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## CONTENTS

[Published by](#)

[Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek Press:](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[About the Author](#)

[For your reading pleasure, we invite you to visit our web bookstore](#)

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **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.

### *Abracadabra*

Rosemary Prescott, a feisty, outspoken, intuitive psychic always walks away a winner from games of chance. Then her luck hits a brick wall or more precisely, Walker Owens the handsome, sandy haired devil who owns Dreamland Casino. Accepting a challenge to work for Walker for 30 days, Rosemary is determined to keep her independence by outwitting a 300 year-old spell, and a meddling aunt's wayward magic.

Walker is being blackmailed. With 30 days to comply with the blackmailer's demands, the last thing he should do is offer Rosemary a job, but he needs to know how she is "heating" And if he can convince himself that there is nothing more to the offer he can dismiss the chemistry between them as nothing more than temporary insanity brought on by stress and some overly imaginative dreams.

With the ghostly appearances of their parents stirring up mischief, a plot to strip Walker of his inheritance, and past life dreams disrupting their nights, Walker and Rosemary learn that loving the right person doesn't mean losing your independence.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **Dedication**

~~For Helen~~

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Prologue

*Outskirts of London, 1700*

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

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

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

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

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

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

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## Chapter 1

*Dreamland Casino, Las Vegas*

"Is he a good kisser?"

"Go away," Cinnamon Prescott said with a hiss.

A warm, golden funnel, heavily scented with Opium perfume, swirled around Cinnamon. A paper napkin danced across the Formica tabletop. In the center of the table, the flame in the votive candle went out. The tea Cinnamon had let grow cold slouched over the rim of the mug.

As the mini tornado waltzed across the pale blue tabletop, gold star shaped confetti appeared. Reaching the booth's navy blue vinyl seat, the funnel hovered. As the gold stars faded, Salina Owens' ghostly presence materialized.

Salina's blonde hair was a riot of corkscrew curls. A skin tight, metallic gold bodysuit's V-neck ended a hair above her navel. The bodysuit and ultra thin strands of gold, roped around Salina's neck, shimmered and sparkled.

Uninvited company was bad enough. One who made Cinnamon feel like a frumpy bag lady sitting next to a beautiful golden cat on the prowl was just plain unfair.

"Don't scowl," Salina chided. "It's not hospitable."

Swallowing a sarcastic comeback, Cinnamon arched a brow. "Who is 'he'?"

"The man you're mooning over."

"There is no man." The half-truth held a sharp bite. Since awakening, Cinnamon had been sending messages to her deceased mother, Caitlin. She had wanted—correction, *needed*—her advice, and a big dose of motherly pampering.

Salina was a walking encyclopedia of advice, as long as it circled around clothing, shoes, hair, shoes, lingerie, shoes, then looped back to clothing. Pampering involved a pedicure and full body massage, not a hug, soothing words and a batch of homemade cookies.

"Bullshit! You're young, pretty, single, and sitting alone in a café at five in the morning.

"By the way, that sloppy ponytail looks awful. With your red hair, stop wearing pumpkin; the color makes you look sick. And baggy sweatpants and t-shirts are an eyesore that should be outlawed. Instead of a cup of tea, why didn't you head to the lounge to drown your problems in something sweet, fuzzy and potent? Who's the guy?"

"Thanks for the kind words, and oh-so-not-asked-for advice. I had a dream. Couldn't go back to sleep. As for the tea I wanted something calming, not stimulating. Satisfied?"

"Good thing I'm accustomed to the Prescott sarcasm or I'd think you didn't like me. There's a fully stocked kitchen in the penthouse. You didn't need to come down to the casino to stick a tea bag in hot water."

*Hell's bells.* Cinnamon arched a brow and tapped a finger against her arm.

Salina smiled, fluttered her fake eyelashes, and purred. "I have all the time in the world. Tell me about the

dream. I'm here to help."

"You are my brother-in-law's mother. In case you've forgotten, you are dead, as in no longer breathing. No offense, but I don't want your advice. Besides, you couldn't change anything if you knew."

Salina shivered. Her assets jiggled like Jell-O.

"I'm not dead. Your folks, Walker's papa Gus, and I are simply in a different dimension. And don't forget we're related. It might be distant, but we share the same Grandmamma's gypsy blood. So think of me as your older sister."

Cinnamon snorted.

"Today is your lucky day. I have officially become your fairy godmother."

"This has to be a cosmic joke. Where are the cameras? Mom has to be hiding somewhere, because Dad wouldn't participate in a candid camera joke."

"Lower your voice or everyone in the casino will hear you. This isn't a joke; being a fairy godmother is serious business. And I plan on being five-star rated, the best of the best. Your mother is under strict orders not to interfere."

"Fairy godmothers are sweet, chubby, and maternal. In that outfit and without an ounce of fat on your frame, you don't come close to fitting the part."

"A compliment, how nice. I'm the new improved version. And I design better outfits than the cutesy prom dress Cinderella wore to the ball. Just think of the fun we will have making you a knock-out wardrobe."

"Go. Leave. Do not return. I do not need or want a fairy godmother."

Salina bristled.

Cinnamon watched Salina's lips move, but couldn't hear what she was saying. Pounding the table with her fist, Salina frowned when the table didn't rattle. Swiping a spoon, she smiled with satisfaction when it clattered against the tile floor. "Right now I'd love nothing more than to zap you into a..."

A low rumble vibrated the air.

Slowly running her tongue over her cherry red lips, Salina nodded. Meekly, she said, "Yes, Warren." Warren, a supervisor, commonly called a guardian angel by earthbound souls, also worked with Cinnamon's parents and Gus. Rattling the air with clapping rolls of thunder when one of his charges said something out of line was his way of attracting their attention.

"When I lived on this side of the veil, I was selfish, self-centered and vain. I used my powers to please me."

Salina snapped her fingers. The cup of cold tea setting on the table began to steam.

"I've changed. You look like hell, drink your tea. You and I are going to become such good friends."

"Salina, get real. Warren's warning proved my point."

"Temporary setback. Nothing more."

"I don't want your help."

"Too bad." Salina wore a smug smile.

"Ask Warren to assign you to someone else. I'll sell my soul, and name my first baby after him. The sky's the limit; all he needs to do is sic you on someone else."

"Not going to happen. I want my powers back. To get full access to my spell casting powers, I have to prove I will use the power for something besides zapping idiots into mice and old hags."

Cinnamon arched a perfectly shaped brow. "I know you lost your powers because you turned Gus's wife into an old hag when she refused to divorce him. Are you saying that wasn't the first time you misused your powers?"

"Of course not. You know the rules great grandmamma set in the spell; abuse them—lose them."

"That's it? You never cast any other spells?"

Salina's sigh was as dramatic as her green glitter eye shadow. "Like I said, I was into me. I cast spells to satisfy my whims and my needs. To prove that I have grown spiritually, I need an opportunity to prove I can use my powers in a more giving manner."

"So I get to be your guinea pig? Lucky me!"

"Yes, you are and don't forget it."

Eyeing Salina's jumpsuit, Cinnamon smirked. "What about vanity?"

"Fortunately, vanity isn't a sin. Between you and me, my sense of style makes Warren smile."

"More likely it blinds him to your wily ways."

"True. Now tell me about the hot body you want to bed."

"I don't..."

"Cinn, at puberty I was given two powers. Besides being a first class sorcerer I was given the power to grant wishes. To do that, I get flashes of insight and snapshot visions. Between the two, I receive an overview of what has happened in the person's life and what manifested their wish. Also, your mom is reading your mind. And we have this really cool telepathic thing going. Now, who is he?"

"Hell's bells," Cinnamon muttered. Caitlin had been granted the gift of hearing; she could hear everything a person thought. She had no shame when it came to reading her three daughters' thoughts. Cinnamon knew she wouldn't be able to wiggle her way through a lie.

"Jack Cutter."

"The FBI cutie. Is he still investigating the counterfeit sting?" A few days before her sister Rosemary and Walker, Salina's son, married, a sophisticated group of thieves targeted Dreamland Casino for a counterfeit scam. Feeding twenty, fifty and hundred dollar phony bills into slot machines, they stole a little over a hundred thousand dollars from the casino.

"Yes, Jack's still in charge of the investigation."

"You're hanging out at the casino hoping he will show up so you can play patty ass. Caitlin neglected to mention that Jack is your soul mate."

Cinnamon squirmed. Her mother, a pro at letting her displeasure be known, would do more than rattle the air with thunder if she so much as stretched the truth by a hair's breath.

"I'm babysitting Wolf until Rosemary and Walker get back." Hearing his name, the big gray Irish wolfhound, currently curled up under the table, whimpered. Rubbing his big head, Cinnamon settled him down. Fairy godmother, or not, admitting the truth to Salina was against her better judgment. She also knew if she didn't, her mother would.

"I don't know who my soul mate is. The destiny dreams are still casting a shadow on his face. Besides, it wasn't a destiny dream that woke me up."

Salina cocked her head. "Something tells me the easy gig as a fairy godmother just took a sharp negative turn. What happened?"

"Nothing unusual." *For me!* Cinn's green eyes turned as dark as dry moss. As she stared, without seeing, her thoughts traveled inward to revisit the dream that wasn't a dream. Her fingers, gripping the warm cobalt blue mug, were white.

"I'm suspended above a multi car and truck pileup. I hear horns honking and car security bells insistently dinging. Under that layer of noise I hear crying, whimpering and curses. A whiff of gasoline reaches me an instant before the air fills with terrified screams. In the darkness, glowing human auras are filled with panic and pain. The auras blend and expand, as they reach out for comfort. Not until I feel heat touch my face do I realize the red and yellow glow is a combination of auras and fire.

"I'm drawn to a woman and a young girl trapped inside a car. The metallic scent of blood is overpowering. The little girl is crying and wiping blood off her mother's cheek. She tells me her name is Kimberly and she thinks her mommy is dead. When I say her mom is only sleeping, she gives me a weak smile."

Cinnamon blinked. The insistent ringing of a slot machine, a high pitched squeal; the scents and sounds of life such as it is, in a windowless casino in the wee hours before dawn washed over her.

"Now that you know what happened, please leave. I'll be fine."

"I'm not going anywhere. By itself, being able to see auras isn't a paranormal gift." It wasn't a question. Salina didn't so much as blink as she awaited the answer.

"I was given the gift of healing." As she emphasized each word, Cinnamon's edge of frustration hung in the air.

The dumb blonde, airhead, bimbo on the prowl, persona Salina had mastered, disappeared. She took her time answering, picked her words carefully. "Astral travel. Not a nightmare, but for a healer it could be close, very close.

"You were given a profound responsibility. The ability to choose who lives or dies has to be a heavy burden. In the wrong hands, your gift could be a powerful tool."

"I thought auras only showed emotions and, to an extent, personality traits."

"For most that would be true. My gift goes a step beyond. Different colors and the intensity of a color show where there is disease. New injuries glow like a neon light. Surgeries and old injuries have their own auras. You have a strong black line from your tummy tuck. There are no lines at your breasts, so they're real."

Salina raised her eyebrows. "You got that right."

"A faint line at your throat makes me think you had your tonsils removed when you were young. A fuzzy smudge just below your left shoulder tells me it was broken, healed, but probably caused you pain." More could be said, but she wasn't in the mood to volunteer the information.

"I'm impressed. Broke the bone just below the shoulder when I fell off a horse. It bothered me every time it rained. The tonsils were removed when I was six.

"Taking you to a cocktail party would have been a blast. What can you tell me about the waitress? Bet she had those puppies enlarged."

"She's tired. The rest is none of your business."

"Touché. Back to the dream, did you heal the woman and child?"

Cinnamon pressed her aching temples with her index fingers.

"I had to divide my energy between the child and mother. The child had a broken arm. Healing energy mended the break. Except for one cut that would have left a scar on her face, I didn't work on her minor abrasions. The mother had a concussion and internal injuries. I did what I could to stop the bleeding and kept her alive until the paramedics arrived.

"When I woke up, my body was shaking, and I had a splitting headache. The headache only happens when the amount of power I've used depletes my energy. I came down here to get sugar into my system, and truthfully, I wasn't in the mood to be alone.

"Be a good fairy godmother; drop the subject."

Tilting her head, Salina nodded. Her eyes narrowed; she nodded a second time.

Cinnamon stiffened her back. It was so not fair that her mother was feeding Salina information.

"Okay, we can talk about the *change* later. You have a recurring dream."

"Hell's bells, fire and damnation! The dream has nothing to do with my destiny dreams."

"Humor me."

Cinnamon crossed her arms, arched a brow and said nothing.

Gardenias, her mother's favorite perfume and calling card or warning depending on the situation, tickled Cinnamon's nose. Waiting for her mother to appear, she bit back a smile of success.

"Good try. Your mother is not going to rescue you. Spit it out, now."

*Hell's bells.*

"The dream always begins with me standing in tall sea grass, on a cliff overlooking the ocean. Waves crashing against the rocks below me sing, or talk, or maybe it's an illusion. Whatever the truth, I am given information. When the voice stops, I walk along a sandy path towards a forest.

"End of dream!

"I've told you everything I remember. Now are you satisfied?"

"Caitlin says you're not telling me everything."

"Yes, I ... oh, I know what Mom's talking about. Right after the dreams started there was more to the dream. I remember a low-lying fog emitting a soft white light and golden beams of light jetting through the pine branches lit the path. The destination was a small clearing where a man waited. He sat on a large boulder shaped like a cupped hand. Shadows veiled his features. We talked. I remember thinking the man was impatient and didn't trust anything I said."

"Finally, we're getting somewhere. What do you talk about?"

"Sex and religion."

Salina's laugh was deep and throaty. "Good try. Now tell me the truth."

"Truth, I have no idea. Logic says I gave him the information that was given to me when I stood on the cliff, but I have no memory of what was said. And we haven't gotten anywhere because after the first five or six dreams I stopped remembering anything beyond standing on the cliff and walking towards the forest."

"Like your destiny dreams, his face was hidden. I would say that is getting somewhere. What type of clothing did he wear?"

"Salina, you are the only one who would ask that. He wore black; jeans, boots, short sleeved t-shirt, everything was black. The granite gray rock and the black create a perfect camouflage."

"How often do you have these dreams?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "They are spaced oddly. Sometimes they come in clusters, but mainly they are weeks to months apart."

"What are your feelings for this unknown guy?"

"I saw him maybe ten times before the memories stopped at the edge of the forest. I don't have any feelings for him."

"Liar."

*Hell's bells.* Did her mother read her mind and pass on that tidbit of information or was Salina that good at knowing people's wishes?

Unlike her sister Ginger, Cinnamon wasn't a medium. Being able to see and talk to her parents for the last few months had been an unexpected and treasured gift. But sitting in a café talking to Salina was surreal.

Salina being given the job of fairy godmother didn't make any sense until she thought about her mother. Protective, loving, supportive, and outspoken, Caitlin would rearrange the universe to protect her daughters. If she couldn't do the job, she would make sure someone else helped. Because Salina was Walker's mother and a distant cousin that shared their mystical *gift*, she knew her mother would have no qualms in passing on confidential information if she thought it would help.

"Is everything we talk about confidential? And yes, I know my mother is picking my thoughts dry."

"Then the answer is yes. Spit out the question that's burning your gut and has you threatening me."

"Did you ever regret losing your powers?"

"You can't lose your ... Ohmigod, you're thinking of having sex—with, with Jack. And here I thought you were the textbook, 'I want to please everyone', middle child.

"I regretted not being able to cast spells every minute of every day. I had to pick up my clothes, make the bed on the days the maid didn't clean, and stand at a hot stove to bake the chocolate chip cookies Walker loved. Instead of wearing outfits I designed, I was stuck buying clothes off the rack. Let me tell you, fixing my hair was a nightmare."

"I can see how life became a living hell. Did you miss being able to grant wishes?"

"I could never use the power to grant a wish for my own benefit. Maybe because of that the power diminished, but was never taken from me."

"Explain *diminished*." Cinnamon took a sip of her tea.

"I had a better wish list than Santa Claus. After the incident with Helen, the ability to hear wishes became sporadic. It was a kick to grant a wish, but I didn't miss..."

Like a bowling ball picking up speed, thunder rumbled. An explosion, like a bullet hitting a keg of dynamite, sent shock waves through the air and rocked the table.

Salina flinched.

Licking her bottom lip, she steadied her breath.

With less force, thunder rolled over them.

"All right, jeez, I head you the first time.

"Here's the truth; I screwed up that power, too. I granted wishes to people I liked, and wishes that caught my fancy or tugged at my heart. It was my power so I did what I wanted, when I wanted; if I wasn't interested, I ignored what I heard." She shrugged her shoulders as if it weren't a big deal.

"How could you ignore someone's wish?"

"How can you think about giving up the ability to save a life?"

"My first official act as your fairy godmother is to inform you that Jack Cutter will be arriving at the casino in about four hours. You look like hell. Change your clothes, better yet burn them, and do something with your hair."

Salina disappeared.

Catching the waitress's eye, Cinnamon ordered a plate size cinnamon roll and more hot tea.

Would she miss being a healer? In one respect, the answer was simple: no. She was tired of being yanked out of her sleep, transported to unknown places, drained of energy, and more often than not, waking up disoriented and soaked in sweat.

Cinnamon rubbed her throbbing temples; she knew she could give all of that up, easily.

On the other hand, being a healer was an intricate part of who she was and what she did, daily.

Cinnamon had a strong suspicion that if she gave up that part of herself she would regret the decision forever.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## Chapter 2

Clouds of steam drifted around the bathroom's open door. With a damp towel barely covering her from tits to ass, Cinnamon's eyes narrowed as she surveyed the bedroom. Dumped in a pile, on the winter white carpet, was every piece of clothing from the closet. The drawers in a Queen Ann dresser were askew. The neatly folded contents were strewn across the king size bed.

"Salina. You are fired. And furthermore..."

Like an engine backfiring, sound bounced off the celery green walls. Each explosion generated gray puffs of smoke. Flashes of white light zinged around the room. Rays of pink light bounced across the top of the bed. Clothes were lifted, hung on hangers and placed back in the closet. An apple green silk blouse and a lacy purple bra whizzing across the room collided, untangled, and continued on their way. Sweaters, panties, and bras neatly folded themselves. Floating through the air, they neatly stacked themselves in the drawers.

As the last dresser drawer slid closed, a piece of paper, clothing, and shoes floated down from the ceiling.

Cinnamon snagged the piece of paper floating towards her. "My delivery's rusty, but when it comes to style I know my stuff. Salina, FGM, in training."

\* \* \* \*

Joan Marks, Walker's secretary, was giving Wolf a homemade doggie biscuit when Cinnamon entered her office.

In the two weeks since the wedding, Joan hadn't seen Cinn wear anything but casual slacks, tops, and well-worn jeans.

"Wow. New outfit, a makeup job Mary Kay would be proud of, and a simple hairstyle that probably took half an hour to achieve. Let me see the shoes. And to die for heels that match the sweater. Did Santa arrive early or did I miss putting something on the calendar?"

"It's too much. I'll run upstairs and change."

"Don't you dare! You look great. The cashmere sweater is a shade of pink I've never seen, but it makes your green eyes pop. The wool slacks are a perfect fit. The shoes are pure sexy fluff. Only another female would know how hard it is to achieve that kind of casual sexy togetherness. If I didn't know better I'd say Salina had a hand in this."

"You and Salina were best friends. Can you imagine her as a fairy godmother?" Joan met Salina on a Greyhound bus when they were seventeen-year-old runaways. Aware of the three-hundred-year-old spell, and the relationship between Salina and the triplets, she wasn't afraid of or in awe of their powers.

When Joan stopped laughing, mascara lined her cheeks, and she had a serious case of the hiccups.

With one eye on a hand held mirror, and one on Cinnamon, Joan repaired the damage to her makeup.

"You're serious," was said between hiccups.

"She gave me the good news a few hours ago."

"In Geppetto's café?"

Cinnamon nodded.

"Well, that explains that mystery!"

Joan hiccupped. Placing her hand on Joan's shoulder, Cinnamon counted to five before speaking. "What mystery?"

The hiccups were gone.

"Thanks. Can I learn that trick?"

"It's simple. All you have to do is realign the grid pattern to relax the muscles around your ribs and diaphragm."

"I'll stick to holding my breath for sixty seconds.

"You were the talk of the gossip mill this morning."

"Why?"

"The casino is worse than a nosy family and trouble-making siblings rolled into one. Being the first to tattle gives a person bragging rights. So naturally, the night shift wanted to know whom you were talking to at five in the morning. When it was established that you were alone, the rumors became more outlandish with each telling.

"The betting pool narrowed it down to two choices. You were lacing the tea with booze because your heart is broken. Drunker than a skunk, you were talking to yourself. Or as Jill, your waitress claims, you looked like you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. No booze, and you were talking to Wolf.

"Everyone knows all food establishments are off limits to Wolf. Witnesses swear you staggered your way to the elevator. You know which scenario the odds are favoring."

"I know the rules. I tried leaving Wolf in the security room, but he started howling. To save their eardrums, the security team on duty promised not to notice that Wolf was in the café."

Cinnamon chuckled. "Imagine the odds the truth would generate. I'll let it slip that I snuck Wolf into the café. And I'll protect the security team by saying they gave me a lecture about the rules."

"That should work. Next time Salina pops into the casino, ignore her."

"Have you ever known Salina to disappear without making a scene if she's mad?"

"Never, but there's always a first time."

"Somehow I don't think it will happen in our lifetime. Can you place a bet for me?"

"I'll add it to my twenty. We can go shopping on the winnings."

Picking up the ringing phone, Joan listened to the caller. "Jack Cutter's on his way up. Guess that answers why you're dressed up. When he leaves, you can tell me about this fairy godmother business."

\* \* \* \*

The window in Walker's office offered a bird's eye view of the Vegas strip and the final approach to the airport.

Cinnamon rubbed a spot behind Wolf's ear as she watched the early morning sun radiate off the gleaming silver fuselage of a private jet as it landed. As she watched a gust of wind gently rock the wings on another plane, in a long line of planes on final approach, Cinnamon chided herself for being nervous.

It wasn't as if she was going to get Jack in a compromising position on top of Walker's mahogany desk. Then again, if she could get Jack backed up against the desk, a quick twist on one high heel could have her toppling into him. Like dominos, they could tumble onto the desk. Her on top, the hard lean length of him—

The phone on Joan's desk rang.

Someone getting off the elevator called out a greeting.

Wolf whimpered.

All reminders that she and Jack would not be alone.

For a dog as big as a pony, Wolf's bark was soft.

Cinnamon turned.

Jack stood just inside the door. His soft silver blue aura soothed her soul, but didn't stop a thousand butterflies from fluttering around her stomach.

Dressed casually in pressed black jeans, black boots and a soft blue western cut shirt, Jack looked more like a cowboy than FBI. His sharp features and square jaw fit together in a way that was interestingly perfect.

"Morning." He'd flown two states out of his way, on the flimsy excuse of delivering a message that could be said in two minutes. And the best he could say was, 'morning'. He needed his damn head examined, or a good swift kick in the ass, or both. Why had he come? It was easier to talk to a madman welding a gun than to get his tongue to work when he was in the same room as Cinn.

Yet, he'd detoured to Vegas because he knew she was here. The chance to see her, if only for an hour, had outweighed all logic. Now he stood, tongue tied, feeling foolish and totally out of his element.

A man would have to be dead to not appreciate the way Cinn's outfit skimmed her hourglass figure. He would have to be blind not to notice how her emerald green eyes danced with mischief. And he would have to be brainless to not want to burn his fingers on the golden fire woven through her red hair. Jack was not blind, dead, or brainless. He left the judgment on foolish open; he still couldn't think of a single sentence that wouldn't make him sound like an idiot.

His world, the one created when he agreed to become an undercover agent was packed full of lies and danger. There wasn't a place on earth safe enough to tuck pretty wives and innocent children when you dealt with human scum with no conscience.

If Cinnamon ever found out the things he had done to stay alive, to save lives and to dig his way through a pile of shit to reach the truth, he knew she would never speak to him. So why had he put himself in this position?

Bob Lowe, head of Dreamland security, walked into the office. Rocky, his wife, liked to remind him he had rotten timing.

Ignoring the thick as mud sexual tension, Bob focused on Jack. "Tell me the counterfeiters have been

caught and you'll make my day."

Work was a neutralizer, safe familiar ground. Jack's tongue untangled. His locked jaw popped.

He gave Bob a curt nod.

"If you've got a crystal ball in your back pocket I might be able to oblige." Over the last several months, the luck Jack had depended upon had run bone dry. If he were superstitious, he'd hunt down the person who'd cast a spell shutting down all but his most basic senses and shoot him.

"Fresh out. Got a call yesterday about a casino in Washington State getting hit with counterfeit bills. Was it the same guys?"

"The serial numbers don't match the bills dropped here, or the casino in Texas. So far that's all we know."

"That doesn't sound good. What do the casino's surveillance tapes show?"

"The originals are on their way to headquarters. I have copies, but haven't had a chance to look at them."

Cinnamon's lips, slightly parted, gave a hint of a smile. "If you want an extra pair of eyes, I'd be happy to watch the tapes with you." When the counterfeit ring hit Dreamland, they spent hours staring at the casino's surveillance tapes. It had been Rosemary's intuitive powers that tallied the odds and identified the crooks and pattern.

Watching surveillance tapes was scraping the underside of a barrel when it came to romantic. But candlelight, a tub of popcorn, and cozying up next to Jack on the couch to watch the tapes and share that popcorn might work. She could offer him a bite of popcorn; he would lick the butter off her fingers. As their eyes locked, he would lean down, place his warm lips on hers, their tongues would touch, sparks would ignite, as he—

Wolf gave three sharp barks.

Rosemary laughed as the dog's large paws plastered her against the office door.

With a thud, Cinnamon landed back in reality.

\* \* \* \*

Sitting on the floor in Joan's office, Rosemary half-heartedly tried to convince Wolf he wasn't a lap dog. "What's this about Salina being your fairy godmother?"

"Who told you?"

"Just before the plane landed, Mom, Dad, Salina, and Gus popped in for a visit. They have..."

"You were able to see them?" Cinnamon demanded.

"All four of them?" Joan added.

"Yes. Walker and I saw them, talked to them, and watched Salina's fashion show of fairy godmother outfits. Thankfully, we were the only ones in first class and the flight attendant was busy in the galley."

Cinnamon groaned.

Joan laughed.

"They have a couple of ideas on why we are still able to see them," Rosemary added. "One possibility is that because Walker and I are related through our great, great, whatever grandmamma, the shared bloodline is creating a new power."

"Not a bad idea. That same bloodline connection could extend to me," Cinnamon said.

"It doesn't explain my being able to see Salina."

"When?" Cinnamon asked.

"This morning just before Wolf came trotting through the door, Salina appeared. She stood in front of the office doors and gave me one of her sassy winks."

"What was she wearing?" Cinnamon asked.

"Gold, lots of gold. She appeared and disappeared so quickly I didn't pay attention to the outfit."

"Gold jumpsuit. She had it on when she visited me in the café."

"Same on the plane. When a patch of sunlight hit the material, it was blinding."

"Please tell me the other theory doesn't include one of Aunt Pesty's wayward spells," Cinnamon pleaded.

"Can't do that. According to Salina, she asked Aunt Pesty a little bitty favor. Aunt Pesty, being her normal absentminded self, screwed it up. Warren is making Salina responsible for what happened."

"Which makes us able to see her? That doesn't make sense unless Aunt Pesty cast a spell to introduce me to my soul mate and they already know it's going to cause a nuclear disaster."

"Wrong." Sparks of red shot off Salina's gold jumpsuit. With her hands propped on her hips, she glared at them. "How, I ask you, can I correct something when I don't know what Pesty screwed up? But Warren isn't listening, or talking. And your mother..."

The air sizzled with electricity. The scent of gardenias, Caitlin's calling card and favorite perfume, filled the air.

"Crap. Now I've got Caitlin sending me warnings. Your aunt is infuriating. She can't cast a spell to make a simple apple pie without causing a disaster."

Rosemary arched a brow. "What happened?"

Salina paced the floor in front of Joan's desk.

"She needed one more apple for the pie. The spell is so basic, a baby could memorize the words. But Pesty casts spells without thinking. By reversing two words, she turned the golf course into an apple orchard."

"When?" Rosemary smiled at the image.

"A few minutes ago. Your mother and I scrambled to correct everything. Wiping the memory out of the golfers' minds was tricky. If your mother doesn't kill me, Pesty's spells are going to drive me insane."

"Salina, you're dead. And if you weren't, that suit's tight enough to kill you. How are you keeping your boobs from falling out?" Joan chided.

"I'm not dead, just different. Not having to breathe has advantages. The material is stretchy and I designed this bra..."

"Salina!" Rosemary cried.

"I'll tell you later," Salina mouthed around a throaty chuckle.

"It's possible both theories are responsible for family members being able to see you. But that doesn't answer why Joan can see you."

"We were as close as sisters. She's Walker's godmother. I have a hard time believing it, but maybe something positive came out of Pesty's screw-up. I'll have Caitlin add the twist to the list of unknowns. Maybe it will make sense later on."

"What was the favor you asked Aunt Pesty to do for you?" Cinnamon asked.

"Can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?" Cinnamon chided.

"Can't. You know the rules; we aren't allowed to disclose current or future events that might change a life changing decision." Salina sounded smug and relieved.

"Surely, the favor had to do with getting Walker and Rosemary together." Joan knew Salina never did anything that didn't benefit her or those she counted as family.

"Maybe." Salina looked at her manicure instead of Joan when she answered.

"You didn't. You asked Pesty to stop Helen from blackmailing Walker?"

Rosemary sucked in her breath. Lifted a brow and held onto her temper as she waited out an answer.

"Maybe." Salina's shoulders tensed. She glanced around the room. No sounds, no voices, no threatening scents or rumbles disrupted the quiet.

When she spoke, her voice was whisper soft. "No way was I going to allow that old hag to blackmail my son out of his inheritance. The right spell could have stopped Helen, and no one would have known. But no, instead I ask Pesty, the one woman who can screw up a spell faster than you can say *alacazam* to help me. If Pesty could remember the exact words she cast, I could tell her how to untangle this unholy mess. But she can't, so this is all her fault."

"What exactly is her fault?" Cinnamon asked.

"Don't know. The spell went haywire and mixed with a different energy altogether."

Cinnamon couldn't fault Salina for wanting to stop Helen. The fact that whatever Aunt Pesty had done hadn't affected the fiasco Helen created only eased her anger a fraction of a centimeter.

"Granted it doesn't take much to get Aunt Pesty to meddle in other people's lives but you asked the favor. And now, because it messed up something else, you want to lay all the blame at Aunt Pesty's feet. I don't think so." Crossing her arms, Cinnamon impatiently tapped a finger.

"You sound just like your mom and Warren. One little bitty favor and look where it gets me."

Like a light burning out, Salina's disappearance created a spark.

"Don't leave in a huff," Cinnamon muttered.

"That went well," Joan offered.

"How do you figure that?" Cinnamon asked.

"When she was alive, a grand exit would have included smashing—"

A blue and white china vase, on top of a cherry wood side table toppled to the floor.

