartment door late that evening, Rosemary had been checking the clock every five minutes for two hours and created at least a dozen possible scenarios for his disappearance. Every one involved a long legged brunette or blonde to go along with the gossip she had shamelessly listened to about his preference in past girlfriends.

It took every ounce of willpower she had not to act like a worried wife by demanding an explanation when he walked through the door looking exhausted and down in the mouth.

"If you're hungry, I can fix you something."

Grabbing a handful of still warm peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies off a plate on the counter, he gave her a tired looking smile. "These will suffice. Your baking is spoiling me."

Walking around the counter, he placed a kiss on her forehead. "Thank you."

"What, for baking a few cookies?"

"That and for being here." It was the perfect opening to ask what was bothering him but he changed the subject. "Are you ready for a day off?"

"More than! I think I'll sleep till noon."

"How about rolling out of bed by nine? We can have brunch downstairs then blow the cobwebs out of the corvette with a run to Hoover Dam."

"Sounds good to me," Rosemary said.

With a nod, he grabbed a few more cookies. Without saying anything, he walked to his bedroom and closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

Rosemary suspected that exhaustion played a part in the fact that she had not had a destiny dream since agreeing to work with Walker.

Standing in the kitchen fixing dinner, she looked at the calendar on the wall. Only ten days left before the month she promised Walker was up.

She would cut her tongue out before admitting to anyone that she had enjoyed being the focus of Walker's attention. The low key sexual charge that crackled through the air like erratic currents of electricity when they were together kept her mentally on her toes and heightened the pleasure of finding just the right retort to make him chuckle or laugh outright.

She adamantly refused to think about love. Smitten was all she would admit to, even when the insistent voice of the She-devil did her damndest to provoke her.

When her sisters and Cole had left she had asked for a hotel room, but Walker and Joan had vetoed the idea because of Wolf. At first she had thought Walker might pounce on her every time they were alone; reality couldn't have been more different. Compliments on her attire, flirtatious teasing, a fair share of looks that at times bordered on smoldering, and a few lightweight kisses as he thanked her for fixing a

meal had been it.

Every morning he handed her a steaming mug of coffee when she met him in the kitchen. Together they followed Wolf down the flight of stairs to his office where Joan's cheery presence met them.

Mornings were spent going over paperwork. With surprising patience, he had explained the many facets of running a large casino.

With Rocky committed to losing the last five pounds of baby weight, the two of them spent lunch hours in the gym. Bob and Walker joined them most days, but with so many people around, there had been no repeat visit to the hot tub.

Afternoons were spent wandering the grounds, but the security room held her interest more than any other department. The first time she had watched a guy cheat at cards they had to physically stop her from marching downstairs to confront him.

The more she was around Walker, the more she admired him. A goldfish in a glass bowl had more privacy than Walker did, yet he never complained. He was gracious to strangers in the casino who recognized him; he addressed employees by name and made a point of asking about their families.

She had watched from the security monitor as he comforted a waitress before picking up a coffee pot and walking the room filling mugs, while she dried her tears.

Another time, walking into one of the kitchens, she found him elbow deep in potato peeling. Like a little kid with a new toy, he was testing a new electric peeler that had arrived while the chef yelled over his shoulder that he was wasting time trying to peel out a deep purple bruise.

He hadn't been kidding when he said the casino was a hot bed for rumors and rumors gave rise to betting pools. Currently there were eight that she knew about. With three employees pregnant there were bets placed for birth dates and delivery times down to the minute. Three more for each baby's sex and name. One was for the date and time a smitten dealer found the courage to ask a new dancer for a date.

Number eight would never pay off. The odds were four to one that Walker would forget about the cameras and nail her in the hot tub. When Joan had warned them, she had started to storm out of the room to confront the bet keeper. Walker had smiled, grabbed her arm and reminded her that she had been warned.

Walker taking over the casino at twenty-eight had been tough. Joan had told her several stories of the jackals that had spread rumors as they set their sights on buying a thriving business cheap when the young inexperienced heir couldn't handle the pressure.

She hadn't realized she had been listening for the front door to open until she caught herself smiling at the sound of the door closing.

Walking into the apartment, knowing she was there, had been a lot easier for Walker when her family had been there as a buffer. Seeing Rosemary in a worn pair of jeans, soft pink sweater and barefoot, all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and snuggle on the couch. It had been a hell of a day. Some TLC would go a long ways towards wiping away a few unpleasant memories and swallowing a few bitter reality pills.

"Cooking meals isn't necessary."

He draped his suit jacket with his tie stuck in the lapel pocket over a barstool. With his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, he looked comfortably rumpled. Bloodshot hazel eyes told a different tale.

He and Jerry had met for several hours in private that afternoon. Not having been invited to join them, she refused to ask for details, but whatever it was obviously hadn't gone well.

"I know, but we have to eat and restaurant cooking on a nightly basis doesn't appeal to me. Besides I'm not cooking, I'm heating up leftovers. There's meatloaf, a pork chop, a couple of country ribs, spoonfuls of half a dozen vegetables and enough mashed potatoes for two potato pancakes."

"Don't tell Greg, but it sounds better than anything he has to offer downstairs." Not bothering to change out of his suit, he walked into the kitchen. "What can I do to help?"

"Open a bottle of wine. Everything else is under control."

"What did you do this afternoon?" Walker asked as he opened the bottle of red wine on the counter.

"Entertained the housekeeping staff."

"How so?"

Dishing leftovers onto plates, she placed them on the bar top along with silverware before sitting on one of the bar stools.

"Jose at the front desk offered to teach me a few phrases in Spanish. All afternoon I thought I was saying, 'hello, it is nice to meet you.' Instead, I was saying, 'hello, don't you think the boss has a nice ass.'"

She didn't look particularly upset over the prank, but looks could be deceiving so Walker didn't comment.

"When I left each group I said, 'I'm hoping you win the hot tub pool.'"

Covering his grin by wiping his mouth with a napkin, he controlled the laughter just before it bubbled out. "When did you figure out the truth?"

"Shelly in the florist shop told me just before I came upstairs."

"Are you going to retaliate?"

"I haven't decided; until I do, I'm going to let him think he got away with the prank. I can't believe that sweet looking old man pulled a stunt like that?"

"Don't feel bad; he's suckered all of us at least once. If you come up with a good prank, let me know. I know several people who would jump at the chance to pull one over on him. He's been here over twenty years and pulled some crazy stunts, but I bet this one's the talk of the strip by tomorrow."

The odds were a hundred percent and climbing that he was right.

\* \* \* \*

With the kitchen cleaned, Rosemary stretched out on one side of the double recliner with a new book she was eager to read. Walker, sitting in an overstuffed barrel chair, was listening to the local news.

"Do you want to go to the Oktoberfest this weekend?"

When she didn't answer, he glanced her way. The book lay open on her lap. Her eyes were closed and her head was cocked at an uncomfortable angle. He thought about carrying her to bed but decided to selfishly indulge himself instead. After turning off the television and the lights, he picked up a large multi

blue hued afghan Juanita had knitted. Easing into the recliner next to her, he gently settled her against his chest. She barely stirred as he adjusted the afghan over both of them.

Heaven or hell? The torment he was putting himself through could be considered either. Like a glass being half empty or half full, it was all a matter of perspective. Inhaling the soft scent of her perfume, he fell asleep before he could decide which perspective to choose.

*He paced the small library waiting for the doctor to return from checking the old man and his wife. It would be ironic if he died just when the heir he was so desperate to have was due to be born.*

*With a fine cut crystal glass, he toasted the document sitting on the desk that documented his inheritance. The old man had agreed, just that morning, to sign over all but the house and the original mercantile he had built with his wife's money over to him. Walker was now a wealthy man and by next week he would own his own estate where he was certain he could convince Rose to live with him.*

*It had been almost seven months since he had told Rose about the marriage, seven long months in which to realize what he had lost. By tomorrow, he had every intention of talking to her, even if it meant taking an ax to break down her front door.*

*A week after stepping off the paddleboat, he received a message asking that he stop by the house. When he tried to enter, he discovered that all the locks had been changed. When the maid answered his persistent knock, he stormed through the house like a raging bull, calling Rose's name.*

*Walking from room to room revealed that all the pictures, knickknacks and trinkets he had given her over the years were gone. As if his presence in the house had never happened, his closet and drawers were empty, his desk cleared out.*

*Entering the hall where the maid still stood, he eyed the boxes lining a wall with distaste. "Miss Rose would like to know what you want done with your belongings."*

*"Give them to the poor."*

*Rose had been true to her word. Remaining on the paddleboat until the last run at the end of October, she had sent meticulous financial records along with his share of the casino's profit to his main office.*

*Breaking into his thoughts, the old stoop shouldered doctor walked into the office, poured a hefty measure of brandy and swallowed the contents of the glass in one swallow. "I'm sorry, Walker your wife died an hour ago."*

*"What about my son?" Walker asked without emotion.*

*"Daughter. The cord was wrapped around her neck. I did everything I could, but she was stillborn. Your father is resting comfortably. I haven't told him; I'll leave that to you." Walking out the door, he didn't bother saying goodbye.*

*He supposed he could get drunk to celebrate his release from the man made purgatory, but he found he didn't have the stomach for it. As much as he detested the farce of a marriage, he had not wished ill of the woman his father and father-in-law had so callously used as a pawn for their mutual gains.*

*Walking into the cold damp air of early evening, he didn't notice the damp chill as it seeped through his clothing.*

*He wasn't surprised when he eventually found himself standing in front of Rose's house staring at the dim light in the front window that told him she was home. Knocking on the door, he wondered what he would say, should say, could say, that would make her understand how desperately he had missed her, wanted her and needed her by his side.*

*When no one answered, he tried the knob. Surprised that it wasn't locked, he let himself in. Walking towards the parlor, he stopped at the arched entry to the room.*

*Rose sat in a low rocker. The open bodice of her dressing gown exposed a lush round breast where a baby with strawberry blonde hair suckled and used a tiny fist to push against the swell of flesh just above his greedy mouth.*

*She didn't look at him when she spoke. "My son was born five days ago. I understand your wife is in labor. Are you here to tell me you have your blue blooded heir?"*

*Walking into the room, he knelt before her. With the back of his finger he gently rubbed the downy softness of his son's cheek as he nursed with greedy gusto. His eyes were closed, but Walker would bet his soul that they would be as green as his mother's.*

*"What did you name him?"*

*"Anthony Robert Hall."*

*It tore at his gut that his son didn't share his last name. It wasn't right, but he was the only person to blame for the situation.*

*"You haven't said why you're here." She still hadn't looked at him.*

*"I wanted to tell you everything is over, the marriage, the battle with my father, the fight for what is rightfully mine. We can be a family now."*

*"You got what you wanted?"*

*Had he? At this point he wasn't sure. The minute his father had signed all the legal papers, he had thought he won the world. Now he found himself questioning if he had won anything worth having.*

*"I've been given what is rightfully mine," he finally said.*

*"Congratulations. I'm sure you and your money will be very happy together. What about your wife and the child?"*

*He had expected biting comments, but he hadn't prepared himself for the indifference or the way the indifference stabbed his heart.*

*He took a deep breath before answering. "She and the child died a few hours ago."*

*For the first time since he entered, she looked at him. He had lost at least twenty pounds. With sunken cheeks and hazel eyes that were now dull and weary, he looked ten years older than his thirty-five. No matter what she wanted, had prayed for, her heart hadn't hardened towards him. The instinct to nurture, to embrace him, to comfort him with her body as she lay her head on his*

*chest to draw her own comfort from the sound of his heartbeat was stronger than ever.*

*Stiffening her spine, she reminded herself that this was the man who had annulled their marriage, made his son a bastard and had demanded to know why she hadn't aborted their child. "Your wife and child aren't even cold, but the first thing you think to do is come here to see if you have another heir?"*

*Was that contempt in her voice? "No. I ... I was headed here when I got stopped by the doctor."*

*Too tired to spar, she let the obvious lie slide. "What do you want, Walker?"*

*"You, my son, a second chance to have the family you dreamed of having."*

*"I no longer have dreams that involve you. It's time for you to leave."*

*"I made that mistake once; I won't do it again. You belong to me, Rosie, and so does my son."*

*Tightening her hold on her now sleeping son, she stood up and brushed past Walker. "I belong to no one and don't call me Rosie. You killed that woman when you annulled our marriage."*

*Walking out of the room and up the stairs, she shut him out of her mind. Shutting him out of her heart would never happen, but she had learned to take one day at a time.*

*Walker sat in the chair Rose had just vacated. Picking up the lap blanket beside the chair, he inhaled the sweet musky scent of her that clung to the blanket's wool fibers. What a damn fool he had been. Still was. It didn't matter what it took, he vowed he would win her back. Shortly after dawn, when she still hadn't come back downstairs, he quietly let himself out.*

*Walking into his father's house, he saw his father's wife and his mother-in-law were taking care of the funeral details.*

*Informed by the butler that his father was demanding his presence, Walker slowly walked up the grand stairway as he tried to imagine what new threats awaited him.*

*The answer shouldn't have surprised him, but it did.*

*"Get me my grandson." Boomed out of the old man's mouth before he had fully shut the bedroom door.*

*"What grandson?"*

*"You think me an old fool. I've kept tabs on the whore. My grandson, my heir, belongs in this house."*

*"What? You plan on stealing him from his mother like you did me? My son stays with his mother."*

*Storming out of the bedroom, he ran into his father's wife and his mother-in-law. Their hateful glares left no doubts that they had overheard the conversation.*

*Once his personal belongings had been packed and carted to his office, he headed back to Rose's.*

*He smelled the smoke long before he saw the golden red inferno shooting towards the sky. Jumping off his horse, he knocked people out of his way as he ran the last two blocks. Like a fire breathing dragon, flames flicked in and out of the broken windows as they licked their way up the*



*exterior of Rose's house and three adjacent structures.*

*Two men grabbed him as he rushed towards the front door. Before he could struggle free, the roof collapsed and the structure caved in on itself.*

Walker awoke to the sound of Rosemary coughing.

"Are you all right?" Walker asked as he rubbed her back.

"Fine. I think." Taking comfort from the steady beat of his heart against her ear, she didn't move out of his embrace.

"Walker, do you think it's over?"

He didn't bother acting like he did not know what she was talking about. "I hope so. What's the last thing you remember?"

"Laughter. The baby and I were asleep on my bed. The sound of hysterical laughter stirred me awake. The room was full of smoke. I grabbed the baby and started to stand up. That's the last thing I remember. What about you?"

"After the roof collapsed, the men that had kept me from running into the house let me go. I was walking through the crowd hoping to find you, when I saw my father's wife and the judge's wife standing on the outskirts of the crowd. When they knew they had my attention, they smiled and waved." Still able to feel the tangible evilness behind those smiles, Walker shuddered.

"The laughter was definitely feminine. Do you think the women set the fire?"

"Probably. Before electricity, house fires were not uncommon. Three other houses also burned which would make it more unlikely for another to think you had been singled out."

"I don't like thinking that someone hated me enough to kill me and my child."

"Do you really think the dreams are a past life we shared?"

"Yes."

When he placed a light as a feather kiss on her hair and tightened his hold around her, she snuggled deeper into his side. "Until tonight, I kept arguing against the odds; now I have to agree with you."

"What changed your mind?"

"Nothing in particular." After a short pause he added, "Everything together. If it's any comfort, I don't think you were hated. You were simply the means to an end for two bitter old ladies."

Lifting her head, she looked him in the eye. "Revenge for the death of your wife and her baby? That doesn't make sense; you didn't kill them."

"Not directly; but out of greed, I agreed to the marriage. When she didn't welcome me into her bed, I forced myself on her until she was pregnant. As for my father's wife, she was revenging the birth of the bastard child she was forced to raise and my son's birth. Who knows, maybe she was also ensuring the rest of my life would be as miserable as hers had been."

"I'm sorry."

"For what."

"Turning you away when all you wanted to do was hold your son."

"For what it's worth, I don't figure I deserve an apology."

Rosemary yawned.

"Do you want to go to bed?"