The office door opened.

Walker looked at the shattered vase, the water soaking into the Persian carpet, and the mangled flowers.

With a deadpan expression on his handsome face, he said, "A word of warning, Salina likes breaking perfume bottles. Unless you want to order perfume by the case, I would suggest hiding your perfume. And the crystal baccarat decanter can't be replaced; please lock it in a file cabinet."

\* \* \* \*

The aroma of buttered popcorn drifted through the penthouse.

Rocky sat in an old wood rocker nursing Bobby, her three-month-old son. Bob sat on the floor huddled against her legs.

Walker and Rosemary snuggled on the couch.

Wolf claimed floor space in front of the couch.

Cinnamon and Jack shared a loveseat. The six inch, no touch zone was a pointed reminder that not everyone in the room was a couple.

The casino's surveillance tape, shot from a second-rate motion sensor camera, had a gray on gray color tone. The film's fuzzy quality and the jerky stop-start motion of the action had created a chorus of grumbling and eyestrain.

"This is the ninth tape. The scam isn't being worked the same way they did here." Rosemary's words, spoken with confidence, grabbed everyone's attention.

When the counterfeiting ring targeted Dreamland, they worked as couples. Feeding counterfeit bills into slot machines, they played one round before cashing out. Retrieving slips of paper that look a lot like a grocery receipt, the receipts were exchanged for cash. With each of the thieves only cashing out at each of the ten cashier cages twice, their winnings raised no red flags.

"What are you thinking?" Jack would bet his growing portfolio that there was more to Rosemary's uncanny intuitive abilities than being observant and having a head for numbers.

"The casino has three cashier cages. We agree the woman having a really bad hair day and the two men wearing baseball caps are doing a steady turn around with slot machine receipts. They can't be ruled out, but at the rate their working, it would take them days to collect a hundred grand. Sticking around for that amount of time would be risky, and considering what they have to lose, stupid."

"The bills were dropped within a fourteen-hour timeframe. What are you thinking?" Jack asked.

"All hundred dollar and fifty dollar bills are tested with a currency pen. An employee could be lazy or get distracted, but you couldn't chance that happening every time. But chips are different. They could be

played at any table game,” Rosemary said.

"Why play? You have the chips; all you have to do is go to a cashier and cash them out. Hell, you don't even have to do that immediately. The chips are embossed with the casino's logo. They could cash them in next week, or string it out over several months,” Walker said.

"Damn,” Jack muttered. Six months ago, his gut would have told him this case was different from the get-go. That instinct had saved his ass more times than he could count. And gotten him a reputation within the agency as a psychic or a weirdo, depending on who was doing the talking. Why his gut had stopped talking, he didn't know, but he damn well wished it hadn't decided to go on permanent vacation.

"Older and low-end surveillance cameras have a limited rotation that creates dead space: areas the cameras don't reach. A weekend class on installing security systems and probably a few Internet sites would supply the knowledge needed to figure out dead angles. It's possible an employee got paid or was blackmailed to be part of the scam. Or a team member got hired as an employee,” Bob added.

"Wouldn't employees, especially ones handling money, have to pass an extensive security check?” Cinnamon asked.

"A mediocre hacker could handle that hurdle in a few hours. Not that I'm bragging, but Bob, Walker and I could get the job done in less.” Rocky's smug grin baited Jack.

"I'm not admitting anything. But you're right, it's child's play.”

"What's child's play?” Ginger asked as she leisurely strolled into the room.

"Ohmigod, you're pregnant.” Rosemary had her hand firmly planted on her sister's stomach as she gave her a hug and stretched up to give Cole, Ginger's husband, a quick hello kiss.

"No kidding.” Ginger squirmed out of Rosemary's embrace to give Cinnamon and Rocky hugs.

"Yeah, but now you have a bump. Can you feel them kicking? Never mind, my niece just gave me a high five.”

"That was Tex, your nephew. Kansas is over here.” Cinnamon rubbed the spot. With her ability to see auras they had known the babies' genders immediately. Giving them outlandish names had become a game.

Jack, always observant, noticed the similar pink hues of the sisters' sweaters. Rosemary, the oldest; Ginger, the youngest by six minutes; and Cinnamon, sandwiched in-between were a triple powerhouse of beauty, brains and trouble. As triplets, they were so identical that from the back people couldn't tell them apart. But like Walker and Cole, Jack never confused them.

Cole was a friend of Terry Robinson, Jack's partner. When a man tried to expose Ginger's extraordinary abilities as a medium to the world, Cole contacted Terry. Jack met Cole and the sisters at their family home in Kansas.

The first time Jack saw Cinnamon she was laughing at something Cole said. Instead of joining the group he had stood by the French doors and observed.

Cinnamon, glancing his way, removed herself from the chattering, scooped up Dum-Dum, a gray cat, and walked towards him. When they were toe-to-toe, she stopped, cocked her head and studied his face. When she had taken her fill, she said, “You are an old soul with the most beautiful and unusual aura I've seen this side of the veil. You also brought a bushel full of talents along with you this time around. Too



bad you aren't using them to their full potential.” With a wink and a soft sexy chuckle, she turned and rejoined her sisters.

The delivery of the statement and the message pulled at a memory that refused to reveal itself. When Cinn walked away, he'd felt a tug, as if some invisible thread connected them. With each meeting that connection, the tug on the thread, was stronger. Maybe that was what had brought him here, the need to relieve the pressure on the thread. Only it hadn't worked that way. Since arriving, the thread felt stronger, the tug more insistent.

"Jack, can you stay for dinner?" Cinnamon gave him a hopeful smile.

Rosemary's insightful observations had saved hours, if not days, of eye blurring, mind numbing work.

He'd missed the meeting in Houston.

He wasn't due to resume his undercover role for three days.

If he flew out at dawn, he would reach the office in Houston at the same time Terry, his partner, arrived. No matter how many hours he spent at the office, there would always be a million details needing his attention.

He ignored the thought that spending time pretending he could be a part of the Prescott sisters' cozy life didn't say much for his intelligence or his survival instincts.

He gave her one of his rare smiles. "I can."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

### Chapter 3

Cinnamon was losing her patience.

She had tried having a conversation with Jack, alone, in the living room. Instead, Cole walked in, made himself comfortable and the conversation turned to counterfeiting.

With the help of Betty Crocker, she lured Jack into the kitchen with peanut butter cookies, his favorite. Before she could pour him a glass of milk, Walker plopped himself down on the bar stool next to Jack. Consuming glasses of milk and a dozen warm cookies, they talked about counterfeiting.

After dinner, she offered to show Jack the work in progress at Rosie's, a poker parlor Walker was building for Rosemary. They weren't ten steps into the main lobby of the casino when Bob joined them. For the next half hour, counterfeiting had been the only topic of conversation.

The men were clueless, or there was a conspiracy to keep her and Jack from being alone. With her mother knowing what she was planning, and Salina's spell casting abilities, she wouldn't place bets against them interfering.

She was trying to come up with a way to tell Bob to get lost when Rocky strolled up. The hours spent in the gym toning her post baby body, were evident in the peacock blue slip dress skimming her slim figure. She draped an arm around Bob's waist.

"Rumor is a high class dame, with a taste for some action, is headed to Tinkerbelle's to shake the dust off her dancing shoes."

Strip-searching her with his eyes, Bob didn't miss one inch of her body. "Where's Bobby?"

"He dumped me for an older woman. Joan is dancing him to sleep. Move it; we have two hours to show off our dance steps."

\* \* \* \*

The postage size dance floor was crowded.

Snuggling was permitted. Cinnamon took full advantage of the opportunity.

Talking was optional. Neither Jack nor Cinnamon had said a word since stepping on the dance floor.

It was perfect. Almost.

They weren't alone, but the music, tune, after tune, after lovely tune, was romantic and slow.

If Salina or her mother questioned her lips lingering for a fraction of a second as they brushed his neck, she would claim it was an accident.

\* \* \* \*

Cinnamon went to bed in a state of euphoria. Happy, giddy with anticipation, she couldn't stop smiling and giggling like a teenager. Jack was interested. She'd felt that interest as they danced. The only thing that had stopped her from sweet-talking him into one of the casino's hotel rooms was the rumor mill and being the object of another betting pool. But if she could get him alone, away from family and a million prying eyes, things would be different.

With her family and uninvited ghosts popping in, that might be easier said than done. But if she could

come up with a foolproof plan, not impossible.

Cinnamon was still smiling when she drifted into sleep.

*The tiny ice cream parlor table was tucked under a red and white-striped umbrella at an outdoor café. She slid onto a dainty wire seat, crossed her legs, rearranged her skirt and waited.*

*Eros always made her wait. Not the best trait in a date, husband or soul mate.*

Without ordering, a cup of hot peppermint tea appeared on the tiny bistro style table.

Sipping the tea, Cinnamon scanned the street.

Horse drawn carriages slowly rolled down the cobblestone street. Like a row of fashionably dressed models, fancy boutiques lined the opposite side of the street. Walking hand in hand, young lovers paid no attention to the fancy window displays.

It was odd, this dream; this destiny that held her captive and gave her no promises. When Eros appeared, she could see him, talk to him, touch him, feel his heartbeat and the urgency of his embrace. But strange as it was, she didn't know what he looked like. For all she knew, he could be the ugly toad instead of the handsome prince.

Cinnamon knew she was dreaming. She knew she was an active participant and she knew she had no control over what happened. Even during sleep, she found the inability to create what she wanted frustrating.

Eros jaywalked across the cobblestone street. His loose-limbed stroll reminded Cinnamon of a black panther. He was watchful, but because he was the king of this jungle he wasn't worried about being attacked.

When he sat across from her, their knees bumped under the tiny table.

His warm lips placed a seductive kiss within the palm of her hand. "Hello Green-eyes. Have you waited long?"

"You know I have. You're always late."

"I am, but you always wait, what does that say?"

"It says I'm an idiot to let you get away with poor manners, or maybe I foolishly worship you."

He smiled. "You are not foolish enough to worship anyone; especially a man who has nothing to offer you.

"You offer me love."

"I offer you no future."

"Why do you refuse to acknowledge your feelings?"

He gave her hand a squeeze. "We have so little time together, let's not argue. Do you want to eat or leave?"

"Leave."

She felt the comfort of his arm around her shoulder and the slight squeeze that drew her closer. He placed a kiss on her temple when she draped her arm around his slim waist. She had to strain to hear him say, "My love."

At the end of the street, they entered a park. A sloping field of grass bordered a long shallow pool of water. Trees decked out in bonnets of pink blossoms beckoned lovers to sit, snuggle and steal a kiss or two.

With his arms securely around her, Cinnamon rested her head against Eros's chest. His heartbeat was steady, but she could feel the tight coil of restraint holding his emotion in check.

"What are you thinking, Green-eyes?"

"How content I feel when we're together. I want marriage, children, and a house with a white picket fence."

"I cannot give you those things."

"You can't or won't?"

"It is the same thing."

"So why do we keep meeting? You cannot deny that these meetings torture both of us."

*"You know the answer." Lifting her face, he let his lips meet hers.*

A windowpane of light on the floor beside the bed caught Cinnamon's attention when she opened her eyes. She felt restless; her body tingled in places only a lover would touch.

How could a soul mate refuse her love? Why did he want to? Was there something about her that he didn't like? Maybe he knew about her powers and didn't want anything to do with her for that reason.

Hell's bells, she was making plans to jump Jack's bones and she was worried about a soul mate who didn't want commitment. She couldn't have it both ways.

Tossing back the covers, she headed for the closet to grab gym clothes.

The closet was empty.

"Salina."

A two-piece pink and black spandex outfit landed on top of the bed. "Cute, but I want my clothes back."

She stood at the gym's door and watched Rosemary land a sharp sidekick into the center of a punching bag. Walker was jabbing a second bag.

"What happened to my sister, the one who didn't believe in getting out of bed before nine?"

"She changed lifestyles. Plus, she has an appointment with the architect building the riverboat poker room in two hours."

"Why not ask Salina? I'm sure her magic finger can zap it out in nothing flat." Her tongue-in-cheek comment stopped Walker's punch in mid-swing.

"That is not funny."

"Neither is finding my closet empty, or finding myself at your mother's mercy for the clothes on my back."

"What happened?"

"When I opened the closet, it was empty. When I yelled her name, this outfit appeared."

"You have to admit, it looks better than your normal gym apparel."

"I'm here to work out, not make a glamour statement."

"I'm siding with Salina, there's no reason you can't do both." Rosemary gave a tongue-in-cheek smile.

Cinnamon did a running jump. The punching bag flew backwards.

Rosemary stepped out of the bag's path. "What got your dander up this early in the morning?"

"Eros."

"The Greek god of love?" Walker lifted his brows.

"That's him. He's my soul mate."

"Your soul mate is a god?"

"Hardly. Would you rather I call him 'lover boy'?"

"Before our past life dreams started, what did you call me?" Walker stood with his hands on his lean hips, a cocky smile on his lips.

"A pain in the ass."

"Figures." His laughter filled the small gym. "If you two are going to talk dirty, I can leave."

"Thanks for the offer, but the destiny dreams aren't beyond the PG13 rating."

"But they have changed," Ginger said as she and Cole entered the gym.

"They have. The prom date venue is gone. We meet at a small outdoor café. Talk, hold hands, play kissyface, but nothing that would be out of line in a public place."

"Does the setting look familiar?" Cole asked.

"Quaint cobblestone streets and brick sidewalks. They remind me of Annapolis and Alexandria. Fancy boutiques like you would find in both locations. The reflection pool and cherry trees in DC, and a sidewalk café straight out of a French painting."

"Sounds like you thoroughly researched the location," Cole said.

"Not really. I spent a month in that area a few years ago. When I wasn't performing hypnosis shows at the children's wards at local hospitals, I played tourist."

"What's going on in the dream that has you pissed?" Ginger asked.

"Eros has told me he will never marry me."

"But..."

"Before you say anything, Rose, let me remind you I had no intentions of getting married," Walker said.

"Ditto, that," Cole added.

"Are you saying that given time he will change his mind?"

"No, we're saying that the dreams are just heating up. You need to give things time to develop," Cole said.

Cinnamon programmed the bicycle next to the one Ginger was riding.

She didn't like admitting that Cole had a point. This morning's version wasn't much different than the other dreams in the series. Given what Ginger and Rosemary experienced, she knew there was more to come.

What wouldn't change, no matter where the dreams led, were her feelings for Jack. Yes, the attraction was physical. It also went deeper than that and she wanted the opportunity to explore those possibilities.

She also wanted to stop the astral travel. The desire made her crazy with guilt, but the emotional drain was depressing her. The physical drain was also causing problems that were affecting her health.

Not wanting her mother or Salina to question that, she pushed the thoughts aside.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 4

*Three days later-New Mexico wilderness*

The dessert air was crispy cold.

The aroma of burning cedar mingled with the heavier musty odor of damp clay and pine needles.

The horses weren't restless.

No voices drifted through the early morning air.

The broken pinecone digging into his hip hadn't pulled him into reality.

Jack was a light sleeper. It was a learned trait that had saved his life more than once, but nothing seemed out of synch. Thinking back to what he could remember, he'd been ... dreaming.

Hell.

Jack closed his eyes, stilled his thoughts and concentrated on each breath as he slowly inhaled and exhaled. Like an instant replay, the dream materialized.

*Without assistance, the rowboat Jack was sitting in sliced through calm turquoise water. Approaching a crescent shaped beach, he could hear the surf caress the purple black sand.*

*When the bow of the boat hit sand, Jack abandoned it without a second thought. Heading towards a line of trees, he ignored the quiet splendor of the beach. The toes of his cowboy boots dug into sand that glowed with the luster of a million black pearls.*

Jack's long stride made quick work of reaching a dense line of trees. Impatient to reach his destination, he paid no attention to the heavy scent of damp earth and the pine trees as he followed the yellow path. As in the Land of Oz, the path twisted its way through a dense forest. But instead of yellow brick beneath his feet, he walked on gold so fine it looked like sand. The trees with their massive red bark trunks were straight, tall, sturdy and welcoming.

Always impatient to arrive, he knew Green-eyes would make him wait. He was good at waiting. He'd played the cat and mouse game so often it was second nature. But this game was different; this was personal. He didn't allow himself to think about why he had been summoned; it was a waste of time and took his mind off the pleasant prospect of seeing the Green-eyed siren.

When he reached a small glen, he headed straight for a boulder. The rock with its natural indent and slightly curved back reminded him of a beanbag chair he'd owned in college.

He felt her presence the moment he sat down.

Eight feet away, directly across from him, Green-eyes stood still as a statue.

Her face was shadowed; her hair haloed in a pale golden light, was a tangle of curls. Trained to pay attention to detail he glanced at her gown. Multi hues of purple faded in and out of the loosely draped fabric. She was a contrast of fire and ice, spiritual and sexual.

"Morning, Green-eyes." He didn't know her name. Over the years he had called her many things, but Green-eyes was the name that stuck.

"Listen closely, there isn't much time. For the promise of power, Jose betrayed his brother.

"Men are riding through the trees from the south."

Jack felt his shoulders tighten. He forced himself to ignore the adrenaline rush.

"How many men?"

"Fifteen."

"We have dropped off the drugs and we carry no gold. What do they have to gain?"

"They will rid themselves of Jose and you."

"My cover was broken?"

"Not to Jose, Pete or Thornton. But there is a man who knows your truths. His hate runs deep, his anger knows no bounds."

"Who? Is he here?"

"No, he is not here. He offered a high price for your severed head."

"Pleasant thought. Thanks for the warning. What did I do to piss this guy off?"

"You live your truth; you expect others to do the same. You have earned respect. You breathe.

"Death does not always mean that a heart has stopped beating. And a walking ghost is a great deal more dangerous than a visible man."

"Dammit, give me more than one of your riddles. I need a name."

"It is all I have to offer. Think with your head not what you think your eyes saw. The answer is tangled in the past, a death and betrayal.

"The man's knowledge makes him very dangerous; his hate makes him a formidable enemy. The drug lord and the counterfeit ring are connected with this man and another you have yet to meet.

"Lucy, the young girl traveling with you, is at the pond bathing. Her father will not be able to protect her. Now it is your job.

"The lone Pinion tree, by the wall of rock, hides the opening to a small cave.

*"Hurry."*

Jack's senses kicked into overdrive.

Terry Robinson, an arm's length away, was awake. The two were so attuned Jack didn't question what had alerted him to a problem. They rolled their bags, tugged on their boots, donned their cowboy hats and slipped into the night shadows.

All traces of their presence disappeared.

Lucy, Jose's daughter, was buttoning her blouse when Jack grabbed her around the waist and cupped her mouth closed.



With his mouth against her ear Jack whispered, "Don't make a sound. Men approach. You wouldn't like them. We are going to get you out of here. Do you understand?"

Jack felt her slight nod and her body relax. Taking Lucy's hand, Jack took the lead. Using trees for cover, they silently made their way to the cave.

The opening to the cave was nothing more than a slim crevice. In the rear, Terry heard the first gunfire as he slid through the opening.

Jack scanned the cave with a flashlight. "It's not the Ritz, but we're not sharing the space with any four legged creatures."

Unrolling his bedroll, he spread the blanket.

"My father did this." Sitting on the blanket, Lucy wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees.

"Are you afraid of the dark?" Terry asked.

"No."

Jack turned off the flashlight. A faint stream of early morning light outlined the cave's opening. The weak light made it possible to see shadows.

"What makes you say that?" Jack's Texas drawl was more noticeable as he kept his voice low and neutral.

"Dad and my step-mom. I heard them talking the night before we left. Maria wanted more money. She talked Dad into betraying Uncle Pete."

"Do you know what the plan was?" Terry asked.

"The drugs were supposed to be stolen before they were delivered. I don't know the plan, but they were going to make it look like Uncle Pete double crossed the drug lord."

"If you knew that, why did you come on the trip?" Terry asked.

"Maria told Dad it was time for me to earn my keep. When he said no, they argued. I figured I was safer with Dad than Maria. When the drugs were delivered without a problem, I thought maybe Dad had changed the plan. Do you think Maria double crossed Dad?"

"It's possible," Jack answered.

It was also possible Pete found out and this was his way of eliminating Jose without making it look like he was responsible. But either way, Jack needed to know the name of the ghost who infiltrated a well organized drug ring and put a price on his head.

The gunfire came closer and was more insistent.

In old western movies, the bad guys would all die. The good guys, with guns blazing, walk away from the trouble unscratched. Jack wasn't in a hurry to shoot anyone. Not that he wouldn't, but if he fired his rifle, it would mean they were being shot at. They didn't have enough ammo to hold off fifteen men.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 5

Rosemary was in the bedroom before Cinnamon's scream stopped shaking the walls.

"What the hell happened?" Rosemary demanded.

"Ohmigod." Laughing, Ginger caught a feather as she stepped into the bedroom.

White down feathers floated through the air. Thousands more littered the floor, the dresser top, the bed, and stuck to Cinnamons hair.

"Salina happened. I told her I was going downstairs to buy an outfit that didn't look like I just got off my night job at the corner of the Strip and Tropicana. She got pissed. When she couldn't find a piece of glass to break, the pillows on the bed exploded."

Rosemary brushed a feather off her shoulder. Picking a down feather out of the air she said, "I'm surprised she didn't glue them to your body. Where's the outfit?"

"Don't give her ideas. When she left, she snapped her fingers. The clothing exploded along with the pillows. I swear my bra and tap pants are less suggestive than the skirt and top she expected me to wear."

"You can borrow an outfit." Playfully Rosemary kicked a pile of feathers with her bare foot.

"I could, but I'm not going to do that. Salina is going to give me a nice presentable outfit and clean up this mess. If she doesn't, I will send a message to Warren, informing him that as a fairy godmother Salina sucks."

A royal blue dust devil swept through the room.

Cinnamon arched a brow. Ginger and Rosemary mirrored her expression.

When the pillows were restored, an outfit materialized. In black slacks, a scooped-neck knit top and matching turquoise suede jacket, Cinnamon looked comfortable and sexy, without being overly suggestive.

"Let's see the shoes," Ginger said.

Lifting the pants' legs revealed black sling backs, with cork heels and a turquoise flower. A hobo style black purse, sporting a large turquoise flower on the closure landed on the bed.

"Okay, now I'm jealous," Ginger said.

Rosemary plucked a feather out of Cinnamon's hair. "She missed one."

A zap of light hit Rosemary's fingers.

"Did not!" Salina's voice echoed.

\* \* \* \*

"I can't believe Walker bought a Gulfstream jet," Cinnamon said as she buckled the seat belt for takeoff.

"It made sense. With family spread between Vegas, Kansas and two ranches in Texas it will make traveling a lot easier. The plane can be used for casino business and a couple of people have asked about

leasing it for business. In the end, it will pay for itself. Plus, Wolf gets to fly with us instead of being locked in a cargo hold."

"And you figured all of that into the odds before signing on the dotted line."

"Naturally."

"How long before we reach Kansas?" Cinnamon asked.

"Two hours," Walker answered.

"Fast, efficient and no one searched my bag or told me I couldn't bring my tweezers. I think I'll book you for all my flights. I can't believe tomorrow is Thanksgiving," Ginger said.

"Please tell me Aunt Pesty isn't cooking the turkey." Rosemary shuddered at the thought.

"I bought a turkey before we left. I'm no more inclined to having her cast a spell for a wild turkey than you are."

"Haven't heard that story," Cole said.

"You won't from Aunt Pesty, ever. We were ten when she talked Mom into having an old fashioned Thanksgiving. Instead of going to the grocery store to buy a fresh Tom, she insisted we needed a wild turkey. Before Dad could stop her, she cast a spell. When the doorbell rang, Aunt Pesty looked a little worried. When she opened the door, a Pilgrim thrust a headless turkey into Aunt Pesty's hands. When the bird moved, she screamed, dropped the bird and the poor thing started running down the driveway. Dad grabbed the bird and hauled it into the garage. A few hours later, we ate Thanksgiving dinner at a restaurant," Rosemary said.

Cole chuckled. "You have to admit, Pesty keeps life interesting."

"Remember those words the next time she disrupts our life. Your folks called just before we left the casino to say they arrived. They are staying across the street with Martin and Aunt Pesty. Your brother, Jack, Aunt Juanita and Uncle Joe will stay with us," Ginger said.

Cinnamon smiled. If she had her way, Jack would be with her, but she wisely kept the thought to herself.

\* \* \* \*

*Sea grass and warm sand cushioned the rocky cliff.*

*Far below, the waves welcomed her with a soothing simplicity of sound. With no illusion of time there was no desire to hasten or prolong the experience.*

The air sparked with energy, a life force beyond anything Cinnamon experienced on a daily basis. The energy was there for the giving, to learn from, to understand, to feel.

In tune with the supernatural energy, Cinnamon turned her back to the ocean. As she stepped into the dark grove of trees, the smell of pine needles and sap, and the feeling of anticipation overwhelmed her senses.

In a hurry to reach the glen, she paid scant attention to the twists and turns in the fog-shrouded path. A step short of the clearing, she stopped.

The man who called her Green-eyes waited. Except for his crossed arms and unusual light gray eyes, he blended into the shadows of the rock.

Attuned to his moods, she could feel his impatience.

Stepping into the clearing, she acknowledged his presence with a nod.

"I owe you."

"You owe me nothing."

"Without your warning, the outcome could have been different."

"It was not Lucy's time. You were on that mountain to keep her safe."

"Are you saying my life was never your concern?" She heard the hint of humor in his voice.

"Your life has always been my concern. In this case, you were not in danger."

"When you are outnumbered, and the bad guys have more ammo, one's life is always in danger."

"I stand corrected. Have you figured out the riddle?"

"I have three names; two were agents and one a mercenary. I witnessed their deaths, or at least it appeared that they died. In two cases, retrieving the bodies was impossible. With the third, positive identification was never established."

"If you are asking which one, I have no answer."

"Why was I summoned?"

"Another warning. Unlike a rattlesnake, the person who wants you dead will not shake his tail to warn you off. But like the rattlesnake, he is good at blending into the surroundings. The next attempt will be made by him."

"Are you saying that if I do not figure out who this person is I will die?"

*"The choice of death is yours to make, not his to give."*

Half awake, Cinnamon rolled over, tugged at the covers to cover her cold shoulders and drifted back to sleep.

*Cinnamon glided over a curving ribbon of blue vapor. A full moon cast the landscape beneath her into a palette of golden light and inky black distorted shadows. Traveling over houses packed tightly together, she could hear dogs barking.*

A cat yowled.

A car engine backfired.

She passed over a mall with its parking lot lit up like a ballpark ready for an evening game.

An owl, making a lazy circle in the sky, cast his silhouette against the moon's pale yellow face.

The silver blue ribbon led her to a boxy house, one of several, creating a semi circle around a rolling expanse of lawn bordering a golf course.

The ribbon evaporated.

*Cinnamon stood in a large brightly lit bedroom. A naked woman, curled in the fetal position, was on a king size bed. Blood on the cream colored sheets and the bruises blooming on the woman's back clashed with the room's cheerful yellow décor.*

Tears dampened Cinnamon's pillow and cheeks.

Under the warmth of a down comforter, Cinnamon's teeth chattered.

When she tried to stand, her legs buckled. Collapsing onto the bed, she thought about crawling back under the covers. But she needed food and a shower.

She managed to turn on the shower before the roller coaster ride her stomach was taking forced her over the commode.

Wrapped in a thick green terrycloth robe, Cinnamon walked back into the bedroom.

Rosemary was rolling the king size bed sheets into a big ball.

"Sit before you fall." The concern etched on Rosemary's face belied the sharp tone of her voice.

Cinnamon sank into a plush navy blue chaise lounge, curled her legs beneath and covered her legs with an afghan. Rosemary handed her a cup of steaming hot tea and placed a plate covered in a mound of whipped cream on her lap.

"Thanks."

The stinging bits of hot water had turned her skin red, but Cinnamon still felt cold, like the core of her being had lost its pilot light. The warmth of the tea cruising down her throat felt good.

Needing to restore her energy, Cinnamon ignored the cramping protest of her stomach as she licked whipped cream off the fork. Forging through the white mound on the plate she found the hidden slice of pumpkin pie.

"You screamed. What happened?"

She didn't remember screaming.

"What time is it?"

"A little after eight. Walker and Wolf left half an hour ago to go jogging with Cole. I came over to see if you were ready to leave. You screamed as I was unlocking the door."

"Tell me about the nightmare." Facing Cinnamon, Rosemary sat with her legs crossed on the end of the chaise lounge.

Was it a nightmare? She knew it had been a long time since she thought of her *gift* as a blessing. Maybe that was why she wanted to give up her power. Nightmare, curse, blessing, there didn't seem to be any difference or answers. At least, not answers she understood and not one that made the astral travel scenes she experienced any easier to handle. That was the rub. Plucked from her bed, she'd landed in the middle of someone else's nightmare, then like a rag doll missing half of its stuffing, unceremoniously landed back in her body. She could handle waking up half sick, but the horrors she saw ate at her gut, and like the latest trip, made her angry.

"I was taken to a house, a plain Jane McMansion bordering a golf course. A dark haired woman was lying on a bed, naked. She had several broken bones, black eyes, a broken nose, cuts from head to toe,

and bruises were blooming."

"Who beat her?" Rosemary was ready to fight the woman's battle.

"Husband, boyfriend, intruder, take your pick. She was unconscious. I don't even know her first name."

It was funny how the little things bothered her. Every trip was different, but Cinnamon made a point of addressing the people she helped by name. Without a name, she felt like the person's life was being devalued, given little to no meaning.

"Did you call the police?"

"No. They arrived on their own. It's one of the unsolved mysteries. They always appear, no matter how remote the scene.

"But that wasn't the beginning of the dream.

"First, I visited the forest."

"Do you remember anything?"

"Unless you want a weather report, I don't remember anything. As soon as that trip ended, I was taken to the woman. I pulled away when the paramedics arrived. Instead of coming back to my body, I was sent to a tube of light. Imagine being inside a kaleidoscope spinning out of control. Beautiful intricate designs flashed before my eyes. There were pale shades of pink, blue and lavender I've never seen."

"You've said before that healing patterns look like that."

"They do. But these patterns were far more complex than any I've ever seen or used. When the kaleidoscope stopped spinning a pale blue light surrounded me." Her brow furrowed. "It felt like the light was alive. I didn't see anything around me, but I didn't feel like I was floating." She shook her head. "Anyway, after what seemed like forever, a voice warned me not to forget the lesson. That was it, I woke up."

"Are you all right?"

"Drained. Puzzled. Worried. That about covers the gamut. The last part of the dream wasn't scary, so I don't know why I screamed."

"Drained, I understand. I'm assuming you're puzzled over the new healing patterns. What are you worried about?"

"Jack. Something isn't right."

"You've talked to him?"

"Not since he left Vegas. It's a feeling that started yesterday. By last night, the feeling worked its way up to concern. This morning, I don't know what it is. It's just there. Like a spider building a web, the feeling that something's wrong just keeps getting bigger. What are the odds that Jack's in danger?"

"Cinn, the man works undercover. The odds are always high."

The air crackled and popped. A plume of burnt orange smoke rose from the floor. Like a curtain rising, Salina slowly appeared. Her knee-high moccasins were dyed mustard yellow. The jagged hem of a dark brown leather skirt showed off her legs. A fringe of beads and feathers dangling over her smooth bare

stomach adorned an orange leather halter-top. Half a dozen yellow and green feathers dangled from each ear. A slow turn showed them that except for the halter's shoestring ties, her back was bare.

"What do you think? I designed this for the Thanksgiving feast."

"Great, if you're trying out for the part of the turkey. I didn't know you were coming to Thanksgiving dinner?"

"The dinner is for family; besides, as Cinn's fairy godmother I'm on call 24/7. So, what do you really think of the outfit?"

"It reminds me of the hand turkeys we made in grade school. Bright, gaudy and something only the creator would think was remarkable. Mom used to tape our hand turkeys together and put a big candle in the center. If you hold a candle in each hand you could be a candelabrum."

"You really don't like this outfit, do you?"

"Not even a little," Cinn and Rose said in unison.

"Are Gus, Mom, and Dad, going to be at the house, too?" Cinnamon prompted.

"Yes, and maybe one or two others."

"As in other spirits?"

"Don't worry, it's not like we eat much.

"With all the talk about my outfit, I almost forgot why I popped in. Your mom got a little upset that I wasn't here to comfort you after that whopper of a dream. Like I told her and Warren, you didn't need me when Rose was already here. And I was really busy trying to decide between mustard yellow and cream corn yellow for the moccasins.

"Anyway, everything turned out fine. Gotta go."

"Not yet, you don't. Do you know what the last part of my dream was about?"

"Maybe."

"How about sharing?"

A low rumble vibrated every piece of furniture in the room. Before the tremor stopped, Salina disappeared.

An orange feather landed on the bed.

"What do you think Salina would do if she couldn't design clothes?"

"Haunt Fredrick's of Hollywood's and Vera Wang's studios. Are you going to be all right?"

"Nothing I can do will change what happened to the woman. The forest dream is nothing. As for the new healing pattern there's no sense worrying when we don't know the motive behind the lesson. I'll be fine."

The pep talk didn't fool either of them.

\* \* \* \*

Jack never arrived for Thanksgiving dinner.

Something about his apology, a phrase, his voice, what he left unsaid, escalated Cinnamon's unease.

With the house full of relatives, dead and alive, having a private conversation took patience and luck. By the time Cinnamon saw Juanita head for the backyard, her patience was long gone.

"When you told Rosemary you couldn't see the future, you weren't being totally honest." Cinnamon's words stopped Juanita in her tracks.

"Can't deny that. Are you hoping your confrontational approach will get me to tell you something in particular?" Juanita was the exact opposite of Salina, her younger sister. Always smiling, she was the perfect image of a fairy godmother.

"Sorry, that was extremely rude. It's no excuse, but I'm tired, cranky and past the point of polite conversation. Early this morning, I was taught new healing patterns. It's the first time in ten years I've been shown new healing grids. Can you tell me why this happened now?"

"And here I was thinking you were going to ask me about your destiny dreams."

"Not a bad idea; that will be my next question."

Caitlin materialized. "Juanita can't tell you anything."

"I thought you were upstairs checking out the nursery rhyme mural Gin's painting in the nursery."

"I was. I've had one ear tuned in to you all day."

"I thought I was doing a good job of hiding my thoughts."

"I'm your mother; I've had twenty-nine years to figure out how your mind works. Besides, you're just like your father; you only try blocking your thoughts when something is really bothering you."

"Hell's bells. Is Dad onto your game?"

"No, and unless you want Salina as your fairy godmother, for life, I would advise you not to tell."

Cinnamon chuckled. "That's powerful blackmail; my lips are sealed. Mom, I know you can't answer my questions. But," she looked at Juanita, "isn't the information you receive about the future, given to you to share?"

"That depends. I won't deny I stretched the truth about my abilities when Rosemary asked about her future. However, what I said was accurate. By using parables I didn't jeopardize the decisions she had to make."

"But you tell people things about their future, I've heard you. Not two hours ago you shared information about the future with Uncle Gus."

"I did. But he still has choices to make that could change the outcome I foretold. Also, he has no idea I'm clairvoyant. He listened politely, but whether or not he believed me or acts on my comments is his choice. And he's not related to me, you are."

"That's not fair." Cinnamon moaned.

"You're too old to pout. Do you want me to invite your father in on this conversation?"

"Why didn't you just say Dad was disappointed? That was the worst punishment you handed out, and it



worked."

Caitlin laughed. "I remember saying similar words to my mother. Can't say that I like admitting your grandmother's saying, 'paybacks are a bitch', is true.

"Most people don't believe in psychics or don't trust the insights to be accurate. When given the truth, some people will give the information consideration. Most people laugh it off and do what they want."

"True, but what does that have to do with Juanita not giving me information because we're related?"

"When Warren realized our family and Walker's family shared the same distant grandmamma, he was concerned. No future event is unchangeable. Nor does changing the future mean it will be for the betterment of those involved or future of the universe in general."

"You're saying if I turned right instead of left because of what Juanita told me it could have dire consequences. Why would my action be different then Jane Doe doing the same thing after being given the same information?"

"Because you know what Juanita sees is likely to be the final outcome, you can consciously make the decision to change the ending. Jane Doe is sitting on the fence. With fifty/fifty odds, Jane is still positioned to make a choice based on her desires, good or bad, not what a psychic is saying will happen."

"If what Juanita sees isn't what I want shouldn't I be given the choice of whether or not to change the outcome?"

"I'd love to say yes, but I can't. You were only sixteen when the drunk hit our car. Your dad and I didn't want to leave you but there were reasons our lives were designed for that to happen. Yes, it was hard, but the things that happened from the result of our leaving were good. I know that's hard to understand but it's true.

"It's the same with your destiny dreams. They need to disclose their truths in the order and time frame the universe has chosen. That time frame might not suit your desires but even what we call coincidences are planned and executed for a reason. You need to decide what you are going to do about your *gifts* and Jack without any help from paranormal powers."

Cinnamon nibbled her bottom lip. She didn't like what she'd heard. And would argue to the end of time about what good came out of losing her folks. She gave her mom a curt nod. "Tell me this, are Aunt Pesty's haphazard spells behind the reason I feel Jack is in danger?"

"Thank god, no."

"Fair enough. I won't ask any more questions."

\* \* \* \*

*Cinnamon strolled down the wide sidewalk, between the well-manicured lawn and the pool. The picture perfect white doughboy clouds and spring green trees reflecting off the pool's clear blue water went unnoticed.*

*Her mind was on Eros. Yesterday they had met at the outdoor café and talked, or more accurately, attempted to talk. Eros had been distant. He'd answered work related questions with questions, or ignored them altogether.*

Cinnamon wanted to share the interesting and trivial bits and pieces of life with him. Ginger called it nesting; settling down, becoming part of a whole as two lives laced together.

Eros wanted to share nothing but the part of his life he considered safe. Which, so far, was nothing more than what foods he liked and a few vacations he had taken.

The impasse was straining her temper and patience.

When she reached the narrow street, she glanced towards the café. Their table was empty.

Eros claimed the café was safe and like a good little girl she was to wait for him there. She was tired of being good and she didn't need his protection.

Pushing open the first shop door, she stepped inside. Crystal stemware lined the back wall. China lined both sidewalls. Scattered around the room were tables dressed in fine linen and topped with china, and sterling silver.

She was tracing a delicate blue forget-me-not flower with the tip of her finger when a shadow blocked the light from the window.

Eros, with hands in his jean pockets and a pleasant smile on his face, watched her. "Have you found something you want?"

"Not really. China is for a hope chest, bridal showers, and happy ever after endings. You haven't promised me a happy ever after."

"Would you prefer that I lie?"

"No."

"Is there a reason you aren't at the café?"

"Is there a reason you're half an hour late?"

"You're pissed!"

"Not really. But I'm no longer willing to play your game. If you're late, you'll have to find me."

Eros rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not safe."

"If you believe the news, neither is breathing. It's your choice, where do we go from here?"

He closed his eyes; when he opened them there was a hint of sadness in their depth. "We continue as before. Whenever possible, we steal a few minutes of time. Then we return to our separate lives until the next time."

"Is that enough for you?"

"It has to be. Let's not waste time talking about what isn't going to change. What would you like to do now?"

"Run away. Find a desert island. We can live on coconut milk and love."

"You'd be bored to death in less than a week."

"Are you saying you couldn't keep me entertained?"

Eros smirked.

"Let's find a place where we can have privacy."

"There is no such place. But for a few minutes, I know a place that will give us what you ask."

As they stepped out of the boutique, Eros took her hand, gave it a little squeeze and placed a kiss on top of their entwined fingers.

At the park, Eros guided her towards a cluster of trees. Stepping over exposed tree roots, Cinnamon stepped into a small clearing. Hidden from the road and the sidewalk, a half circle of trees made a cozy love nest.

A blanket, a bottle of champagne and a wicker basket were waiting.

"You had this planned." Her laughter bubbled with happiness.

"I hoped. There was no guarantee the moment would be right."

The basket held an offering of deviled eggs, grapes, several types of cheese and a variety of crackers. Cinnamon wasn't hungry, but she laid the small feast out on the blanket.

Eros popped the cork off the bottle of champagne. "To us." Their crystal glasses clicked.

She fed him grapes; they drank all the champagne and they flirted and laughed over silly jokes.

Eros lifted her chin and leaned into her; his kiss tasted like Champagne and chocolate mints. Cinnamon didn't remember moving, but the weight of his solid body pressed against her. When his knee slid between her legs, her nipples hardened; warmth spread through her belly, curled lower and heated her feminine core. When he circled a hardened nub with his thumb, she whimpered with pleasure.

He shivered when her hands ran up his spine. When her hands reached his hair, she massaged his scalp and ran her fingers through his baby soft hair.

It was an old cliché but true; time stood still.

Before buttons popped and zippers slid open, Eros pulled back. Brushing a strand of hair off her face, he lightly kissed the corner of her mouth, the tip of her nose and her forehead.

"We must leave. I will think of you."

"Why do we have to leave?"

Eros chuckled. "For one, this is a public park. We are lucky no one has interrupted us. And I have work to do. This was a mistake, one I take full responsibility for."

"Why was it a mistake?"

"We are too exposed. When we're like this, I can't think, I can't protect you."

"Who do you think you need to protect me from?"

"The bogey man."

"He's dead. My Dad killed him with a magic water gun when I was four."

Eros didn't smile at her joke.

*Standing, he helped her up. With his arms wrapped around her waist, he nuzzled her neck and brushed his lips against her hair. When their lips met, the kiss was long and hard.*

Opening her eyes, Cinnamon stared at the red lights on the digital clock. Four o'clock.

Eros was the devil in disguise. Telling her no, then all but seducing her with his tongue and hand was not fair play, but she hadn't behaved any better.

As soul mates, they'd shared lifetimes. Those past lives created an imprint and brought into the destiny dreams knowledge of each other's bodies. That knowledge haunted her as the memories left her body hungry for more.

Years ago, she and Ginger hatched the idea of bypassing the destiny dreams. Under hypnosis, they weaved their way through past lives. Most lives were ordinary birth to death experiences. But a handful of shared lifetimes had not ended in happy ever after.

With careful wording, they tried using hypnosis to pull knowledge of their soul mate into the consciousness of this lifetime. The experiment failed.

But perhaps she hadn't analyzed the past lives correctly. In at least two lives, her soul mate hadn't been able to protect her from rape and death. In her destiny dreams, Eros was obsessed with protecting her. It was possible that like Rosemary and Walker's experience, there was past life karma making him leery of commitment.

One of the reasons her long ago grandmamma had cast the spell was to insure her granddaughters recognized their soul mates, first in dreams, then in reality.

Eros and Jack held her differently. Their scent was different and the way they made her feel sexually had subtle differences.

Like Eros, Jack wasn't big on communication. They both disappeared without saying goodbye and they both had a strong sense of duty and protecting the innocent. Both men were allergic to marriage and both claimed that protecting her was why they wouldn't consider marriage.

If she was supposed to act like the weaker sex so a man could feel macho, it wasn't going to happen. But maybe she needed to prove that she could take care of herself.

Problem was whom did she need to show, Eros or Jack?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 6

Wide-awake, Cinnamon jumped in the shower, finger combed her wet hair and after digging through a box marked 'college', pulled on baggy old sweats.

In the kitchen, she made a pot of earl gray tea and pulled a bowl of leftover bread stuffing out of the refrigerator.

During college, she'd discovered a talent for textile designs and graphic art. The work was a nice change of pace from the demands of her hypnosis shows and healing work. Pulling a sketchpad and pencils out of a drawer in the buffet, she sat at the dining room table and let her mind wander. The pencil curled and circled and slashed across pages of crisp white paper.

"I wouldn't share those designs with your father." As green sparkles danced in a circle, Caitlin materialized on the chair next to Cinnamon. Her green pants suit matched her eyes.

"Morning. What's wrong with the drawings?"

Caitlin picked up two sheets and held them up. "You tell me."

"Oh my." She snickered. "The clouds are couples, subtle but definitely erotic. I think they have potential."

"I agree. But until you're old and gray, don't let your father see them. Are you okay?"

"That's a loaded question for this early in the morning. If you're referring to yesterday's astral travel, yes. The sexual edge from the destiny dream is working its way out. Guess the drawings are proof of that. The antsy feeling that something isn't right with Jack has grown a life of its own."

Caitlin nodded. "Are you going to add a few more drawings to those to make a nice collection?"

"Guess changing the subject means you can't discuss my feelings about something being wrong with Jack. Did Salina design your outfit?"

"Is something showing that shouldn't?"

Cinnamon laughed. "I ask that question every morning. The style is different from what you usually wear. The cut shows off your figure and looks really good on you. Subtle sexy, looks like Salina's learning. So, why are you all dressed up and stopping by for a cup of tea before the sun's up?"

"Forget tea, a good cup of coffee is what I miss. Your dad wants to see a car show in Europe."

"Sounds like Dad. What bribe did he use to get you to join him?"

"A walk on the River Thames and dancing."

"Smart choices. Mom, I'm fine. Go have fun."

As she watched her mother disappear, a warm hug and a brush of air kiss made her smile.

Setting the two designs aside, she doodled. One idea fed off of another until she had a dozen workable designs. Adding suggestions for colors and paper textures, she packaged the material.

Grabbing her purse, she headed for the door.

"You can't go out in public dressed like that!" A canary yellow, sleeveless top with rows of deep ruffles starting at the pert points of Salina's chest ended at mid thigh. Black cropped spandex pants and black mules with rhinestone-studded bows finished off the conservative outfit.

"I'm headed to the hardware store. They won't care what I'm wearing."

"I care! As your fairy godmother, it's a reflection on me when you look frumpy."

"The world does not revolve around you, so stop the insults. The sweats are comfortable, not frumpy. Besides, no one would believe I had a fairy godmother, much less that *you* had the job."

"The people that count know, and they have faith in me being able to succeed."

"Succeed in what?"

"Can't say. But I'm going to do this job properly. How you dress matters."

"I ... The outfit you designed for Mom was really nice."

"Yes it was. Now why aren't you wearing the outfit I designed for you and left on the bed this morning?"

"The kimono top was sheer lace over a bustier. Nice. In fact the outfit is very nice. But I wasn't planning on strolling down the screw me isle. No one, outside of the family knows you exist. When are you going to accept the fact that style does not revolve solely around your tastes?"

"Never." Her eyes narrowed. "I cleaned out your closet. Where did you find that butt ugly sweat suit?"

"A box. It's a leftover from college."

"It looks it. Now tell me what you were planning to do at the hardware store after you embarrass yourself wearing baggy pants and a top that make you look like you have boobs, a fat ass and no waist?"

"I need something to do! Thanks to you, my closet doesn't need rearranging. I'm going to paint the living room and foyer. Right now I'm going to buy paint, or paint samples, or at least bring home a stack of color samples ... Hell's bells, I don't know."

"And you thought you needed to inhale paint fumes to achieve this transformation? Watch, learn and appreciate."

Cinnamon felt a momentary draft of air. Looking down, she saw purple knit slacks and black ballet slippers. A thigh length tunic with a rushed center, deep V neckline and three quarter length sleeves covered her torso.

Cinnamon ran her hand over the material. "It's soft and comfortable."

"And a hell of a lot better looking than that moth eaten sweat suit. Now I can concentrate."

As she pointed her French tipped index finger towards the foyer, smoke filled the room. Salina coughed and muttered her way through a creative list of curses. "Sorry about that. I'm still a little rusty. The smoke's almost gone; you can open your eyes."

Cinnamon gasped. "It's, it's..."

"Breathtaking? Motivating? Unique? Wish I'd been able to cast spells when Gus and I lived in Dreamland's penthouse. I would have changed the décor every day. Wouldn't that have been a kick?"

The foyer's wainscoting was painted high gloss black. The stark white upper walls were covered in black-framed prints of nude women, nude men, and couples ... *Cripes!* There was more going on than skin-to-skin hugs. The hardwood floor had been replaced with black and white checked squares of marble. Her grandmother's petite rosewood dresser, used as a table, held a simple marble bowl filled with dried lavender. In the corner, by the front door was a life size bronze statue of lovers embracing.

God forbid! The foyer was an erotic nightmare.

"Umm, I think it's a bit too much?"

"You don't like it? With the sketches you just drew and your wanting to bed, Jack, I thought you'd appreciate the artwork. You know, prime the pump for the big event."

Cinnamon almost swallowed her tongue. Between the destiny dreams and her imagination she didn't need encouragement. "My drawings were subtle. Do I need to explain the difference between subtle and in your face risqué?"

"Prude." In a sweeping gesture, Salina waved her hand.

Covering the center of the marble floor was a zebra skin rug. Black and white pictures of Africa covered the wall above the dresser. A three-foot high bronze elephant dominated the corner.

With another wave of her hand the foyer resembled a pink and white nightmare of stripes, plaids, gigantic cabbage roses and alabaster vases.

"Not good. How about this?" Salina laughed with childlike enthusiasm.

The walls and wainscoting were painted muted mustard yellow. An antique black walnut grandfather clock that had belonged to Cinnamon's paternal grandmother shared the space with a late 1800's Windsor chair, a brass umbrella stand and a large wicker basket filled with colorful balls of yarn.

"This I could live with, but it's not what I had in mind."

She was learning the hard way that telling Salina no was equivalent to waving a red flag in front of a bull. "Let's make a deal. You want to help and I want something different. Think casual, and timelessly elegant. Before you give your hand whiplash let's talk about likes, needs, choices; mine not yours. Do we have a deal?"

\* \* \* \*

Night had fallen before Salina left.

As she sipped a cup of hot jasmine tea Cinnamon ran her hand over the soft blue velvet upholstered couch.

A spotlight, the same soft blue as the couch, filled the center of the living room floor. Her mother's magnolia perfume tickled her nose.

A gloved hand appeared. With a snap of its fingers the hand disappeared. Caitlin, wearing a sea foam green strapless evening gown appeared.

Without fanfare, Herb materialized. He looked comfortable in his worn jeans and Christmas green polo shirt with its bulge in the pocket. Walking to an overstuffed chair, covered in eggshell white brocade, Herb stretched his long frame out and casually crossed his bare feet at the ankles. His favorite pipe, with a curling ribbon of smoke rising from the bowl, was resting in his hand.

Caitlin strolled into the foyer and took her time looking. She touched the edge of a yellow and white polka dot shade adorning a black rod iron lamp. She rearranged a selection of blue and white spatter ware on her mother's old petite dresser. And slowly examined the collage of family photos above the dresser.

In the dining room, she studied the painting above the sideboard. The background, a swirling mass of soft pastels, pulsated with life energy. Cinnamon's copper red hair was styled in a French braid. Gold hoop earrings brushed her shoulders. An untied blue ribbon, threaded through the eyelet laced collar of a white, peasant blouse. The large emerald cut smoky quartz necklace Cinnamon always wore lay within the shadow of her cleavage. Her ring-laden fingers cupped the sides of a large crystal ball. Her lips painted a deep rusty red were pursed, as she pondered what the misty depths of the crystal revealed. Within the crystal ball, a hazy figure of a man with dark hair could be seen.

Caitlin realigned a large piece of white coral and ran her finger over pretty seashells scattered around the coral's base. Pulling out a dining room chair, she ran the palm of her hand over the butter yellow cushion.

Settling on a new royal blue slipper chair, she studied the intricate pattern on the large blue and white area rug. "I like what you've done; the rooms feel inviting. The yellow in the pillows and ginger jar lamp add a healthy punch of color that livens up the traditional blue and white décor. Think about adding a large blue and white urn to balance the starkness of the coral on the sideboard."

"Dad, did Mom really come here to comment on the new décor?"

"Be patient, you know she hates it when we use the logical side of our brains to cut to the chase."

"How was the car show?"

"The new streamline designs have no style. I'll take a classic Mustang over any of them."

"Did you walk along the Thames?"

"Hmm, it was lovely. This morning we didn't get a chance to talk about Thanksgiving. The meal was perfect and Juanita makes excellent pies."

"I saw you add salt to the gravy, as did Ginger."

Caitlin chuckled. "What can I say; it needed a pinch more. I do miss cooking; it was fun to be in the middle of the preparations."

Cinnamon frowned. "Ginger always told us you were at every family event. She described what you were wearing and the grand entrances you made."

"We were and she did. Being invisible to everyone but Gin is different; you're there but not a participating part of there."

Cinnamon understood. Knowing her parents were there and seeing them and interacting with them had been different. A contentment sadly missing since their death had made the day extra special.

"I'm sorry your young man couldn't join us."

"Is Jack my man?"

"Don't bait me. It didn't work yesterday and it won't work now. I gave Warren my word that I would behave. If I want to pop in for visits I can't comment on anything that hasn't happened. But know this, no



matter what you decide we are proud of you. As for what Jack is or isn't, that is for you to decide."

"I'm not whining, stomping my foot, or pouting, but why me? Why am I different?"

"You aren't different." Caitlin shot out of her seat. With her back to the room, she muttered. Cinnamon picked out Warren's name and Pesty.

"Sweetie, brat number two, I know that detail oriented brain of yours is adding two plus two and coming up with six. But trust us, and be patient. When it comes to matters of the heart, the spell your three hundred year old grandmamma cast works in strange ways."

From his breast pocket, he pulled out a lemon drop, his answer to all their childhood tears, tantrums and triumphs. Placing it in Cinn's hand, he sat beside her. A traditional hug had nothing on the loving warmth he radiated around her.

"I have an aunt who meddles where she shouldn't, casts spells off the top of her head and promptly forgets what she said. I have a fairy godmother with a smart mouth, a taste for trashy clothes and a shoe fetish. Half the time her magic wand sounds like a car backfiring and she doesn't know the meaning of 'no'. To help people, I astral travel down rat holes into hell. If patience is a virtue, I've earned my gold star."

"Yes, you have. If you need us, I promise we will do everything in our power to help. Give me a smile and promise to go to bed and get some sleep."

"I promise."

Hanging above her king size sleigh bed was a massive gold star. The covers on the bed had been turned back. Resting on a pillow was a lemon drop.

Frustration and the inevitable monthly cycle of jumbled hormones caught Cinnamon off guard. Between tears she wobbled. "Dad, I love you."

The bedroom light blinked on and off a couple of times—one of her dad's tricks that let her know he'd heard.

Sleep eluded her. She analyzed everything her parents had said a dozen times.

The ability to see them, talk to them, and have their undivided attention was a gift she'd never expected. Because she'd been so young when they died, she hadn't realized how many characteristics, gestures and personality traits they shared.

Cinnamon could match her sisters' and mother's pout for pout. But only on stage did she share Rosemary and Caitlin's flare for dramatics or their coy feminine wile.

Like her mother, Cinnamon had a soft heart. But like her father, she had no patience for the insignificant details people tended to ramble on about. Like her father, she prioritized information and had a good eye for remembering details. And like her dad, she tried not to jump to conclusions.

Her parents hadn't dropped by just to say hi, admire the new décor, or talk about cars and Thanksgiving dinner. During their visit she'd been preoccupied, but with hindsight she saw what she had overlooked earlier.

Nothing more than energy, auras are no different for those that have passed over. The happy yellow glow that should have glazed their energy after an evening of moonlit walking and dancing had been absent.

Her dad, a master at relaxation, had tension running through his aura when he hugged her goodbye.

Her mother's touching and primping wasn't normal. But she'd needed to ground herself, reassure herself that life was normal, before she could talk.

Something was about to happen, something out of their control. Without being able to say anything, they were showing their support in the only way they could.

Sleep came gradually, layer by layer the body relaxed, the mind shut off; the room held her physical body but not her soul.

*The vortex pulling Cinnamon through space pulled her skin taut.*

*Traveling at the speed of sound, lights blurred into non-descript streams of color.*

As suddenly as the trip began, it ended.

Suspended in space, Cinnamon had a clear view of a rock-strewn gorge. The scene looked like a western movie set, but there were no cameras, no artificial lights, no director yelling 'action'.

Cinnamon counted seven men crouched behind giant red boulders. Thirty feet above a narrow ravine, they had their cowboy hats tucked low, and their rifles aimed and cocked.

In the dry narrow gully below them, a half dozen men used crowbars to pry open wooden crates. Another six men broke jugs of pottery and stuffed saddle packs with the white pouches hidden inside the jugs.

Standing in a cluster, contentedly sharing scattered blocks of hay were saddled horses and a string of pack mules.

Half a mile away, more men approached.

Three men standing to the side of the horses caught her attention. One man carried a dusty gray saddlebag over his shoulder. As early morning sun peeked over the horizon, a bolt of lightning shot off the silver metal in his hand.

A flash of light, an explosion and rifles firing, brought her attention back to the men hidden behind the boulders.

A scream stripped her vocal cords raw.

She felt emotional and physical pain. Before dust settled and boulders and rock stopped rolling, souls abandoned their earthly bodies.

A man pointed a rifle at a man's back.

Cinnamon screamed.

As a bullet ripped the flesh on his thigh wide open, the man's body twisted.

Jack.

She tried moving towards him, but invisible arms held her back.

Powerless, she watched Jack's face contort with pain and rage.

A second bullet tore open his stomach.

The invisible power restraining her released its hold.

Soothingly she caressed Jack's cheek.

"Jack, it's going to be all right. I'm here to help. Please don't give up. You need to fight. You need to help me. Please, don't give up."

As if divided in half, the healer scanned his body. As her hands ran down his mangled body, a healing grid appeared. Over the grid, a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors appeared. Every grid lacked the sharp clear colors of health.

Jack's injuries were more than she had ever seen, or worked on. His life, his earthbound essence was in her hands.

Panic overwhelmed her.

Frozen with fear she didn't feel the warmth of the blue light until she heard the man's voice. "You were given the tools and knowledge. You know what needs to be done."

Cinnamon closed her eyes. Several deep breaths cleared her aura and helped her concentrate on the grid before her.

*Tuning out everything but the grid, she concentrated on the patterns.*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 7

The riddle Green-eyes Jack gave could fit three people. None of their deaths had been neat and tidy. But one name had tightened his gut and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

The guy had been smart and ruthless. He'd also had a wide network of connections on both sides of the law. Finding out the truth before the truth bit him in the ass turned into a dead-end nightmare.

Green-eyes had never been wrong and he didn't believe she was this time. No matter which man turned out to be the living ghost, Jack wasn't taking chances.

Friends and family made easy pawns. Not willing to risk what he claimed as his, he'd cancelled his trip to Kansas, tried to protect his back, and he'd doubled his search effort.

Now he rode one of eight horses, going single file down a narrow gorge. The horses were moving slower than a duck at a shooting gallery. Even mediocre marksmen could win a shit load of giant panda bears in seconds.

Pete had refused to disclose the transfer location until they were on their way.

Pointing out the danger of heading into an unknown gorge had earned him a sneer and a comment about being a chicken shit gringo. He'd have happily accepted the title if it had succeeded in getting Pete to listen. But Jack had seen smarter men than Pete allow greed to blind them to the possibility of their own death or failure.

A two-way radio, smaller than a watch battery, was tucked in Jack's ear. Dipping his head, Jack barely moved his lips. "How far back are you?"

"Three quarters of a mile. What's happening?" Terry answered.

"Crap. The goods are piled in the middle of an open slaughterhouse. Get your ass up here before hell breaks loose."

Jack took his time dismounting. He scanned the boulders on both sides of the gorge. Nothing moved. Nothing looked out of place. Except for the crates, there wasn't a tree or rock big enough to offer cover.

The setup was his worst nightmare come true.

He ignored the excited comments Pete's men made as they tested bags of drugs hidden inside cheap pottery.

His loose limbed stroll defied the tension running up his spine.

"Tell me it's the real thing." Pete shoved a metal plate towards Jack.

An explosion echoed through the air.

Rocks and boulders tumbled down both sides of the gorge.

There were no good choices.

A bullet ripped his thigh open.

Jack thought he heard the fiery bowels of hell crackle with laughter, laughter loud enough to wake the

dead.

Pain like nothing he'd ever experienced radiated from his belly.

Soft, gentle fingers touched his cheek.

Jack forced his eyes open.

Cinnamon knelt beside him. "I'm going to frisk you."

Her low husky voice, as smooth as a fine wine, calmed him.

"I should be so lucky," whispered past his dry lips.

Jack's eyes closed.

Like an electric blanket being pulled up, warmth started at his feet and slowly worked its way up. Where the warmth touched, the torturous pain stopped.

Jack's heartbeat slowed.

In the cool air, the sweet scent of vanilla replaced the acid scent of fear.

All too soon, the warmth stopped. Jack begged for the warmth to return, then he begged the devil to take him.

Cinnamon, the woman who had tempted him since the first time he met her, whispered, "Jack, the devil doesn't need you. I do. Listen. You have to listen and do what I say."

"Stupid. Mistakes. I was warned. Should have stopped. Should have told Pete no."

"Jack it's over. The past can't be changed. You have to do what I say."

"What?"

"I have a favor to ask."

"I'm a dead man?"

"You aren't going to die. I plan on having your babies."

Jack opened his eyes. The heat of the sun had to be playing tricks on his pain-riddled brain. Cinnamon smiled. Tenderly she stroked his forehead. He didn't care that he was hallucinating; he welcomed her touch, the comfort of her smile.

Behind her a white light shimmered. Love and acceptance radiated from the light. As he watched, a carpet of light crept towards him. From the depth of his being he knew that if he wanted, he could enter the light, and in the fate awaiting him, his past would be wiped clean.

It would be easy to float to the light; the pain would be gone, so easy ... He forced his drooping eyes open.

"You want to have my babies? When?"

"Now."

"Now?" A bitter laugh didn't make it past his lips. "Tired. Headache. Stomach hurts like hell. Besides, I'm dead."

"Jack, listen carefully. For me to help you, you need to want to live. There isn't much time."

"Need time to make babies. Do it right." The words slurred together; his voice faded.

"Jack, you need to fight. You have to want to live; without that, there is nothing I can do for you. Don't make me cry."