"Not really, I'm not ready to be alone." Settling her head more comfortably on his chest, she was asleep in minutes.

He had been serious when he said he didn't deserve an apology. At the beginning of the dreams, he had felt no emotional tie except that of sexual gratification; but looking back, he knew his partner had felt differently.

When the dreams had shifted after meeting Rosemary, he hadn't wanted to think about that Walker being him, for that would be an admission that at one time he had been a completely self-absorbed asshole.

He smiled at the idea that although he hadn't wanted to see himself as the other Walker, he'd had no trouble envisioning Rosemary as the enticing, seductive Rosie. What that said about his character he didn't know, and didn't want to think about.

If Helen and the old man's wife were the same spirits, they hadn't changed their basic personalities. With similar bitter dispositions, one had gotten her revenge for his birth and Helen was giving it a good run in that direction.

Gus and the old man had both used their wives' money to start businesses. Whether it was a lesson learned from the past or something a smart lawyer had insisted upon, Gus had paid Helen back at more than double the going interest rate a year after borrowing the money. Both men enjoyed women. Although to give Gus his due, once he met Salina he never strayed, not even after her death. He couldn't think of any other similarities. The two had different personalities, different builds, different business ethics, morals and values.

Salina and Patsy had been similar, but also vastly different. Salina lived life to the fullest and didn't care what others thought. Saying what she thought and wearing what she wanted, she was never predictable. In the dream, Patsy had feared life and her own shadow. Salina had tucked him into bed every night. Patsy had done the same on the nights his father shared her bed as he slept on a cot in a room off the kitchen. Both women had listened to his childhood tales with active enthusiasm. Where Salina had been absentminded about balanced meals, bedtime and making sure homework was completed, Patsy had never been given the opportunity to develop motherly instincts.

Something about the Judge seemed familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on who or where so he pushed it out of his mind. The judge's wife and daughter didn't seem to fit anyone he had met and frankly he hoped it stayed that way.

Having exhausted everyone on the list, only Rose was left, the one person who could free him or enslave him. Selfishly, he wanted both. Be it magic, natural progression, personal growth, or being hit over the head with a two by four filled with a surreal world of realities, his perspectives of truths had shifted.

There was no arguing that as the other Walker, he had treated her badly. In today's society, he would have been called a chauvinistic pig and Rosemary had made her opinion of the species very clear.

Sharing his world with Rosemary, he had learned how much he craved her attention and appreciated her insightfulness. As surely as a hot iron branded ownership, she had seared through his indifference, touched his soul, recognized his needs and walked away with his heart.

He figured convincing her of that truth was not going to be easy.

## Chapter 26

Rosemary awoke slowly. Stretching like a well-rested kitten, she ran her foot lazily down a well-proportioned male leg before draping itself over a calf. Rubbing against the soft cotton beneath her cheek, the light rise and fall of her pillow penetrated her foggy brain. Opening one eye to see what was causing her nose to itch, she found herself getting an up close and personal look at the hair on a masculine arm. Moving her eye down the arm, she saw a hand resting lightly over her breast.

*Hells bells.* Twitching her nose didn't stop the itch. Extracting herself without waking up Walker was going to be tricky. Scrunching down seemed the most likely move. Moving her arm, she sought a leverage point. Sliding her arm down, her fingers caressed his body. Finding a hard leverage point, she started to push. *Oh shit.* It twitched. As her hand slid a little further over, her fingers curled around the rock hard shaft.

The rise and fall of Walker's chest stopped. His heartbeat sounded like a tom-tom beating out a war dance.

Or a sexual tango.

*Hells bells.* He was awake. To save her from embarrassment, going on the defense made the most logical sense. But her mind had turned to mush and the She-devil was whispering, "*Let's play show and tell.*"

"Don't stop on my account, Kitten." The rumble of his sexy sleep drugged voice shot her into action. Planting her hot as a piston hand on his hip, she pushed. His arms felt like a vice as they neutralized her action.

"Relax. It isn't going to bite you and as enjoyable as the idea of show and tell sounds, when I finally get you naked, I plan on taking my time."

*Hells bells.* She knew she hadn't said a word. How the heck had he read her mind?

Before she could protest, he tilted her face upward and gave her a thorough, mind-numbing kiss. As her stomach did a slow somersault, warm fuzzy rays of liquid sex spread through her body and popped out her ears. Stretching like a kitten, she purred with pleasure as her foot once again stroked Walker's leg and a hand found its way to his soft as silk hair.

He hadn't meant to start something he knew couldn't be finished and would only cause frustration. But the minute their lips had met, his heart had fluttered, skipped a beat, kicked into overdrive then did a triple somersault before he felt it tilt upright, wobble and settle on a ledge of indecision. Heaven or hell, which would it be?

Breaking away, he placed a tender kiss on her forehead before resting his forehead against hers. As their heart rates slowed he sighed. "Rose, as much as I would like to spend the rest of today continuing, as is, we have a meeting to attend in half an hour."

When she started to pull away, he tightened his grip. "Promise me that until we have a chance to talk about the dreams, you will not run away."

Funny, she hadn't thought about running. But then again, her mind was mush and her body still felt warm and fuzzy. "No running."

\* \* \* \*

After hours of negotiations, Sidney drummed his fingers on the table as his six clones sat stone-faced. Their eyes shot daggers at Walker.

"What do you mean you need another month to make a decision? Either you want the joint or you don't. It's that simple." A vein on the side of Sidney's neck looked like it was ready to explode.

"Like I said, the independent auditors going over your ledgers have requested additional time." Walker's voice might have sounded casual, but the glint in his eyes would have had a sensible person stepping back.

"Are you implying there's something wrong with the numbers?"

"Why would you jump to that type of conclusion, Sidney? Everything we've discussed so far sounds fine, but the bank will not agree to the loan until the auditors are finished and they have asked for additional time. Considering the amount of work we handed them, I didn't think the request was unreasonable. With nothing to hide that shouldn't be a problem for you either." There was an underbite in his tone that had the clones paying closer attention.

Sidney fumed.

Leaning back into his chair, he continued drumming his fingers as he reappraised Walker and his team. Jerry was good. Damn good. Gus wouldn't have kept him on board if he hadn't been the best, but he was nothing more than a legal mind and nothing he'd been given could be questioned.

But the dame, maybe his men had missed something when they ran the check on her. With nothing more than a couple of fancy college degrees and a fat bank account thanks to a lucky streak at cards, she had no qualifications. So what the hell was she doing sitting in on the meetings?

Shit, what did it matter? Helen was going to cut off his balls when she found out he'd been deuced by Gus's snot nosed bastard. Then again, what did it matter, Helen was going to get the casino and all the bastard's money anyway.

"You have your month."

Walking around the table, Sidney stopped in front of Rosemary. "We have a mutual friend. Bill Harper says you're not only beautiful, you're the best poker player he's ever met. I'd be honored if you'd play a few hands with me this evening."

If the devil himself had appeared, she couldn't have been more surprised. Not wanting to know what Walker was thinking, she didn't glance his way. "I'll have to remember to thank Bill for the compliment. Will seven this evening in Fiddling With The Devil Poker Parlor suit you?"

Taking her fingers in his pudgy, hand he kissed them. "Seven it is."

No one said a word as Sidney and the clones walk out of the conference room.

"That was fun," Joan said to break the silence.

"About as much fun as getting bit by a snake. I need to wash my hand; I think he slobbered on it."

"Kitten, that was drool."

"Euhhhh. That is so gross. The guy's old enough to be my grandfather." Walking to the sink at the built in bar, she dumped a huge glob of liquid soap onto her hand.

"What have the auditors found in the records?" Rosemary asked as she dried her hands.

"Nothing yet. I had our bookkeepers go over the books before turning them over to the auditors. They found a couple of abnormalities," Walker answered.

"Like what?"

"The books have passed several audits so we knew all the numbers would work out. So they started matching our operating costs against the figures Sidney supplied. When a few didn't jive, it gave the auditors a place to start," Jerry said.

"Why did you agree to play poker with him?" The words might have been said casually, but Walker wasn't fooling anyone in the room, he was not happy.

"First, I enjoy winning money from liars, cheats and over confident jerks. Since he fits all three categories, it's like eating a double chocolate brownie with icing on the top without having to work off the extra calories. Second, you would be amazed at what I learn after a player's had a few drinks and a few good hands. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and learn something interesting."

"What's the third reason?" Jerry asked.

"What?"

"You said, first, then second not secondly. That means there's a third reason." Count on a lawyer to pick that up.

"I love playing poker and I haven't played since the day I arrived. You wouldn't want me to get rusty would you?"

"Heaven forbid," Jerry muttered.

"Look on the bright side, Dreamland won't be losing a dime."

"The casino will stake you," Walker said.

She crossed her arms and started tapping her finger in irritation. "No way. I don't need grub stake."

Walker rubbed the back of his neck. He didn't like it one bit, but he knew from her stance she wasn't going to budge and arguing wasn't going to win anyone anything.

Taking a quarter out of his pocket, he flipped it in the air a few times. "How about we negotiate. Heads you stake the game, tails the casino stakes the game."

She knew the outcome, but she wasn't in the mood to give in graciously. "I'd rather cut cards."

"I bet you would, Kitten, but you're forgetting I watched you in action at Rumor's birthday party. What you can do with a deck of cards is scary."

Arching her brow, she smirked. "Fine, have it your way, but first I want to check that coin."

"What, you think I'd cheat?" he said as he handed her the quarter.

"Funny, I seem to remember hearing similar words not too long ago." Handing the coin to Jerry, she baited him. "You get three chances, best two out of three is the winner and Jerry flips."

There was no hesitation between flips. "Tails. Heads. Heads."

"How did you do that?" Walker demanded.

"Do what?"

"Know that the first flip was going to be tails. If I hadn't let you change the rules, I would have won. I still say the casino needs to stake the game," he grumbled.

Her finger was tapping her arm in double time. "Stop being a sore loser; it's not becoming."

Before she could leave the room, he said, "You forgot to stomp your foot."

She smirked. "Shows what you know. Foot stomps are reserved for temper tantrums. In case you forgot, I won; so why would I pitch a fit?" With that, she left the conference room.

"What are you two grinning about?" Walker grumbled.

"Who me? I'm not grinning. Well maybe just a little. It's good to see a female that isn't impressed with your money. When they groveled at your feet, it was so embarrassing." With that, Joan left the room.

"You, dear boy, are sick. Didn't Gus and I lecture you about playing with fire?" Jerry asked.

"You're forgetting I grew up with fire."

"Just how much like Salina is she?"

"If you're asking about the witchcraft, I don't know."

\* \* \* \*

Walking out of the bathroom in her birthday suit, Rosemary gave a tiny screech.

"Jeez, don't scream," Salina said.

"Then don't pop into a room uninvited."

Tilting her head, she gave Rosemary a thorough appraisal. "Not a bad looking body, those workouts in the gym really keep you toned. With some tips from me you could be a real knockout."

"Thanks, I'll take that into consideration the next time I go shopping. Are you alone?"

Salina's outfit was interesting to say the least. Gold lame, draped low, exposed a good measure of her assets, front and back. Skimming the bottom of her butt, her bare legs looked like they reached her eyeballs thanks to a pair of matching six-inch high platform heels. With her strawberry blonde hair in a large mass of corkscrew curls and elaborate stage makeup done to perfection, she reminded Rosemary of a hooker she had seen strutting her wares outside the hotel.

"It's just little ole me. Wanted to have a heart to heart about my boy."

Being buck-naked put her at a distinct disadvantage. Scurrying into the tiny wisps of silk underwear she had laid on the bed she tried to not lose her temper. "Do me a favor next time you want to talk, wait until I'm dressed before popping in."

"Why, you don't have anything I haven't seen before."

Closing her eyes, she reminded herself that this was Walker's mother. "What do you want to talk about?"

"You hurt Walker big time; I want to make sure you're not going to do it again."

"What are you talking about?"

"Before, when you were Rose. All he wanted was what was rightfully his. There was no need to throw him out; he had every intention of coming back to you."

Rosemary arched one brow, crossed her arms and tapped her arm with her index finger. "I thought you couldn't give me any information that could change my decisions."

There was a flicker of hesitation behind Salina's heavily made up eyes. "We can't but you saw the last of the dreams last night, so I'm not telling stories that haven't been revealed."

"Let me get this straight. For four years, we kept our marriage a secret. Then he had our marriage annulled, married another woman, doesn't tell me until she's pregnant, gets mad because I didn't abort our child and when the heir apparent turns out to be a stillborn female he comes running to my door to see if he sired a son. And you think I was too hard on him? Frankly, he's lucky I didn't cut his balls off."

"He only wanted what was rightfully his. What's so bad about that?"

"Nothing if you're up front and honest about your intentions," Rosemary growled.

"It didn't get me what I wanted." Salina held her breath waiting to see if she had said too much. When nothing happened, she said, "Look, all I'm saying is Walker had his reasons. Maybe he was too proud and a little materialistic and maybe he did you wrong, but everyone deserves a second chance."

Talking to herself, Rosemary heard her add, "And sometimes a third."

Obviously this wasn't completely about her and Walker. "Look, Salina, I appreciate your words of wisdom. I don't agree with them, but that's my prerogative."

"What would you have done differently if you had to do it over again?" Salina demanded as sparks of fury flashed around the room.

Lifting his head from under the bed, Wolf looked at both of them then high-tailed it out of the room.

Rosemary didn't hesitate. "I wouldn't have agreed to the secret marriage to begin with. That alone would have changed everything else that happened."

"So don't."

"Don't what? Walker hasn't asked me to marry him in secret or any other way for that matter."

"Would you say yes if he did?"

Hells bells. The woman was worse than a pit bull as she nipped her where it hurt. If she admitted that the idea of marriage didn't sound near as bad as it had a month ago would that make her more vulnerable? Were the ideas she had recited with heartfelt thunder really been formulated by events that happened over one hundred and fifty years ago? Was the past really in the past or was this go round going to be an updated version that, like in the movies, was always worse than the original? Playing a million questions with no one willing to give her answers was gaining her nothing.

Taking the chicken way out, she said, "I don't know."

"You know you could change the way it works. You could ask him to marry you."



"I don't think ... Isn't it about time you fizzled out?"

The smile Salina gave was friendly and genuine. She knew she had given Rosemary a lot to think about and she hadn't gotten in trouble with Warren once. All in all, she was pretty pleased with herself.

"Actually, I'm starting to get the hang of conserving my energy, but I get your drift. You want to change the subject. So let's talk about this dress you plan on wearing. It really needs a little eye popping pizzazz."

## Chapter 27

Walking into the apartment, Walker tossed his key onto the foyer table. He seldom noticed the painting of Salina that had been hanging above the table forever. Today he stared at it, willing it to come to life. He had several questions that only she could answer. Instead, the vision of the sexy vamp/mischievous childlike innocent that the painter had captured to perfection made him wistful.

With GPS precision he walked into the living room to find Rosemary. Her floor length red dress draped over one shoulder then caressed her body with light as air material that shimmered as it fluttered around her legs from a light breeze coming in the open sliding glass door. The one-carat diamond studs winking in her earlobes perfectly complimented the simple elegance of the dress.

It was as natural as breathing to walk towards her and slip his arms around her tiny waist as he pulled her backside against him. Nuzzling her exposed shoulder he slowly worked his way towards her ear as the scent and feel of her worked their soothing magic.

When he had walked through the door he had felt totally drained, more than a little uptight about the upcoming poker match and ready to beat the hell out of the punching bag in the gym or anyone that was stupid enough to get in his way. Now, although still mentally drained, he felt his determination and optimism return.

"I had visitors while I was dressing."

The scent of Opium and gardenias mixed with the lighter scent of roses lingered in the room. Engrossed in thought, the scents hadn't registered.

Looking around the room, he didn't see anything unusual but that wasn't necessarily reassuring.

"You saw them? I thought Ginger had to be in the room for that to happen."

He felt her slim shoulder rise in a shrug. "Salina arrived first. When she tried giving me some tips on jazzing up my wardrobe Mom appeared. They got into a heated discussion over flash and flesh versus seductive class. Before I could say a word, they both vaporized."