He was dying; the conversation was nothing more than a hallucination. No matter, he refused to die with Cinnamon's tears on his conscious. "Don't cry, Sweetheart. I'll do anything you ask."

"Good. My hands are going to move over your body. Like the first time they are going to feel very warm. But the warmth will intensify. The heat will feel hotter than a fiery red branding iron. Accept the heat, Jack. Visualize the warmth flowing through your body. No matter how hot, don't stop the flow of the heat. Promise me."

He didn't respond.

"Jack, promise me."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever. Takes more than heat to make babies." Before his words faded, he felt his body jerk. A jolt of heat slammed through his body. Current worse than a live wire carrying 220 watts of electricity cruised through his veins, jolted his heart and short-circuited his brain.

Cinnamon was wrong; the heat was far worse than a branding iron.

"Jack, a helicopter's going to take you to a hospital. I have to leave."

He didn't move.

His heart beat, barely.

Gently, Cinnamon brushed a strand of dusty auburn brown hair off his forehead, gave him a fleeting kiss, and disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

Lying on her side, Cinnamon stared at the bedroom wall. Bathed in early morning sunlight, the walls' rich orange sherbet color normally made her smile. Now, they were nothing more than a testament.

She was home.

She was in her bedroom.

But she hadn't been. Where had she been? She had to remember, it was important. Personal. Cinnamon didn't know how she knew that; it was just there, lingering, like a balloon that lacked enough helium to lift it up; the knowledge hovered.

She needed to get up.

She needed a hot cup of tea.

She needed sugar.

The scent of magnolia perfume and rum, vanilla and licorice pipe tobacco filled the room.

Her parents appeared.

Cinnamon didn't have the strength to sit up or say hello.

Herb sat on the edge of a royal blue chaise lounge. His elbows were braced on his knees. His expression was sober.

Caitlin sat on the edge of the bed. Holding a mug to Cinnamon's lips, she said, "You need to drink this."

Cinnamon managed a couple of swallows. "Swiping the dribble on her chin with the sheet, she whispered, "It tastes awful."

"Can't be helped. Three more swallows and you're done."

"What happened?" The words slurred.

Cinnamon blinked. Once. Twice. The third time her eyelids did not open.

\* \* \* \*

"Cinn, wake up." Ginger opened the door to the walk-in closet as she spoke.

"I'm awake." Rubbing sleep-laden eyes, she didn't move. "What are you looking for?"

"Got it." She threw an overnight bag on the bed.

"Like the living room. We can talk about that later.

"There's no easy way to say this. Terry Robinson called. Jack's been hurt. He needs surgery. Terry wants Cole on the team. Walker and Rose are on the way here. The plane lands in an hour. Move it."

When Cinnamon didn't move, Ginger stopped pulling lingerie out of the drawer. "Are you all right?"

"Yes ... no ... I don't know. I feel ... like hell. My mouth tastes like ... can't think of anything that tastes this bad, it's terrible." Struggling, she made it to a sitting position.

"Headache?"

"Major sledgehammers. There are chocolate bars in the freezer. Could you please get me a couple?"

Cinnamon wolfed down one candy bar and had the paper off the second bar before trying to stand. Her legs wobbled but when she didn't fall, she shuffled towards the bathroom. "Give me twenty minutes."

"Can I get you something for the headache?"

"Short of cutting off my head, no. Sometimes a hot shower helps. After that it just takes time."

"I thought you were kidding when you said Salina stole your wardrobe. Besides sexy panties and bras is there anything in the drawers?"

"Nope. Don't worry, by the time I get out of the shower there will be an outfit hanging on the bathroom door."

\* \* \* \*

Settled in the backseat of a classic '65 red mustang with black leather interior, Cinnamon leaned her

head back and absently listened to the Beach Boys sing, "Don't Worry Baby".

She'd eaten two more candy bars, a bag of chocolate covered raisins and drank a soda. Nutritious it wasn't. Her head no longer felt woozy, but she still had a bitch of a headache.

The headache and lack of energy said she had astral traveled. The last memories she had were entering the bedroom, seeing the gold star hanging on the wall behind her bed, and crying.

"Rosemary called Juanita several times, but no one's answering," Ginger said.

"Hell's bells," Cinnamon muttered. Picking Juanita's brain would have removed a huge pile of questions.

A whiff of licorice, rum, and vanilla pipe tobacco caught Cinn's attention. "Have you talked to Mom and Dad?"

"No. Not answering. And yes, I smell Dad's pipe tobacco. Staying invisible's a cute trick he and Mom use to keep from having to talk."

"Herb is talking to me." Cole's voice was a sexy Texas drawl.

Cinnamon eyed the seat next to her. The white-gloved hand appeared. Between finger and thumb was a lemon drop. As she held out her hand the lemon drop tumbled into her palm.

"Maybe he doesn't want the two of you working him over for answers he can't give."

"We would never..." Ginger sputtered.

"Yes, you would! You wouldn't be able to resist the temptation."

"Give it up, Gin, they know us too well. Is Dad here for moral support or is this a male bonding ride along."

Cole chuckled. "Herb said to be nice. We have an agreement. I let him pick the radio station and he doesn't complain about me driving the speed limit."

"Such a deal." Cinnamon purred.

"Our timing is perfect. Herb says the Gulfstream is on final approach."

\* \* \* \*

"Where is Jack?"

With or without permission Cinnamon had every intention of seeing him.

No nonsense. No polite request. Terry Robinson liked that. It said the feelings Jack was fighting for the pretty redhead weren't one sided.

"He's in ICU. They said no visitors. Follow me."

Jack didn't respond to the squeeze Cinnamon gave his cold hand. Closing her eyes, she forced the sound of beeping machines and their maze of wires, blood and another IV feeding into veins, and the energy flowing from a private nurse and Terry to disappear.

The grid appeared.

A black spot showed where something was pressing against Jack's heart and lung. Cinn didn't doubt



Cole's abilities as a cardiology surgeon, but removing the object and repairing damage would be a tedious, difficult task.

Pushing that worry aside, she continued down the grid. The intricate patterns, shown to her in the dream, appeared.

Chunks of patterns were missing.

Never had she seen a body so badly damaged.

The healing work she did during stage shows, astral travel, and visits to children's wards was like treating a skinned knee compared to the task at hand. The volume of healing energy needed would shoot through him and hurt like hell.

The ICU was a glass fish bowl; she hoped to hell Jack didn't move or scream.

Cinnamon didn't realize Salina was in the room until she spoke. "Jack won't feel the heat and he won't move. Concentrate on the lessons you learned. Don't look for pieces; they will present themselves in the order they need to be fixed. Concentrate on that piece, nothing else. Hold onto the chunk of smoky quartz around your neck; it will feed you energy.

"I'm not leaving. If you have a question your mom will hear you."

Thank God.

Putting a lid on her fear, Cinnamon concentrated on the grid. A tiny icy blue chip, shaped like a rose petal appeared. Some pieces, appearing in clusters, filled several spaces at once. Other pieces were so minuscule, finding where they belonged was like finding a speck of gold in a handful of sand.

Just inside the ICU door, Terry watched. Cinnamon didn't move, blink, or look like she was breathing.

Long, agonizing minutes passed.

A nurse, dressed in scrubs, stepped into the room. Speaking to no one in particular, she said, "I'm moving him to surgery."

Cinnamon didn't move.

Stepping forward, Terry gently touched her arm. When she didn't move he said, "Cinn." She released the death grip she'd had on the chunk of smoky quartz.

"They need to get Jack to surgery. We're in their way."

The small waiting room was full to overflowing.

Quietly, Ginger and Rosemary fussed over Cinnamon.

Leaning against a wall, Terry watched Cinnamon consume candy bars and several cups of hot sweetened tea. He watched Rosemary smear ointment over a deep red mark on the palm of the hand that had held the smoky quartz. And he wondered if he'd ever get a truthful answer to what the hell had just happened.

\* \* \* \*

Cinnamon refused to leave the hospital.

Regulated to ten minute visits, she spent the time piecing together the grid.

When the kaleidoscope patterns were repaired Cinnamon used her power to restore energy to Jack's immune system and boost the healing energy within each pattern.

Three days after surgery, Cinnamon was halfway through her ten-minute visit when Jack's eyes fluttered open.

"Welcome back." Her exhausted smile was rewarded with a slight squeeze to her hand.

As Cinnamon walked into the waiting room, Rosemary looked up from the magazine she was flipping through.

"Jack opened his eyes. A doctor is with him now."

"Thank God."

Cinnamon had lost weight. The circles around her eyes looked like bruises and her skin had lost its healthy glow.

"You have two choices. The hotel or I'll have Cole admit you."

"No argument. Point me in the direction of the nearest bed. Whatever kept me moving vanished the minute Jack squeezed my hand."

\* \* \* \*

The next time Jack opened his eyes, Terry was sitting in a chair beside the bed.

"Is he dead?" Jack whispered.

"No."

"Son of a bitch! What happened?"

"We're still piecing parts together." Terry ran his hand over his face. He'd seen Grover die. No, not true. Like Jack, he'd seen Grover's car explode and the charred remains of an unidentifiable body.

Three days ago, with the help of the two-way radio in Jack's ear, he'd heard Grover gloat. There was no mistaking his voice. And this time there was no mistaken identity; Grover wasn't in the body count.

"Cinnamon. Get her the hell out of here. I don't care what you tell her, but keep her the hell away from me."

\* \* \* \*

Two days later Jack said goodbye to ICU.

His memory of the attack had Swiss cheese size holes, holes that left him in a foul mood.

Refusing to use a bedpan, he'd managed to get himself into the bathroom. He was shuffling his way back to the bed when Terry and Betty Jo arrived.

"Get me the hell out of here," Jack growled.

"Morning to you, too." Jack didn't complain when Betty Jo helped him back into bed. Stopping short of tucking the blankets around him, she bussed his cheek. "Glad to see you got your sense of humor back; you had us worried."

She was an attractive, tiny woman with soft golden brown eyes and light brown hair worn in a casual chin length bob. No one looking at her would guess she was a federal agent, which was just what the agency banked on.

Standing beside his wife, Terry's dark chocolate eyes were unusually soft. Outside of his wife and son, Jack was the only person he considered family.

"Until that ugly mug of yours has some color you aren't going anywhere. Tell us what you remember."

"Not a hell of a lot. After we left Pete's place he got a call on a cell phone I hadn't seen before."

"I heard the ring. Didn't pick up the conversation," Betty Jo said.

"There wasn't one. He listened, hung up, and threw the phone out the window. When Pete got the call we were headed south, after the call we headed east. I'm thinking Grover changed the transfer location."

"By the book, textbook perfect. The gorge isn't marked on any map. If we hadn't had a local with us, we would have been scrambling." Betty Jo pulled a sturdy gray metal chair closer to the bed and sat.

"I remember telling you to get your ass in gear, but if you'd been ten steps behind us it wouldn't have changed anything. The setup couldn't have stunk worse if a skunk had sprayed my face. The largest boulders in the gorge were a ways up the hill on both sides of the transfer point. There were seven deliverymen, all unknowns. Pete barely glanced at the plate or the guy holding it. You heard the conversation; he was handing it to me when the explosions rocked everything loose."

"What's been retrieved?"

"Not a hell of a lot. Only the top layer of bags was coke. The rest of the crates held a few hundred pounds of sugar. Added to Pete's gang, the body count in the basin matches yours. Behind the boulders, we found another five men with their throats slit."

"Grover's favorite form of entertainment. Anyone of interest?"

"Mercenaries. No surprises. The guy running their group is missing. It's possible he stayed with the helicopter, but for a bigger cut he wouldn't have said no to slitting a few throats."

"What about the plate?"

"Along with Grover, it disappeared."

"After the explosion, the only thing I clearly remember is Grover standing over me. What was happening at your end?"

"Not a damn thing. We'd closed the gap to half a mile. Five minutes after we arrived, we heard a helicopter take off. A couple miles up the trail the gorge takes a sharp turn. Unless you know the gorge, the turn isn't noticeable. By the time we got down there all we saw was a speck in the sky."

"He's changed his appearance. But the voice..."

"Yeah, we heard. There's no mistaking that gravel pit." Terry walked to the window. Not looking at Jack, he continued. "In desperation I asked Ginger if she could demand newly deceased ghosts appear. After she told me all the reasons it wouldn't work, I had her hypnotize me." Through hypnosis and Ginger's powers Terry and Betty Jo had been able to visit with their deceased daughter, Hanna.

"And?"

"And nothing. Other than assuring me you were going to live, Hanna couldn't answer any questions about what happened."

"Do you remember anything else?"

"Not clearly. Something makes me think Grover hollered my name."

"He did. He also laughed like a jackass."

"Damn, I was hoping that was just a nightmare. He said something; just before he pulled the trigger he said something. I can't remember what it was."

"He said, 'you screwed the wrong person when you messed with my plan.' You can explain that later. Do you remember anything else?"

"No. Should I?"

"I don't know. At the end, the communication got garbled." Terry had clearly heard Jack's end of the conversation with Cinnamon. After watching Cinnamon stand beside Jack's bed and go into a trance he'd asked Hanna if the conversation was a hallucination or fact. Hanna had refused to answer and insisted he not repeat what he heard unless Jack remembered.

For now he would comply with her request.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 8

*Seven weeks later*

The energy Cinnamon spent working with Jack physically cost her. Other than a handful of hypnosis shows performed close to home, she slept through the holidays. As if the universe knew her body was physically and emotionally drained, her sleep hadn't been interrupted with astral travel.

Salina hadn't hovered but she'd been there, in the background, running her life. Underneath the makeup, outlandish outfits, and the *me, me, me persona* was a caring, nurturing soul. Not that Salina would have appreciated the observation or showed that side of herself in normal motherly actions and words, but it was there and Cinnamon was grateful.

She hadn't given up on the idea of giving up her *gift* but without Jack in the picture all she had were daydreams. And daydreaming her life away wasn't an option.

"Break a leg." Salina's command brought Cinnamon back to the present.

She was wearing Salina's latest creation: a fire engine red ankle length gown with a filmy skirt and a form-fitting halter style bodice. Her smoky quartz necklace, fashioned into a bracelet, and a creamy white rose tucked into the deep V of the dress's bodice were her only adornments.

With pomp and ceremony, Denver's Chief of Police said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to introduce the talented and beautiful Cinnamon Prescott."

With the same easy agility it took to put on a pair of comfortable slippers, Cinnamon slipped into her stage persona.

Confidently she strutted onto the stage, stepped into the spotlight and scanned the audience. The bright lights made it impossible to see faces, but in the packed auditorium she had no trouble seeing the mirage of human auras as they merged and collided.

The Chief of Police had reached the stairs at the opposite end of the stage. In what would later be called fluid sex, Cinnamon dropped her voice to a husky whisper. Holding a cordless microphone close to her lips, she said, "Chief, please come back here and talk to me for just a second."

The Chief, with a circle of hair edging his bald dome, was pushing sixty-five. With heavy bags under his eyes, a large hooknose, sagging jowls and a thick neck, he resembled a tired, sad eyed Bassett hound. Since arriving in Denver, several people had told her he was an open-minded boss who growled a lot and stood behind his men.

When he reached her side, Cinnamon wrapped her arms around his slightly thickened waist. In her three inch red heels, they stood eye to eye.

"Besides your lovely wife, has any woman ever told you that you have soulful bedroom eyes?"

"A few." He had a good poker face. Only a slight stiffening of his spine said he was uncomfortable with the question.

"Only a few? That is absolutely shameful. The women in Colorado must be totally blind."

Pursing his lips, he didn't comment.

"My daddy was bald as a cue ball. Mom said he was the sexiest man on earth." Playfully she rubbed the Chiefs shiny dome. "You remind me of him."

"Humph."

"I bet when you were patrolling the streets more than one gal commented on what a handsome devil you are, while trying to sweet talk her way out of a ticket."

"Do I have to answer that?"

"Sweetie Pie, you just did."

"You were born and raised in Denver, correct?"

"Yes."

"How many people in this room know that the caption under your senior yearbook picture says: *He sings like an angel and wiggles his hips like the King?*"

"Who told you that?"

"Sweetie Pie this is my show. I ask the questions, you answer. Got it?"

"Got it."

"You're really nice and cuddly." Wiggling a little, she let him squirm before whispering into the mike, "I'll let you in on a secret: every high school library keeps copies of the school's year books. All you need is a reason, a door pass, and helpful staff to use those libraries. But today I got extra lucky. I talked to Principal Kinghorn."

Groaning, the Chief hung his head.

I see you remember Mr. Kinghorn. For the record, you left a lasting impression on him, too."

"Anything he told you is a lie."

"Really? He seemed to think you would know something about a jockstrap flapping in the breeze on the flagpole."

"Not me."

"I'm impressed you didn't so much as twitch when telling that lie."

"I've had some good teachers."

"I bet you have, Sweetie Pie. He also mentioned a band. I believe it was called, Four Bad Boys."

"Never heard of them."

"Guess that explains your cute Jimmy Durante nose. It just grew another inch."

The audience, of local and state law enforcement, was invitation only. When the foot stomping and clapping died down, Cinnamon asked, "Is your wife the jealous type?"

"No. Why?"

"Sweetie Pie, remember, I ask the questions."

"Force of habit."

"I bet it is. Did I meet your lovely wife earlier this evening at a dinner party?"

"Yes."

"Did you, or did you not, tell us that you are always aware of what is going on around you?"

"I did."

"Did you also say it is impossible to hypnotize someone who refuses to relax?"

"I did."

"Are you hypnotized right now?"

"No."

"Are you positive?"

"Absolutely."

Behind them, a four-piece band started playing "Love Me Tender".

"Sweetie Pie, I fell in love with you the moment we met. Do you think it would be possible for you to find it in your heart to love me true?"

For a moment the Chief looked at her blankly. But when the band changed tunes he sang, "Wise men say only fools rush in."

"Sweetie Pie, you are so hypnotized?"

"Impossible. I can't be hypnotized."

"You mean you really love me? You have no idea how happy it makes me to know I broke up another marriage."

The Chief answered by singing, "You're The Devil In Disguise."

"Why, Sweetie Pie, that's the sweetest compliment anyone has ever given me. How did you know I was a she-devil?"

"You hypnotized me with your sexy voice."

Cinnamon chuckled. "Yes, I did. Now can I sweet talk you into marrying me?"

The Chief got down on bended knee and sang the opening lines to "Love Me Tender."

Cinnamon placed a bright red lipstick kiss on the top of his baldhead. "Your proposal is very flattering. You said your wife wasn't the jealous type, but I do believe polygamy is against the law. I couldn't possibly settle for anything less than marriage. Aren't you afraid of landing up in jail?"

Standing, the Chief gyrated his hips to the music. When handed his old guitar, he moved the band's mike to the center of the stage and sang "Jail House Rock."

Cinnamon was delighted. She hadn't doubted that she had hypnotized the Chief shortly after the dinner party ended. But there was never any guarantee that a person would take the cue of suggestion.

Having taken the suggestion that he use Elvis Presley songs to sing answers to her questions, beyond the simple request, he created a great opening act.

Cinnamon brought him out of hypnosis as he was taking his third bow.

Applause and catcalls filled the auditorium. Dazed, the Chief stared at the guitar in his hand.

Cinnamon slipped her arms around his waist. "Sweetie Pie, this piece of advice is a bit late but don't ever say never. Especially in front of me and a woman who for over thirty years has watched your eyes glaze over whenever you talk about fishing."

"I will never underestimate either of you again."

"I bet you won't, Sweetie Pie. Before you take your seat, I need your help one more time. Have you noticed that police officers don't volunteer for anything?"

"Never had that problem."

Amid laughter she said, "Glad to hear that. As a stage hypnotist I need volunteers. I've been told that you have perfected the perfect growl. I am going to handpick a few volunteers. If they resist, your job will be to growl. Do you need to practice a growl?"

"If anyone here thinks I need to practice, speak up."

Silence greeted the question.

"Sweetie Pie, you are good, really good. You could hear a pin drop from thirty rows back. Before they stop trembling, let's pick my victims, I mean *volunteers*..."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## Chapter 9

Early the next morning fat wet flakes of snow fell to the ground as the plane took off from the Denver airport. As the plane broke through the storm clouds' milk bottle blindness, Cinnamon stared at the solid floor of grayish blue billows of fluff beneath the plane.

It was moments like this, with no distractions to occupy her, that her thoughts went to Jack. Betty Jo had sent Cinnamon home. She also gave her an abbreviated reason behind the request. If she hadn't shared that information, Cinnamon wouldn't have accepted the banishment.

Thanks to Cole, she knew Jack's wounds were healed and he had returned to work. But that didn't tell her what he was doing or where he was.

Selfishly, she wanted to know if Jack thought of her or wondered what she was doing.

Their one date, dinner and a movie, ended without a kiss goodnight. At Ginger's wedding, they danced under the stars. At Rosemary's wedding, they shared laughter and dances. Coupled with the precious hours at Dreamland's Tinkerbelle dance club, she had gained knowledge: Jack's lean hard body fit against her perfectly. Instead of wearing cologne, he used a spicy scented soap. The hair at the nape of his neck was baby fine and soft. When her breath brushed his neck, he'd tightened his hold, drawing her closer to him. And there was no mistaking that she turned him on. That delicious knowledge had fueled hours of pleasant daydreams.

Like a slippery shadow he disappeared after each of their encounters, never giving her the opportunity to say goodbye, kiss him goodbye, or let him know he would be missed. In daydreams she spun a tale of him being so enamored he was running scared, afraid a kiss would have him slipping between her sheets, connecting them spiritually and physically. Logic said he was just plain running, as far away and as fast as he could.

She hadn't doubted or questioned the threat Betty Jo described. Jack had made enemies; it came with the territory and shouldn't be scoffed at. But she wasn't fooled; it was also a convenient way to keep her at arm's length.

With the plane's tiny window as a pillow and the clouds' hypnotic powers, her eyes drifted closed.

*Cinnamon was on her second cup of lemon tea when Eros slipped into the chair across from her.*

*With his warm hand over hers, he gave a squeeze.*

Smiling, she said nothing.

"Did you miss me?" Eros asked.

"Was I supposed to miss you?" Her brow arched. She tugged her hand out of his clasp.

Eros chuckled. "Guess I deserved that. But I thought, perhaps you would."

"Twice, you've left me sitting here, without sending a message, without thinking how much I would worry, because you wanted me to miss you?"

"No, not that. I've been busy."

"And I'm not? Are you implying that my time is worth nothing?"

"No. Of course not."

"Eros, this isn't a game. I thought we were beyond necking behind the gym, stealing kisses when no one's looking and testing the boundaries of each other's trust and affection."

"You're right. I know that." Frustrated, he ran a hand over the back of his neck.

"Do you? I wonder. You arrive late. You dally with my affections. You make me no promises. In fact, you go out of your way to make certain I know we have no future. But each time we part, you give me a date and time to meet."

"We do have a future, just not the type of future you have in mind. I won't make promises I can't keep. I have nothing to give you and you deserve to be given the moon and stars. But..."

"Have I ever asked for anything but love?"

"No, but I can't give you myself."

"Is there another woman?"

His chuckle held irony. "My mistress is not physical. Everything I do, every decision made, has one purpose—your protection. Your safety, your life, means more to me than my life. It's as simple as that."

"If it is your work causing your fears, is it more important than what we share?"

"It is who I am. But that's not the whole. If we married, I could not bear losing you again."

"I'm not going to point out the holes in that type of thinking. Why are you prolonging the agony?"

"Because we love each other. Because no matter what I know, I cannot stay away."

"Do you love me? You've never said the words."

"You know I do."

"No I don't. Are the words that hard to say?"

Eros looked away. Hesitated, stood, pulled her out of her chair, draped his arms around her waist and whispered in her ear, "Let's walk for awhile. In the time we have left, let me act like the teenager you accuse me of being. Let me steal a few kisses and pat your ass."

She didn't try to wipe the disappointment from her voice. "I guess they are that hard to say."

Eros pulled her into his arms. A kiss near her ear followed a kiss on her forehead. In a husky voice, he whispered, "Please, let's not argue. Are a few kisses too much to ask?"

Any anger she'd been harboring dissolved in a puddle of lust. "Are kisses all you want to steal?" Tilting her chin down, she looked at him through her lashes.

Silently they headed for the half circle of trees. Within the shelter, Eros leaned against a tree and pulled her into his arms. Their bodies were thigh-to-thigh, belly-to-belly. Cinnamon slipped her arms around his neck. The kiss was instantly demanding. Eros tasted like mint toothpaste and dark chocolate. Her senses went into overdrive. As his hand worked its way under her sweater, she shivered.

*Arching her back, she gave him access to the clasp on the front of the bra. His thumb brushed...*

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. We have started our descent. It is currently twenty-eight degrees and snowing in Boise. The wind is out of the northwest at eighteen miles an hour. During descent we are expecting light to moderate turbulence. Please put your seats in an upright position and fasten your seat belts. We will touch down in approximately fifteen minutes."

"Hell fire and damnation," Cinnamon muttered in frustration.

"Did you say something?" the dressed-for-success businesswoman sitting next to her asked.

"Nothing worth repeating."

Aunt Pesty liked to say there was no use crying over spilled milk. Right now, she'd like to argue that point. Instead, she recorded the dream in a small notebook. Later, she'd copy it into her dream log.

As the plane broke out of the storm clouds, a sea of snowflakes flowed past the window. The plane did a small bounce on the runway. As the brakes squealed and the tires grabbed for traction on the slick asphalt, Cinnamon braced a hand on the seat in front of her.

Two weeks of travel had left her tired. The performances, and the energy used for healing had been strenuous. Taking longer than normal to regain her energy was a continual reminder that the healing energy she had used on Jack had depleted her reserve.

With a weary sigh, she reminded herself tonight was the last show and tired or not there was still research needing to be done before she walked out on stage.

Most actions and reactions were predictable, but how people reacted under hypnosis was unpredictable. Working with spontaneous reactions that hadn't been filtered through the propriety of the conscious assured that each show was fresh and entertaining. It would be hard to top last night's performance by Denver's Chief of Police, but she knew that tonight's show would produce a few unexpected twists.

\* \* \* \*

Following the signs and the flow of traffic to baggage, Cinnamon opted to take the stairs next to the crowded escalator.

Unless she was working, or something was unusual, she didn't consciously think about auras. The silver overlay in the man's aura coming towards her on the escalator was an instant attention grabber. The melting snowflakes on Jack's dark auburn hair put a welcoming smile on her lips.

His face was turned slightly away from her, but his steel gray eyes watched her every move.

A physical jolt slammed her body. A second later he said, "You don't know me."

His lips never moved.

Her smile melted.

The steps in front of Jack were empty. Two steps below Jack, a man's eyes were paying extra attention to her chest. Without the ability to see and read his aura, Cinnamon wouldn't have given the man a second glance. There was nothing distinguishable or unpleasant about his brown on brown construction. But the leer on his thin lips, the predatory gleam in lifeless dirt brown eyes, and the muddy red brown haze in his aura brought a shiver of apprehension.

As the escalator brought Jack within touching distance she heard him whisper, "Later." Again, his lips never moved.

She wanted to know if Jack was going through security, meeting someone or if he was turning around to follow her down the stairs. Glancing back was a hard temptation to refuse, but the look in his eyes, the warning and the word *later* stopped her from acting on impulse.

On automatic pilot, she continued to the baggage area.

Now what? She wanted to know what he was doing in Boise. She wanted to run to him. She wanted to feel the strength of him when he wrapped his arms around her. She wanted to kiss him hello and not stop till they were naked and satisfied.

She wanted ... the hairs on the back of her neck to stop sending chills down her spine.

Jack stood ten feet away. His stance was casual, but his aura didn't lie; he was wound up tighter than a cuckoo clock. He was facing her, but his eyes didn't drift her way. On one side of him, she had the chiseled profile of the man who made her skin crawl. On Jack's left side and slightly facing her, stood an older man. Well-dressed, in a black wool topcoat and highly polished black shoes, the gentleman leaned lightly on a sliver capped, hand carved walking stick. Something about the man was familiar. She couldn't place the what, but she knew he wasn't someone she had seen or met in the last couple of weeks.

Trying not to be obvious, she kept sneaking glances in their direction. Jack looked good. His color was healthy. If she ignored the haze of anger around his edges, his aura was clear, glowing with vitality and healthy energy.

Cinnamon wondered if she'd really heard or just imagined that he said *later*. And how was he supposed to locate her without knowing her new cell phone number?

Contemplating the idea of having Salina cause a division, she didn't notice two of the city's finest enter the area until Jack scowled. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, the officer's footsteps created a path that headed straight to her.

Jack attempted to draw his companion's attention away from Cinnamon and the uniforms. The action was as futile as stopping everyone in the general area from hoping they were going to witness something interesting to repeat to friends and family.

The officers stopped three feet in front of her. "Cinnamon Prescott?" The strong clear voice bounced off the ceiling and spread outward.

Cinnamon wanted to glance at Jack. She wanted to say, 'sorry, I didn't expect this,' but the damage was done.

Making the best of a bad situation, Cinnamon pasted on a smile and slipped into her stage persona.

"Guilty." Even in heels Cinnamon was two inches shorter than the cute brunette. Glancing at her nametag, Cinnamon added, "Officer Adams, I swear the plane landing early had nothing to do with my lead foot."

A few eavesdroppers chuckled. Tall, slim and fresh faced, Officer Placer didn't look old enough to be out of high school. Winning the battle to suppress a smile, he shook his head. "Sorry, ma'am. We will note that in our report, but radar guns don't lie. We've also been given information that says you tamper with people's minds and steal incriminating information."

"Absolutely, any chance I get. But bribery's more fun. Do you like latte's?"

"For two Cappuccino Grande's and industrial size muffins we'll squeal like pigs. Pun intended," Officer Adams said.

"Deal."

\* \* \* \*

Cinnamon wasn't in the mood for a swim in the hotel's heated pool. She'd talked to both her sisters, and answered her e-mails. The two paperback books in her suitcase had been read. Stretching out on the couch in the mini suite's living room, she turned on the television. Surfing past the twenty-four hour news channels, the history channel and the cooking channel, she set the remote down when she found a rerun of *Sex In The City*. Before the first commercial, she was asleep.

*Late afternoon sunlight warmed her face. A cup of hot herbal tea appeared on the café's small round table. Feeling exposed, as if someone were watching, she took her time scanning the street. A woman with a small child was leaving a boutique. In front of another store, a teenage boy swept the brick sidewalk. A couple of tables away, an older couple held hands and quietly talked.*

*Nothing was out of place, but the feeling persisted, making her nervous and edgy. Spotting Eros purposely striding across the cobble stone street, she fought the urge to run to him.*

Eros didn't say hello or smile.

Taking her hand he tugged her out of the chair.

"This way." With her hand firmly in his and his long stride, she was forced into a half run. At the end of the block they slipped around the end of the building.

They hugged the outer walls of shops and restaurants as they raced down several back alleys. Eros Stopped. For several minutes she stared at his shoulder blades while he silently watched traffic.

He squeezed her hand.

Pulling her forward they blended into a group of people that had crossed an intersection.