Taking a step away from him, she turned to face him. "Do you think this dress is too plain?"

"Seductive class gets my vote. Please, whatever you do, don't ever listen to Salina when it comes to clothing."

The lights in the room flashed on and off several times. Rosemary chuckled. "That was either Mom saying thanks, your mom voicing her disappointment or Dad agreeing with you. Dad likes flashing lights on and off so I'm betting on the latter."

"Do I want to know what your mother does to get your attention?"

"Gardenia's filling the room is her subtle calling card. If lightening starts flashing from the ceiling, do what Wolf does, run for cover."

"Why do I have the feeling that in the not too distant future we'll learn how Dad and Salina are going to announce their presence?"

"Sucker bet. Get used to it. It's time for me to head down. You coming with me?"

"No. I'm going to plant myself in front of a monitor in the security room and twist a few million paper clips into small pieces. Are you sure you won't allow the casino to finance this game? All the players at the table are high rollers; the reserve is going to be steep."

"Positive. Stop worrying; I don't need your money." Brushing a light kiss on his lips, she lingered a moment before pulling back. "I gotta go. You and Wolf want to walk me to the elevator?"

Before they reached the elevator, Rocky, holding two large bags of freshly popped microwave popcorn and Bob holding a sleeping baby, met up with them.

"Please don't tell me you are headed to the security booth."

Rocky snickered. "Okay, we won't tell you that you're the number one rated show of the evening. Like the dress. Lift up the hem so I can see the shoes."

The four-inch red opened toe slides had tiny rhinestone bows and clear acrylic heels. Her sexy underwear and the shoes had been the only part of her ensemble Salina had stamped with approval. Too bad she hadn't thought to share that bit of information with Walker. It would have been fun to watch his reaction.

"Ouch. Cute. Thank goodness you won't be standing for long; they'd kill your feet within an hour. Must admit, though, that shade of red lipstick looks almost as good on Walker as it does on you."

As the elevator door opened, she gave him a quick smack that left him looking like a clown with a lopsided smile. As she entered the small elevator and the door slowly closed, Walker heard the song he had begun to think of as his and Rosie's.

"Did you two hear that song?" Walker asked.

"He's terminal," Rocky said as she watched Walker stare at the closed elevator doors like a lovesick puppy dog.

"Kind of looks that way. What do you think would snap that stupid grin off his face?"

"A life sentence and half a dozen kids that keep him up all night." Bob said.

"Would the two of you stop talking about me as if I'm deaf?" Even as he said the words, he started chuckling. "Forget the half a dozen kids. Two is plenty. For the record, the song is, 'It Had to Be You'. This time Billy Holliday was singing. It was coming from the elevator speaker. Come on, Wolf, let's go watch Rose play poker."

"When are you going to point out that there is no elevator music?" Rocky stage whispered.

"Never. It will be a great story to tell his half a dozen rug rats," Bob laughed at the glare Walker shot over his shoulder.

## Chapter 28

The first thing Rosemary noticed when entering the poker parlor was the rich smell of beeswax that kept the elaborately paneled mahogany walls and ceiling glistening. Next, was the way the devil's red carpet reflected off the prisms in the two crystal chandeliers and smaller crystal sconces adorning the walls.

Tonight one poker table with six chairs sat in the center of the room. A table covered in a white linen cloth held an appealing array of finger foods, bite size desserts, a sterling silver pot of coffee and another pot of hot water for tea. Next to that was a big quarter-sawn spruce bar shaped like a fiddle. The bartender with his ebony hair, highly waxed handle bar mustache and black tux with tails could have been the devil incarnate.

Ted Parkinson, a slim middle-aged playboy billionaire, and Sidney, both dressed in custom made black tuxes, sipped amber liquid as they stood by the bar talking quietly. Stan Cummings, a white haired gentleman who had retired after selling a handful of car dealerships for a handsome profit, was piling two plates with goodies. With a nervous habit of eating nonstop while playing, it was amazing his short frame wasn't as wide as it was tall.

Marc Jacobs, a thirty-year-old trust fund baby, sat at the table wearing a white tux that nicely showed off his deep tan. With his spiked dirty blonde hair, midnight blue eyes and slight cleft in his chin, he was the poster boy for rich, pumped and pampered.

"Hey, Rose, how's my Austin Healey?" Marc said as he jumped up to give her a quick hug.

"You mean *my* Austin Healey. I won it, remember? Please tell me there won't be any cars thrown in the pot tonight." Rosemary took the bite out of the remark by giving him a quick peck on the cheek and returning the hug. Marc was a foolish gambler, but a nice guy if you liked good-looking men with no ambitions and enough money to waste away a lifetime.

"I'm good to go. Sid had my check verified before he'd agree to let me sit at the table. Besides, tonight's the night I beat the notorious Rose."

"My momma always said if you were going to dream, you should dream big."

Unlike Marc's friendly greeting, the older men nodded their acknowledgments as they took seats around the table.

The dealer broke the seal on a new deck of cards as he gave them the rules. "The game is five card draw. Opening ante is a thousand dollars. After that, all bets are open. Any questions?"

When no one said anything, he shuffled the deck and placed the cards in front of Sidney for the first cut.

The cards were running slow. For three hours, no one had a hand to brag about. As small pots passed back and forth across the table, Stan ate his weight. Winning hands got fed chocolate. Bluffs got fed anything non-chocolate and busts gave him time to refill the plate.

During the second break, Ted switched from drinking scotch on the rocks to beer. With each drink his mouth got looser and his bets more erratic, but not enough to jeopardize his staying in the game. With a good hand, he closed the fanned out cards then slowly fanned them back out each time he placed a bet. When bluffing, he lightly tapped the fanned out cards against the table.

After winning the Austin, she had sat Marc down and had a heart to heart talk with him. It was nice to

see he had listened. Like her, he was drinking water. He no longer touched his tongue to his top lip when he had a good hand and all fidgeting had stopped. He had taken another cue from her without her suggesting it; after looking at his cards, he laid them on the table and didn't pick them back up. His friendly banter had also changed, now he didn't let it override his concentration.

In concession to his diabetes, the amber liquid Sidney was sipping was sugar free ginger ale. With an unending supply of stories about Ted, Marc's dad who was a long time friend, gamblers, gambling and casinos, he never stopped talking. Despite his mouth running on overdrive, his bets were precise, his actions never hesitant. He had one habit besides the tiny finger twitch: every time he had a good hand, he mentioned his deceased wife. She would love to ask Freud what that meant.

By midnight, the tide had turned. Stan, in a burst of enthusiasm for something other than food, pushed all his chips into the center of the table. When Marc's full house beat Stan's three aces, he walked away from the table grumbling that he had indigestion and was going to bed. Marc winked at her and mouthed thanks.

Shortly thereafter Ted got a sloppy drunk smile on his face. "I call and raise you fifty."

Sidney and Marc both dropped out.

Rose held a pair of aces with a jack high for the third card. "I call and raise another fifty."

Ted hesitated. Fanning out his cards he looked at them than stared at Rosemary's neat stack of cards as if he had x-ray vision.

Pushing ten neatly stacked chimneys worth two hundred grand into the center of the table, he gave her another sloppy drunk smile. "You going to call, little lady, or sit back and watch how the big boys play?"

Every time Ted opened his mouth he managed to say something belittling or derogatory about females. Frankly, she'd had all she could take of him. "This little lady would rather see your cards. I'll call and raise the bet to include the last chimney in front of you."

Ted's grin would have made a great toothpaste commercial. "Read um and weep, little lady." As he threw his hand down on the table, two aces, a jack, five and a deuce skidded to a stop next to the chips.

"Too bad, Ted. Better luck next time." Turning her cards over, she smiled as she arched an eyebrow and looked towards the ceiling camera.

Two aces, a jack, seven and five had Ted turning a very unflattering shade of green. Standing, he walked towards the bar without saying a word.

They'd been playing for seven hours when Rose knew Sidney had gotten the hand she'd been waiting for.

"I'll open and raise twenty," Sidney said.

Marc folded.

"I'll match and raise forty," Rosemary said casually.

After Sidney met the raise the dealer looked at Sidney. "How many cards?"

"None." The finger wasn't twitching and for once he didn't mention his wife.

"Rosemary," the dealer said.

"I'll take one."

Having set the cards face down on the table, she didn't pick them up or look at the card the dealer slid across the table.

Sidney sat back in his chair. She'd played a damn fine game. If she had any vices, he hadn't caught them, but she was a damn fool not to look at the last card. Her overconfidence told him she was bluffing. It was going to be her downfall.

Slowly, he pushed his pile of chips into the center of the table. "I'm not going to bother counting them. You decide to do the same, we'll call it even."

Without hesitation, she slid all her chips into the center of the table.

Marc grinned.

The dealer sat a little straighter in his chair.

Ted and the bartender stopped talking as they walked to the table to watch the action.

"Sorry, kid, you gave it a good try, but you lose." Turning his cards over, Sidney had a straight flush king high.

Rosemary didn't smile. Without taking her eyes off Sidney's face, she flipped over her original four cards. Four sixes lay side by side.

Without saying a word, Sidney stood and walked out of the room.

Marc shook his head. "Didn't think he'd be a sore loser. Guess I was wrong."

"Please tell me you don't want to play to the death," Rosemary said.

"I'm good. Besides, your pile's a whole lot bigger than mine and I really like my new Corvette. Let's get out of here."

After extracting chips to leave as tips for the dealer and bartender, they waited for the dealer to count their chips and hand them slips to give the cashiers for their winnings.

"Want some breakfast?" Marc asked.

"How about a rain check?"

"Deal." Kissing her on the cheek, he was whistling as he headed towards the gaming room to see if he could find a different kind of action.

Drunk on an overdose of adrenalin, she didn't notice the scent of tobacco and perfume in the elevator as she zipped up to the twenty-second floor, nor did she notice that it followed her to the security room.

"Any chance some of that popcorn is left? I'm starved."

"I don't believe it. She just won a ton of money and she wants popcorn instead of champagne," Rocky chided as she gave Rosemary a bone-crushing hug.

Looking around the room, she saw Joan sitting in a chair smiling at her as she gently rubbed Bobby's back as he slept peacefully through all the commotion. Jerry, standing next to Joan, wore a look of

puzzlement as he watched a monitor replaying the last hour of the game.

Bob, with one ankle crossed over the other and his arms crossed against his chest looked relaxed as he leaned against a table and watched the rerun. The look on his face said he, too, was trying to unravel a puzzle.

Half a dozen others milled around the room as they did their jobs and kept an eye on what was going on in the room.

"Where's Walker?"

"Right behind you." Letting go of the cart he had been pushing, he slipped an arm around her shoulder, pulled her against his side and gave her a loud smacking kiss. "That and the cake are from Greg and his crew."

The cake shaped like a fiddle had, 'some folk can do strange things with a pair of aces and a pair of eights,' written just below the black licorice strings.

"How much did they win?"

"They weren't saying, but from the grins on their faces they were more than happy with the results."

"What about the rest of you?"

No one said anything. "If all of you bet against me, I'll be really disappointed."

A soft-spoken brunette finally spoke up. "No one in this room bet against you, but you have to remember we've watched you play. We were in the minority, so I'll say thanks for the down payment on my new car."

\* \* \* \*

"How long before the inquisition?" Rosemary asked right before covering her mouth to hide a yawn.

"There's no hurry. Sleep as late as you want." Standing in the living room, he watched her slowly walk towards her bedroom.

It hadn't taken long after eating a piece of cake for the crash and burn of the adrenaline high to hit.

If she surfaced before noon, he'd be surprised.

## Chapter 29

He was glad he hadn't placed a bet on her arrival time when she walked into his office at precisely ten in the morning, wearing snug fitting jeans, sandals, a sleeveless knit top, the ever-present cat's eye necklace and a sexy grin that he was becoming way too fond of seeing.

Walking around the desk, she thought of the dream where he had been sitting in much the same position at her desk. Reminding herself that this wasn't a dream and she wasn't looking to lose her virginity in front of a plate glass window, she wisely stood to the side of his chair as she gave him a blow your socks off good morning kiss. "Thanks for the pot of coffee. It was much appreciated."

"Morning, Rosie. Next time you decide to blow my mind away, would you please pick a more secluded spot?"

Ignoring the 'Rosie', she arched a brow. "Who says there will be a next time?"

"Me and that kiss."

"No hanky panky in the office. You're embarrassing me," Joan said as she walked in.

Rosemary blushed.

Walker snorted. "More likely you're jealous."

"Sweetie, I love you dearly, but when it comes to blow your mind kisses, I prefer kissing Jerry."

"Glad to hear that. What did I miss?" Jerry said just before he gave Joan a sedate peck on the cheek.

"Nothing. I walked in the room to find them necking." Joan smiled sweetly as Walker once again snorted.

"If you're jealous, we can take an early lunch," Jerry offered.

She jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. Before she could comment, varying shades of red and pink appeared. Like the neon light show at O'Hara, the colors rippled across the floor, up a wall, across the ceiling and down the opposite wall. When the lights reached their starting point they turned into a red swirling funnel.

Walker groaned.

Rosemary bit her lower lip as she watched Joan and Jerry's eyes grow big as saucers.

When Salina materialized, Jerry gasped.

"Boy, it's great to see you two. I wouldn't turn down one of those kisses you guys are giving out so freely, but we have business to discuss and I don't mean monkey business. Besides, kissing me is like kissing thin air."

Joan collapsed into a chair. Jerry crossed his arms and glared at Rosemary as if she were responsible for the manifestation of a ghost.

"Salina, where's Dad?" Walker's casual words hid his sudden tension.

"He's coming. We were waiting for Caitlin and Herb but all your talk about sex made me want to join in



the fun, so I kind of jumped the gun.” Wearing white wedges, lime green slacks and a floral print sleeveless blouse with the top two buttons undone was shocking in its conservativeness.

With only a slight stirring of air to announce their arrival, Gus, Caitlin and Herb joined them.

"Well, guess I don't have to worry about telling our family secret. The four of you took care of that in grand style."

"Don't work yourself into a snit, Rose. Everyone in the room already knew about Salina's bag of tricks. Knowing you are related to Salina, Joan and Jerry have been going crazy trying to figure out what type of power you hold in your hand," Caitlin said as she gave her a warm air kiss hello.

"Gus, what the hell is happening?" Jerry demanded as if he had just talked to him hours ago.

"Just a little family gathering. Man, it's great to be talking to you; sit down and I'll try explaining."

Walker leaned against the windowsill next to Rosemary after Gus automatically took command of his old desk. Joan and Jerry sat in two of the chairs in front of the desk with Salina sitting in a chair between them. Rounding out the circle, Herb stood next to Caitlin who was perched on a low file cabinet.

"There's been a little mix-up, so we have been given permission to help fix the problem," Gus said with a simplistic ease that told them nothing.

"Let me guess, Aunt Pesty worked some magic and it backfired," Rose said as she crossed her arms and started tapping her arm.

"You're only half right. Salina is half to blame for the problem." Caitlin, duplicating Rose's arm tapping, lifted one brow and glared at Salina, daring her to contradict the truth.

"I was only trying to help. Besides, you could have warned me about Pesty. I could have had her write the magic spell out if someone would have told me she's negligent with her spells," Salina whined.

"If you hadn't eavesdropped on a private conversation..."

"Enough. Both of you." Gus's voice boomed.

Everyone in the room stifled smiles as Caitlin and Salina fell silent.

"I couldn't have done that better myself," Herb said.

"Let me bring you up to date, then Gus can take over. Caitlin's sister, Pesty, was given the *gift* of spell casting. Her spells tend to take erratic turns that can cause minor to major problems. Salina overheard Caitlin and Pesty talking about the kids. Thinking that Pesty and she were on the same level of competence, she figured out a way to talk to Pesty about the problem she had created with Helen."

"You're saying I have Pesty and Salina to thank for Helen trying to take over the casino?" Walker could have strangled Salina if she weren't already dead.

When Caitlin chuckled and winked at him, Walker kicked himself for forgetting she could read minds.

"With free choice there is a possibility she would have used the tapes at some point anyway. What we do know is the spell that was cast caused Helen to decide to force the issue at this time," Gus said.

"Can't Pesty reverse the spell?" Jerry asked.

Herb rubbed his baldhead. "Pesty can be a little absentminded if pressed for details. She can't remember the exact spell, so the answer is no, it can't be reversed."

"Plus, a little twist developed shortly after the spell was cast; so even if we knew the spell, a reversal wouldn't work," Gus added.

"What twist?" Jerry asked.

"Let me enlighten you. They cannot disclose information if it means we will be given information that could change decisions we have not yet made. A twist developing would fall under that category. In other words, we're on our own," Rosemary said.

"Not entirely; since Salina helped create the situation, we can help you with any solution you decide to try in regards to the tape. But you're right; you have to figure out the problems and the solution on your own," Gus said.

"What tape?" Rosemary asked.

Reaching towards the desk, Walker tapped the remote for the television. "Watch this."

Except for Salina and Joan who moved by the doors to talk privately, everyone's eyes were glued to the television as the tape played.

"Have you talked to the police about getting her arrested for extortion or blackmail?" Rosemary asked.

"It could be done, but at what cost. If one tape goes public, Walker's life becomes a living hell. The kid she had put the tapes on CD is a convicted hacker, you can bet he has his own stash of copies," Jerry said.

"Can the tape be made to look like a Hollywood movie?" Rosemary asked.

"That was our first step. The best makeup artist in the industry could duplicate the results, but there is a quality to film as it ages that can't be duplicated."

Hells Bells. "What you're saying is you need the original tapes and the copies that were made at that time."

Walker rubbed the back of his neck as he debated about what to say next.

"Spit it out, son. No sense stewing over what's already done."

Looking only at Jerry, he said, "Last week, I made a quick trip to Palm Springs. Using Dad's old key I was able to get into Helen's house. Guess she figured with him gone there was no need to change the combination on the wall safe. I found half a dozen tapes and CDs along with the keys and numbers to three safety deposit boxes. Blanks are now in the safe and I have duplicates of the keys."

"How did you know the combination?" Rosemary asked.

"Fortunately, Dad has a lousy memory for numbers, dates and addresses. He kept everything written in a little black book that's still in the office safe. Dad, do you remember how many copies she claimed to have?"

Salina saved him from having to admit he didn't. "Twelve plus the originals. Always figured it was double that amount."

"Do you think one of the tapes you now have is the original?" Jerry asked.

"I have no idea. To me they all look the same."

"Do you want to call her bluff or just get your hands on the rest and be done with it?" Rosemary said as she looked at Walker with an I know what to do grin.

Caitlin's chuckle turned into a full belly-rolling laugh by the time she had read all of Rosemary's thoughts.

## Chapter 30

Closing the door to the apartment, Walker tossed his keys on the table before grabbing Rosemary around the waist and pulling her against him. Sighing with satisfaction, he absorbed comfort from her solid presence, 'solid' being the key word.

"Well that was interesting, our deceased parents, my Godparents, and you and me in a room for hours on end and not once did anyone comment on the strangeness of the situation."

"True, but you have to admit there were some funny moments. I'll never forget the look on Jerry's face when he sat on Salina. Was she always a practical joker?"

"She was. She always seemed to know what to say or do to lighten up an awkward situation."

"She certainly proved that today."

"You know you're not going to squirm your way out of talking forever."

"About what?"

"To start with your *gift*."

"I thought you had that figured out."

"So did I, but you haven't commented on how great I look in the buff, so I don't figure you really have x-ray vision."

"Pretty cocky about your body for someone who hasn't had a date in over six months."

"Joan has a big mouth. For the record, since a certain redhead spent a week trying to bankrupt my company, we've had a ton of dates. They might not have been the meet me at the door with candy and flowers kind of dates, but I know I've had more fun and memorable moments with her than anyone I've ever known."

"Fancy words, Walker, don't say something you don't mean."

Before releasing her he said, "Oh, I mean them. Now before I get sidetracked by showing you how much I mean them, tell me about your *gift*."

Walking into the living, she grabbed a deck of cards off the end table as she plopped down on the couch. Shuffling the cards, she said, "Let's play five card draw, but don't pick up your cards until I'm done dealing."

"Okay."

"Psychic intuitive is the technical term for my gift."

The moment she dealt the last card she said, "I win."

"That's impossible for you to know."

"Play them out."

An hour later he was muttering to himself about never playing cards with her again.

"How does twenty-one work?"

"I know if the dealer is going to bust or win. It's that simple."

"Show me."

Thirty hands later he stopped dealing.

"Craps?"

She shrugged a shoulder as she grimaced. "Haven't got a clue! Whether the dice roll what I pick or if I'm choosing what the dice are going to roll is a mystery to me. Because my winning streak draws attention to me, I seldom play the game."

"Roulette?"

"A little different. I know if it's going to land on red or black, but the only time I know the number is if it is going to land on five, seven, eleven or twenty-two. Again, I seldom play the game."

"What's the significance of the numbers?"

"Not really sure."

Picking up the cards, she reshuffled them before turning over the top card. It was a five of hearts. "The next card's lower." It was a three. High, low, low, low, high, high, low. By the time they got to the last card she was tired of the game.

"How often do you know what the next card is going to be?"

"Never. I don't know the suit or the card. In fact I am always wrong if I try to guess, which is almost as abnormal as someone guessing correctly every time. I've tried systematically visualizing an ace through a king to see if I would know what number or card was coming up. Dasha went totally silent. Before you ask, 'Dasha' means *gift* in Greek."

"What about slot machines?"

"As I walk down the rows of machines I just know which ones are ready to pay off. No voice, no special effects, I just know."

"Flipping a coin?"

"I knew I would win two out of three. I'm able to accurately figure the odds on anything."

When he frowned at her, she knew he was thinking about the coin toss. "So shoot me. Now are you satisfied?"

"For now."

Night had fallen. A crescent moon hanging low on the horizon made a pretty backdrop for the inky darkness beyond the bright lights on the strip. With no lights on in the apartment, a comfortable coziness, filled the room.

"Walker, what *gift* did you receive?"

"Are you guessing or do you know that for fact?"

"A little of both. Odds are sixty/forty, but my gut says you inherited something."

"Finely tuned instinct and a weird ability to know things I shouldn't is what I always thought it was until Joan told me Salina could see flashes of what was about to happen. When I had you play twenty one the morning you arrived, I knew before you turned over the cards they were both aces and that the matching king and queen would show up next to them."

"Have you ever tested the *gift's* abilities and limits?"

"No. Now that I know that it's not a freakish abnormality, I'll think about testing the limits, but right now I'd rather talk about you, me, us," Walker said.

"You first." Sitting sideways on the couch with her legs curled underneath she rested her head against the back of the couch and waited. The outward appearance of casual relaxation was deceiving. She was as scared as a stray kitten pretending to be indifferent to a friendly voice and a warm bowl of nourishing milk.

"As Walker Williams, I went through life as a self-centered prick. I thought myself different than my father, but in truth I was as despicable as him. When Rose kicked me out of her life, it didn't take long to realize what I had lost. Still, I was cocky enough to believe I could change her mind after I got what I wanted."

"Do you think that life affected this life?"

"Maybe in little ways. I can remember many a night when I crawled into bed with my folks because I'd have a bad dream about my family trapped in a burning building."

"Do you still have that dream?"

"No, they stopped right after I visited New Orleans for the first time."

"How old were you?"

"Eighteen. A fraternity brother invited a bunch of us to Mardi Gras. The town felt comfortable, like I had finally come home. I visited New Orleans several times a year after that. Five years ago when I walked in the front door of the old plantation house my friend's family owned, I had a few flashbacks that I refused to think about. The next day an old lady told me I had killed Rose and her baby and wouldn't find her in New Orleans this time around. I fled town that same day and never went back."

"Guess I'm lucky nothing like that ever happened. Although I did give a boy a bloody nose one day after he called me Rosie."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

There wasn't enough light in the room to clearly see his face, but she could feel the smile behind the comment.

"I always thought being told I had to wait to marry a predestined soul mate or lose my *gift* was what made me so determined not to marry. Seeing the ending to that life, I realize I have always felt that my soul mate wouldn't live up to my expectations so why bother getting married if it was going to land up in divorce court."

"Could I live up to your expectations?" The question surprised both of them.

"I don't know."

"Rose, hurting you is the last thing I want to do. Lord knows I'm not perfect and I'm sure as hell no saint. But I don't leave dirty laundry on the floor. I put dirty dishes in the dishwasher, I make my own bed every morning after starting the coffee and I squeeze the toothpaste tube from the bottom."

"Are you looking for a pat on the back, or writing an ad for a roommate?"

"In case you hadn't noticed we haven't done too bad living under the same roof."

She had noticed.

"As for a pat on the back, that goes to Gus, Salina, Juanita and Joe. As role models, each one of them put things on the table. Sometimes I was a slow learner, but eventually most of it sunk in and stuck."

When he took hold of her wrists, it didn't take more than a small tug to have her sprawled on top of him as he leaned back on the couch.

The kiss was instantly demanding; without restraint, she met the demand as his expertise had a soft kittenish purr rumbling through her body. Shifting them so part of Rosemary's body rested on the couch, he worked his hand under her top. Finding no clasp on the back of her bra, it took him only seconds to undo the front clasp. Cupping a full breast within his hand, he rubbed the hard nub of her nipple between his finger and thumb.

With desire igniting faster than a match thrust into an open flame she pressed as close to him as she could get without crawling under his skin.

While he licked and nibbled his way towards her breast, she ran her hands through his hair, across his broad shoulders and down his spine. Without knowing how it happened she was beneath him. The solid weight of his body pushing her into the soft cushions felt comfortably familiar.

Peeling Walker's shirt over his head, she tossed it behind her head. With skin meeting skin for the first time she wanted to savor the sensations of warmth, hard muscle meeting softer flesh, and ticklish chest hair rubbing against tender flesh.

Walker had other ideas.

With unexpected tenderness he worshiped her body as he tasted, kissed and explored every inch of exposed skin from her navel to eyebrows.

"Not yet, kitten. Be patient." He whispered in her ear when she tried unsnapping his pants.

Rubbing her damp core through her panties, he felt her shatter into a million pieces. With his kiss silencing her cry of ecstasy, he shifted back within the cradle between her legs. Raining kisses on her face, he didn't stop until he felt her heartbeat return to normal.

"We're good together, Kitten. We like a lot of the same things and we work well together. With you here, the apartment feels like a home again. You make me laugh, you make me think, at times you drive me crazy and you drive me wild with a longing that goes far deeper than lust. The next few days are going to be hectic, but promise me you will think about what just happened and what didn't happen."

Planting one foot on the floor, he eased off the couch. Feeling deprived of his weight and warmth Rosemary covered herself with the afghan that had been draped over the back of the couch.

"Walker, why did you stop?"

"Why would you buy the cow, if you can get the milk for free? I want a commitment before you get to taste my favors."

"Why did you call me 'Kitten' instead of 'Rosie'?"

"I won't call you 'Rosie' until you ask."

Grabbing his shirt off the lampshade, he walked towards the kitchen. After grabbing a beer out of the refrigerator, he walked back into the living room.

"I'll take Wolf out for his last walk. Get some sleep."

Sitting up, she grabbed his free hand before he could walk away. "Walker, what about my *gift*?"

He sighed. Sitting on the coffee table, he realized there was just enough light coming through the windows to see the worry in her eyes.

"I love you. The family heritage doesn't scare me and someday, if I'm lucky, I'll get to watch our kids develop their talents. Wolf, walk." Without another word, he followed Wolf out the door.

Hells bells, the guy was going to drive her crazy. It was only ten, but she was exhausted. For that matter, Walker was, too, but she knew he'd sidetrack to the gym before bringing Wolf back. After the demonstration on the couch, he had to be ready to take his frustrations out on something. Her bet was the swimming pool.

And what a demonstration! Hells bells, if that was a prelude, she was looking forward to the real thing. Marriage, commitment, compromise, sharing. Could she do it? Did she want to put herself in that vulnerable of a position?

*What about sex, friendship, great sex, companionship, fantastic sex, babies, kinky sex?* the She-devil whispered.

Rosemary groaned as a quick as lightening preview of Walker's and her naked bodies tangled together in an interesting yoga knot flashed before her eyes.

She needed answers.

"Mom." She knew both sets of parents had been hanging around during the intuitive demonstration. How long they stuck around after that was anybody's guess.

"Long enough to read Walker's mind and know he had no intention of letting the situation get out of control." Without fanfare, Caitlin materialized on the couch next to her.

"Were you scared when you married Dad?"

"Terrified. Being able to know his every thought almost stopped me from marrying him."

"Why? Dad worships the ground you walk on."

Caitlin smiled. "You think so? You wouldn't have placed a bet on that in the beginning. We had terrible fights. There were days we could have gladly killed each other. I'd get mad over something he thought. He'd get mad because I was reading his mind and not giving him room to think things through. One day I stomped my foot so many times, I bruised and sprained my ankle. While my mother wrapped my ankle,



she looked at Herb and said, "You have my undying sympathy."

"Who compromised?"

Caitlin placed her hand over Rosemary's. The energy sent a warm tingling feeling through her body. "We both did. I promised not to mention things he was mentally working through until he was ready to talk. He promised to ask my opinion before he made a decision instead of after. Nothing is foolproof but for the most part it worked."

"What does love feel like? I know Walker's my soul mate, but does that equate to surefire love?"

"For me, it meant sharing my *gift* with someone who understood the complications of the ability as well as the benefits. The idea of never having to say you're sorry is a crock of bull. But knowing he wasn't going to think less of me if I made a mistake meant a lot."

"I find myself wondering what his opinion will be a hundred times a day."

"And this is bad, how?"

"It feels like I'm giving up a part of myself. Every time I think about something, I wonder what Walker will think, will want to do, how he will react. It's like I've lost the ability to function on my own. I don't like the feeling."

"Maybe you're gaining the ability to function as a team. You still have the option of acting independently but, truth is, most activities are more fun if you have someone to share them with."

"As Rose, I was head over heels in love with him and look what it got me."

"That was then, this is now; think of what you learned, what you changed, how you grew emotionally."

"I don't follow."

"Don't play dumb with me. You would never tolerate being anything but number one priority in Walker's life nor would you agree to a secret marriage. Rose came from a solid middle class family, but when she took up gambling as a profession instead of helping her father in their general store, her family and society branded her a woman without morals. She met Walker a few months after she allowed Boston's society to shame her into leaving town. He was as much a lifeline as a lover. Granted, she financially took care of herself, but without Walker handing her the opportunity to open *Rose's* she wouldn't have been as successful."

"Maybe the dreams should have gone back a little further. I didn't know that."

"Or maybe this talk was meant to be. Today's society is far more forgiving, but there is still a well-defined double standard between the sexes. You have not only proven yourself worthy of respect, you have taught several good ole boys that there's a brain wrapped inside the pretty packaging."

"Mom, you're forgetting I know who's going to win, that doesn't take brains."

"Really? Shows what you know. Do you think you'd be as successful if you tapped a finger, arched a brow or smiled every time you had a good hand? Your dad keeps a tally of your hands. Your presentation helps you bluff your way to forty three percent of your wins. Do you really think that doesn't take skill above and beyond your *gift*?"

She'd had no idea. "You're saying without my confidence and playing skills, the results of those bluffs

could have been different?"

"Exactly, no gift comes with a guarantee of success. Pesty's track record should have taught you that."

"Thanks, Mom, it means a lot for me to know that."

"Good, now go get some sleep; the next few days are going to be hectic."

## Chapter 31

"Are you sure you can do this?" Cole asked again as he twisted in the seat to look at the triplets sitting in the back seat of the rented black Mercedes SUV.

"Positive." Giving Cole a brush of a kiss, Ginger looked into his solemn eyes. "Trust me, after hypnotizing the crew at the casino, this will be a piece of cake."

"Do you want to go over everything one last time?"

"No," three identical voices echoed around the confines of the car.

Walker, who was driving, suppressed a chuckle.