Halfway down the block they followed several people into a hotel lobby. Like an attentive lover, he draped his arm around her shoulders, and guided her towards the elevators. Eros hit the elevator button then pulled her into the stairwell. Neither of them spoke as they walked up five flights. At the third door from the stairs he slid a plastic passkey into the lock.

The blue on green décor was classic hotel generic. Eros opened the fake wood entertainment center, grabbed the remote control, turned on the television and adjusted the sound to a point just above conversation level. Pulling the drapes closed he pulled back a corner and watched.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Cinnamon waited.

When he stepped away from the window she demanded, "What the hell is going on?"

"I'm keeping you safe."

"From what or who?"

"That isn't important."

"It is to me."

"The less you know the better."

"Why, because you don't want to take the time to answer? Because you think I can't handle what you

have to say? You don't trust me? Why?"

"How about, what you don't know can't hurt you."

"Hell's bells and bull. What I don't know can get me killed as easily as what I do know."

"And that is why I shouldn't be here. It's not safe for us to be seen together, but I can't stay away."

"Then don't. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"If only I thought that were true," he muttered.

Sitting beside her on the bed, he pulled her onto his lap. Before their lips met, his cell phone rang. He read the caller ID, tossed the phone on the bed, and nuzzled Cinnamon's neck.

"How long before you leave?"

"I should be gone now. Five minutes, I'm going to take five minutes."

He made a trail of kisses as he worked his way from her collarbone to her ear and slowly down her jaw line. Along the way, he paid attention to every sensitive nerve.

When he pulled back she whispered, "Stay."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and gently brushed his lips against hers.

She could feel him pulling back, restraining himself, allowing her time to get herself under control.

"I'm sorry, I can't. Promise me you won't leave here until I return."

"I can't promise that. I have a life, obligations. Besides, I refuse to hide."

"I don't have time to argue. If you don't promise to stay here, out of sight, I won't be back."

His eyes said he was telling the truth.

*"I promise."*

Cinnamon grabbed the cup of tea on the end table as she headed to her overnight bag. Pulling the spiral notebook she used as a dream log out of a zippered pocket on the suitcase, she logged the dream's details.

Two destiny dreams in one day, did it mean something or was it just coincidence?

Cinnamon scoffed.

Nothing happened by chance.

Ever!

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 10

"Tell me why we are doing this?" Salina whined.

"I was going crazy sitting in the hotel. I decided to do something dumb to get your attention. I want to buy a book. I don't know. You haven't dragged me into a shoe store for three days; I needed a fix to stop the withdrawal symptoms. Throw a dart to find your answer or make up one of your own.

"While you're at it, wave your magic wand and put some fur lined boots on my feet. And a coat like you're wearing would be appreciated."

"Not going to happen. If you'd been sensible you would have turned back when you fell on your ass and broke the heel off your boot. You have no one but yourself to blame for being wet and bone cold."

"Since when did you become sensible?"

"You're rubbing off on me."

"Yeah right! More likely you're gloating over the fact that you were right and I was wrong."

"That, too, but I was trying to be nice and not rub your nose in that fact."

By the time Cinnamon reached the mall, her nose was red and runny. The musty wool odor of her snow-cruised jacket was overpoweringly unpleasant.

"If I say pretty please and promise to get a taxi back to the hotel, will you thaw me out and make me presentable?"

"Add every shoe store in the mall and Victoria's Secret and your wish is granted."

"Three shoe stores."

Sweeping her hand from Cinnamon's feet to her head, Salina smiled at her handiwork.

"Thank you."

Trench coats normally hung straight and loose. Salina's coat belled and the buttons looked ready to pop off. Cinnamon arched a brow and crossed her arms. "Temperatures don't affect you. Why are you wearing a trench coat?"

"It's stylish."

"She lost a bet." Caitlin's chuckle echoed down the hall.

"You just tried selling me a story about being sensible, but you made another bet with my mother. You're nuts! She reads your thoughts. There's no way you can win."

"But I..."

"She's a sucker," Caitlin said.

Salina shrugged. "She's right; I can't pass up the chance to try to best her. Besides it's fun, and one of these days I will win."

"What was the bet?"

"I bet her she couldn't name Seven Wonders of the World without referencing them to clothing." Stardust waltzed around them; Caitlin's perfume filled the air, but she didn't appear.

"I did fine until I got to the Taj Mahal. Honestly, how can a person mention that gorgeous mausoleum without thinking about harem pants, slippers with curled toes, and filmy veils?"

"The romanticized clothing of a concubine, paired with a mausoleum built in tribute of a dead wife. Makes sense to me.

"I'm jumping to the assumption that like your other bets, if you lost, Mom got to pick your clothing for a day."

"Right."

"There is no way Mom would have picked a trench coat. I have to see what you're hiding under that coat."

"No you don't."

"I'll add a fourth shoe store to the deal."

In a blink, the trench coat disappeared.

Salina wore bobby socks, saddle shoes, a black poodle skirt, pink crinolines, and a baby pink twin sweater set. A black scarf was tied around her neck and ponytail. At her neck, a high school ring hung from a gold chain.

"Is the football or basketball captain your date for the sock hop?"

"Not funny. Thank God I was a baby when this style was fashionable."

"It's a fun style. Admit it; you aren't embarrassed, you're just mad you lost the bet."

"I admit nothing." With a wink, Salina led the way to the first shoe store.

"This is my idea of fun and style." Salina breezed around the shoe store. The sixth since they entered the mall.

"I've bought five pairs of shoes and two pairs of boots. I really don't ... oh my, aren't these cute? Prada, at half price."

"Leather, old lace and beads. Grab the black silk ones and the pink rattan with purple trim. I can zap together outfits that will do those sandals justice."

"Yes, you can."

"I knew you were learning to appreciate my talents. Smile, the clerk's headed this way. He thinks you're talking to yourself."

"Better than thinking I'm crazy or shoplifting. The clerk that saw the necklace floating in the air was babbling and crossing her fingers to ward off a hex when we left the store. If this guy calls me a witch you have my permission to hit him on the head with a shoe box."

To her credit, when an arm draped over her shoulder, Cinnamon didn't yelp. Competently shifting handled shopping bags from her hand to his, Jack kept them moving.



"I hope to hell you're done shopping because we're out of here."

"Have fun." As she faded, Salina gave a finger wave and a wink.

"Hello to you, too." Jack wasn't smiling. Not that he smiled often, but it would have been a nice 'hello, I'm glad to see you' gesture. His blue gray eyes were still the dark gunmetal gray she'd seen at the airport; a good indication that along with the smile, a friendly hello kiss wasn't going to happen.

His black mid thigh ski parka, denim jeans and black ostrich hide cowboy boots were far more causal than the custom made dark blue suit, white shirt and three tone blue tie he'd been wearing at the airport.

"Could you have found a brighter coat?" He grumbled as he helped her into a cherry red down coat with a fur-trimmed hood before pushing open a door.

"We could go back and exchange it for eggplant, tangerine or kiwi green. But let me warn you, the sales clerk was having an emotional meltdown when I left. It's not the coat's color that's bothering you, so spit it out."

An icy blast of snow forced them to tuck their chins into their chest. Between the wind and ankle deep snow, staying upright took all of their concentration.

Jack opened the door to a black Suburban, tossed the bags into the back and helped Cinnamon climb into the high seat. The heater was blowing cold air when he finally spoke. "The man I was with this morning got a bee up his ... he thinks you had an ulterior motive for coming on to him."

"Are you talking about Brownie?"

"Who?"

"Nothing."

Fiddling with the SUV's heater Jack waited.

"On the escalator, the man below you was a monotone of browns. His hair, eyes, skin and clothes blended together in an unappealing palette. I named him Brownie. How on earth did he jump to the conclusion that I was interested in him?"

"He thought your sexy hello smile was aimed at him. Your police chauffeurs had him adding two plus two into five. He thinks the smile was part of a trap."

Hell's bells, even when saying her smile was sexy, Jack was scowling.

"I gather it wouldn't have been prudent to tell him he's full of hot air."

"You get an A for understatements."

"He doesn't know where I'm staying."

"Like everyone else within thirty feet he heard the police officer say your name. All he has to do is start calling hotels and ask to be connected to your room."

"Damn, I hadn't thought of that. Is that how you found me?"

"No, unlike some people we both know, I did it the simple way; I called your family."

She gave a fleeting smile at the reference to a stunt she and her sisters pulled at Dreamland to get Walker's attention.

"After giving me the name of the hotel and your room number, Ginger said something about dreams that didn't make any sense."

Destiny dreams. Ignoring the unasked question she asked one of her own. "How did you know I was at the mall?"

"Instead of breaking into your room, I asked the hotel clerk if she saw you leave."

"You can pick locks? Dumb question, of course you can."

"The clerk said you braved the storm to walk to the mall and hadn't returned."

"Braved the storm? Must be your charm; she told me I was crazy. The million dollar question is will Brownie try to locate me?"

"When I left, he was talking about doing that. Once he gets an idea he doesn't get sidetracked until he's satisfied with the results."

"Hell's bells and damnation," Cinnamon said under her breath.

"Here's the plan, I'll keep the desk clerk's eyes off the TV monitors. You go in the back entrance, grab your bags and get back in the car ASAP."

"No problem. All I did was set the suitcases on the stand. Then what? The police officers that dropped me at the hotel are picking me up before the show."

"For now let's get your belongings. I'll make a call to change your ride as soon as I find someplace that has a vacancy."

\* \* \* \*

"That was easy," Cinnamon said when Jack slid into the driver's seat.

"Let's hope our luck extends to finding another room."

"Won't be a problem. I borrowed the phone book from the room. We'll let our fingers do the walking."

"Who would book a convention in the middle of winter?" Cinnamon challenged the fifth hotel clerk.

"Snowboarders, skiers, and snowmobilers. Yeah, I get it, snow plus winter, plus winter sports, equals winter conventions. Any idea of who might have a vacancy?"

"Timbuktu?"

"How about within the city limits?"

Cinnamon huffed. "The smart ass hung up on me."

"If your finger is getting tired of walking, I can take over," Jack said when she disconnected.

"You're driving."

"I can pull over once we get around this mess."

"Oh my, what happened?" In front of them, the intersection looked like a demolition derby.

"A white sedan slid into the intersection. The black pickup was hell bent on beating the yellow light. The rest of the idiots were following too close for the road conditions."

"How did you prevent us from being part of that mess?"

"No one was behind us, and I was a good five car lengths behind that blue Forester."

"There's got to be at least ten cars involved."

"Thirteen."

"Lucky number. Do you think we should call the police?"

"Already did. You were busy sweet-talking the smartass desk clerk. I prefer not to be here when the cops arrive. The only way around this chaos is to drive through the snow plowed into the turn lane. Hang on."

"Are you crazy? That snow has to be close to five feet deep."

Gunning the engine, Jack headed straight into the mound.

"Hang onto what?" Before Jack answered she had one hand on the dashboard. The fingernails on her left hand cut into the upper part of Jack's thigh.

Snow sprayed the windshield. The backend slid sideways. Backing up a couple of inches, Jack gunned the engine. Losing traction the Suburban slid sideways a second time. Popping the gears from reverse to first Jack kept gunning the engine.

"You can let go." Jack's voice was strained.

A charge of awareness crept up Cinnamon's hand, sparks of current ran up her arm. Like her, Jack didn't move a muscle. Unlike her, his arousal, brushing against her fingers, was obvious.

Trying for casual, she sat back in the seat. "Sorry. If it makes you feel better I've had my tetanus shot."

"No, you haven't," he muttered.

Seven calls later, Cinnamon exclaimed, "You have a room? Save it for us. I don't care what room it is. I don't care if it's smoking, non-smoking or how much it costs. Yes, it's perfect, we'll take it."

Holding her index finger up, she blew on it. "Piece of cake."

Jack grunted.

With each swipe across the glass, the windshield wipers screeched. Visibility was next to nothing.

"You know, even an insane man wouldn't look for me in weather like this."

"Think again. The weather makes a perfect foil. You have to leave the hotel to eat. In weather like this, who's going to be standing outside to notice a woman being kidnapped?"

"You would think my choice of chauffeurs at the airport would give him second thoughts."

"His mind is wired differently. He believes he is above the law, smarter than cops and lawyers, and ready

to prove that to anyone who dares to defy him. He likes challenges. You are not only a challenge, your choice of company makes for a more interesting game."

"If you're trying to scare me, you're doing a good job."

"Good."

"Let me finish. I try not to walk into things with my eyes closed and I know how to take care of myself. I appreciate that you're being honest and I will be more cautious. You want to protect me, watch my back, and that's fine, but don't mistake my being female with being helpless."

It cost him; he didn't like admitting that's what he'd done. If it were anyone else sitting next to him he would play dumb. But not with Cinn, that said a lot about his feelings, but that was the way it was. "Fair enough. I did just that. I won't make the same mistake twice. You say you can take care of yourself, how?"

"The body has meridians, places where energy flows just beneath the skin. If you press or strike the meridian you can diminish the flow of energy. It is not only painful, if done properly, the person will pass out. Would you like a demonstration?"

"I'm driving." He knew a couple of the meridians. Had used them effectively, but why would Cinn need that knowledge? "Who taught you martial arts?"

"Uncle Gus. He's lived in the house next to the family home since before I was born. He was big on self-defense, especially for us delicate females." She fluttered her lashes at him.

A corner of his mouth twitched. "I won't apologize. But I stand corrected."

"Big concession, for you. I'll admit that if I had to deal with scum like Brownie I'd have a hard time keeping my mouth shut."

"There have been moments."

Pulling under the shelter of the hotel's entry he said, "Stay here."

One room. One bed. With a ten month supply of daydreams to pull from, it didn't take much imagination for Cinnamon to see their naked bodies wrapped around each other on this cold wintry night.

If she tumbled into bed with Jack, tonight would be the last time she used her healing powers. She tried coming up with a word to describe her feelings. Happy, jubilant, scared, sorry, regretful, they all had merit and they all fell short. If she stepped over the line her grandmother had drawn, there would be no going back, no second chances allowed. She would have to live with her choice and never open the door to second guessing the outcome.

Jack wasn't a flowers and candy type of guy. But from what she had learned about her soul mate, neither was he. She didn't need the flowers, or the candy, or walks in the moonlight. Well, yeah, she did need walks in the moonlight. But what she really wanted was...

Jack slid into the driver's seat. He was smiling. Not a full, show your teeth smile; this was a slight lift to one side of his mouth smile that said 'I know something you don't know.'

Parking the Suburban behind the hotel, Jack grabbed Cinn's luggage and a black leather overnight case. Cinn collected the shopping bags in the back seat.

A mirror-lined elevator carried them to the third floor. Setting the bags down, Jack unlocked the hotel room door. Before she realized his intentions, or had time to protest, Cinnamon was swept into Jack's arms. One step over the threshold, he said, "Welcome to the honeymoon suite."

Their eyes locked.

Jack lowered his head. Their lips brushed, not so much a kiss as a cautious test, a dip your toe in the water exploration, that felt good, right, perfect. Cinnamon placed her hand on Jack's cheek. The kiss deepened, still cautious but more sure of a welcoming response. The tip of Jack's tongue traced her lower lip; another step, bolder, more certain but still holding back, questioning. Cinnamon met the tip of his tongue with hers. The time for questioning ended. Sparks, desire, lust, call it what you want, smoldered, ignited and consumed.

"Mommy, Mommy, look they're kissing."

"Sorry." The young mother hurried her giggling daughter towards the elevators.

Cinnamon's arms were locked around Jack's neck. Jack released her legs. Her body slowly skimmed his.

She trembled.

Jack sighed.

Spanning her waist with his hands, Jack steadied her, allowed both of them time to catch their breath, climb off the tower of utopia.

Jack placed a light kiss on her forehead, dropped his hands, and stepped back. His booted foot collided with the shoe bags Cinnamon had dropped.

"Look Mommy, the man fell on his bum. David fell on his bum when I punched him in the nose. Do you think the lady punched the man in the nose?"

The elevator's arrival stopped them from hearing the answer.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only my pride."

"I thought you landed on your bum."

Laughter broke the last of the tension.

They didn't notice the desk clerk holding an ice bucket with a chilled bottle of champagne and two fluted glasses until he spoke. "Compliments of the hotel. Would you like me to put this inside the room or would you prefer to sit on the floor and drink champagne in the hallway?"

"You could have told him we weren't newlyweds."

"Didn't want to spoil the fun he's going to have repeating that story."

The suite was divided into two long rooms. A full size kitchen, dining room and a compact living room filled one side of the suite. A large screen television was built into a cubbyhole above a corner gas fireplace. A sliding glass door opened onto a very narrow strip of cement. The three rooms were decorated in complimentary shades of blue and cream.

At the door to the bedroom, Cinnamon stopped. Her heart did a fast tango. She murmured, "Ohmigod."

The king size bed was covered in faux brown mink. A red tiled, heart shaped, jetted tub filled one corner of the room. Across from the tub mirrored doors covered the closet.

Past side-by-side sinks and a built-in vanity, she entered a super-sized bathroom. Behind the clear glass shower door, Cinnamon saw a cedar wall. Opening the shower door, she discovered a sauna large enough for two.

An old fashioned fainting couch set against a red and white wallpapered wall created several interesting X-rated visions.

From the living room, Jack called out, "There's a grocery store down the street. Tell me what you want to eat."

"I'll go with you?"

"Is there any part of 'no' you would like explained?"

Cinnamon joined him in the kitchen. With his arms crossed, Jack leaned against the counter.

"Did you know a tiny dimple appears above the corner your mouth when you're frustrated? It's..."

"Cinn!" His voice dropped an octave.

"I'll make a list."

As soon as he left, she grabbed her cell phone.

"Hi Gin, just wanted you to know Jack found me. We are now at a different hotel."

"Jack's with you?" Ginger asked.

"I told you what happened at the airport, the creep with Jack thought I was smiling at him. He was talking about trying to locate me. Jack's not taking any chances on that happening."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I let him know I could take care of myself. It's okay."

"Good. It's Aunt Pesty's night to meet with her quilting club so Martin came over for dinner. He found a spell book in their computer room and some notes tucked inside the front cover. I looked over the notes, but couldn't make any sense of them."

"Hell's bells. You don't have to tell me this is a stupid question, but did Martin confront her?"

"He did. According to him, she cried crocodile tears."

"And like a typical male at the sign of the first tear he became a basket case and she wrapped him around her finger."

"You got it. He did say she's been wringing her hands and muttering to herself since Jack got shot."

"Her meddling shouldn't surprise me; but damn, life would be easier if she left things alone. Have you talked to Rosemary?"

"I did. The odds were one hundred percent that a new spell has been cast. As for it working into a disaster that was fifty/fifty."

"Hell. Is she positive?"

"We're talking about Rose the human odds calculator."

"Yeah, I get that. I was just hoping in your delicate condition you might have misunderstood what she said."

"I'm fat and pregnant. My ankles are swollen, my breasts hurt and one of the little darlings has spent the day kicking me in the ribs. That makes me cranky. I'm not delusional."

"I stand correct. Won't make that mistake again. What was Rose's take on disaster striking being fifty/fifty?"

"Not much. Rose said we need more information on what Aunt Pesty hoped to accomplish before she could get a better fix on the odds."

"Could be she wasn't trying to fix anything."

"You're thinking she's butting her nose into something else?"

"That's her mission in life. All of her spells are based on good intentions. I'm thinking if she can't correct a mistake she might think she can give the person cursed help to find the answers."

"A new version of a fairy godmother?"

"The image of a second Salina and the possibilities sends chills down my spine, but yeah, something like that."

"I'll pass the idea onto Rose; see if she can come up with odds."

"Keep me posted, I'll do the same."

"Rub your belly and say hi to Ramos and Mia for me."

"You lost me. What's the reference point to those names?"

"Famous soccer players. Love you, bye."

Ginger and Cole had been married nine months as had Aunt Pesty and Martin, Cole's uncle. With Ginger expecting twins, they had hoped Pesty would be so busy making baby quilts she would allow the universe to work its magic at its own pace. Obviously, they were wrong.

"Salina, Mom, if you know what Aunt Pesty is thinking I'd appreciate a hint or the whole honest to God truth."

No one answered. The air didn't stir. Perfume didn't fill the air.

Comfortably slouched, with her feet propped on the coffee table, she worried the tip of her thumbnail and tried to figure out how Jack would react to the information. Ginger told Jack his mother liked to turn lights on and move objects to get his attention. He hadn't burned a cross in the front lawn, but he hadn't had too much to say about the truth of it. She'd never considered the family powers witchcraft, but Jack might.

"I can't tell you anything. If Salina wants to keep her powers, she'll keep what she knows to herself.

"Stop chewing on your fingernail."

Cinnamon slipped her hand under her thigh. Looking around the room, there was no smoke, sparks, or color to indicate that her mother was in the room.

"When and if the time comes for Jack to know the family secrets you won't need to question right from wrong."

Her mother's perfume filled the room. A puff of iridescent smoke appeared in front of the fireplace. Caitlin Prescott materialized. Her fur trimmed white hooded cape showed off white lace up boots. Her hands were tucked in a matching hand muff.

"You look like you just stepped out of an old-fashioned Christmas card."

"We were at a snow festival in Switzerland. We took the most romantic sleigh ride."

"You should have stayed. I didn't mean for my thoughts to grab your attention."

"It never did matter, if you were laughing, talking, thinking or crying, you always were the loudest of the three. We were ready to leave, so don't apologize."

"Where's Dad?" Unless their mother decided to materialize in a bathroom or when they were dressing it was unheard of to see one parent without the other.

"You know how he hates hearing his daughters talk about sex. He's outside building a snowman."

"You told me about the birds and bees years ago. What's left to talk about?"

"That was some kiss."

Cinnamon felt the heat of the blush creeping up her neck. "Used to be when a boy kissed me goodnight, Dad allowed ten seconds before turning the porch light on and off. I can't believe you watched."

Caitlin chuckled. "I remember that. Warren held the stopwatch and your Dad kept his eyes on the boy's hands."

"I used to count the seconds; guess that doesn't say much for my dates' kissing skills."

"Not so with Jack's kiss. We were already at the winter carnival. Your thoughts were jumbled, but the words, help and dying, got my attention. All I did was a quick check to make sure you weren't hurt. How does Jack's kiss compare with the man in your destiny dreams?"

"Totally different, which answers the all important question; Jack isn't my soul mate."

"As an emotion, jealousy is not one that should be a deciding factor in your future."

"What does jealousy have to do with my destiny dreams? And I thought Warren said you couldn't talk to me about my future."

"I'm not talking about your future; we're discussing jealousy." They both knew she was splitting hairs. What wasn't surprising was her mother had figured out a way around Warren's gag order.

Caitlin arched one perfect brow, crossed her arms and started tapping a finger against her forearm.



Cinnamon swallowed her pride.

"Okay, maybe I am a tiny bit jealous of my sisters being married." She held up her hand and used a finger and thumb to measure half an inch of space. "But that has nothing to do with me thinking about giving up my powers."

Caitlin's brow arched higher. "You're right; it doesn't, but it does have to do with relationships and the future. When your Dad and I married, Pesty's jealousy grew into an ugly green monster. I didn't like hearing her thoughts any more than I like hearing yours."

As quickly as, 'then don't read my mind,' materialized, Cinnamon put a lid on the thought. Stopping her mother from hearing her thoughts was impossible, but igniting her temper was avoidable if you didn't linger over a fleeting thought for more than a half second. "If you can't comment on my thinking about giving up my powers where is this leading?"

"It wasn't always easy for Pesty to see Herb and I happily married or to watch the three of you grow up."

Her dad called Caitlin an unmovable force when she decided something needed to be said in a certain way. Like her fussing over the new décor in her living room, Cinnamon knew her mother would get to the point faster if she went with the flow. "Why do you think it took her and Martin so many years to find each other?"

"Martin isn't Pesty's first husband."

She paused just long enough for the statement to sink in and hit home. "Two years before you were born she married an Air Force pilot. The same day Frank received orders to Vietnam, our mother confirmed Pesty's pregnancy."

Pausing, Caitlin sighed through a wistful smile. "Our due dates were a month apart. Mom had already told me to expect twins. With Frank leaving for a year, Pesty moved in with us. We had more fun than little girls playing house. Using Mickey and Minnie Mouse as a theme, we set up the nursery with three of everything.

"Pesty was six months along when Frank's jet was shot down. She went into labor a week later."

Silent tears rolled down Cinnamon's cheeks. "Is that why you named Ginger after Aunt Pesty?"

"As you know, your grandmother delivered all three of you. She insisted Pesty be in the delivery room. The nurse was busy tending to Rose and Herb was holding you when Mom realized she was about to deliver a third grandbaby. Something went wrong and I started hemorrhaging. Mom yelled for help. Before the nurse could move, Ginger slid into Pesty's waiting hands."

"Why haven't we ever heard this story?"

"There was no need to resurrect the pain. Even now, after all these years, it's hard to talk about. As you know, Pesty lived with us while she went to college. Truthfully, without her help I would have gone crazy. But it was also a time for healing. School gave Pesty a goal, but the day-to-day routine of feeding, clothing, bathing and doing a ton of laundry helped get her through emotional landmines."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"When we received our powers, Pesty complained continually about memorizing spells. They were silly, some rhymed some didn't. Why did a spell talk about death when you wanted to create life? She could rant for hours. No matter what she said, when tested, she aced every examination.

"Before Frank left, she created a spell to protect him. No amount of talking ever convinced her that spell hadn't somehow caused his death.

"Pesty's absentmindedness is caused by a lack of trust in her own abilities. In all her years at Kennedy Space Center, she was so afraid of causing a mishap she never cast a spell.

"Right or wrong, your dad and I have been fairly tolerant of Pesty's mistakes. We tried to stop her from casting the last spell, but we were too late."

"She wouldn't cast spells at work, but she'd inflict her haphazard spells on family. That doesn't make sense."

"Before our deaths, Pesty kept the spells simple."

"But—"

"Don't interrupt. Yes, some went haywire, but no real harm was done and except for your dad's baldness, they were simple to fix. The spell she cast to help the three of you work through your anger and grief was her first major spell after Frank's death. It worked. That gave her confidence. From there, she expanded out."

"Lucky us! Maybe someone should have told her to dust off her lesson books."

"Don't think we haven't! She has a stubborn streak that defies logic."

"She has cast two spells in addition to the favor Salina asked?"

"No. She's been busier. Her first spell was to bring Cole and Gin together."

"How did she know Cole was Gin's soul mate?"

"Pesty isn't saying. Although I normally wouldn't admit this, at times her thoughts are so scattered I don't know everything she thinks. The second spell was to put a jumpstart on Rose's destiny dreams. Then she cast the spell to help Salina. That spell was cast before Rosemary made the agreement to work with Walker at the casino."

"Every one of those spells caused problems."

"There's no denying that." Caitlin wanted to add more, but she didn't need to read minds to know Warren was monitoring the conversation. "You've figured out that she cast a spell to hasten your destiny dreams. She swore it was foolproof."

"If that were true, Salina wouldn't be acting as my fairy godmother. And you wouldn't be telling me about Aunt Pesty's past or worrying about my being jealous of Gin and Rose having bed partners."

"You are so like your father; always cutting to the point."

Icy crystals of air swirled around the room. Herb, wearing a heavy fur coat with bone toggle closures and knee high furs boots that made him look like an Eskimo, appeared. As he pushed the coat's hood off his bald head, his robin's egg blue eyes shined with merriment. "Are you two done talking?"

"No. Mom hasn't gotten to the point where she has me spilling all my thoughts about the kiss Jack gave me."

"Humph. I heard about him falling on his ass. Must have been one hell of a kiss. I'll leave you two alone

awhile longer."

"You might want to sit down. I was just getting ready to tell Mom that Aunt Pesty cast another spell, today."

"Good lord, the woman's becoming a menace."

"Without Warren grumbling and throwing a few bolts of lightning through the ceiling, can you give any information about what went wrong with Aunt Pesty's spells?"

"No we can't." Herb unbuttoned his coat and settled into a chair. Taking his favorite pipe out of a pocket, he made himself comfortable.

"Jack was at the airport with two men. Are they part of the trouble?"

"You and Jack will have to figure that out." Caitlin gave both of them stern looks of warning.

"That sounds like a yes. It also sounds like I will be telling Jack about Aunt Pesty."

"Don't push," Caitlin warned.

"Dad, have you ever noticed how Mom warns you about giving out information, but she will fudge on the rules when she deems the timing is right."

"Cute try, honey, but you're not going to rile me. That little trick might still work with Rose, but I've had your number since you were old enough to start using that sharp brain to manipulate your sisters."

Herb chuckled. "You're right; she does do that. She's even wiggled her way around Warren's objections a time or two."

"I know Warren's your supervisor, but would he really punish you if you broke the rules?"

"Don't know; no one in our group has pushed the limit. It doesn't really matter; we are never going to risk losing the ability we have to visit you to find out."

"This might be a dumb question, but why can't you see what Aunt Pesty is doing and stop her before it happens or block the spell from being effective?"

"Everyone is entitled to privacy, even when you kiss a man senseless in a public hallway."

"We were a step inside the room," Cinnamon said defensively.

"With the door wide open! My point is, we can talk to her, but we can't stop Pesty from doing anything."

"Then—"

"Don't interrupt. I know I taught you not to be rude." Like a three-year old, Cinnamon zipped her lips together.

"Honey, think about what you have learned over the years. Life's lessons, even the drudgery and pleasures of normal daily activities, revolve around a combination of personal choices, fate and karma. It is not up to us to determine if the spells Pesty casts are part of fate, karma, or good and poor choices," Caitlin said.

"At some point you know or you wouldn't have been able to step in to help Rose and Walker when Aunt

Pesty's spell put Walker in danger of losing the casino." In a perfect mimic of her mother, Cinnamon arched her brow.

"True. We are able to see the outcome of particular actions, but not before the universe has had the opportunity to implement a person's choices. When Pesty casts a spell we can't interfere until after the ramifications of a spell are revealed," Herb said.

"Which brings me back to my first question. Are you going to allow the green goblin of jealousy to taint your relationship with your sisters and sway the choices you are about to make?"

"Marriage and jealousy have nothing to do with giving up my powers. Hot and steamy sex is a different matter. So you don't have to pick my brain, I am seriously thinking of seducing Jack in the sauna and making a few babies of my own."

"My babies thinking about, talking about, or having sex is something I don't want to think about, much less talk about." As Herb disappeared, he gave her a warm air kiss and deposited a lemon drop in her hand.

"That was cruel but funny," Caitlin chided.

"Without sex, he wouldn't be getting the two grandchildren he's already bragging about."

"True, but he would rather have selective memory; what isn't talked about in his presence can be ignored. You didn't answer my question."

"Jealousy is a harsh, ugly word. Yes, I'm envious of what they have, but I would never want their lives to be less than what they have. So stop worrying. As for what I'm going to do I haven't decided. From the beginning, astral travel has physically and emotionally drained me. In the last year, my recovery time has lengthened with each trip. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I can physically survive many more trips.

"I'm not in the mood for Warren's wrath so I won't ask your advice or opinion."