Hoping to get Cole's mind off his misgiving over why they were headed to Palm Springs, Ginger opened up a topic that was guaranteed to divert everyone's attention. "Honey, maybe now's a good time to give Rose and Cinn their presents."

"What? You bought us presents in Italy and didn't give them to us yet? Where are they?" Rose demanded as she ignored the puppy love grins Gin and Cole were wearing.

Reaching into her purse, Gin pulled out two long narrow jewelry boxes. "Actually, we made them in France."

"But you've been home from France for two months. Ripping the pink and blue paper and bows off the box, Rosemary looked in confusion at the thermometer tucked inside the cotton-lined box.

Cinnamon had no problem identifying the object inside her box for what it really was. "It's about time you two squealed. I've been going crazy trying not to mention the pink and blue glow mixed with your aura."

"Oh my God, you're pregnant. When? How? Tell me, tell me." Rosemary squealed as both sisters hugged Ginger who was sitting between them. Wiping away a few tears that had spilled forth, Rosemary tucked Ginger's hair behind her ear so she could clearly see her face.

"Actually, it's been ten weeks since we went to the conference in Paris. As for how, your dreams must be lacking something if you have to ask."

"You know, Cinn, you could have given us a hint. Until last week when I couldn't button my favorite jeans and the calendar revealed I'd missed two periods, we didn't have a clue."

"Gin, you know I decided a long time ago not to reveal anything until a person mentions the P word to me."

"But I'm your sister."

"All the more reason for me to keep quiet. It was your gift to share, not mine to reveal."

Walker turned off the engine as he stopped in front of a visitor center at a rest stop. Turning sideways in his seat, he shook Cole's hand before they listened to the conversation in the back seat.

"Have you told the folks?"

"Are you kidding? Mom sat on the bathroom sink counter and held my hand for a full ten minutes before

I could muster the courage to look at the results. When I walked into the office to spring the surprise on Cole, he and Dad were grinning from ear to ear."

"Caitlin wasn't real happy with Herb for telling me before Gin got a chance, but he was so excited he couldn't wait to hand me two bubble gum cigars," Cole said.

"Wait a minute. Dad handed out two cigars and you said blue and pink glow. Two auras means two babies. Right? Are we having two babies? A boy and a girl?" Ginger voice trailed off as she looked at Cinn for confirmation.

Hells bells. "Do I apologize for revealing that little fact and their sexes, or are you okay with my being the one to tell you?"

Cole was out of the car and opening the passenger door before anyone could say a word. "Cinn, I love you dearly and I'm delighted with the information, so move it; I want to get to my wife."

Pulling Ginger out of the car, he held onto her for dear life as he lifted her off the ground and swung her around in circles.

Back on the road, Rosemary asked tongue in cheek, "Is it too early to start suggesting names?"

"Why?" Cole asked suspiciously.

"Well, Mom named us after her favorite herbs and spices. I was thinking you could name these two Paris and France or, considering how you met, you could name them after famous ghosts?"

"I think not," Cole said.

"How about Pearl and Gherkin. I saw you sneaking the olives and pickles out of the refrigerator this morning," Cinnamon said.

"Let's not forget the Rocky Road and Raspberry Sherbet she ate last night," Cole said as he reached between the bucket seats to give Gin's knee an affectionate squeeze.

"It's going to be a long six and a half months if this is the type of abuse you guys are going to dish out."

## Chapter 32

The foyer of the mansion was large enough to hold a hundred people comfortably. A long console, two chairs with floral covered seats and backs, a tall cabinet holding paperweights, four massive mirrors and a center table large enough to seat eight were all gold leafed. With the largest yellow and white fresh flower arrangement Ginger had ever seen placed in the center of the table, it reminded her of an old movie setting. She half expected Ginger Rogers and Fred Astair to come dancing down the twelve foot wide center staircase at any moment. The black and white checked marble floor echoed her footsteps as she followed an older, sober faced, Hispanic maid wearing an ugly blue uniform and rubber-soled shoes.

"Miss Blankenship to see you, madam." Stepping aside, she allowed Ginger to enter the room.

Three distinct sitting areas filled the huge room, the palette throughout was white on white with touches of gold and black. Helen, wearing black, was sitting in a high backed white chair. She did not get up or offer her hand when Ginger extended hers.

"Ms. Owens, I'm Kathy Blankenship from the claims department of Adams, Gibson and White. Thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice."

"It was an inconvenience to rearrange my busy schedule, but if you need to talk to me before the claim can move forward, I really didn't have much of a choice." Helen's tone held just the right quality to convey her annoyance without being nasty.

Sitting on a white and black and white striped love seat, Ginger set a briefcase by her feet and pulled out a clipboard and a pen with a handy little strobe light. "Before you ask the staff to join us, I have a few questions that need to be addressed. Do you mind if I tape our conversation?"

When Helen nodded, she pulled a recorder out of the briefcase she was carrying and turned it on.

Handing over a picture, she gave her a moment to study it. "Are you the legal owner of the eight point two caret pink diamond in a platinum setting shown in the picture?"

"Yes."

"How did you acquire the ring?"

"My deceased husband gave it to me for our tenth anniversary." Liar. The ring was a family heirloom that had belonged to Helen's stepmother. Helen had stolen it before the lawyers could hand it over to the legitimate heirs.

"When was the last time you wore the ring?"

"Five years ago. After my beloved Gus passed on, I just couldn't bring myself to look at the ring after that. It has been locked in a safe since then."

"When was the last time you remember seeing it in the safe?"

"Actually, the box is still in the safe. I checked after your firm called to tell me it had been found in a pawnshop. I can't honestly remember the last time I looked inside the box. Like I said, the ring brought back too many painful memories."

Answering the mundane questions, Helen had relaxed. It was time to get the show on the road. Turning

the pen's light on, she held it between her index finger and thumb. Turning her wrist back and forth, she smiled when Helen's eyes started following the movement of the blinking light. Asking a few more questions, Ginger slowly lowered her voice to just a hair above a whisper. "The ring was found deep, deep down..."

Oh how she loved her work. Helen didn't trust anyone, so it had taken longer than expected to get her to relax, but once relaxed she went down fast and deep. In the end, Ginger had to pull her back up to stop her light snoring.

"Helen, call the maid into the room. Tell her you need her to go into town to do a special errand and tell her to take her lunch hour while she's there."

As soon as the maid left the room Ginger continued. Knowing that even under hypnosis a person would never say anything they didn't want revealed or act in a manner against their morals, she tested Helen.

"How old you are?"

"Sixty five" Obviously that was one truth she wasn't willing to reveal.

"How much do you weigh?"

"One hundred pounds." True.

"Were you happily married for fifty years?"

"Married yes, happy no." Truth.

"How many plastic surgeries have you had?"

Helen sat stone still.

"How many children do you have?"

"Seven." Strange lie, but before she could question the answer she heard the front door open.

"Sleep." Helen slumped sideways in the chair as her eyes closed.

"You can come in the room," Ginger said as she looked towards the door.

"How did it go?" Cinnamon asked as she eyed Helen's slumped form.

"She doesn't trust anyone, so hypnotizing her was tricky. She wouldn't answer all the questions and lied on a few so this could be a waste of time. We'll have to really monitor her. She could easily pop out of hypnosis if she gets scared. Are the cameras ready? I really don't want to prolong this session."

Having agreed that Cole and Walker would not speak in front of Helen, they nodded that they were ready to start filming. Rosemary sitting next to Ginger was going to figure the odds on the truthfulness of each answer.

"From this point forward, you will answer any questions asked truthfully and without hesitation. When you hear the next voice you will open your eyes. Your body is glued to the chair you are sitting in. You cannot move. You cannot speak unless asked a question. Do you understand?"

Ginger crossed her fingers for luck. They were pushing the envelope to warp speed when it came to what can and can't be accomplished under hypnosis.

"Yes."

Gus and Salina entered the room in a gust of wind that had the curtains flaring out from the windows. Helen shivered as if the temperature had dropped ten degrees.

"Hello, Helen, your worst nightmare just came true. If you thought Salina and I were out of your life forever you were sadly mistaken."

Helen's eyes popped open. When Helen's breathing remained shallow and slow, Ginger nodded for Gus to continue.

"You have always scoffed at the idea of ghosts. Well, welcome to the real world as we take you on a trip down memory lane."

With a snap of Gus's fingers, a scene from the same era as Rosemary and Walker's dreams materialized. Ten feet high, twelve feet wide, the floating image showed a well-dressed, comely young woman pushing her favors on a young man. "Remember that day, Helen?"

"Yes."

"Did I rape you?"

"No."

With a snap of his fingers the scene changed.

The young woman was now crying as she pleaded with her father to have mercy on the young man. He had done her wrong, but she would rather marry him than have a child out of wedlock.

"Where you really pregnant?" Gus demanded.

"Yes." Rosemary wrote, 'lie', on a piece of paper.

"Did you conceive other children during that marriage?"

"Yes."

"How many before I stopped visiting your bed?"

"Seven."

"Why did you abort the children?"

"Hate kids."

"Why did you trap me into a loveless marriage?"

"My younger sister wanted you and I hated her."

The scene changed. A pretty young woman sat in a rocking chair nursing a newborn as she sang a lullaby.

"Who is this woman?"

"My sister, your mistress, and her illegitimate brat."

"How did she lose favor with your father and get disowned?"

"I don't know."

"That's a lie," Rosemary said aloud without thinking.

Helen squirmed in her seat. "I paid two lovers to tell my father a few lies about her."

"Why would he believe the lies?" Salina asked.

"I told them about the birthmark she had on her lower back. It made the story believable."

Salina snapped her fingers. The scene jumped a hundred years.

A much younger Helen and Gus danced under a full moon as she used every trick available to convince Gus to follow her to her room.

"The baby you lost after we were married, was it mine?"

"Hell, no," she spat.

"Who was the father?"

"Sidney Lutz."

Rosemary put her hand over her mouth to smother her gasp.

"Why didn't you marry him?"

"He was already married and Catholic besides."

"What about the other miscarriages you suffered?"

"There were no other miscarriages, you idiot. That supposed emergency appendectomy while I was in Switzerland was a guise for the scar from having my tubes tied."

With the outburst, Ginger stopped the show until she was satisfied Helen was still hypnotized.

When the scene changed, they watched a hotel maid opening a drawer beside a bed. Sitting on the bed she took a needle and punctured several holes in every condom in the box.

"Why did you pay the maid to do that?" Gus asked.

Helen didn't answer.

"Why?" Salina said in a whisper.

"Gus got a private eye to investigate my sexual activities. I figured if he knocked you up, he couldn't use my activities to force me into a divorce."

"Why didn't you want a divorce? He offered you millions of dollars," Salina asked.

"Prestige. Invitations to anyplace I wanted to go. I didn't think he'd allow you to raise his brat. I figured with a kid under my roof I'd have full control of Gus."

"Why did you hate me?" Salina whispered.



"Gus loved you." The simple statement hung in the air as the depth of her resentment shattered Salina's composure.

Before Gus continued, Ginger talked Helen down into a deeper sleep. It might have been overkill but she wanted to make sure the woman didn't remember anything that was about to happen.

"Where are the tapes and CDs hidden?" Gus asked.

"In three different safety deposit boxes."

Rosemary shook her head 'no'.

Ginger glanced at Gus in surprise when his voice whispered through her head telepathically.

"Helen, Monty your lover has just left. You have convinced him that the CDs and tapes are tucked safely in bank vaults. As a great actress, you are looking in a mirror congratulating yourself for conning another fool. In the process, you mention the great hiding place you have kept secret from everyone. Do you understand?" Ginger said.

"Yes."

"Action."

Sitting straighter in the chair, Helen began looking at herself in an imaginary mirror. As she primped she talked.

"God I'm good; imagine Monty thinking he could sweet-talk me into telling him something different than the lie I told him in the first place. He'd shit a brick if he knew he'd been lying right on top of all the tapes and CDs every time we were in bed. Guess it's time to have Sid's men give him a little visit. I wouldn't want any of the extra tapes he made accidentally being made public before Walker's deadline."

"Sleep." With those words, Helen slumped sideways in the chair; she looked like a rag doll.

Walker and Cole checked the camcorders they held. Satisfied with the results, they headed towards the master suite without saying a word.

"That was slick," Rosemary said as she forced herself not to do bodily harm to the hypnotized woman.

"Don't worry, Rose, she'll get her just punishment," Cinnamon said.

"I know, but that doesn't stop the urge of wanting to strangle her."

"Why don't you go help the guys? We'll set up the next act," Ginger said.

Twenty minutes later, the men walked back into the room with two white trash bags full of tapes and CDs. Rosemary was carrying an old Kodak movie camera and projector.

"Did you have enough tapes and CDs to replace the ones you took out?" Ginger asked.

"Yes, but Gus was wrong about the make of the camera and projector. Hopefully she won't notice," Rosemary said.

"We'll be waiting for you outside the gates. One of the friendly ghosts will let us know if you run into problems," Ginger said just before leaving the room.

Left alone with Helen to continue the charade, Cinnamon propped Helen up so her head rested against the winged side of the chair. "You will remember nothing about the pink diamond ring being stolen. It is safely tucked inside its box in your safe. Do you understand?"

"The ring is in the box. Yes."

"My name is Sue Thomas. You will remember everything about the visit from Gus and Salina but you will think it was part of a hypnosis treatment for insomnia. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Why is a hypnotherapist visiting you?"

"Insomnia."

Perfect. A few minutes later she was ready to bring Helen out of hypnosis.

"On the count of three you will be fully awake. Rested, alert and remembering only what you have been told. One. Two. Three."

Helen slowly opened her eyes. Sitting straighter, she looked around the room. Blinked a few times, looked around the room again, then rested her eyes on Cinnamon.

"Who the hell are you?"

Cinnamon's mouth went dry. Suppressing panic, she hoped her face showed surprise or at least confusion.

"Sue Thomas."

"I would have sworn you were a washed out brunette with the oddest looking gold green eyes I've ever seen."

"Really? I can't imagine why. As you can see my hair is black and my eyes dark green. My mother is black Irish, I take after her side of the family. Must be a side effect from the scare you had during the session."

Helen's eyes narrowed.

Cinnamon held her breath.

"Why exactly are you here?"

"A friend of yours, a guy by the name of Lamont hired me to help you with your insomnia. Remember, we made the appointment last week."

Helen wasn't about to admit she didn't remember. "Of course. What was the scare you mentioned?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Yes, of course I do. I just want to hear your version," Helen snapped.

"When I asked you to travel back to the core root of the issue in regards to your insomnia, you traveled back in time to a past life."

"Rubbish. That's a bunch of nonsense." The words and the fright on her face told two different stories.

"Rubbish or not you certainly were talking the talk. You kept babbling answers to a man named Gus. You also talked to a person named Salina."

"Why didn't you stop the session? Surely you could see I was upset."

Hallelujah. She did remember. Although she hadn't seemed the least bit upset until now. "That was the point of the hypnosis. You went back to the root of the issue. I wasn't able to walk you through the whole healing process, because time ran out, but maybe until our next appointment you'll be able to sleep better."

"Was that tape recorder working during the whole session?"

"Looks like it ran out and I forgot to turn it over, but about half the session got recorded."

"Give me that tape. I don't want anyone listening to the rubbish on here."

Cinnamon smiled sweetly as she handed the blank tape over.

"You know, you don't need to worry about what you discovered. The statute of limitations on murder doesn't carry over from one lifetime to another."

The look on Helen's face was worth the risk of having made the remark.

Picking up a bell on a side table, Helen began ringing it as hard as she could.

"If you're expecting the maid to answer, you must have forgotten you sent her to town on an errand and told her to have lunch before she came back."

"Why on earth would I do that? She's not entitled to a lunch hour."

Cinnamon shrugged. "Maybe you didn't want her knowing you were being hypnotized."

"I ... Is everything that happened here today held in the strictest of confidence?"

"You have my word that I will not personally talk to anyone about this session that is not already in the know."

Helen narrowed her eyes then relaxed. The girl was being a smart aleck, but she had said the session was confidential.

"Do you have a business card? I'd like to pass your name along to a few friends."

Slipping two cards out of a side pocket of a big black purse, she laid the cards on the black lacquered table next to Helen's chair.