"Logical and practical, like your dad. I won't fault you that, but it's not near as much fun as playing with fire. Since you didn't ask and I do enjoy pushing emotional buttons I'll tell you this, I can't give you advice when I don't know what I would have done if faced with the same situation.

"Jack just entered the elevator; try to act like you've been doing nothing but twiddling your thumbs."

Three spells. The first spell, a favor for Salina, blended or interfered with another fate. The ramifications were still being worked out.

The second spell was cast to quicken her destiny dreams along, problems unknown.

The third spell was an unknown factor that could have major to minor consequences. A lot would depend on why the spell was cast.

And people thought if they had supernatural powers life would be easy. If they only knew!

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 11

Hugh Piper wore a black Stetson, a white dress shirt under a black sports coat, and black cowboy boots. His salt and pepper handle bar mustache was waxed and curled. At fifty something, not an ounce of flab hung over a silver and gold star belt-buckle engraved with the initials HP. His aura, a solid primary blue, said he knew who he was and was content with where he was in life.

"Where's the hand tooled leather holster and ivory handle six shooters?" Cinn asked after introductions were made.

"At home. They tend to make a man get noticed." As if the handle bar mustache didn't!

Leaving the hotel, she was sandwiched between Hugh and Jack.

"Oh my." Cinnamon stopped dead in her tracks.

In the middle of the hotel's front lawn, wearing a purple striped stocking cap and matching scarf, stood a fifteen-foot snowman. He had a banana squash nose, green acorn squash eyes, and an oversized corn cob pipe was stuck in his jack 'o lantern pumpkin smile. A dove, made of snow, was perched on a thick-limbed arm.

"You wouldn't by any chance know anything about this would you?" Standing behind her, Jack's breath brushed her cheek.

"What makes you ask that?" A tingle running down her spine put a hitch in her breath and a sultry sound in her voice.

"Suspicion. Strange things happen around you and your sisters. The snowman mysteriously appeared while I was at the grocery store. Look at the snowman, there's a slight glow around him; you would say an aura. Not one snowflake is landing on his surface. What do you think could cause that?" He couldn't see her face, but her shoulders touched his chest. Pushing past the tingle that was working its way down his chest and arms, he felt her body tense.

"An angel made him. I'm guessing, but maybe the dove is protecting them from the storm."

"Magic. I'm not going there. Stay close to Hugh. If he says duck don't ask questions first. I'll see both of you later." Jack ducked into the shadows and disappeared.

"How did you meet Jack?" Hugh asked.

"Terry Robinson introduced us."

From the frown on Hugh's face Cinnamon was thankful she couldn't understand his mumbling. After they were both buckled in he studied her face. "Are you one of the Prescott triplets?"

"Depends. If what you've heard was complimentary, yes; if not, I don't know what you're talking about."

Hugh's smile showed off straight white teeth but the smile didn't reach his eyes or mask his annoyance. "Terry isn't too keen on alacazam, abracadabra, pull it out of the hat hocus pocus. Ginger's ability to connect him and Betty Jo with their daughter Hanna impressed him.

"Damn, I must be getting old; I never connected the last name with the three of you. Your emerald green eyes, they are so unusual, how the hell could I have forgotten them?"

"Let's back up. Your mustache is a memory maker. Until ten minutes ago, we never met."

"Before I retired, the mustache didn't exist. I met you, your sisters and your parents, a long time ago."

"Can you narrow down the time frame of long time ago?"

"You were four or five. You, your sisters and a dark haired girl had dressed a dog in doll clothes and put him in a baby buggy. Clomping up and down the sidewalk in high heels, the four of you took turns pushing the buggy. After that, you had a tea party in your backyard. You took turns feeding the poor dog a baby bottle."

"Uncle Gus's Jack Russell was not a 'poor dog' candidate. He loved every minute of the attention, the milk we poured down his throat and the tons of dog biscuits he got to eat. How do you know Uncle Gus?"

Hugh hesitated. He had no idea what Cinnamon had been told about her Uncle Gus's background, but he'd stake his ranch on a bet that the story wasn't based on truth. He could lie; it wasn't like he hadn't perfected the art, but his gut squeezed tight at the thought. His mustache twitched—a sure sign to go with the gut. "We went through Quantico together."

Cinnamon stilled. Her truths shifted thought pieces of information that had never made sense and realigned into a truth that left a sky-high stack of unanswered questions. "What happened?"

"Not my story to tell. When he walked, your dad hired him."

Cinnamon almost, almost asked why. But there was no need, she knew. Uncle Gus was their favorite babysitter. Uncle Gus was part of the family, part of everything they did. She thought of all the times she saw him talking to the private security force that patrolled the community and wondered why she had never questioned the why of it.

Hell's bells, fire and damnation, what else in her life wasn't what it seemed?

\* \* \* \*

Cinnamon stood behind the eight hypnotized volunteers. The black beads on her costume sparkled under the light. Addressing the men and women she had handpicked from the audience she said, "Our wise and eccentric politicians have passed a law that forbids anyone from saying the number four. Anyone saying the number four will be arrested."

Her hand rested lightly on the back of a man's neck. His muscled arms and flat stomach were a testament to the hours spent in a gym working out. If it weren't for the potential aneurysm at the base of his brain, his aura would be a picture of health. "Ted, you handsome hunk, it is your job to arrest anyone that says the number four. Would you have a problem flexing your muscles and arresting lawbreakers?"

"No, ma'am."

"I didn't think so. The same politicians that made the law outlawing the use of the number four changed the wording on the Miranda rights to Mary Had A Little Lamb. The words need to be sung as loud as possible. Can you do that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ted, have you ever arrested someone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"When you arrest someone, do you read them their Miranda rights?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'd love to have you whisper the words in my ear, but in four minutes..."

Jumping up, Ted flexed his arm muscles and sang, "Mary had a Little Lamb".

Cinnamon placed a hand on the shoulder of the tiny woman sitting next to Ted. The lump in Carol's breast was tiny. Working with the healing grid for tissue, Cinnamon made sure that when it was found and checked the results would show a benign cyst. "Carol, at the beginning of the show you said you worked in payroll. Are you good with numbers?"

"Yes."

"Glad to hear that. Do you know how many fingers you have?"

"Ten."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes. I have ten fingers and ten toes."

"Would you please count your fingers?"

"One, two three, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven. No, that's wrong. One two, three, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven."

Carol took off her heels and counted her toes. Twice.

To everyone's delight she took off Ted's shoes and counted his toes.

Walking to the end of the stage Cinnamon pulled a bottle out of a small box.

"Carol, maybe this will help. This time when you count Ted's toes put red nail polish on each toe."

Towards the end of the show, Cinnamon asked Ted to put his shoes and socks on. Addressing the audience, she asked, "Is Ted here with someone?" A cute brunette raised her hand. "If you want to have some fun, don't tell Ted about the nail polish. The show has been taped, and a tape will be given to each participant. But you might want to keep it from him until tomorrow."

Cinnamon had worked the healing grid on the handpicked participants. She responded to everything happening on the stage with perfect timing. And throughout the show, a part of her was very aware that somewhere, hidden in the shadows, Jack watched and waited.

\* \* \* \*

"What happened?" Cinnamon demanded the minute she saw Jack.

"How the hell ... nothing happened."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not. Brownie was in the building."

"You didn't catch him; I can see the frustration in your aura and the anger in your eyes. How?"

"Don't know, but I sure as hell plan on finding out."

"Did he spot you?"

"No."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I was above you, on the catwalk. He slipped inside the doors at the back of the auditorium. Before Hugh could nab him, he slid back out. Thanks to the snow, Hugh tracked him to the parking lot where he watched Brownie's BMW fishtail onto the road. Now you know what I know."

Cinnamon let out a huff of air. "Thank you for accepting that I can handle the truth."

"I'm not accepting anything. I figured if I didn't come clean, the steak I bought for dinner would become an eye patch."

"Smart ass."

\* \* \* \*

Jack surprised her by turning the radio to an easy listening station.

As they ate dinner, they watched the snowfall.

"This is nice." Jack sipped his wine.

"The food, mother nature's show or the company?"

"All three."

"I felt you in the auditorium. Besides the catwalk, where were you hiding?"

"Here and there. Didn't stay in one place for long."

He wasn't much of a talker, exposing his feelings had never been his style, but since defying death he'd changed. The spontaneous kiss they hadn't talked about was a good example of acting on his impulses instead of shutting them down. Whether the change was good or bad was debatable, but he found himself answering revealing questions instead of using the non-committal, all-encompassing male grunt.

Doctors had labeled him with a list of unflattering words: oddity, bizarre, abnormal, and aberration to name a few. One doctor uttered the word freak as he scratched his head over the report stating that the bullets that ripped through his thigh and gut did no significant damage to arteries or organs. Yet the amount of blood he had lost and the shock his body experienced indicated that damage had incurred.

Healing quickly, only a small pockmark on his leg showed where the bullet entered. A month after his gut was stitched together, the scars were barely visible.

Defying orders to the contrary, he'd gone back to work and hadn't gone back for follow-up doctor visits.

"The T-bone was cooked to your liking?" Cinnamon asked.

"As I recall, my choice was rare, rare or rare. Since I have no problem watching blood ooze out of meat, it's perfect."

"That sounds disgusting." Contrary to the words, Cinnamon took a bit of meat.



"Obviously not that disgusting. Thank you for cooking. If you had left it up to me we would have had pancakes, scrambled eggs or hamburgers."

"You need to broaden your cooking skills."

"Why? I don't starve and there's always Chinese take-out or pizza to supplement my diet."

"Like I said, you need to broaden your cooking skills. Fast food and take out is not a healthy diet."

"Are you saying the Oreos you had me buy are healthy?"

"Absolutely. The sugar balances out the starch in the potatoes, the protein in the meat and the vitamin C in the carrots."

"I'm not buying that line."

"You sure?"

"Positive. Your eyes are the color of emeralds, highly unusual and memorable. But when you get mischievous your eyes remind me of a leprechaun's shamrock."

"How many leprechauns have you met?"

"That I'm not telling. Tell me how you decide what to do during a show."

"Why the change of subject?"

When he didn't answer, she remembered a piece of advice from her mother that applied nicely to this situation—she went with the flow.

"Mostly it's occupations and personalities. Switching typical gender roles makes funny situations. Sometimes the way a person reacts during one skit gives me an idea for using them in something else. And face it, having anyone but muscle pumped Ted sing 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' wouldn't have been as funny."

"Yeah, I can see that. I'll admit having seen a stage hypnotist at a state fair, I had a different idea of what you would do."

"I've heard that a time or two. My kid friendly shows have slapstick funny suggestions. For adult only shows, I do funny without the slapstick. The sexual innuendoes depend on the crowd, the participants and what's happening on stage. If someone gets out of hand, I tell the person to sleep, it works like a charm and no one is the wiser."

"Smart and practical, I like that."

"Me too. I hate changing the subject, because you aren't going to be happy, but there's a man across the street. In this weather I don't think he's taking the dog for a walk."

"I can't see a damn thing."

"Actually, I can't see anything either. What I see is glimpses of an aura. The energy identifies it as male."

Jack pulled his cell phone out. "Henry where are you? Sounds good ... Call it a night. Thanks."

"One of my men. We're leaving first thing in the morning. You did the cooking, so I'll clean up the mess."

"I'd suggest you get some sleep."

\* \* \* \*

*Without worrying about the rowboat that delivered him to the beach, Jack's boots splashed through water as the rush of tide and foam rolled past him.*

*Walking up a small incline, and over the gold covered path, Jack didn't waste time as he headed to the glen.*

When he first started making these pilgrimages, his body had sat as stiff as the boulder. Now loose limbed, he relaxed into the contours of the rock and waited.

The shapely outline of a female figure appeared. Eight feet away, her slightly slanted eyes glowed like a cat. Without blinking, she watched him.

"What is your name?"

"You know I won't answer that question."

"I called you a leprechaun earlier this evening."

"I'm flattered. Why a leprechaun, you don't believe in luck or magic?"

"Your green eyes. This forest reminds me of stories my mother told me about the wee people."

"You want to meet somewhere else?"

"No, but I would like to see you."

"Who says you haven't?"

"I'd remember that."

"Maybe. Time will tell."

When annoyed or pressed for answers, Green-eyes disappeared. Not wanting to lose her company, he changed the subject. "I haven't seen you since I got shot."

"There was no reason."

"The riddle. You were warning me about a man named Grover. Do you know where he is right now?"

"He is like a snake. When he does not want to be seen, he slithers underground."

"Is that figurative or literal?"

"Literal."

"Do you know where the snake pit is located?"

"No. I can tell you this: the snake is close enough to strike."

"Shit. Did you bring me here to tell me that?"

"That was one reason."

"What is the other reason?"

"It's time for you to think seriously about your future," she replied.

"What's wrong with what I'm doing?"

"Nothing, if you like being shot at on a regular basis and pretending you're someone you're not."

"Haven't died yet."

"Are you positive about that?"

Jack rubbed the scars on his belly. "Are you the one I have to thank for saving my life?"

"You saved your own life."

He didn't argue the point.

"What about my future?"

"It's time for you to settle down. Raise a family."

"Never going to happen."

"Why not?"

"A green-eyed leprechaun stole my heart."

"You're flirting with me. How sweet. But you need a flesh and blood wife."

"Not going to happen. I like being footloose and fancy free."

"Marriage isn't a jail sentence."

"No decent woman would want me."

"Is that you talking or fear talking?"

"Truth."

"Keep thinking that way and you just might manifest that reality. There is an alternative to fear."

"And that would be?"

"Trust. You need to learn how to trust. When you learn that, you will be ready to move forward."

"I trust you."

"No, you accept that my words are truth. There is a difference."

"Give me a reason why I should trust anyone."

"Because I want you to think, I'll give you one reason among many: without trust you can't love someone. As for trusting me, I saved your life."

"In New Mexico?"

She didn't confirm or deny the question. Instead, she said, "Texas, ten years ago."

"That bullet didn't come close to killing me."

"What part of you would have been in the direct line of that bullet if you had simply walked in and headed straight to the coolers?"

"I ... Are you saying you're the voice I've been hearing for ... hell, I don't know how long?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"If what you say is true, when I'm awake, why don't you sound like a seductive siren?"

"You flatter me. Think about this, which is going to get your ass moving more quickly? A seductive purr or a drill sergeant's bark?"

He gave a grunt. "I wouldn't call it a bark, but I get your point. If you are here to save my ass and help solve problems, why do you slip around questions and answer in riddles."

"Life is about choices. If all the answers are freely given, you won't think. You won't come to your own conclusions and you won't grow as a person."

"What do you have in mind for my future?"

"Your future is in your hands, not mine. I'm here to keep you out of trouble."

"If what you say is true, you've done your share of that."

"Not if, Jack. After all this time, you still find it hard to trust, rely on others or admit the truth."

Denying the first two was a waste of breath. "What truth?"

"You're smart. Think about it, the truth is there if you are willing to look."

"Why was Cinnamon put into the mix with the counterfeit ring?"

"I'm impressed. I wasn't sure you had figured out she was a part of the game."

"It isn't a game. If I have any say, she won't be involved in that part of my life."

"It is out of your hands. There are several expressions; the tide has shifted, the cat's out of the bag, the ball is rolling. They all mean the same thing; there is no going back. Cinnamon is now a part of what is happening, past and present."

"Explain past."

"In time, the answer to that will present itself."

"You didn't mention the future."

"Because you have yet to make the choice."

"What choice?"

*Green-eyes disappeared.*

Normally Jack woke up fully alert. After visits to the forest, he felt lethargic.

Discovering that the couch converted into a bed, Cinnamon had insisted on making it up before closing herself off in the honeymoon suite's bedroom. Rolling out of the bed, Jack absently rubbed the light network of scars on his stomach.

The first time Green-eyes bewitched him, he'd been an idealistic green recruit. From their first encounter he'd known the message within the dream meant more than a slightly homesick kid subconsciously manifesting one of his mother's many fairytales.

Green-eyes' first message had been one of encouragement; he had made the right choice for the present. Questioning the word 'present', she'd said nothing was permanent. A cocky comeback made her laugh. He'd never been able to remember what he'd said, but her throaty laughter burned its way into his memory. Over the years, the memory of that laughter caused him to relax, self-hypnotize, daydream, he wasn't sure how to label the experience, but the result was always the same, elusive answers materialized.

The night he'd walked into the robbery gone bad, he was headed home. Driving past a small convenience store, he yanked the wheel and drove over the curb into the parking lot. That gut reaction earned him his first bullet and a commendation for saving the lives of the two kids working that evening.

By his fourth trip to the forest, a pattern developed. A small white rowboat carried him to a pristine beach covered in purple black sand. Several long steps took him to the top of a slight rise. From there he could scan the crescent shaped beach and the deep blue ocean beyond. Half a dozen more steps took him to the edge of a forest. A narrow path leading up a steady incline ended at a small clearing. Settling himself on a chair shaped rock he waited for the green-eyed siren. In the beginning, he never saw anything but her slightly slanted green eyes. Three years ago, a path, much like the one he walked down, appeared about ten feet away from the rock. The path emitting a faint light, offered him a view of her shapely feminine figure.

Green-eyes picked her words and timing carefully. What she disclosed today was no mistake. Why she chose now to tell him she was the voice that protected his back was important. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why.

Green-eyes was wrong about one thing. He'd fallen under her spell the moment they met. Over the years, he'd compared every date with the sharp tongue conversations he enjoyed with Green-eyes. The only woman who could match her was Cinnamon.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 12

A little before eight, Cinnamon walked into the suite's living room.

The hide-a-bed was closed.

Jack was gone.

At the sliding glass door, she sipped hot jasmine tea and watched a car slide across the intersection. A heavy wind rattled the windowpane, shook snow off tree branches and swept powder snow into deep drifts. The roads hadn't been cleared and from the look of the clouds it wouldn't be long before more snow fell.

"What do you think?" Salina appeared beside her. She was wearing a Chinese red, mini dress with a mandarin collar and frog buttons. Her platform shoes, made of matching brocade material, had peep toes and ankle straps. Her natural blonde hair was coal black and styled in a chin length bob.

"Can you bend over without showing half your butt?"

"Not a problem, I'm wearing cute tap pants in the same material. I'm going to wear this to a Chinese New Year party."

"You'll be the envy of every ghost there."

"That's not much of a compliment. Your mom agreed to let me design her outfit. Do you think she'll go for a mini skirt?"

"You have to ask?"

"That's what I thought. Oh well, I'll come up with something that will pop a guy's eyes out and gets Caitlin's approval. What are you going to do today?"

"I fly home at four."

"Not today. The airport's closed. A reliable source says another storm is heading this way. Don't expect to fly out within the next three days."

Cinnamon arched a brow. "You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

"Heard a rumor. Who knew it would turn into the snowstorm of the century. Maybe this is the opportunity you've been wanting. Why didn't you put the 'jump-Jack's-bones' plan into motion last night?"

"Timing wasn't right. Jack's aura was buttoned down; his mind was centered on Brownie. Don't think I'm off the mark when I say he'd like to wring the guy's neck."

"If you knew what I know, you'd offer to help. But something else has you hesitating. What's it going to take to get you to spill your thoughts?"

"Should have known I wasn't going to be allowed to mull this over, privately."

"Phil, the guy in the show last night, has a wife and five kids. He also had an appendix ready to rupture and an ulcer he was blaming for the pain. I can't save everyone, don't think I'm supposed to, but without my healing powers, he would have died before they got him to a hospital."

"Can I live the rest of my life knowing that I put my wants before helping someone like that?"

"You're asking the wrong person that question."

"Jack is on his way up. Can't fault your outfit since it's my creation, but today's plans have changed."

Cinnamon felt a chill. Salina had stripped her down to her pale pink panties, bra and goose bumps.

With another wave of Salina's hand, purple cowboy boots, with silver capped toes adorned Cinnamon's feet.

Admiring the purple cowl neck sweater and black jeans in the reflection of the plate glass window, she admitted there was one really nice thing about Salina dressing her—her jeans fit perfectly.

\* \* \* \*

Entering the living room, Jack didn't return Cinnamons smile.

"The snows closed down half the town, including the airport."

"So I've heard. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Aura's don't lie. There's a rim of blood red energy around you. The kiss we shared yesterday put a buzz on both of us, but right now I'm thinking your temper's just under boiling. Don't try lying; your aura will turn brown around your gut."

With hands on his hips, he asked, "Does anything get by you?"

"Not much."

Jack scowled. "It's always the uncontrollable elements that foil plans. Yesterday, someone called a local talk radio station and mentioned the hypnosis show and your name."

"Okay, that answers how he knew to come to the auditorium. What else put the burr up your bum?"

"He found out you're here."

"He saw your car?"

"No, he gave a desk clerk a line of bull and flashed a copy of your picture from a website."

"I'll admit that doesn't make me happy and I understand it hurts your pride when you can't control every situation. But we were planning on checking out this morning, so tell me what's really bothering you."

"We're wasting time. Pack. You have ten minutes."

"I'll get my coat, you can grab the bags. They're already packed."

"You changed cars." Cinnamon buckled her seatbelt as she checked out the interior of the black Ford F350 super cab pickup with privacy windows and a camper shell.

"It blends nicely."

"And Brownie won't connect the truck to you. What is Brownie's real name?"

"Evan, his name is Evan." The words were spit out one at a time.

"What did Evan do or plan to do that has you ready to explode?"

"Drop it. It's not important," was an understatement of mega proportions. More than anything he wanted to turn the clock back, it would have been easy to keep Evan from seeing Cinnamon at the airport.

Green-eyes' prediction that Cinnamon would be a part of the take down burned a hole in his gut. She had never lied to him or given him information that wasn't pertinent to a case, but he would give his soul to have her be wrong.

"Jack, I'm a big girl. I can handle whatever happened that has you strangling the steering wheel."

"God, I hope it never comes to that. He's sending a friend to invite you for lunch and some recreational activities."

"Are you the friend?"

Jack snorted. "No, he has a couple of flunkies to do his odd jobs."

Odd jobs. Cinnamon shuddered at the implications.

"Where are we headed?"

"Hugh's ranch. Breakfast is in the pink box. The Coffee Hut had something called chai tea. Figured you would prefer that to coffee."

"You figured right. Thanks."

Jack grabbed a cake donut with chocolate glaze.

Cinnamon bit into a glazed cinnamon twist and took in the snow-shrouded landscape.

The road out of town curved around a dam and skirted a reservoir. When the road narrowed to two-lanes only one set of tire treads ran down the middle of the road. In spots, the pickup's tires ran through the edges of snowdrifts.

Between sets of country western music, a local radio station urged people to stay home. The next storm predicted to hit by noon, was predicted to drop another eight to ten inches of snow.

The road was following a shallow river strewn with snow covered river rock when Jack broke the comfortable silence.

"Pretend you have already given me a lecture on nutrition and tell me if a hotdog will satisfy your hunger for a few hours?"

"With chili?"

"That can be arranged."

Jack parked the truck in front of a general store that looked like it was built in the 1800's.

"If the town wasn't buried under snow, I'd take you for a tour. Gold was discovered here in 1862. With a population of around twenty thousand people, Idaho City was the most populated town in the territory. Over two hundred and fifty businesses were opened during the gold rush. Several of the original buildings



are still standing and some people claim a ghost or two walk the streets."

"How does a Texan know so much about Idaho history?"

"Exploring ghost and old mining towns is a hobby."

"Did you share that information with Ginger?"

"No, the timing hasn't been right. I'd like to have her along on a ghost town expedition. Do you think she'd agree?"

"Gin's not real crazy about running into spirits with an attitude, but she might. With Frick and Frack due in three months don't plan on it happening any time soon."

"They still haven't come up with names?"

"If they have they aren't saying."

"I know she has weekly phone conversations with Billy Jordan and his deceased grandpa but nothing was said about her seeing ghosts outside the office. What about you, would you be interested in a ghost busting trip?"

"How the hell..." During a late evening gabfest, Cinn and her sisters speculated, and Rose figured the odds were ninety percent in favor of Jack having intuitive powers. They'd spent time considering the possibilities but without him talking, what they had was nothing but speculation.

Jack was an expert at hiding his emotions and thoughts, but like a kid winning a game of chance he flashed her a smug smile. "What do you want to drink?"

"A chocolate malt and onion rings, please."

Sitting at a small square table by a window Cinnamon studied an oddly shaped snow covered hump outside the closed visitor's center.

"It's a stamp mill," Jack said as he placed their meals on the table. "They were used by miners to crush ore dug out of the hillside. After the ore was pulverized into what was called sandy slurry, they washed the slurry through a screened trough to retrieve the gold."

"Sounds like a lot of work. How much gold was found?"

"Over two hundred and fifty million dollars."

"Wow. I'm impressed. Instant wealth for a lot of people."

"No doubt, there were lucky miners. Some were smart enough to walk away with the money in their pockets. Far more walked away from here with little to show for their backbreaking work. The general stores, bars and cafés that sprang up around a mining town were notorious for price gouging. The entrepreneurs had a better chance of walking away with healthy bank accounts than the miners."

"What about the girls who worked the brothels?"

"No doubt there were some houses. But houses were a luxury. Most soiled doves plied their services in poorly heated tents. The bar owners that allowed them to work their customers and the madams that owned the tents made more money than the working girls. They had a rough life. Tombstones tell a story of early deaths. Most were caused by disease and murder."

"Why murder?"

Jack gave a slight shrug. "Their stash of money, clothes, jealousy, competition, a man. If we walk down the main-street you might get lucky and run into one of them. Have to say I'd be real interested in hearing their stories." Cinnamon didn't miss the *I dare you* quality to the statement.

Cinnamon had been right about Jack not smiling often, but he had a sexy way of lifting one corner of his mouth when he was amused. He'd been wearing that tug of a smile since they arrived in town.

"What makes you think I see spirits?"

"In the mall, I followed you. Before you get all huffy, it was to make sure Evan or his hired help hadn't managed to find you before me."

"I never saw you. Before you say I wasn't supposed to see you, I get that. What surprises me is not seeing your aura. Guess that doesn't say much for my observation skills." Like a fingerprint, Jack's aura was distinct. If his aura had been visible, nothing would have stopped her from seeing him. Which said that someone or something had blocked his aura, but why? Since he planned on making his presence known it didn't make sense. And nothing would convince her that Salina or her Mom hadn't known.

"When did you arrive?"

"You were in Victoria's Secret. Whoever was with you has interesting tastes. The black panties with kiss my ass, written next to the red heart got my attention and stamp of approval."

Cinnamon felt heat creep up her neck.

"I didn't know women still blushed."

"Then you've been associating with the wrong type of woman."

"No doubt. It goes without saying; a magician couldn't pull off what I saw. You're lucky only two clerks saw items dangling in thin air."

"I..." She bit her bottom lip. Why deny the truth? Jack knew what he'd seen. "You missed the sales clerk who thought I was shoplifting and the woman who pushed a religious pamphlet in my hand and promised to pray for me."

"You had a busy day. Do you want to talk about the black lace bra that hung in the air before dropping into your basket and how nicely the bra and the lethal looking black heels that were shoved into your hands match the black panties?"

The blush sprang to life, creeping up her neck. Cinnamon's scalp tingled with warmth.

"No."

"Then name the ghost with the great taste in panties."

"I ... Mary, your mother was with me."

Jack laughed; a rich, decedent belly laugh. The sound remarkably soothing to the ear, made her belly tighten. He was as close to being relaxed as she'd ever seen him. No doubt that could change in an instant. But if her embarrassment could accomplish a few minutes like this, she'd gladly pay the price of admission.

"My mother's idea of sexy would have been pink cotton. She never purchased anything that wasn't practical. And Sweetheart, those panties are anything but practical. And don't say your mom, I won't believe that either."

"Why?"

"Research. Your mother wore gardenia perfume. Like the perfumes you and your sister's wear, it is a signature scent, created exclusively for her. In the stores, I picked up your cinnamon spice and a heavier scent that reminded me of the sandalwood oil a friend likes to burn."

Hell's bells. She wanted to ask who the friend was but she didn't really want to know. Well, she did but didn't.

Pushing aside temptation, she said, "Between the possible kidnapping of Gin and the counterfeiting, I should have realized you would investigate our family. Find out any other interesting nuggets of information."

"Nothing that hadn't been filtered through a good press agent. Most of the information was in context to the Prescott banks. A lot of well earned praise for the communities your dad designed and a few articles about his passion for rebuilding classic cars." There was so little mentioned about the triplets and Caitlin Prescott, Jack suspected someone had gone to great lengths to shield them from publicity.

"No more stalling. Name the ghost at the mall."

"Don't insult me." Without fanfare, Salina materialized. Her hands were firmly planted on her hips. Her eyes flashed with irritation. "I am not a ghost. However, this woman is a ghost. It's bad enough she chooses to wander the streets and haunt the property where she used to live. But to be seen in public wearing that outfit is a crime. My God, the bustle under that dress makes her look like a lard ass. The cleavage works, but she's wearing baggy cotton bloomers and a whalebone corset ... I ... I can't go on, it's too much, way too much."

"And you look like a harlot in a handkerchief. If I'd sullied myself to dress like you, I would have been working the tents instead of owning the finest brothel in town."

Closing her eyes, Cinnamon mumbled, "This isn't happening. It's a bad dream, a really bad dream. When I open my eyes the only person I will see is Jack."

"I smell the same perfume I noticed in the mall and violets. Who's here?"

Peeking through two fingers, Cinnamon moaned.

"No one."

"Don't push me," Salina warned.

"Hell's bells and damnation. Salina has a tendency to break things when she gets mad. Maybe we should take this discussion outside."

"Salina Owens, Walker's mother?" Jack asked as they left the mercantile.

"The same. Since Rose and Walker met, family members have been able to see my folks and Walker's folks." She figured not mentioning that Joan and her husband could also see them wasn't so much a lie as a simplification of the facts.

"A word of warning, don't call Salina a ghost; it makes her a little testy. That said, a female Salina is calling a ghost is also here. The woman claims she owned the finest brothel in town."

"Miss Jayne's. Until her death in 1870, she was a respected business woman and famous Madame in these parts."

"Thank you, kind sir; it's nice to know my reputation was not tainted by my scoundrel of a husband."

Jack stopped in his tracks. "I heard that. How the devil? Where is she?"

"The where is beside you. As any lady does when walking with a gentleman, she has slipped her arm around your arm. As for how the devil, that would be Salina. She has the ability to casts magic spells."

"What are the chances of me seeing them?"

"I tried Sweetie; Warren nixed the idea. Maybe later. Right now we need to talk. Jayne refuses to leave here until she gets the satisfaction of destroying her husband's life."

"Let me explain myself, sir. I was murdered. Treating me like a common rat, my husband fed me small rations of poison. Let me tell you, my death was slow and painful. And the worst of it is he got away with murder because the doctor said I died of a stomach ailment. Before my body had a chance to grow cold, he moved a whore, a whore I detested, into my bed. The sleazy bastard treated my girls poorly and cheated my customers. I was beside myself, sir."

"This floozy thinks I have no sense, but how could I leave knowing what he was doing? When the brothel burned down in '71, he left town with over a million dollars of my money. Money I earned while he sat in a saloon gambling. Since then, I have been patiently waiting for his return."