Picking up one of the cards, Helen read it before saying, "I'm rather tired; I'm sure you won't mind finding your own way out."

Grabbing the purse sitting on the side table, Cinnamon walked to the door before pausing to say in a sugary sweet voice. "When you feel ready to work through all the negative karma you've created in this lifetime, don't hesitate to give me a call."

She smiled demurely at the rage that entered Helen's eyes.

Her smile had spread from ear to ear by the time she climbed in the back seat of the SUV. "It's a good

thing someone thought to make up those phony business cards. I'd love to see the look on her face if she calls the number and finds out it's the local mental hospital. Let's get out of here before she starts checking under the bushes for the bogey man."

"Did you turn off the recorder?" Walker asked.

"Not yet. Here, Cole, it's all yours."

After passing the purse between the seats, Cinnamon yanked the black wig off and fluffed her hair with her fingers.

"Man, that thing is hot. What do I do with these?" she asked after removing the green contacts that had made her eyes look three shades darker.

Without saying a word, Rosemary took them out of her outstretched hand. Rolling down her window, she stuck her hand out and let the wind carry them away.

"By the way, she commented on the unusual shade of Ginger's eyes."

"Good. Her description of the two of you will be so far off the mark, even if a good private investigator connected the two of you to me, he wouldn't be able to see any similarities," Walker said.

"Help me with this," Cinnamon said as she struggled to pull a mid thigh length lose fitting blouse over her head.

"Trade places with Gin. It will be easier if you're sitting in the middle," Rosemary said.

Removing the padded jacket that gave her Dolly Parton sized breasts and four inches of padding around her midriff and hips was a little tricky in the confines of the car, but they managed to do so as the men egged them on with a lousy rendition of bumps and grinds striptease music.

Once down to a black maillot swimsuit, she slipped loose gauze slacks with a drawstring waist on before sitting back with a sigh of relief. "That was fun."

"The striptease or the con job on Helen?" Walker asked as he eyed her in the rear-view mirror.

"Both. But my nerves couldn't handle the stress of being on the wrong side of the law and Dad would kill me before I'd be allowed to pursue burlesque, so I think I'll check out the local theater, see if I have any hidden talents."

When the dome light flicked on and off half a dozen times, Walker glanced at Cole. "Do you ever get used to their unexpected visits."

"It comes with the territory. Then again I only have to contend with two ghosts dropping in on me unexpectedly. Salina is going to make your life interesting."

"Tell me something I don't know," Walker mumbled.

Finishing a quick fast forward on the tape, Cole said, "From what I've seen, the tape looks good. Maybe we need to send a new purse and thank you card this Christmas to Samantha Jones for teaching us how to hide a camera in a purse."

"Sure, right along with an invitation to audition for *I'm A Little Teapot* at the kindergarten's Christmas pageant," Ginger said with a straight face.

"By the way, Cinn, Jerry called. The diamond ring Helen stole has been returned to the rightful owners. He said they were thankful enough to have it returned that when told, 'ask me no questions I'll tell you no lies', they let the matter drop," Ginger said.

\* \* \* \*

"Thanks for watching Wolf. I know he can be a handful," Rosemary said to Rocky as Wolf enthusiastically greeted her before turning his attention to Ginger and Cinnamon.

"He was no problem. This morning after his walk, he insisted on visiting the offices so I left him down there. He knocked on the door with his head in time to take a nap with us. I taught him how to push the baby swing with his head. He kept Bobby entertained while I did some cooking and worked some more on the plans for the new garage."

"He has certainly made himself at home downstairs. I think the guys in security have stashed a few bones for him, but they're not admitting anything. You've seen the dog bed Walker got him and Joan has a big box of gourmet doggie treats in her bottom drawer. The smarty even figured out how to open the drawer."

"Any word from the insurance company?"

"Nothing good. At the rate they are moving, Bobby will be in preschool and I'll be pregnant again before I have to feel guilty about being a working mom," Rocky said.

"Do you really feel guilty?" Ginger asked with interest.

"Not really, my mom will spoil him for half a day and he'll be with me the rest of the time. I figure by the time he's five, he'll be able to identify bad spark plugs from a cracked head just by the sound of the engine. And thanks to his dad's training, he'll be able to deal a card from the bottom of a deck without being caught. Just think of all the job offers he'll get with those two talents listed on his resume."

"Sounds like a specialty career in the making," Cinnamon said.

"Bob told me to mind my own business, but is everything okay?"

"It's great. I'm sorry for the mystery, but I went to see a medical specialist and I really wanted both my sisters with me. Cole was so nervous I asked Walker to drive. We just got the happy news that we're expecting twins. Frick and Frack are perfect."

"Fast thinking," Cinnamon whispered in Rosemary's ear as Rocky and Ginger started talking pregnancy.

## Chapter 33

Sipping cups of coffee, Jerry and Bob sat across from Walker in his office.

"How many counterfeit hundred dollar bills have been identified?" Walker asked.

"Ninety-four so far. Add twenty eight hundred twenties and a thousand fifties to the pile gives you a grand total of sixty five thousand nine hundred dollars."

"What's the time frame?" Walker asked.

"There's the problem. We know they came through over the weekend. Because the machines accepted the bills, it wasn't until the bank called late yesterday that we knew there was a problem. I've pulled all the surveillance tapes from Friday morning on just to be on the safe side."

"Good thinking. Have the police been notified?" Walker asked as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"The bank called them. Got a call from an Agent saying he will be here before three. Sure as hell hope they have some idea who they are looking for, because I don't want to even think about how many man hours it will take to look at every single tape," Bob said.

Wolf trotted in the door like he owned the place a good thirty seconds before Rosemary.

"Am I interrupting a private meeting?"

"No. Grab a cup of coffee and join us. You might as well hear the facts from Bob; I'm sure the gossip mill has already massacred the truth," Walker said.

"Have you been downstairs since you got back?" Bob asked.

"No. I just left your place. After an hour of baby talk, my eyes were starting to cross. Cinn detoured to the apartment but..."

"I'm here and look who's with me," Cinnamon said as she headed to the table, holding the coffee pot.

"Jack." Giving him a big brotherly hug and a kiss on the cheek, Rosemary didn't see the scowl on Walker's face.

"Hi, Sunshine." Pulling back, but still standing within Jack's embrace, Rosemary took in the sober faced man that had arrived with Jack. With a short, big boned body, thick neck, square face, and sagging jowls, the unsmiling man standing just inside the office doors resembled a bulldog.

"Does he bite?"

"Not that I've noticed," was Jack's deadpan response.

"I gather this is business."

"Smart girl. How about introducing me to the guy behind the desk that's ready to rip my arms off."

"Walker, I'm sure you remember Cole mentioning Agent Jack Cutter when we were discussing that little problem with stolen property being taken over state lines."

Walker nodded as he looked pointedly at Jack's arm still casually draped around Rosemary.

Jack, deriving too much fun from the situation, didn't move until Walker forced the issue by walking around the table and extending his hand to shake.

Neither man flinched as they took each other's measure.

Knowing it was a tie, Rosemary smothered a smile as she watched the scene play out.

"Cinn and I will leave," Rosemary offered.

"Unless someone says differently, there's no need for you to leave. I doubt at this stage they have any information that isn't already circulating downstairs," Walker said as he walked back to his chair.

After everyone was seated and introductions were made, Jack said, "Agent Smith is from the local office. His expertise is counterfeit bills. I was called in because the hit is similar to another situation I've been working. As you said, at this point we know very little."

"The surveillance tapes are pulled, what else can my staff do to help?" Bob asked.

Before Jack could answer, Rose said, "I thought the pit bosses and cashiers checked the hundred and the fifty dollar bills with that magical pen before accepting them."

"They do," Walker said.

"Let me save everyone a few questions. Someone has managed to make a bill that will pass the sensor that is currently marketed to accept paper currency for any type of vending machines. The new slot machines that accept paper currency use the same sensor. By the time the currency makes it to the bank where it is scanned again, the thief is long gone. It's a counterfeiter's dream come true," Jack said in a tone that effectively conveyed his frustration.

"Hells bells," Rosemary said.

"What can we do to make your job easier?" Walker asked.

"With your approval, two people on my staff will work side by side with your personnel that sort the currency for deposit. From past experience, I seriously doubt the perpetrators are still in town, but I'm not willing to overlook the possibility. The other casinos are being alerted to the problem. From now on, anyone handling the bills coming out of the machines needs to be wearing latex gloves," Agent Smith said.

"You really think you can get a finger print off a bill?" Cinnamon asked in surprise.

"It's a stretch, but stranger things have broken other cases wide open."

"Besides the tapes, a television, a comfortable room and access to a steady flow of coffee are my only requirements at this time," Jack said.

\* \* \* \*

"You put him where?" Walker bellowed an hour later.

"I'm not deaf. And you heard me the first time. He's sitting in your living room. You have a problem with that?" Rosemary glared at him.

"Hell yes, I have a problem with that. He walks in here and manhandles you and you expect me to throw out the welcome mat. It's not going to happen."

Rosemary arched her brow as she looked down her nose at him, which is no easy feat when you're five

inches shorter than the solid block of rage glaring at you.

"I had no idea you were the jealous type. I can't say as I find it flattering."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he counted to ten. "I'm sorry, I overreacted. It's no excuse, but ever since I was old enough to understand when a man was coming on to Salina, I get a little testy with men poaching on females I care about."

"Let's get something straight, I'm a hugger. No one I consider family is exempt from receiving a hug. Get used to it, because I'm not changing. If a man is overstepping his bounds, I won't need you to deck him, I can do it myself."

Between her stiff legged stance and the change in her eyes to a deep bottomless pool of dark green, he knew she was furious. Unlike Salina, she wasn't screaming at the top of her lungs as she threw everything within reach at his head. This was a good thing as well as another reminder that while similar their reactions were drastically different.

"Got it." Pinning her arms at her sides as he locked his arms around her, he kissed her on the forehead. "Can I have a list of these male family members so I know who to throw out the welcome mat for and who to deck if you don't do it first?"

"That could be arranged, if you ask nicely."

He started at her brows; by the time he had kissed his way to her mouth, she had managed to free her arms. As she ran her fingers across his shoulders, he leaned back against the desk and nestled her between his legs. With his erection pressed against her lower belly and his hands kneading her bottom, both of them forgot where they were until there was a knock on the partially open office door.

When Rosemary started to pull away, Walker tightened his hold. "What?" Walker growled.

"Sorry to interrupt," Joan said as she walked into the room.

"Why don't I believe that?" Walker scowled.

When Rosemary again tried to move, he refused to loosen his grip.

"I could remind you that this is a working office and you have a perfectly good bedroom one flight up, but it was a waste of breath with Salina and Gus and I doubt the results would be different now."

"I'd like to remind you that there's a federal agent, two sisters, a brother-in-law and probably Rocky currently in the apartment. And let's not forget at least one ghost determined to protect Rose's virtue."

Rosemary started laughing. Not trying to move out of Walker's embrace, as she had figured out she was shielding his obvious arousal, she turned to face Joan.

"I'm sorry, Joan, we were out of line. You're right; this isn't the time or the place."

"Honey, don't apologize. I'd rather see the two of you embracing than circling around each other like boxers in a ring trying to land the first punch. I interrupted because Sidney Lutz called and I thought you might want to call him back before he leaves the office for the day."

"Good call. Thanks."

Taking time to nuzzle Rosemary's neck, he placed a kiss in the hollow behind her ear before standing up and taking a step away. "You want to wait while I make the call?"



"How about I take Wolf for a walk than stop back here. By then you should be done and we can go upstairs together."

"Deal." Before she could move, he gave her a light kiss on her moist swollen lips.

*A gal could really get used to this kind of treatment*, She-devil whispered in her ear.

*Really?* Common sense shot back with a chuckle.

*Both of you can shut up at any time!* Rosemary silently yelled as she walked out of the office with Wolf by her side.

## Chapter 34

By the time dinner was ready, Jack had been staring at the television screen for hours, scanning the tapes.

"Any luck?" Cinnamon asked as she sat in the chair next to him at the dinner table.

"No." His blue eyes told their own story of frustration. The glasses he'd reluctantly put on attested to the eyestrain caused by watching a few hundred too many grainy tapes.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Ginger asked as she passed a bowl of mashed potatoes to Cole.

"Hard question to answer. First, would be the lucky break of recognizing someone from the tapes we got from the last hit. After that, it's anything that looks unusual, out of the ordinary, abnormal. More than anything, it's a gut feeling to look closer." A gut feeling that had mysteriously left him stranded high and dry since the first counterfeit bills had been pawned off at an unsuspecting Indian Casino in Texas.

"Great meatloaf," he said to change the subject.

\* \* \* \*

If Jack was surprised to have the whole crew join him in the living room after the kitchen had been cleaned, his face gave nothing away. Watching Walker casually drape an arm around Rosemary and pull her against him as he settled next to her on a soft chocolate colored love seat, he admitted to more than a little envy. He'd trade places in a heartbeat if it were Cinn he could snuggle.

"What time frame are you looking at?" Walker asked.

"Eight, Friday evening."

Three hours later, Ginger was curled up against Cole sound asleep, and a once upon a time full plate of warm peanut butter cookies held nothing but crumbs.

"Jack, stop the tape," Rosemary said as she sat forward.

"Back it up a few seconds, then run it on slow."

"The odds are up to ninety five percent that she just fed the machine a counterfeit bill."

"How the hell..." Jack started only to be cut off.

"I've been running an odds calculation on everyone that comes on screen. With each multi appearance on the screen the odds have gone up for that individual. This woman is the first one to make it to over ninety percent."

"Rose, she's been flitting from one machine to another for the last two hours."

"You're right, but there is something else that skews the odds. Take the tape back about fifteen minutes?"

Everyone noticed the aroma of clashing perfumes, a cigar and pipe tobacco. Only Jack looked around the room trying to find the source.

"What are we looking for?" Jack asked as the tape started playing.

"The lady in brown and the guy with her in that ugly brown plaid shirt. All the machines in this section

have maximum bets of two to five dollars. Any gambler knows you always bet maximum if you want to get ahead. These two are only betting the minimum one-dollar. After playing twice they collect the ninety-eight dollar cash receipt. They disappear from camera range for ten to twenty minutes than reappear and repeat the same process."

"If you go to a different cashier each time and switch back and forth between rows of slots, the steady players don't take notice of your coming and going and the cashiers don't become suspicious," Walker said as he appreciated the cleverness of the operation.

"Let's face it, with as plain vanilla as they look, a cashier would have to help them several times before they would make an impression," Cinnamon said.

"Good observation. Rose, are these the only two on your radar?" Jack asked.

"No. The guy wearing the black baseball cap backwards and the gal in the white blouse and black slacks with him are using a similar pattern."

"There are ten cashier booths. If we set up ten televisions, we can monitor all the booths in the same time sequence at once. Once we identify people that are cashing in regularly we can look for them on the floor tapes to watch how they play," Jack said.

"I'll call Bob and have him set up what we need in the conference room. Anything else?" Walker asked.

"No, that should do it. I need to stretch my legs, I'll meet you there." Jack walked to the sliding glass door and moved the curtains aside before heading for the door.

Cole grinned at the identical looks of wary suspicion Rosemary and Cinnamon shot each other.

Sparks and sizzling lights filled the room; with a popping sound Gus and Herb appeared. A second later, the sizzling lights parted like a curtain coming up on the first act of a play, Salina and Caitlin made their grand entrance together. Standing in a row, all four bowed.

"How do you like that quick thinking? Your friend did look for us behind the curtains," Salina said.

"It was spectacular," Walker said honestly.

Looking at the gown Salina was wearing, he marveled at his lack of embarrassment. It was definitely a turning point when he found himself amused by the strut she did around the room to show off the gown that covered her from chin to toe. The only problem was except for some strategically placed slashes of silver, she was covered in sheer netting.

"The reason behind our visit is to let you know that you are on the right track. With Rose's help you'll spot all the hustlers. Because of some divine and earthly intervention, we have been told we can help you, but first you need to find the answers. Just remember not everything is as black and white as it looks on paper." As a low rumble filled the room, Gus muttered, "Yeah, yeah, I know; so shoot me."

Without saying good-bye, they disappeared within a flash of pale blue light as star shaped sparkling lights rained from the ceiling, floated gently in the air and burst with a flash of light just before reaching the floor.

"Oh, Mom and Dad were here. What did I miss? And why didn't someone wake me up?" Ginger poked Cole in the side with her finger as she made the last comment. Stretching, she looked around the room.

"Where is Jack?"

"He said he needed to stretch his legs. Wolf trotted out with him, so I'm guessing that while Wolf is watering the trees, Jack is making a phone call or two. Rose might have spotted the group feeding the counterfeits into the machines," Cole said.

"I think Jack smelled the perfume and tobacco, but I didn't get a chance to ask before the folks disappeared," Cinnamon complained.

"Mom probably read your mind. If they couldn't answer, she probably made sure they were out of here before you could ask," Ginger said.

\* \* \* \*

"It must be a guy thing," Cinnamon grumbled.

"What?" Rosemary asked as Ginger leaned closer.

"Look at them. After an all-nighter, the three of us look like death warmed over and they look rumpled and sexy."

"She's got it bad if that's what she's seeing. All of them have blood shot eyes and unless I'm reading something wrong, they all have tension headaches. Everybody needs a hot shower and a good sleep," Ginger said.

As Ginger rubbed Cinnamon's back, Bob massaged his lower back. "That's it. You might want another crew to go back over the tapes, but it looks like we have identified all of them."

"I'm satisfied. Headquarters will examine them again before they start the process of trying to match people to other jobs," Jack stated.

"What's the final tally?" Ginger asked between two lung filling yawns.

"Twelve couples. Working in groups of four, they work a two-hour shift before rotating out. With a mix of ages, average builds, weight, clothing and looks, they easily blend in with the heavy weekend crowd," Bob answered.

As they got ready to leave the room, Rosemary turned to Jack. "Do you have to leave immediately?"

"The plane is not taking off with a pilot that hasn't slept in over twenty-four hours. I want to make copies of the tapes, then I'm going to crash. Why?"

"I want to talk to you about your portfolio."

"I won't leave until we talk."

"Fair enough. Catch you later."

## Chapter 35

"How much sleep did you get?" Rosemary asked as she walked into Walker's office several hours later.

"I've only been here half an hour. What brings you down here?" Smiling, Walker watched Rosemary walk towards him.

"Would you believe I was hungry for a Ding-Dong?" Grabbing one from Walker's stash, Rosemary began nibbling off the outer layer of chocolate as she headed for the coffee pot. "Plus Wolf wanted out and everyone else was just beginning to stir."

He knew her well enough to know she was working up to something, so he sat back and watched her curl up in a chair.

"And a couple of things are bothering me."

"Only a couple?" Walker said as he shifted in his seat. Watching her lick chocolate off her upper lip was making it hard to concentrate and damned if her smile didn't say, 'I know what you're thinking.'

"Walker, focus. Helen said Sidney was the father to the baby she passed off as Gus's. You didn't seem surprised by that revelation. Why not?"

"Sidney used to be a heavy drinker, like a lot of drunks he would become talkative, one night he said too much. It was all in a report Gus had in the safe."

"Are they still an item?"

"When Sidney lived in Vegas, it was public knowledge that Helen visited him and his wife regularly. Sidney moved to Atlantic City after his wife's death. I have no idea if they socialize."

"How did the proposal for you to buy Aces Wild come up?"

"Sidney approached me a few months ago."

"Didn't you think it was strange to have him contact you, considering the relationship he had with Helen?"

"Not really; in spite of Sidney's relationship with Helen, he and Dad were friends. Over the years, they partnered on several financial deals."

"Investments aside, what if the friendship was a guise to keep Helen informed on what Gus was doing both professionally and personally?"

"Professionally, this town has few real secrets, but it's possible. Dad and Salina had a circle of friends here in town that didn't care about their marital status. Sidney was not part of that group. Outside of the command performances Helen insisted upon, Dad kept a fairly low profile. I doubt Sidney could have told her anything she didn't know."

"He was passing along information, you can bet on it. And let's not forget that for the right price, employees will happily sell casino gossip."

"Where are you going with this?"

"I don't honestly know. I keep seeing a triangle. Helen's threats, Sidney's offer and their relationship

make up the three sides. Somehow I feel that given the right formula, the information will turn the triangle into a circle where the corners smoothly flow together."

"If I didn't figure asking Dad's opinion of the offer would fall under that 'we can't tell you anything that might change the future rule', I'd put everything in front of him. As it is, we'll just have to wait and see what happens after midnight tonight."

"What's coming down at midnight?" Jack asked as he walked in the open office door right behind Cinnamon.

"Halloween," Walker said without hesitation.

Settling in the chair next to Rosemary, the men silently appraised each other.

Cinnamon looked at Rosemary with a lifted brow.

"The odds favor them staring each other down until they both die of boredom," Rosemary said.

"What a waste of well packaged testosterone. Any ideas?" Cinnamon countered as she shook her head in mock dismay.

"I guess the humane thing to do would be to put them out of their misery."

"It would have to be quick. I'd hate to see them suffer," Cinnamon said.

"True. The peashooter strapped to Jack's ankle and the one in Walker's file drawer should do the job nicely."

"How do you propose we get our hands on said peashooters?"

"Wolf could sit on Jack; as he tried licking Jack to death, you could grab the gun."

"What about Walker?" Cinnamon asked.

"Distraction is the key," Rosemary said as she flashed Walker a wicked grin.

"We could steal his Ding-Dongs," Cinnamon offered.

"Or I could do something to render him senseless."

"I thought yellow bellied sidewinder snakes didn't have any brains."

"True. I could try tickling him, but I'd have to straddle him to get his shoes off."

"Well that would certainly distract him."

"It could also cause another problem," Rosemary said before giving Walker another devilish grin.

"Are they always this incorrigible?" Jack asked. Just a hint of a grin played with one edge of his mouth.

"Worse. You haven't heard about the stunt the three of them pulled down in the casino," Walker said.

"We had good reason to pull that stunt," Rosemary declared as she lifted her chin.

"I'm sure you did, Sunshine, and I want to hear the story, but you're not getting me off track. What's coming down at midnight?"

## Chapter 36

Midnight came and went without a phone call from Helen.

The six of them were finishing breakfast when Joan called to tell them to turn on *Vegas In The Spot Light*, a local morning talk show that interviewed celebrities visiting town and kept track of local gossip.

The camera focused on a blonde sitting slightly forward, with her arms resting on the rolled arms of an off-white upholstered chair. With a look of concern in her eyes, the angle of her head showed off gold chandelier earrings as she looked seriously into the camera's eye.

"With us this morning is Helen Owens. Helen is the widow of Gus Owens, the former owner of Dreamland Casinos. Earlier today, she shared an amazing story with us along with some camera footage to backup her allegations."

As the camera drew back, Helen appeared on the screen sitting in a matching chair next to the pretty host.

Wearing a high necked black and red pants suit that added bulk to her anorexic body, she did not smile as the camera zoomed in for a close up shot. The makeup artist had done an excellent job of masking the paper-thin quality of her taut skin.

"Helen, it has been five years since your husband's death. What recently happened to make you believe that you could no longer keep silent about an event that happened a little over thirty-three years ago?"

"Let me start by saying my husband and I were married for fifty years. Like all couples we had spats, but we never stopped loving each other. In the early seventies, we were faced with the reality that we would never have the pleasure of raising our own children. The news hit Gus particularly hard."

"Did you separate during this time?" the host asked, more to make certain she was back in the spotlight than a necessity to keep the story flowing.

"Not in the sense you're referring. I retreated to our home in Palm Springs. Gus tried burying his disappointment by working longer hours at the casino."

"I know this is difficult, but what happened while the two of you were separated?"

"A very young woman enticed Gus into a relationship. In a matter of weeks, she told Gus she was pregnant with his child. When he demanded blood work to prove paternity, she showed her true identity."

"The young woman you are referring to is Salina Howard."

"Yes."

"When you say she showed her true identity, what exactly do you mean?"

"Salina Howard was a witch. She used her abilities to cast a spell over Gus and his lawyer Jerry Marks."

"For what purpose?"

"She cast the spell to make both men believe that the witch child she was carrying was sired by Gus."

"Who do you believe sired her child?"

Helen leaned slightly forward and towards the host as if they were having a private tête-à-tête. "Who knows, perhaps the devil himself. All I know for certain is that Gus and Jerry were placed under a spell that controlled their actions."

"What happened next?"

"Gus had Jerry draw up divorce papers. When I refused to sign the papers, Salina barged her way into our home in Palm Springs and threatened me."

As the camera focused solely on the host, she said, "Before we continue we will show you, the audience, an amazing film clip Helen has provided to substantiate her claims."

When the clip started, everyone in the room gave a huge sigh of relief as they watched the tape they had planted in the under bed safe.

Within seconds, Walker's cell phone started ringing; checking to see who was calling, he turned it off without answering.

"What happened next?"

"For reasons I never understood, Salina decided she didn't want to marry Gus, but she insisted that he give the bastard child she was carrying his name. From that day forward, Salina controlled our lives."

"The child you are referring to is Walker Owens?"

"Yes."

"Salina Howard died in 1981, did your relationship with your husband change after that?"

"No. There was also the matter of dealing with Walker. Not knowing exactly what his abilities were, we were hesitant to do anything that would cause him to harm us."

"You believe Walker Owens could be dangerous?"

Helen rubbed her hand over the material on her leg in a great show of nervousness. "According to legends, Warlock's don't come into full power until they reach maturity. Gus didn't want to risk Walker's retaliation after what Salina had already put me through."

"Why are you coming forward with this information at this time?"

"Walker has been able to successfully hide his supernatural abilities from those closest to him, but being a spawn of Salina he is a warlock. Yesterday, I was informed that an unsuspecting woman is now carrying his children. I could not sit back and silently allow two more witches to enter this world without warning the public."

"You said two children. This woman is carrying twins?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the identity of this woman?"

"Rosemary Prescott."



"Can you tell the audience how it felt to be manipulated by a witch?"

Walker muted the sound.

"Personally, I think the whole show went well. She came up with a few twists we hadn't anticipated, but nothing we can't handle," Cole said.

"After the LA incident I don't like the idea of our being on television, but after she announced to the world that Rose is carrying my babies I don't think we can prevent that from happening," Ginger said.

Walker was furious that he hadn't thought of the possibility of Rose or her family being dragged into the mess. "My warlock powers tell me Jerry's in my office. Let's go see if he thinks we can prevent that from happening."

\* \* \* \*

"Not a chance in hell." Jerry said without hesitation.

"Why not?"

"You must have missed it on the way down. They had a picture of you and Rose driving out of the garage. The top was down on the corvette."

"Shit." After rubbing the back of his neck, he grabbed a handful of paper clips out of the bowl on his desk.

"Any suggestions, Jack?"

"We can wait for the full moon to see if you turn into a werewolf or a Warlock."

"Great idea. When the camera lights reflect off my enlarged incisors, I'm screwed. What's your next brilliant idea?" Walker said around a chuckle.

"Exhume your dad's body to have the DNA tested."

"You'll have to do better. Both Salina and Dad were cremated."

"What's your blood type?" Cole asked.

"AB negative. Before you ask, I have no idea about Dad or Salina's blood type."

"AB negative is not that common. Shouldn't be too hard to find out which one of them had that blood type. Guess Jack and I just got assigned a job. We'll be down the hall using the computers."

Just before walking through the door, Cole stopped. "Gin, Cinn, Rose, don't even think about coming up with a scheme to alter anything. Do we understand each other?"

"Perfectly," they said in unison.

## Chapter 37

By noon the tape had been aired on every major television station. With so-called experts taking sides, the ones declaring the tape a genuine artifact were in the majority.

Walking into Walker's office, Joan verbally checked items off a list.

"Ginger and Cole are back from the hospital.

"Lunch will be served in the conference room in twenty minutes.

"The press conference is scheduled for three.

"Juanita called a few minutes ago to say the town is having a great time giving outlandish directions to reporters looking for the ranch.

"A Halloween party has been scheduled in the high school gym, every piece of candy and crepe paper in town has been bought and the whole town plans on attending.

"So far, the security guards you sent to the ranch haven't seen anyone coming close to the property."

"What did you do?" Rose asked.

"Nothing much. Sheriff Watkins called after the first television van arrived to assure me the town would protect Juanita and Joe. As a thank you and a way to keep the kids off the streets with a bunch of strangers in town, I offered to pay for a Halloween party."

"You're hiding something. What else did he say?"

"He said you need to make an honest man out of me before the twins are born."

"You told him the truth, didn't you?"

"No. I told him he should have given me one of those prized gold foil packages when he caught us necking on the side of the road."

"You didn't? Walker, so help me..."

He grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap. "Relax. I told him the truth." Before she could say more, he took both their minds off the turmoil around them.

\* \* \* \*

The large reception room adjacent to the Dreamland's wedding chapel was packed with reporters.

"Ladies and gentleman, many people would like to blame their problems on unseen forces or a lawyer that has been bewitched into telling a lie. For the record, the only person who has ever bewitched me and still does is my wife."

When the chuckling died down, Jerry continued.

"The accusations presented by Helen Owens this morning were both shocking, slanderous and outlandish to Walker Owens, Rosemary Prescott, myself and our respective families. In hopes of stopping this slander in its tracks, I have assembled several people who can answer the accusations with

knowledgeable authority. The first person I would like to introduce is Dr. Hale Anderson."

The short gray haired doctor stepped up to the makeshift podium in a no-nonsense manner that made no effort to hide the fact that he did not want to be addressing a room full of reporters. "Gus Owens and Walker Owens shared the same blood type, AB negative. This information will be made available to you from one sheet of medical records recorded on the day Gus Owens donated a pint of blood to be used during surgery for his seven-year-old son, Walker Owens, who had been injured during an automobile accident."

"Was the witch driving?" someone yelled.

"According to the medical report, he was a passenger in a taxi that was broad-sided when someone ran a red light." Not wanting to answer any more questions, he stepped back from the microphones and left the podium.

No one spoke as a sandy haired gentleman stepped up to the podium. "I am Dr. Weis, the head of OBGYN at Mountain View Hospital. This afternoon I had the pleasure of meeting with Rosemary Prescott and her sister, Ginger Young. I can assure you that Rosemary Prescott is not pregnant. On the other hand, I had the pleasure of handing Rosemary's sister and bother-in-law the first pictures of their twins due next year."

"I'm told you can't tell them apart. How do you know they didn't switch identities?"

"Fingerprints don't lie." Before anyone could question why the girl's fingerprints were on file, the doctor retreated.

As murmurs went through the crowd, Jerry returned to the microphones.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a few hours ago we received a call from Lea Sakimoto, a makeup artist renowned for her work in science fiction movies. We postponed the earlier scheduled conference so that you would have the opportunity to hear her story firsthand."

Even wearing platform shoes, the tiny woman with shiny black hair falling down her back from a straight center part could barely see over the podium.

"Thank you. Thank you. It is wonderful to receive this most prestigious of awards. I want to thank my parents and my husband for being so supportive."

The looks of confusion had her smiling. "Sorry guys, I couldn't resist saying that because the film you are all raving about was created by me."

The media went crazy.

When control was finally established, Lea continued. "For many years, my father Suzuki Ichiro was the head sci-fi makeup artist for Toho Film Studio in Japan. Thirty-five years ago, Helen Owens asked him to create a costume for her to wear to a costume party where everyone was to dress as a character in a horror story. I assure you, the film shown on television this morning was not the result of a witch casting a spell. Each progression was the result of hours of painstaking work to create the old hag costume Helen Owens commissioned my father to make."

"How do we know you haven't been paid off by Walker Owens to tell us this story?" a CBS reporter yelled out.

"I have turned over an original copy of the film my father made during the making of the costume to the

local police department. I am holding in my hand a copy of that tape and an updated version of the old hag costume I made with today's more sophisticated technology. The quality of each film makes it very obvious which is old and which is new. When you are done asking questions, both tapes will be played."