"Which means she's been haunting the house built where the brothel stood. She also walks up and down the boardwalk checking out every man that comes to town," Salina added.

"At least I am properly dressed for such excursions, Madame. I never haunted anyone; I simple went for walks. If the few people who were able to see me were scared it was their doing not mine."

"I am not a Madame."

"That is obvious! A Madame has more class." Raising her chin, Miss Jayne looked haughty.

Salina growled. Lifting her hand, she pointed a finger at Miss Jayne.

"Salina. I don't think you want to do that," Cinnamon warned.

"I'm only going to..."

Beside the wooden sidewalk a bolt of lightning hit the ground.

Salina lowered her arm.

Out of the corner of her mouth she said to Jack, "Don't ask."

"As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted, I want revenge for my death and a respectable grave."

"Miss Jayne, I sympathize with your plight, but I can't imagine how we can help. Surely, the man has been dead for over a hundred years," Jack answered.

"I have no doubt he died. But I assure you, sir, his soul walked this very boardwalk a few days ago. He goes by the name Thornton Lutz. He's slick, smooth and still thinks carrying a walking stick with a derringer tucked in the handle is stylish. He was with a man named Evan Jones. Sleazy man, I would never have allowed him in my establishment."

Jack's back stiffened. "You're a good judge of character, Miss Jayne. Did you by chance hear what they were discussing?"

"Your name was mentioned and they were most unhappy about a plate being lost. Why men would be interested in china is beyond me, but times have changed."

Cinnamon bit back a chuckle when Miss Jayne ran her eyes over Salina's outfit and shuddered.

"Salina's appearance was at a most appropriate time. Being the first ghost outside of the locals I have ever seen, I was most eager to make her acquaintance."

"I am not a ghost." Salina's words, said through clenched teeth, were ignored.

"Miss Jayne, where were you buried?" Cinnamon asked.

"In a pine box in a pauper's grave. It was humiliating. Absolutely humiliating."

"If you see Lutz again, would you be able to eavesdrop on his conversation?"

"Of course, sir. Unlike his features, his aura has not changed with this life. It was, in fact his aura that caught my attention. After listening to his conversation I was positive, he was the same conniving, self-serving man I was foolish enough to marry. He has a most unusual color in his aura. I will have no trouble spotting him."

Cinnamon raised a brow. Interesting, she hadn't thought of ghosts seeing auras, but it made sense. She'd like to know what Miss Jayne saw that was different in Thornton's aura but seeing the impatience on Salina's face, she shelved the question.

"Salina assures me that she can reach Cinnamon. As much as it pains me to admit, Salina has been generous with information. She has also instructed me on how I might contact her. If Thornton returns to town I will immediately contact Salina."

\* \* \* \*

"No sense repeating everything twice. Hugh needs to hear everything that just happened so right now I will only ask one question. What was Salina wearing?"

"Thought that got your attention. Three metallic black scarves were sewn together at the tips of corners to make a very skimpy dress. There was a lot of exposed skin. Use your imagination, you'll figure it out. Her metallic black suede boots stopped mid thigh."

"Not an image I would associate with angels, unless you're talking Hells Angels."

"Don't give her any ideas. She has an active enough imagination on her own."

"An old article from a gossip column called her clothing elaborate, and worthy of the Ziegfeld Follies. It didn't come across as a compliment."

"Don't imagine it was. If you nix the headpieces, the costumes worn during Vegas shows are similar to some of Salina's more outlandish creations." Thinking of the costumes Salina created for her to wear on

stage she added, "But others are elaborate, sexy, without being over the top."

"Like the outfit you wore on stage last night."

The one-piece spandex leotard exposed one creamy white arm and shoulder. From the hips up the material was covered in tiny black beads that caught the light. Where the beading stopped a triangular black silk scarf with a deep fringe gracefully hugged her hips and draped downward. Just thinking about removing that scarf so he could run his hands over her lush body made Jack twitch to attention.

"That would be a good example. Salina doesn't believe in conservative, if an outfit doesn't make a statement it isn't worth wearing."

"In my line of work, I have a fine appreciation for the directness of statements."

Cinnamon chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind."

Jack fell silent as he concentrated on the snow-covered roads.

Meeting Miss Jayne made Cinnamon nervous. She didn't doubt her story, didn't fault her need to make her murderer pay for the injustice. What bothered her was the timing. The convenience of it smelled suspicious, Aunt Pesty suspicious. And that was what set her teeth on edge.

Miss Jayne said that since her death, Salina was the first non-resident ghost she had met. Her mother was good at reminding her that there were no coincidences. She knew what her mother was really saying was look at the recent past for the oddities, the things that were different, out of the ordinary that in fact created the current situation. Salina and Aunt Pesty fit all three categories.

Coincidence reaching out to smack her in the face for a third time didn't give her a warm and fuzzy feeling of wellbeing.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 13

Nine Springs Ranch was tucked in the northeast corner of a small valley. The ranch's barn, a two-story log house, trees, and a log fence were half buried under the thick blanket of newly fallen snow.

In the spring, daffodils and tulips would crowd the fences and circle the weeping willows in the front yard. The fields beyond the barn would be covered in wispy blades of hay. A stone's throw from the cabin, a patch of newly plowed ground would be waiting for tender shoots of green beans and pumpkin vines to germinate. In the corral, beside the traditional red barn, two colts would play.

Cinnamon knew this because she had seen the ranch in springtime, or as good as. Just before leaving on the tour she had watched Ginger embellish her signature ghosts and goblins into a painting she had done of the Nine Springs Ranch.

Which left her with one question. Flipping open her cell phone, she punched Gin's number.

Nothing happened.

"The mountains block reception. You'll have to wait until we're in the house; it's one of a few sweet spots on the valley floor."

Jack parked the truck under a carport by the barn. Hugh and two black labs greeted them. "You're just in time. We can take your bags in later. If you don't have hats and scarves, there are a few in the barn. Let's get going."

Sitting on the springboard bench, Cinnamon was nestled between Hugh and Jack. The fur-trimmed hood on her coat tickled her checks, but she was thankful for the warmth.

"I'm on a sleigh ride, on a real sleigh being pulled by four of the biggest horses I've ever seen outside of Budweiser commercials. I'd say pinch me, but if I'm dreaming I don't want to wake up. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, even the silence is breathtaking. I don't want this to end, but where are we headed?"

"It's a surprise." Hugh's voice rang with pride and pleasure from the compliment.

The air snapped with frost.

Their breath crystallized.

Jack, feeling Cinn shiver, draped his forearm over her thighs and pulled her closer to his warmth. He was playing with fire, the type of fire that warmed the belly, spread out, burned its way into one's heart and didn't let go.

Jack wasn't sure how he felt about being Hugh's source of amusement, but from the smile Hugh passed his way, he was expecting to see Jack go up in flames.

"How could something be burning with all this snow on the ground?" Cinnamon hadn't realized she'd voiced her thoughts until Jack answered.

"Steam rising off the hot springs."

"Nine Springs Ranch; makes sense. How hot are the springs?"

"Three springs stay between a hundred and a hundred and five degrees. The rest are cooler," Hugh answered.

A few minutes later, the horses slowed their pace.

In front of them, large brown mounds of fur dotted the landscape. As they drew nearer the lumps grew restless. A bull elk, with a magnificent seven-prong rack, stood, raised his head and bugled. High pitched, with a slight rattle, the Elk's cry reminded Cinnamon of a rusty door hinge being forced open.

"He's huge," Cinnamon whispered.

"And he's hungry. Time to work up an appetite for dinner." Jack climbed to the back of the sleigh before helping Cinnamon over the seat.

Pulling two pairs of yellow leather work gloves out of a pocket, he handed Cinnamon a pair. "After I cut the bailing twine, you push the bale over the side of the sleigh. The horses will go slow, but keep your feet about shoulder width apart, or you'll find yourself sitting on your backside."

When Cinnamon pushed the last bale off the sleigh, hay rimmed a wide circle.

Back on the sleigh's spring bench, the men stretched two large thick wool blankets over their legs. Over the blankets they added a canvas tarp to help block the wind. When Jack hooked his hand over her thighs and pulled her closer, Cinnamon didn't object.

The sky, wearing a veil of snow bearing clouds, darkened. The temperature had noticeably dropped. A coyote's howl carried with the wind.

It was odd how this place carried a feeling of contentment, and an intimacy that welcomed her soul. If such a thing were possible, Cinnamon imagined that her heart sighed, as if it had found its way home. Not necessarily the setting of home, but a feeling of belonging, a oneness, a place she had been a hundred and one times before and just now rediscovered.

Cinnamon didn't know where that left her. She was deeply attracted to Jack, had been since their first meeting. The kiss she was forcing herself not to think about had churned her emotions into a tizzy.

Her feelings for Jack were different then what she felt for Eros. That was fact. But was it fair to compare emotions based on dreams, against emotions churned into a frenzy when flesh touched flesh?

She wouldn't fool herself into believing she wasn't physically or emotionally attracted to Eros. But their relationship was based on being soul mates. Other than his fear of needing to protect her, Eros didn't share thoughts, or the funny incidental things that happened. And not once had he asked her to share her life, her thoughts or beliefs.

But what she felt for Jack ran deeper than the sparks that flew as skin connected. Jack made her think, he asked questions and he listened to her answers. And when he was willing to share, he had a sharp wit that kept her interested.

Not wanting to continue comparing a dream man to the one currently making her skin tingle from his touch, Cinnamon asked, "How many elk are in the herd?"

"About two hundred this year. Last year the number was higher," Hugh answered.

"Why the drop?"

"Fires and drought conditions diminish the food supplies. Hunters thin the herds, but sometimes it isn't enough to prevent weaker and older animals from starving. Wolves got their share. Life is a cycle. I'd say that's something you understand."



Hugh was right, she understood. "Is starvation what made you start feeding them?"

"I purchased the ranch ten years ago. The previous owner neglected to tell me elk wintered by the hot springs. The first winter, they sniffed out the hay in the barn and didn't leave until spring. I decided that if we were going to share the property there had to be a better arrangement."

\* \* \* \*

"Please tell me that isn't elk stew." As she watched Hugh stir a simmering pot of meat, tomatoes, potatoes, celery, onions and an array of spices, Cinnamon's stomach rumbled.

"Not this time. Best beef in the state; raise it myself. The bowls are in the cupboard behind you. There's a loaf of sourdough bread in the second drawer. We'll sit by the fireplace to eat."

After hearing about the encounter with Salina and Miss Jayne, Hugh watched the flames in the fireplace sizzle their way over dry moss.

"I don't like this. Have you heard from Thornton or Evan today?"

"Not since this morning when I left Evan's place. The plan is to meet in three days. If I hear from them before that, it's because the plan changed. I have a man watching Evan's place and there are GPS monitors on their cars," Jack said.

"Cinn, because of Gus, your honorary uncle, I know a little about your family. My understanding was that Ginger was the medium. Have you always been able to see ghosts?"

"Today was a first.

"Before Salina jumps on your statement, and Jack on mine, I'll give you the ghost versus soul 101 course. Souls have crossed over the veil. They have the ability to travel on earth and the celestial plane. I have it on good authority that they would never haunt anyone.

"Ghosts are earthbound. For some, it is a matter of refusing to accept their deaths. Other ghosts choose to stay here until they put closure to a wrong. Miss Jayne fits that category. Until they accept that they are dead, or decide that their reason for staying here is finished, a ghost won't move on. Few ghosts set out to intentionally scare people. But for most people the fact that they are seeing something that shouldn't be there is enough to scare the gee bees out of them."

"Good points. Today, seeing Miss Jayne, a ghost, was a first. What about Salina?"

"Last October. But things started happening before that. When Cole and Gin met, something in the universe shifted. That isn't scientific, but it's as close as we can come to an explanation. For the first time since our folks' death, Rose and I were able to see and talk to them. When Cole proposed to Gin, he was able to see Mom and Dad. He is still able to see spirits that are related to us. When Walker and Rose met, his parents were added to our list of vaporous drop-in visitors."

"Why do you think that happened?"

"Salina and her sister Juanita share a grandmother with us."

"Do they visit often?"

Cinnamon chuckled.

"I've detected Salina or Caitlin's perfume several times. When we were watching the surveillance tapes, I

smelled pipe tobacco and a cigar in the penthouse,” Jack said.

"Rum, vanilla and licorice, my father's favorite pipe tobacco and his calling card. Gus, Walker's dad, is the cigar smoker. Just because you can smell one, or all of the aromas, doesn't mean they appear. Sometimes they just want to let us know they are listening or they're around but can't or won't interfere with what is happening."

"Do they do that often?" Jack asked.

"What can I say? They are family. They might not knock on the front door, and they don't always tell you what you want to hear or answer questions, but they are welcome.

"Hugh, your aura has been charged with a tangerine orange energy since we started talking. You know the saying; curiosity killed the cat. Why not just ask what's on your mind?"

"I'm not sure this is the right time."

Curled on a rug in front of the fireplace, the two black labs lifted their heads, whined, and moved closer to Hugh.

The lamp on the end table went out.

The room glowed with a pulse of electric pink energy.

The logs in the fireplace popped and hissed.

A yellow mist appeared.

The heavy scent of Opium perfume filled the air.

With a hip jolting strut, Salina stepped out of the yellow mist.

Hugh sat straighter in his chair. When the dogs barked, he placed his hands on their necks and murmured, "It's okay boys, she isn't here to harm me." Without taking his eyes off the sexy as hell apparition, he asked Jack, "Do you see her?"

"She's kind of hard to miss." Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Cinnamon silently laughing.

Salina wore a skintight pink beaded gown with a full train. There were enough feathers on her headpiece to make an ostrich jealous. She tickled Hugh's face with her boa. Half turning she looked at Jack and winked. "This is Ziegfeld at its best."

In a blink, sheer pink chiffon hugged Salina's skin. Hot pink beaded flowers and green leaves, in a free flowing pattern, covered the crucial points of interest. Doing a slow runway turn, she winked at Hugh. "This is outrageous, fun and outlandishly sexy."

"And this is sexy conservative." A pale yellow, mini tube dress with a halter-top, hugged Salina's perfect figure. Her shoes were cork wedges, with yellow patent leather peep toe tops and sling backs. Her blonde hair was a mass of feminine waves and soft curls.

"Eavesdropping isn't polite," Cinnamon scolded.

"Can you tell me a better way to learn what people really think?"

When Cinnamon started seeing auras, she devoured every book available on the subject. The general

consensus of what a color meant had little to do with her reality. Filled with energy, she saw auras as layers; some were as thin as an onion's skin, other layers were inches thick. Yellow mixed with blue still made green, blue and red made purple and red and yellow made orange but each shade or combination of shades had different meanings. And mixed with another meaning gave a deeper understanding of a person's emotional state.

Hugh's aura said he was curious, but not surprised by Salina's appearance. There was a story there. Before the night was over, she planned on hearing that story.

The blue sliver on Jack's outer aura never changed. Sitting beside her, in a dark red leather recliner, his inner aura, the pulse of energy hugging his body was carrot orange. A color correctly associated with high energy and inquisitiveness. Right now, Jack was like a dog sniffing out a tasty bone.

Cinnamon knew she wasn't wrong to believe that nothing in Jack's experience, fantasies, or research, could give him half a clue about the truth.

"While these two wipe drool off their chins, tell us why they can see you."

"I sweet talked Warren into cutting through some red tape."

"What outfit were you wearing?"

Salina's throaty laugh traveled to the rafters in the living rooms open beam ceiling. "Warren has a soft spot for robin's egg blue. The dress was similar to this one, but it was strapless."

"In other words, you hypnotized him with your assets. Can't fault the strategy, but I don't believe Warren's a fool or a dirty old man. What golden nugget of logic prompted him to agree with you?"

"No earthly event would force two tight lipped agents or you to divulge secrets. Realizing the truth of what I said, Warren agreed to let me intervene. If that means telling what I know, fine, but I'm hoping that won't be necessary. Each of you knows something about the counterfeiters that no one else knows. And each of you has abilities that can work together to solve the case. Hugh, you get to be the first talker."

Walking to a mini bar in the far corner of the room, Hugh grabbed two long neck bottles of beer and the bottle of wine he had opened for dinner. Snatching a wine glass, he didn't bother with glasses for the beer.

Hugh studied Salina, tugged on the side of his mustache and guzzled half the bottle of beer. When he'd shuffled his loyalties and principles into choices he could live with, he grinned. "From the first time I received communication from the other side, I prayed for this moment. Salina, you just made my day, in more ways than one. This moment is beyond anything I ever hoped. Thank you."

"Aren't you a sweetie?" Salina glowed.

"As for my ability to communicate, it is nothing like this experience. When a spirit talks to me it is telepathically, in short messages. Most of the time they show me images; some are obvious, more often the images are symbolic and need interpretation. A handful of times I've experienced dreams where I observe something happening. Those dreams were realistic and with the insight gained, I was able to change the outcome of the case I was working.

"That pretty much covers me." Hugh chugged the remainder of his beer.

"How old were you when you started seeing spirits?" Cinnamon asked.

"My memories start at age three. My mother claimed it started earlier. A psychiatrist friend of parents called Andy a classic example of an imaginary playmate for a shy, introverted child. I always wanted to cram his psychology degree down his throat. Until age nine, Andy was my constant companion. He still visits occasionally, but his visits are personal in nature."

"What happened at age nine that changed your life?"

"I met your Uncle Gus."

"Finish the story." Salina purred.

Hugh's aura dimmed and pulled into his body. He and Salina eyed each other. Whatever passed between them made Hugh relent.

"Gus's parents weren't opened minded. He learned at an early age not to mention spirits, ghosts or knowing things he shouldn't know.

"At meals, my mother set a place for Andy. My folks never sat next to me without first asking where Andy sat. I'm not saying they encouraged my beliefs, but they didn't scorn me.

"Imagine Gus's surprise when I introduced him to Andy and my surprise when Gus saw and talked to Andy. It cemented our lifelong friendship.

"We were recruited by the FBI our last semester of college. Until Gus decided to leave the agency, we made a powerful team."

When Salina turned her attention to Jack, he forced himself not to squirm. "Your turn. If I think you're editing too much I'll fill in the details. I'll make you blush. And don't think I can't."

One corner of Jack's mouth lifted. "I believe you could. Halfway through training, I was at the top of my class. I'd always been a loner, but one guy started sticking to my side. He had a way about him, can't explain it but he could invite himself into anything without appearing pushy. Before you knew it, you'd be thinking it was your idea that he was part of the group.

"Close to the end of training I had a dream. I was told the guy was planning to destroy my credibility. It wasn't just the warning, it was the way it was presented, the truth of the details that stuck with me. The next morning, the two of us and a female recruit were paired for a test. No sense going into details, but I was able to prevent him from sabotaging the test. In truth, the information and his actions prevented an innocent person from dying and me being blamed for the death.

"The second time I experienced the dream I was working a case that wasn't going anywhere. During the dream I was told where to retrieve crucial information we hadn't been able to dig up. When everything proved to be exactly as I was told I became a believer." He'd cut his tongue out before relating the details of those dreams or any since. When he glanced at Salina, she winked.

"Over the years, the dreams, telepathic messages, and warnings have given me a reputation for having damn good gut instincts, and kept me from eating a bullet or two."

"The man, did he figure out what happened?" Cinnamon asked.

"He wasn't one to make mistakes, so he had to have known I doubled back and changed what he'd done. But he couldn't very well ask. Why?"

"Curiosity. The man made a powerful enemy. You've been rubbing the spot the bullet went through your

leg. I'm stretching my neck out here, but I'm thinking he's the man that shot you in the stomach and left you for dead."

Jack looked at Salina. Her smile could be described as anything but innocent. Between her and Cinn's lie detector abilities he didn't stand a chance in hell.

"He was. Betty Jo has gone over every case Grover worked or he could get information on. With hindsight for clarity, it's possible he worked both sides from the beginning. Two years ago, during an undercover operation, several million dollars went missing and we lost two good agents. A week later, Grover's corvette blew up. It was impossible to positively identify what little was left of the body."

"Drugs and counterfeiting. Are they normal bed partners?"

"Greed and connections make anything possible."

"During the dreams who is the person talking to you?"

"Don't have a name. And I've never seen a face."

"When was the last time you had one of these dreams?"

"This morning. The information I was given had nothing to do with the case."

Salina was looking all too smug.

"I've allowed the men to keep some secrets. But let me warn all three of you, the day will come when you will disclose everything."

"The story Cinn is about to tell is mine as well as hers. Hugh, you know a little about what is about to be said. I add this so Cinn understands; Uncle Gus knows all. Jack, what can I say, you've wanted to know the story behind the story since the day you landed in Kansas."

Cinnamon poured the last of the wine into her glass. When she smelled her mother's perfume and felt a soft rushing of warm air, she relaxed.

"Around three hundred years ago, Salina and I had a Grandmamma named Maria Romano. Of gypsy blood, she came from a line of female descendants who inherited mystical powers when they reached puberty."

"Married to the powerful leader of her gypsy band, Grandmamma gave birth to one child. Sophia was a raven-haired beauty. At an early age she learned her beauty, body and dancing skills could seduce men into total submission."

"Sounds like Delilah," Jack said when Cinnamon paused to sip her wine.

"Good observation. Sophia's father had the same idea. He decided to use Sophia's persuasive powers as a bartering tool. His goal was to join his band of gypsies with another equally powerful band of gypsies."

"Sophia, however, refused to cooperate."

"There are a couple of versions to this part of the story. One has her falling deeply in love with a man and running away with him when her father refused to allow the marriage. The other version says she was as ruthless as her father. By marrying a wealthy man outside of the band she selfishly created a comfortable life for herself."

"Personally, I believe both versions hold truths. I won't judge or guess on whether or not she loved the man. But in love or lust, she took a man outside of the gypsy community as a lover to put a halt to her dad's plans. If the man's wealth, status and lifestyle helped her decide, it certainly wouldn't have been the first or last time something like that happened.

"Grandmamma was sympathetic; she liked the man, not because he was wealthy and handsome, but because he treated Sophia with kindness. However, Grandmamma was also distressed. If Sophia married an outsider, she would be forbidden from visiting or returning to their band.

"Grandmamma inherited the Gift of Prophecy and the gift of Spell-Casting. Using her gift of sight to look into her only child's future, the visions she saw were not happy ones. Sophia, granted the Gift of Healing, abandoned her spiritual heritage. One version of the story says she did this to appease her new husband's family. Another version has her refusing to use her gift because she wanted to totally disassociate with her heritage."

Jack interrupted. "What do you believe?"

"Times were hard. Many gypsy wagons were lavish, but they weren't solid walls with a front door for visitors to enter. Run out by the local gentry or the law, gypsies were constantly on the move. It was a hard life for the women and the children.

"With her father ready to barter her body for his own selfish reasons, I believe she jumped at a chance to escape without giving much thought to the future. Maybe she wanted to shed her past permanently. Or maybe it was necessary to fit into her husband's social circle. Either way, in the beginning, I don't think she gave her actions much thought.

"Kind of like running away from home when you're seventeen. With no place to go and no solid idea of what you will do tomorrow."

Salina's laughter, filled with merriment, was a sound that had a person wanting to laugh with her. "You do have a bite. Yes, that's exactly what I did, and would do again. But my roots were root bound, confined within a small town that wouldn't let me breathe. I needed a new pot, a place to spread out, sink in and blossom. I found it in Vegas. I also believe your assessments about Sophia's decisions are correct. Now, continue."

"Looking further into Sophia's future, Grandmamma saw five children. Three boys, born in the early years of the marriage, were properly raised to take over the family's vast businesses.

"Later in life, Sophia gave birth to twin daughters. The girls inherited their mother's dark beauty. Their father and grown brothers spoiled the girls. As was customary during that time, the girls were sheltered from the harsher realities of society. Perhaps because of their sheltered lives, they had none of their mother's survival instincts.

"Reaching further into the future, Grandmamma saw that when the twins came of age, they inherited The Gift of Knowledge and The Gift of Prophecy. It is said that Sophia was jealous of her daughters' youth and beauty. One belief is that Sophia's jealousy kept her from teaching her daughters about their abilities. It is also possible that after years of neglecting her abilities, Sophia lost her powers and the knowledge needed to tutor them. What we know for certain is that without proper training the twins lacked the wisdom to use their mystical abilities appropriately. The greed of lesser mortals and poor choices brought about the girls' deaths. And effectively brought to a close the spiritual gifts that had benefited many people for hundreds of years.

"When Grandmamma told Sophia what she had seen in her visions, Sophia either didn't believe her or

didn't care. That night, fearing her parents would try to stop her marriage, she ran away.

"Grandmamma could not interfere with Sophia's choice, but nothing prevented her from helping the granddaughter's she would never meet. Casting a spell for future generations of female offspring was a gift she could freely give her granddaughters without Sophia or her husband's knowledge or protests.

"To ensure the powers of future generations would not be used unwisely, Grandmamma incorporated a key of accountability into the two part magic spell. Each recipient has to accept both *gifts* or they will lose the use of their magical powers.

"The first *gift* is given to female offspring upon puberty. As had been the case for generations, the universe selects the supernatural, mystical powers. The powers are uniquely crafted to take advantage of each child's unique talents, interests, temperaments and desires.

"The *gift*, as it is usually called, becomes known during a dream on the night the girl blossoms into womanhood. With dream visions guiding her path and with practice, each female heir is given the knowledge necessary to control and use her unique power.

"Each descendant is free to use her *gift* however she desires. But if the *gift* is used solely for the purpose of self-gain, all supernatural powers are taken from her.

"The second gift is the knowledge of love.

"Grandmamma believed a true soul mate would never scorn his lover's heritage or ask her to relinquish the *gift*. Starting at age sixteen, female descendants begin a series of dream visions in which they meet their soul mate. The visions become more intense as the time to marry draws near. Grandmamma believed that if her descendents could recognize their lovers they would not be misled into marrying a person who would take advantage of their gift.

"And to make certain her descendents lived by a certain code of ethics: if a descendant chooses to ignore the second *gift* by giving themselves to someone other than their soul mate, they will lose the use of their supernatural powers.

"The end."

"Hell of a story; hell of a heritage. I know Ginger uses her *gift* as a medium to help clients talk to deceased relatives. I have to admit that if what we are experiencing tonight, she encounters daily, I'm green with envy," Hugh said.

"Caitlin was able to read a person's thoughts. From some funny stories Uncle Gus has told me, she still does. What's your story, Salina?"

"I can cast a spell as good as Grandmamma. And like Glenda the good witch, I am able to grant wishes."

"You say that in present tense." Jack sat straighter.

"I do. But hold your thoughts, there are ground rules. If I grant a wish, it cannot interfere with choices you have yet to make. Which translates into this—I cannot cast a spell that will show you who is behind the counterfeiting or stop a future event from happening. If needed, I can help, but only after you have figured out the answers. As with your dreams, you can be guided, but if you think about it, you were never given specifics unless you already had the answers. When it comes to your safety we can run interference by giving you a warning. Most people don't listen, but that goes back to making choices."

"Cinn?" Hugh said her name but both men looked at her.

"I was given the gift of healing."

Rosemary's ability to win any game of chance and Salina's gift for granting wishes were, on first impression, more impressive. But Cinnamon knew her ability to heal held more power, responsibilities and burdens than all other gifts combined.

Jack slowly rubbed his hand over his belly.

"Hands-on healing?" Hugh asked.

"Yes."

"Last night during the show, you placed your hand on the shoulder of each participant. It wasn't obvious or inappropriate, but I wondered if it had something to do with the hypnosis," Hugh said.

"You're observant. Over the years I've done hundreds of shows and no one has ever picked up on that."

"So the handpicked volunteers aren't really picked at random."

"No, never at random, but you're headed in the wrong direction if you think I pick my volunteers. When I walk a room, a soft yellow light surrounds each person that gets asked to join me on stage. Because I see disease as a dark spot in a person's aura I know where healing energy is needed. When my hand touches their shoulder a healing grid appears. It isn't until I see the grid that I know what is wrong and what healing grids need to be used."

"Tell them the rest." Salina's voice was soft, her expression solemn.

"Periodically, during sleep I astral travel. During those journeys, I am taken to places where my healing abilities are needed."

Hugh stood. Tossing three logs onto the pile of red-hot ambers, he poked at them with his boot until he was satisfied with how they sat. Grabbing two more beers, he handed one to Jack before settling back into the recliner.

The logs spit and hissed as flames licked their sides. At Salina's feet, the dogs settled on the rug.

When Hugh spoke, his words were carefully chosen, his voice was curiously soft.

"When Salina said we were all connected, it didn't make sense, maybe now it does."

"A few years back, three men kidnapped me. In an alley, in the middle of a cluster of deserted warehouses they used me as a punching bag. Their intent was to inflict as much pain as possible before killing me. There was no way anyone heard my screams or knew where I had been taken."

"When the men left, an angel appeared, or what I later told myself was an angel. She held my hand, told me everything would be all right, and assured me help was on the way."

"While I waited for the white light of death to take away the pain, the angel placed her hands over me. Like tentacles, deep warmth spread through me. As the pain in my lower back eased, I rolled onto my back. When her hands skimmed over my chest I felt a rib lift, my breathing eased, and the gargling sound in the back of my throat stopped. She held the forearm, I'd heard snap, between her hands. And she placed her gentle hands over my face. Able to breathe through my nose, I didn't care when she apologized for not being able to stop the bruising or swelling."

"She stayed with me until the light bar on a police cruiser was flashing across the metal buildings. Seconds



later, an ambulance arrived.

"My shirt and the ground were spattered in blood. In the emergency room, the only wound doctors found was a small cut on my right leg. X-rays found no internal injuries. The next day, hunched over and shuffling my feet like an old man, I walked out of the hospital. She wasn't wrong about the bruising or the swelling, but I was thankful to be alive.

"The cops claimed dispatch sent them out. Dispatch had no recording of a call, and the dispatcher had no recollection of the call. Got the same response with the ambulance service.

"Besides the woman's soothing voice, I remember her eyes. In this light, your green eyes match the spruce trees outside, and the angel that saved my life.

"I need to think about this. Salina, it's been a pleasure. I hope we meet again."

Unusual for Salina, as she wasn't the mothering type, she placed a warm hand on Cinnamon's shoulder and brushed her cheek against Cinnamon's hair. "Your mom is having a hissy fit because Warren wouldn't let her be a part of this. Tonight went better than I expected; but be patient, Sweetie."

Jack eyes, fixed on the blazing logs, didn't blink. He wanted to believe that it didn't matter, but it did. If Cinn was responsible for him sitting here, breathing and healthy, how many times had she saved his life? The answer had to be more than once. He knew that because Terry had told him he hadn't expected to find him alive. And the emergency medical team hadn't expected him to make it to the hospital alive. When he had, doctors hadn't given much hope that he'd make it through surgery. Without logical answers, the doctors had labeled him an oddity, a freakish wonder. But Betty Jo had called it a miracle and made a point of telling him that from the minute Cinn arrived at the hospital she spent every minute possible at his side.