"Why would Helen Owens travel to Japan to have a costume made?" a reporter from a local Vegas station asked.

"My father was not only light years ahead of anyone else in the business, with his talent it was unlikely that anyone would copy her idea or give away her secret until the night of the party."

"Did someone pay you to enhance the tape?" Mr. New York Times shouted.

"Since I was a child, I was fascinated by the custom. Being in the business, I decided to see if I could improve upon the details. It was a learning experience, nothing more. No one paid me."

"How did Helen Owens get a copy of the tape you made?" a member of the CNN press team asked.

"I sent her a copy."

"Why?" several people yelled at once.

"Pride is a silly thing. But that was why I did it. I was proud of my work. I thought she might enjoy seeing it."

\* \* \* \*

"Well that certainly went well," Joan said as she collapsed onto a chair in Walker's living room. Easing her heels off, she rubbed her toes.

"Now would someone please tell me what happened out there?" When no one said anything, she looked around the room. "Jerry, don't leave me in suspense."

"I believe, like you, he is waiting for answers," Lea said as she walked into the room in front of Walker and Jack. "Could I please have a drink? I still feel a little shaky after facing that sea of sharks."

Walker and Cole made quick work of bartending duties as everyone settled in the living room.

"Did your father make the original film clip or did someone working with him make the clip?" Jerry said to break the ice.

"My father. With the costume being hush-hush, no one but my family saw the costume. What I said to the reporters is true. Helen Owens came to Japan and commissioned Father to make the costume. He spent three months working on details and making the prototypes. Using two cameras to film the work in progress, each segment you saw was a clip of the work with the real dates on the slate board."

"Helen stayed in Japan during this time?" Jerry asked.

"She flew to Hong Kong several times, but most of the time she stayed at the Imperial Palace Hotel. Father wrote notes on everything. On drawings he made of the costume, there are several references to her leaving and what day she was expected back.

"I was ten at the time, but I spent a lot of time after school at the studio pestering more than helping. I remember Helen Owens clearly, because she would order me around like a servant."

"Could we have copies of those drawings?" Jerry asked.

"I will make certain they are made available."

Looking at Walker, she said, "She was a very demanding person. Each time he would be satisfied, she would veto the costume. She wanted more bumps, more bulk, a bigger hump on the back. I must admit, her demands inspired my father and made the costume spectacular."

"When the costume was finished, did she ask for the tapes your father had made?"

"I do not know. I do know one tape was kept at Father's studio; the other was on a shelf in his home office."

"Did Helen bring the costume back to the states with her?"

"No. The party was supposed to take place a few weeks after she returned to the states. It was agreed that Father would travel to the states with the costume. He would then help her into the costume and complete the makeup work on her face."

"Do you know exactly when he came to the states?"

"He didn't. The morning he was to leave he received a call from Mrs. Owens. She said she was ill and would not be attending the party. My mother said she had no heart, no understanding or appreciation for true art or she would have gone to the party anyway."

"What happened to the costume?"

"A month after the canceled trip, Father's lifeless body was found lying on the floor in his studio. The room had been trashed, costumes slashed, both of his cameras and several tapes were missing. The police believed Father walked in on a burglary and during a struggle hit his head."

"What do you believe?"

"Until a few weeks ago when I received an altered copy of the tape, I thought the police were correct and Mother was wrong for insisting that Mrs. Owens had something to do with his death."

"I don't know anything about making costumes, but it would seem to me it would take more than a few days to create the film we saw today," Jack said.

"You are correct. Like I said earlier, the costume fascinated me. Beyond its time thirty-four years ago, I have never seen anything in a movie that came close to its grotesque realistic features. I wanted to see what it would look like with modern material to enhance it. In my spare time, I have been working on the updated version for over a year. Seeing the tape I believe was stolen from Father's studio, I couldn't understand why the dates on the slate board had been altered by several months."

"You had been working on the costume. Had you also made film clips during the process?" Jack asked.

"Pictures of the progression, but there was no slate board to date the steps."

"When did you create the version we saw today?" Jack asked.

"Two weeks ago, when a man handed me a copy of the original tape my father made and asked if I could duplicate the costume with modern material. I only told a half lie when I stated I had sent Helen a copy of the tape. In truth, I have no idea if I gave the updated version of the tape to someone working for her or for you."

Jerry ignored the unspoken question. "Why did you come forward today?"

"When I saw my version of the costume and heard the lies Mrs. Owens was claiming, I knew that she was the reason behind my family's sorrow even if she didn't actually commit the crime. I couldn't let her destroy another family."

"What will you do now?" Walker asked.

"Take a trip to Japan to put flowers on my parents' graves. Seeing Mrs. Owens be made a liar does not avenge Father's murder, but it will be enough to put a smile on my face as I go to sleep each night."

"Thank you for coming forward with the information. Is there anything I can do to repay you for your kindness," Walker said.

"Thank you, but that is not necessary." Looking at her watch, she added. "Maybe there is something. My plane leaves in half an hour; what are the chances of my not missing the flight? I promised my daughters I would be home in time to make them into Raggedy Ann and Andy for Halloween."

"I'll handle it," Joan said as she slipped her aching feet back into her shoes.

"Don't talk until I return," she called over her shoulder as she followed Lea out the door.

"Where is the second original tape?" Jack asked.

"Destroyed along with all the copies. The only hope I had of destroying Helen's credibility was to switch out the old eight millimeter film with the newer version and hope that the experts would back our claim that the tape was recently made," Walker said.

"How did you figure out who had made the original tape?"

"A friend that writes sci-fi books knows everything there is to know about the industry. He told me Lea had the best reputation in the business. Until she called this morning, I had no idea her father had made the costume," Walker said.

Pulling a cell phone out of his pocket, Jack walked out on the small balcony as he took a phone call.

Patting her stomach, Ginger looked around the room. "Anybody besides Hansel and Gretel hungry?"

\* \* \* \*

"She's off. There was no way security was going to let her on that flight, so I chartered a plane. A limo will have her at her front door by six."

Grabbing a plate, she selected a piece of medium rare prime rib as she said, "What did I miss?"

"Jack had to leave, other than that..." Cinnamon stopped talking as gray smoke filled the center of the room.

"You didn't miss anything." An ugly old crone wearing a plain black cotton dress that fell in a straight line to the floor materialized through the plume of gray smoke. On her shriveled up, open-pored, toothless face, her nose looked ten times too big. Her eyes, sunken in their sockets, were framed with heavy drooping eyelids and bushy gray brows that made her eyes look like a beady rodent. Coarse gray whiskers growing out of a black mole on her cheek and on her chin finished off the costume.

"Salina?" several people said at once.

"I don't believe it," Walker muttered.

"Believe it. She lost a bet." Caitlin wearing a black pointy hat tilted low over one eye, a V-cut black dress with a handkerchief hem showing plenty of leg without being indecent, fishnet stockings and three inch heels breezed through the smoke.

Herb dressed as Count Dracula and Gus dressed in black tails, a ruffled shirt and furry over sized wolf paws materialized from a plume of red smoke.

"Word of advice, Salina, never make a bet with a person who can read minds," Rosemary said as she struggled not to laugh at the misery written all over Salina's face.

"Like the paws, Dad. Do you think you could have given us a hint about the tape?" Walker asked.

"Not allowed. You thought to call your sci-fi friend, we were able to nudge him towards giving Lea's name instead of the current Hollywood golden boy of horror films, but you still had the choice of whether or not to contact her," Gus said.

"Without Lea Sakimoto coming forward, our statements wouldn't have been as impressive to a jury or the general public," Jerry said.

"True. But she did, so what didn't happen is immaterial."

"I understand the need for Lea to find peace over her father's death, but why did you, Salina and Walker have to live with the lie Helen created?" Rosemary asked.

"Because I used my power inappropriately," Salina said.

"You threatened her. Obviously, it didn't work. The fact that the creature was created from a costume proves that," Joan said in defense of her friend.

"You're wrong." When a long knurled finger pointed towards the television, a scene instantly appeared.

"This is how Helen looked the day I visited her. At forty-three, her skin and hair glowed with health. Now look at her two years later. The day before she had her first plastic surgery."

Gone was a woman who could pass for ten years younger than her age. With permanent bags under her eyes and jowls that were starting to sag, she looked old and tired.

"Surely that could have been caused by the stress of worrying that someone would find out she'd had a man murdered?" Joan said.

"That would be true if you had a conscience; Helen doesn't," Gus said.

"Okay, so she aged a little faster, big deal, surgery took care of that. What you guys went through doesn't seem fair," Joan said.

"Look at me, Joan, what do you see?"

"Except that you need to hunch over like you're old and decrepit, I see a great wicked witch costume."

"Wrong. You are looking at Helen, or at least what she would look like without a million bucks worth of surgery."

Joan opened her mouth to speak than closed it again without saying a word.

"Can I ditch this skin now?"

Caitlin waved her hand. When Salina looked down, she was dressed as Lilly from The Munster's television show. "You could have picked Morticia from the Adams Family; her dress at least had style."

"I can change you back to how you appeared when you arrived," Caitlin said as she arched a brow questioningly.

"You would, too, wouldn't you?"

"With pleasure," Caitlin said with an impish grin.

"What did you two bet?" Rosemary asked.

"I said she couldn't go an hour without talking about clothing, hair or makeup. The winner would have the pleasure of being able to dress the loser for twenty-four hours; obviously I won."

When it looked like the women were going to talk babies, Cole, Jerry and Walker staked out a different section of the living room.

"What are the chances of you giving me some information on what was behind Sidney's offer to sell me the casino?" Walker never took his eyes off his father as he asked the question.

"None."

"Can you tell me anything about the counterfeited bills dumped on the casino?"

"You know the rules. Just remember nothing is ever black and white." Gus didn't bat an eye when a low rumble echoed off the walls.

"You said that once before. I thought you were talking about Sidney's relationship with Helen. Are you saying there's more to the situation?"

"Sorry son, I can't say more."



## Chapter 38

Two days after the media fiasco, everything had settled down to a dull roar.

A few die-hard journalists were still hanging around the lobby trying to get an interview with Walker and Rosemary.

Jerry was putting in extra hours handling the legal ramifications surrounding Helen's accusations. Taking into consideration how the tapes had been planted in her home, they had decided not to press charges, but the law and the media had other ideas. The words blackmail and extortion were stressed in every headline story.

Sidney, having been told Walker was backing out of the deal for the time being, had not been pleasant during their last conversation.

Rose had said nothing about leaving Vegas or about remodeling the section of the casino he had promised her in exchange for her staying a month.

Jack, reappearing the night before, had given them no new information on the counterfeiting ring.

At the sound of the office door opening, Walker looked up. "What brings you down here? I thought you were sleeping in."

"It's past one. You're working too hard, how about taking a break?"

"What do you have in mind?"

Walking around the desk, she sat on his lap, placed her hands on his cheeks and lowered her mouth to his. The kiss was slowly seductive as she teased his lips apart, nipped and dueled with his tongue and ran her fingers through his hair. Pulling back, she looked pleased at the hungry look in his eyes.

"If you follow me upstairs, I just might surprise you." Grabbing his hand, she pulled him out of his seat and out the door without a word of protest from him.

Walking up the stairs, he would have sworn he heard someone whisper, "It had to be you..."

Walking into the living room, Walker didn't know what to think. Joe and Juanita were standing by the sliding glass door beaming. Next to them stood Pesty, Martin, and Cole's parents, Virginia and Walt wearing looks of smug happiness.

Wolf, sitting next to the swing where Bobby was sleeping, moved his paw as one of the two cocker pups Virginia had adopted nipped at his leg. The sight of Rocky wearing a pretty pale lemon yellow dress and Bob in a suit confused him even more. With Cinn, Gin, Cole, Pagan, Jack and four ghosts filling up the rest of the room, he knew his thoughts of hot and steamy sex certainly weren't going to materialize any time soon.

"Walker, not long ago you said I needed to make an honest man out of you. I am asking you now, will you marry me?"

"Yes." His voice was loud enough for everyone one to hear, but his eyes never left Rosemary.

"Would you be willing to repeat our vows three times in front of hundreds of people?"

"I'll marry you a hundred times in front of a million people, if it will make you happy."

Tissues dabbed at tear moistened eyes, but no one made a sound.

When the pastor from the church Juanita attended stepped into the room, the significance of the elegant white calf length dress Rosemary was wearing, with the cat's eye necklace he had given her a lifetime ago hung around her neck, registered.

Taking her hands in his, he placed a kiss in the palm of each hand.

"Let's get married, Rosie."

## Epilogue

"I can't believe you wanted to come to New Orleans on our honeymoon to walk through The City Of the Dead," Walker said as they walked hand in hand between rows of family crypts.

"Like you didn't understand why I wanted us to get married three times?"

"Oh, I understood that completely but you are miscounting, we repeated our vows four times. The Elvis impersonator during the reception at the casino for the staff was my personal favorite."

"I give you points for being a really good sport, but the look on your face when Elvis stepped onto the stage was comical."

"Actually, I thought Salina had somehow orchestrated that one."

"No, Shelly from the florist shop told me Jose had started a betting pool saying the Golden God of Vegas wouldn't agree to something that foolish. I figured hitting his pocket book was the best way to pay him back for the stunt he pulled."

"From the look on his face I'd say you succeeded."

"You have to admit it was fun. With weddings in Texas, Kansas and Vegas, no one can ever say we are not truly and properly married."

"The rings still have me puzzled. The last time I saw them, Dad was wearing his and Salina's ring was on his pinky."

"Joan had them. She promised Gus that she would give them to you when you were ready to appreciate their meaning."

"Are you comfortable wearing Salina's ring?"

Admiring the white gold band of three interlocked spiraling rings with a sapphire placed in the center of each spiral, Rosemary said, "The ring is perfect. The Celtic design is called Triskele. The three spiraling rings stand for the sun, afterlife and reincarnation. Considering our past and our parents' ability to visit, there isn't a ring made that could have more meaning to me."

Stopping, he pulled her into his arms. "Thank you for making an honest man of me and for three wedding nights to remember. Not every groom gets to peel his wife's wedding dress off her three different times."

"Come to think of it, that created some fond memories for me, too."

Before Walker could kiss her, she pulled out of the embrace. "Look, we found them."

Made of white marble with a black marble slab for a top, the crypt had a small angel sitting at each corner. A large gray marble basket holding roses sat in the center of the crypt's top.

\* \* \* \*

*Rosemary Lynne Hall*

*June 11, 1823—March 10, 1851*

*May All Your Dreams*

*Come True*

*Sweet Dreams Rosie*

—

*Anthony Robert Hall*

*March 5—March 10 1851*

*Son Of My Heart*

*Beloved Wife and Son of*

*Walker Lee Williams Jr.*

—

*Walker Lee Williams Jr.*

*May 9, 1815—May 9, 1851*

*Be Careful What You Wish For*

*Money Couldn't Mend*

*His Broken Heart*

\* \* \* \*

"Guess that answers how my life ended."

A voice, heavily laced with a French accent came out of the fog slowly rising around them. "Actually, it was just the beginning. Looks like you took my advice, young man, by looking for Rose outside of New Orleans. Maybe this time around you will both find happiness."

"Do you see her?" Walker asked.

"No. But I like her advice. Let's go create a home full of happiness," Rosemary said.

"I'm right behind you, Rosie. Lead the way."

\* \* \* \*

"Pesty, can you hear me?" Caitlin asked.

"I hear you. You know the saying, 'all's well that ends well'? There were a few bumps in the road but everything turned out just fine."

"Well, don't pat yourself on the back too hard, some creative intervention helped. Which is why I'm here. We are under strict instructions not to interfere with Cinnamon's future."

"Oh, dear."

"What does, 'oh dear,' mean?" Herb's voice boomed.

"Nothing. Really. This time it will work out perfectly. I promise."

## 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.

You are invited to visit the author's website at:

[rhondaplummer.wcpauthor.com/](http://rhondaplummer.wcpauthor.com/)

For your reading pleasure, we invite you to visit our web bookstore

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Visit [www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com) for information on additional titles by this and other authors.