Grover shot him in the gut at point blank range. It was the one thing he clearly remembered, and the last thing he remembered until waking up in the hospital. He'd heard a belly full of crap about memory loss, distorted memory and how he could never have lived through a rifle tearing open his gut. But the smug look on Grover's face and the words, "adios asshole", remained the one memory of that morning he didn't question.

"Tell me about astral travel." His Texas drawl was unusually thick.

"In the paranormal realm, it is said to be a form of lucid dreaming. It is also called an out of body experience. People claim to experience the phenomenon during self-hypnosis, daydreaming, and sleep.

"A 'by the book' doctor would say it was an experience related to brain stimulation, insanity, drugs, trauma to the head, or an attention grabbing overactive imagination.

"People who have experienced astral travel say their soul leaves their earthly body and travels to the spirit world. In that world you can travel through the past or, if you want, visit the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

"Hugh's experience, where he saw the possible outcome of a future event, falls under the guidelines of astral travel."

"You, what do you experience?" The words were hushed, as if it pained Jack to ask.

"A sucking sensation as I'm being pulled through a lighted tunnel. When I leave the tunnel, I get a quick overall view of what is happening. Then I'm pulled to where I am needed. When I'm done working, I wake up in my bed." Jack didn't need to know about the headaches, the draining of energy, not now, maybe not ever.

"Did you save my life?"

"Jack, I don't know. My first memory of that day is walking into the hospital. According to Gin, I was in a sound sleep when she arrived at the condo. Apparently, I was on the quiet side during the flight, but I responded appropriately to everything said."

"You know the details of what happened; you were in ICU before I was taken into surgery. What do you believe?"

Restless, Cinnamon stood, walked to the fireplace. Jabbing at the burning logs with the poker disturbed ambers, which spit and hissed with displeasure. When she turned, Jack was standing behind her.

"In ICU, during that first visit, the way the grid showed odd patches of healing around open wounds made me wonder, but I had no memory. Still don't. To answer your question, from what I saw, you wouldn't have lived without a miracle."

Jack cupped her face with his hands. He kissed her forehead, then each of her closed eyes. The kisses were tender, loving, like a parent kissing a baby. Pulling back, he used the pad of his thumbs to catch the tears at the corners of her eyes.

"Thank you." Without looking back, he left the room.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 14

When Cinnamon entered the kitchen, the still warm coffee pot was empty.

Standing at the kitchen window, she watched the black labs chase each other through belly high snow. Jack, driving an old rusty red tractor, dumped snow in a corral beside the barn, as he blazed a trail between the house, barn and three open-sided hay sheds. The blue gray clouds, hanging heavy and low, looked ready to dump more.

Filling the teakettle on the stove with water, she checked out a large walk-in pantry before calling Ginger.

"Morning, do you want the long or short version of what happened last night?"

"You're an hour too late. Both sets of parents were sitting at the kitchen table when I came downstairs. So you know, they visited Rosemary and Walker first."

"They've been busy. Is Mom still mad?"

"Let's just leave it with she isn't happy about Warren keeping her away from the action."

"That doesn't surprise me. Just before I left, you were painting a picture of a barn and log house. You named the setting, Nine Springs Ranch, what prompted the composition?"

"Not sure, could have been a dream. The day I started the painting the idea was jelling from the time I got out of bed. By the time I prepped the canvas the composition was as vivid as a snapshot."

"What about the ranch's name?"

"It popped into my head. Doesn't say much, but that's what happened. I finished the canvas the day you left. A couple of days ago I added a few more details."

"What?" Cinnamon snapped.

"Haze along the tree line behind the ranch and I added a cloud just above the top of a far hill. Now tell me what this is about?"

"Jack brought me to Nine Springs Ranch yesterday. The haze at the tree line is steam rising from nine thermal springs."

"Hell's bells. Do you think one of Aunt Pesty's spells caused this?" Ginger asked.

"The cloud—is it a ghost or a snow cloud?"

"I'm in the studio looking at the painting. Not a ghost. More like a weather cloud with puffy cheeks blowing a nasty wind."

"That fits the weather right now, but you painted the ranch during springtime. The cloud could represent trouble blowing in. One of Aunt Pesty's spells could certainly fit that explanation. What bugs me is no matter how I twist and bend ideas together, I can't come up with any reason for the coincidence."

"Who says it has to make sense? We're talking Aunt Pesty, and spells. We've been warned that one of her spells connected to something else. Who's to say the others didn't do the same thing. Or the painting could be nothing more than the fact that you were traveling there—I picked that up in a dream."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Not for a minute. I'll call Juanita to see if she can shed any light on the situation and Cole's good at wrapping his mind around unsolved mysteries. If I learn anything, I'll call."

"Sounds good. Kiss Pitter and Patter for me."

Cinnamon pushed the sleeves of her canary yellow sweater up to elbows, measured out flour and milk and added eggs and a dash of salt to the mixture.

Until well past midnight, she'd sat in front of the fireplace and gone over everything said.

The day before Jack was shot, Salina had kept her busy as they changed the décor in her condo. That evening, before she'd had time to drink a cup of tea, her parents arrived. By the time they left she'd gone to bed. Whether by design or chance, between the three of them she hadn't spent the day alone. After her parents left she'd immediately gone to bed. She didn't remember dreaming, Gin waking her up or the trip to the hospital. Maybe she would never remember, but she would never forget the overwhelming feeling of despair when she laid the healing grid over his body. She hadn't lied to Jack; without intervention, his soul would have separated from his mangled body before reaching the hospital.

There were no answers to the why, but last night's disclosures opened a door. She hadn't stepped over the threshold, but last night, she felt the pulse of a new gift. The energy felt different than the energy she used for astral travel and healing. Wrapped in fancy gold foil paper and silver ribbon, pretty as a Christmas present, she'd been eager to tug at the bow, lift the lid and pull back the tissue paper. This morning, in the light of day, she was more cautious. The wanting to know hadn't lessened, but she was willing to wait until the universe said the time was right.

"That smells wonderful." Hugh hung his sweat-stained gray cowboy hat on a wooden peg by the back door.

On the deck, Jack was using a bootjack to pull off snow-covered rubber boots. He looked rested, but his expression gave nothing away.

"Anything I can do to help?" Hugh walked into the kitchen wearing moose head slippers.

"Table needs setting. Love the fashion statement."

"A friend's granddaughter gave me the slippers for Christmas. This was as close as Suzy could come to elk."

"Stealing Salina's saying; you're a sweetie. Most men wouldn't wear them unless the gift giver was present."

Flustered, Hugh banged a few cupboard doors as he set plates and silverware on the table.

"I hope you like biscuits; I made enough for an army. Scrambled eggs with onions, ham and cheese are in the oven. And the last batch of pancakes is almost done."

"I see you found the bread maker and the ground beef." Hugh broke a baking powder biscuit open, smeared a thick layer of butter on one piece and popped it in his mouth.

"I did. I thought I'd make spaghetti to go with the bread. Or would you prefer something else for dinner?"

"Sounds wonderful. If it's not too much trouble, I'd appreciate you making a double batch of the sauce,

I'll freeze the leftover for later. Those biscuits are as good as my mother made. You're going to spoil me, and I'm going to let you."

"Doubling the sauce is simple. And once in awhile, everyone needs to be spoiled."

\* \* \* \*

Jack didn't know if it was on purpose or just the way the conversation went, but Salina's appearance wasn't mentioned during breakfast.

After breakfast, he and Hugh headed back outside. The ranch was small, ten horses, a hand full of Black Angus, and one pigmy goat Hugh kept for Suzy. But there was always something needing to be fixed, cleaned or, in the case of the hay, moved.

With fresh snow on the ground, there was the additional chore of plowing a path to the barn and hay sheds. The morning's work had kept his hands busy and allowed plenty of time to think and stew.

A self-propelled rowboat, a path covered in gold, and information that helped solve cases had made Jack a firm believer in the supernatural. For more than half his life, Green-eyes and the dreams had haunted him and influenced all aspects of his life.

Cinn's eyes were the unusual clear brilliance of an emerald; Green-eyes were darker, like a shamrock. The differences were noticeable, but it could be nothing more than a trick of lighting or circumstances. And that logic had started a dangerous game. During trips to the forest, he began imagining Cinnamon was Green-eyes. It was one of the dumber things he'd done, but he couldn't stop himself. And once done, he couldn't erase the image. He was tempted, but not quite ready to ask Cinn if she knew anything about his dreams and if there was a connection between his dreams and her destiny dreams.

But Cinn deserved a husband she could be proud of, a banker, doctor, or a candlestick maker, the 'who' didn't matter as much as the knowing that it couldn't be him—a jaded agent with several notches in his gun belt. What he'd done over the years had been done under the guise of work, but he'd never believed that made the ethics of the actions any less wrong.

Right after meeting Cinn, he'd tried wiping her out of his mind by reopening an on again, off again, relationship with a waitress he'd known for several years. The dates had smoothed out the rough edges, but he'd felt like he was cheating on Cinn. One-night stands, with nothing but the investment of a few drinks and a motel room, hadn't fared any better. With no emotional attachment, the act did nothing more than release the pressure and make him wish he'd stayed home and read a book.

Knowing everything he knew, knowing they had no future, he still wanted to walk into the kitchen, lift her into his arms and carry her to bed. He wanted to run his hands over every curve on her body, know what colors her eyes turned when she was lost in passion, and hear the soft kittenish mews she would make when he buried himself in her.

Crap, it was ten degrees outside, his dick should be shriveled to the size of a peanut; instead, he was rock hard and pressing against the confines of his jeans.

In the mudroom, Jack pulled off his boots.

The sleeves of Cinn's sweater were pushed to her elbows. A flour handprint decorated her backside. The backside was doing a little wiggle as Garth Brooks sang, "Low Places".

Jack gritted his teeth as the outline of a zipper was tattooed to his manhood.

"You didn't have to spend the entire morning cooking."

Glancing over her shoulder, Cinnamon smiled. A smudge of flour dusted her cheek. To stop the temptation to brush it off and kiss her senseless, he stuck his hands in his back pockets.

"I know. But I enjoy cooking and I got inspired."

"How on earth can the idea of standing at a hot stove half a day be inspiring?"

"It smells better than standing in a stall shoveling manure."

"You have a point."

After washing his hands, Jack dipped a spoon into the corner of a mini loaf pan. Four spoonfuls later the small bread shaped pan was empty. "How many more of those pans are peach cobbler?"

"There were four each of peach and blackberry, and four are a combination of the two."

"Good, I won't have to fight Hugh for a second helping."

"I was going to freeze half of them."

"Sweetheart, by the time lunch is over there won't be half of them left." Cinn's face warmed. She wanted to lean into him, steal a peach flavored kiss.

Damn, Jack was looking at her as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.

\* \* \* \*

"I would have sworn I didn't like pot pies," Hugh said as he mopped up the last of the creamy sauce with a baking powder biscuit.

"Glad you changed your mind. There are a dozen more in the freezer. I'll write out the baking instructions for everything."

"Everything?" As if a look would dole out answers, Hugh checked out the kitchen counters.

"Two apple pies, two berry pies, and the pot pies."

"Hot damn! If you weren't young enough to be my daughter, I'd beg you to marry me."

Jack answered his cell phone with, "I'm listening."

"Damn ... Yeah ... I agree. Croft lives just outside of Idaho City. Tell him to tail the car as far as his place. If he doesn't turn off by then, the only place to stop is town ... No, I have someone who says they can cover the town ... I'll wait to hear."

"Cinn, can you contact Salina?" Jack carried the cutting board loaded with warm cobbler pans to the table.

"Haven't had to, but I imagine I can get her attention. Gin did a cute little act where she dialed 1-800-heaven, and asked for our parent's. Let's see if this works." Pretending she was holding a phone to her ear, Cinnamon said, "Operator please connect me with Fairy Godmothers, Incorporated..."

The kitchen lights went out. With storm clouds obscuring the sun, the room dimmed to twilight. Nails clicked against the tile floor as the black labs headed under the table.

Holding a black silk elbow-length glove by the tip of one finger, a hand appeared then quickly

disappeared.

A shoulder and bare back draped in a red feather boa flashed then vanished.

A silk clad leg peeking out of a high slit blue sequined gown materialized. A hand rolled the black silk stocking down the leg before the scene dissipated.

A long black cigarette holder held in a gloved hand appeared. When the cigarette holder was a fraction of an inch from red lips the lips puckered and blew them a kiss.

The room flashed black.

When the kitchen lights popped on, Salina stood at the arched entry leading into the living room. She wore a brown felt fedora tilted low over one eye, a tan trench coat and brown stacked heels. Strutting, she walked towards them.

"Audrey Hepburn, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Lauren Bacall. Quite a combination." Hugh saluted her with his coffee mug.

"Why the Sam Spade outfit?" Cinnamon asked.

"Jack is sending me on an undercover assignment."

"How did..."

"My mother, remember she reads minds."

Jack muttered, "Oh shit, how the devil could I forget that?"

Hugh burst out laughing.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 15

Jack was restless. Everything that could be done was set in motion but the feeling that something wasn't right persisted.

"Ever been on a snowmobile?" Jack asked as he placed the last of the lunch dishes in the dishwasher.

"No. Are they hard to run?"

"Forget it Sweetheart, you are riding shotgun."

"Are you saying I couldn't run the machine?"

"I learned a long time ago that answering a sucker question leads to trouble. I'm driving, you're riding, end of discussion."

Without argument, she left the kitchen. Jack heard her chuckling as she walked up the stairs to the bedrooms.

Salina being her fairy godmother did have its perks. Slipping silk long johns up her legs she had a hard time believing they would hold warmth, but they felt wonderful against her skin.

As Cinnamon walked down the wide stairway into the living room, Jack took his time checking her out. Her red, bibbed overalls had black racing strips down the sides. She was carrying the matching jacket. Her snow boots were black with red straps around the ankle and red soles. A black thermal top with a mock turtleneck fit like a second skin.

"I didn't realize Mandy's ski suit would fit you." Jack's eyes had zeroed in on the hard nubs pressed against the top's thermal material.

"Who's Mandy?"

"My lady friend. The outfit is not hers!" Hugh stepped on Jack's foot as he carried a load of logs towards the woodbin beside the fireplace.

"Ouch. Watch where you're going."

"I was. Stop acting like a fourteen year old, or I'll stomp on the other foot."

*Hell's bells.* She hadn't thought about having to explain where the outfit came from. What was she saying, in for a penny, in for a pound? After last night, disclosing one more secret wasn't going to make much difference.

"Salina is my fairy godmother."

"Like the fairy godmother in Cinderella?" Jack sounded more than a little skeptical. "After the performance in the kitchen, I find that hard to believe."

"Salina doesn't much care for the image of cuddly, chubby, motherly, fairy godmothers. She's doing everything in her power to change the image. This is one of her creations."

"She's got my approval." Hugh said.

\* \* \* \*



Jack placed a safety helmet on Cinnamon's head and adjusted the strap to his satisfaction.

Straddling the black seat on the lemon yellow snowmobile, she muttered to herself, "I'm missing something. Where the heck is the hand hold?"

"Right here, Sweetheart. Put your arms around my waist." At the sound of Jack's voice, Cinnamon jumped. Her crotch collided with Jack's backside.

"You could have told me the helmets had two-way radios."

"Could have, but it wouldn't have been near as entertaining. Hold on."

Clearing the barn, Jack accelerated at warp speed. Hugging his backside, she had a death grip lock around Jack's waist. His silent laughter vibrating against her torso and the tingling shot of current running through her veins each place they touched made her a little light headed.

"Ever heard the expression, paybacks are a bitch?"

"I'm quaking in my boots, Sweetheart. As I recall, I said arms around my waist not hands lightly touching my sides."

Jack drove beside the snow-covered road then skirted a creek and zigzagged cross a small open field. Further up the creek, Jack slowed the snowmobile to a crawl as they used a narrow wooden bridge to cross over the frozen stream.

Delighted with the outing and the speed, Cinnamon squealed with laughter as they climbed a hill.

At the top of the rise, Jack cut the engine.

"Unless you want to sink to your knees in snow, don't get off the machine."

As they removed their helmets, an ice-cold breeze slapped them in the face. "Never thought the oxymoron 'cold as hell' was a fitting description of the weather. I was wrong. It feels colder than the weatherman's forecast." Cinnamon shivered as icy wind made her eyes water and turned her nose an unbecoming red.

"Wind chill's dropping the temperature."

"With all the animal tracks, it looks like we stopped at a major intersection." Pointing to one set of tracks, Cinnamon asked, "Would the dogs wander this far from the ranch?"

"Not without Hugh. Bobcat tracks. With the creek frozen, the animals head to the thermal pools and springs. There's probably a small spring inside the stand of trees."

"Are we still on Hugh's property?"

"At the edge. The trees are on an adjoining property."

Turning to get a better view, Cinnamon squirmed against Jack's backside. He had thought the layers of winter clothing would negate the sexual sensation of Cinnamon straddling his back.

Wrong.

With her clinging tighter with each bump the snowmobile hit, Jack's imagination was in overdrive. Which answered why he managed to hit every jarring bump in the road and why he was currently paying the

price for his stupidity.

"I think my nose is frozen and it's trying to snow." Reaching her arm out, Cinnamon caught a lone snowflake in her gloved hand.

"Time to head back."

Following the tree line, they headed to the opposite end of the property. Abruptly, Jack slowed the snowmobile. Cinnamon's pelvis crushed against Jack's hips. Barely giving the machine time to stop, Jack threw the gears into reverse. Fifteen feet in reverse, he stopped and pulled a small pair of binoculars out of a coat pocket.

"Do you have your cell phone with you?"

"No. What's wrong?"

"Probably nothing." Jack's aura closed in, his voice no longer held its carefree Texas drawl. Whatever had caught his attention wasn't good. Seeing the blood red line of anger he was trying to keep under control, she didn't challenge the comment.

The sleigh was loaded with hay and the horses were harnessed when they arrived back at the ranch. As they set out to feed the elk, a strong chilly wind swept the top layer of powder snow across the open pasture. To stay warm, Cinnamon slipped her arms under the thick layers of blankets spread across their laps.

"We saw a red fox, a couple of jackrabbits, three deer and a flock of wild turkeys. And some animals camouflaged in the trees that I couldn't make out." A knitted scarf covering the lower half of Cinnamon's face muffled her voice.

"Sounds like you had a good time. See anything else?"

"Roads haven't been plowed today. Until the driveway is plowed, the only way out is on the snowmobiles. There's only one set of tire tracks on the highway. They made a stop at your driveway, my guess is you have mail, but we didn't stop to check. You'll find the coyote den under the tree that was hit by lightning last year. The beaver dam is going to give you flooding problems come spring. A white Jeep was parked on the old logging road. And on top of Bear Ridge, someone using binoculars was laying low."

"Were we on the same trip? I didn't see any of that."

"If you hadn't spotted the buck in the trees, I wouldn't have seen him."

"Oh thanks a lot, give me a pat on the head to make me feel better. There weren't any tracks in the snow. And I looked down that road. I saw auras, but no Jeep."

"What do you mean you saw auras?" Hugh asked.

"Human, animal, plants, furniture, coffee mugs, everything is made up of energy. That energy creates an aura, but there are differences between the auras of objects and living breathing souls."

"That's what you meant when you said you saw camouflaged animals. Seeing the aura, you knew they were there, but couldn't see the animal."

"Exactly. Dry wood gives off a different aura than a living tree. Sheet metal gives off a different aura than

chrome or tin. I didn't see anything indicating metal."

"If it makes you feel better, the driver did a hell of a job making certain the truck was concealed under tree branches. It was just dumb luck that had me seeing light reflect off a corner of a license plate frame."

"Jack, it was trying to snow. No ray of light just happened to find a speck of metal hidden under tree branches. You sent Salina on an assignment. I never saw the aura, even when you were using the binoculars. I'm thinking my mother or father is behind your dumb luck."

"Humph. The truck had to have been there since yesterday. There wasn't much snow on the tree branches and yesterday's storm would have made short work of filling in the tire tracks."

"When are we going to check out Bear Ridge?"

"Me, not you, Sweetheart. You are going to stay safely tucked in the house. When Salina returns, the two of you can design a new wardrobe for Suzy's Barbie dolls."

"That is so not funny."

Finding Cinnamon's hand under the layer of blankets, he gave it a squeeze. When she didn't pull away, he left his hand over hers. The tingling sensation running up his arm was stronger. If he were experiencing the first indication of a heart attack he'd worry about it later. For now he was happy to bask in the warmth of having Cinnamon beside him.

\* \* \* \*

Visitors, the kind that didn't need to breathe, were waiting for them in the log cabin's living room.

Salina looked stunning and sexy in a simple strapless empire waist black gown.

Not to be outdone, Miss Jayne was wearing a red Victorian ball gown. The full skirt had a tiered bustle and full train. The form-fitting bodice was cut low. The gown's puffed sleeves were designed to bare the shoulders.

Fluttering a fan at a height to ensure Hugh's attention, Miss Jayne curtsied. "Sir, I am sorry to barge in uninvited, but Salina said we would be welcome."

"Madam, you are welcome in my home anytime."

When Hugh bowed, Salina rolled her eyes.

Cinnamon, biting her bottom lip, managed not to laugh.

Whatever Jack was thinking was hidden behind his poker face.

Addressing Jack, Miss Jayne said, "You were correct sir, Thornton arrived in town to meet a gentleman, but not the same gentleman he was with last week."

Jack knew Evan hadn't left Boise, but his back stiffened a fraction of an inch more. To get a break in this case would be a godsend, to get the break through a ghost, was beyond anything anyone would believe.

"In fact, Thornton met with two gentlemen. A Mr. Grover Feldman arrived in town late yesterday. He booked a room at a local bed and breakfast. An exceptionally charismatic man, he says all the right things to charm the women, but his aura shows a heart as cold as the arctic. I must admit, at first, it was his handsome face that had me following him like a lovesick puppy."

"Mr. Feldman wears one of those odd-looking contraptions that hangs on one's ear. They must not work very well; when using them, people talk loud enough to wake the dead. When I heard him say 'Jack Cutter,' I decided to haunt his every step. I must say I learned some interesting things. I was most amused by the skimpy little strap that covered nothing more than his personals. Do all men wear..."

"Jayne. They don't give a damn about his jockstrap. My God, I can't believe you talk and act like a virgin. Finish the story. When we leave here, I'll take you to a gym where you can swoon over pumped up muscles, and decide if you prefer men in boxers or briefs. And if you stop fluttering your eyes every two seconds, I'll fix it so you can cop a feel."

Jack forced himself not to cover his crotch when Miss Jayne's eyes drifted below his belt.

Fluttering her fan, Miss Jayne raised her eyes to meet Jack's. "The first time Mr. Feldman mentioned your name, he was clearly not happy. He kept saying he had killed you and that the agency was passing a double off as you. Whatever does that mean?"

"Someone who resembles someone else," Cinnamon said when the men didn't speak up.

"Oh, a twin. Why didn't he say so? He ordered the person to send someone to keep an eye on Nine Springs Ranch. He wanted a head count, and told the gentleman to do whatever was necessary to make sure no one left the ranch. He also made it clear that he wanted the people alive until he personally had time to deal with them. Do I assume correctly that is here?"

"Yes. Did he call the person he was talking to by name?" Used to asking questions and getting direct answers, Hugh was having a hard time letting Miss Jayne tell the story in her own sweet rambling time.

"No, sir. He called him many names, but none would have been written in a family bible." Giggling like a schoolgirl she peeked at Hugh through her long ash smudged lashes.

With the act Miss Jayne was putting on, it was hard to remember she had owned a brothel. Cinnamon wasn't sure which was worse, Salina's sexy 'here I am' flirting, or Miss Jayne with her sweet and innocent coyness.

"Last night, Mr. Feldman made several calls. He was most agitated to learn that you were indeed alive."

"Names. Did he call anyone by name?" His voice smoldering with impatience, Hugh rubbed the back of his neck.

"Only once. Among other things, he called a man named Floyd an idiot. I was able to see the numbers he pressed on the ... I believe you call it a cell phone."

"Are you saying you remember the numbers?" Jack was afraid to be hopeful.

"Do not think that because of my tender age and my beauty that I am not educated. I have a head for remembering numbers. As a businesswoman, that skill was handy. If you have paper and pen, I will gladly repeat the numbers."

"Miss Jayne, I could kiss you for this information," Hugh said when the four phone numbers were written down.

"Why sir, I'm flattered. I always did have a weak spot for men with handlebar mustaches; their tickle is so enjoyable." Starting to flutter her eyelashes, she saw Salina smirk. Changing tactics, she fluttered her fan against her bosom.

"Today, when Salina arrived, Mr. Feldman was sitting at a table in the café."

"Thank God, I didn't think she'd ever get to this point. I'll cut to the chase. If you remember, I said I couldn't divulge what you hadn't learned or figured out a way to learn. Jack, you did very nicely. Calling me and asking Jayne for her help showed you're able to think outside the box."

"I should do a drum roll, but what the heck, you've waited long enough, Sidney Lutz arrived at the meeting with Thornton. He is the owner of Joker's Wild Casino in Atlantic City. Last year, Sidney tried to convince my son, Walker, to purchase Joker's Wild. His selling point was the incentive to expand Dreamland to Atlantic City. I will let Walker fill you in on the shady details. Sidney also has a history with Helen, Gus's former wife. Cinnamon knows all the details about that sleazy mess."

"Because it won't take much digging to find out this bit of information, I can tell you Sidney and Thornton are first cousins. Grover is another cousin, shirttail, but close enough that Sidney knew when Grover joined the FBI."

"They didn't talk long, but what was said was major. Grover found the engraver who made the counterfeiting plate. After the man figured out a way to change the serial numbers without making a whole new plate, Grover got rid of him."

"The plate you saw was one of a set the engraver stashed for life insurance. The other two plates have not been found. Sidney was very unhappy at Grover for killing the man."

"The plan right now is to continue with the trade, day after tomorrow. I'm not speaking out of turn when I say it's a trap. What I can't tell you is what's planned."

\* \* \* \*

"Now what?" Cinnamon ladled spaghetti sauce into a serving bowl.

In the living room, Jack was on the phone.

"We eat. That apple crisp pie on the counter has been calling my name all afternoon."

"You could have had a slice."

"After pigging out on four cobblers at lunch, I was determined to show some restraint," Hugh said as he finished setting the table.

"Is there any reason for you to leave the house?" Jack looked at Hugh as he walked into the kitchen.

"Dogs will need a run before bedding down. I'll take them out front and have them stick close to the house."

"We're locked down." Disconnecting, Jack stuck the cell phone in his pocket and took a seat at the table.

"Locked down; sounds like we're prisoners. What's happening? And don't you dare say I don't need to know."

"We don't want to tip our hand to Grover."

"Which means the guy with the binoculars doesn't get taken down. But you're afraid he might decide to get a closer look?" Cinnamon said as she passed the meat sauce to Jack.

"Right. They needed to know we wouldn't be wandering around outside tonight."

"What about tomorrow?"

"It's supposed to snow again tonight. Don't expect the roads will be plowed again tomorrow. Unless I get a phone call, we'll do what we did today; stick to the property and act like we don't have a care in the world."

"Is Salina really your fairy godmother?" Hugh asked.

"Okay, I guess we're changing the subject. Yes, she is. At first Salina was a pain in the butt, but for the most part we've worked out a doable arrangement."

"Meaning?" Jack asked.

"Meaning, we had several heated discussions over sexy versus slutty, and sexy with class versus in your face, no way in hell. Since she stopped trying to dress me in outfits where the ratio of skin showing was larger than the ratio of skin covered, the arguments have dwindled."

"Is being a fairy godmother something Salina decided to do on a whim?" Hugh asked.

"Heavens no. For reasons that don't matter, Salina lost her powers. To get her powers back, Warren told her she would have to earn them."

"Who is Warren?"

"Supervisor, guardian angel, teacher, camp leader, a combination of all is probably the best description. According to my father, Warren makes sure they don't break the rules."

"Do you know what the rules are?" Hugh asked as he helped himself to a second slice of garlic bread.

"Only one for certain. No living soul can receive information that might change that person's future decisions or lessons. Although, when you're dealing with my parents and Salina, that rule is as shaky as Jell-O."

"Salina casts spells. As a fairy godmother, she grants wishes. Sounds like an easy job," Hugh said.

Cinnamon gave a half chuckle. "The last few months would have been a whole lot easier if Salina was the fairytale version of a fairy godmother. Our relationship is based on arguments, negotiations, and compromise. Somehow we've managed not to kill each other and we've both learned a few things."

"What about the rest of the females in your family?" Curiosity and a sense of forbearing spiked the edges of Jack's aura.

"As you know, Gin is a medium.

"Rose is physic intuitive. Meaning she can calculate the odds on everything. She is never wrong, and I do mean never. Jack, you saw her work when she figured out how the counterfeit ring was working at Dreamland."

"What about the stock market?"

"If you're really asking if she uses her talent to work magic with your portfolio the answer is, yes."

"Would have saved me a ton of aggravation if I'd known that before questioning her on the stocks she sold last month," Jack grumbled.

"Juanita, Salina's sister and Walker's aunt, is a psychic or seer; past, present and future. Going back to that 'can't tell you rule,' Juanita and my mom have ganged together to keep some things secret. Goes without saying how frustrating that can be.

"As you already know, my mother hears people's thoughts and still does."

"Hears or reads?" Jack asked.

"Hears. It's a constant chatter that can drive you crazy."

"Those sound like words of experience," Hugh prodded.

"They are. After months of begging, for our fifteenth birthday present, Mom allowed Aunt Pesty to cast a spell. For two days we experienced the *gift* mom was given. Except when asleep, people never shut down their thoughts. At first it was fun, because we were only around family and a close friend. But then we went to school and learned there's a negative side to knowing what a person really thinks and what is happening with them personally."

"How many boys did you punch in the nose?" Jack asked.

"Not me. Rose, and she aimed lower. I dumped a tray of food on a couple of girls and Gin accidentally sent three ghosts after a bully. Looking back I can say it was a fun day. What none of us realized was how irritating constant chatter can be. Turn on a dozen televisions, set each one on a different channel and turn the volume to low. That will give you a hint of what it is like."

"There are times it sure as hell would come in handy, but no thanks. Tell us about your aunt," Hugh said.

"Aunt Pesty earned her nickname by meddling and causing havoc. Like Salina and our three hundred year old Grandmamma, Aunt Pesty was given the *gift* of spell casting. The down side is her spells have a way of causing problems."

"How big of problems?" Jack asked.

"One night, during a bedtime story, my dad stepped into our bedroom at the same time Aunt Pesty cast a spell to do a mini production of *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*. He became Dopey. When Aunt Pesty reversed the spell, Dad was bald. His hair never grew back.

"During our sixth birthday party, the paper donkey in 'pin the tail on the donkey' became a real donkey. When we were fourteen, we got stuck in traffic on the way to a football game. Aunt Pesty cast a spell to turn time back ten minutes. When we got to the football field, instead of the high school football team, the field was full of gladiators. Another spell had tulips blooming on rosebushes and roses on tulip stems. That happened during my mother's garden club meeting."

"I'm having a hard time picturing the sweet woman I've talked to as a living, breathing, time bomb."

"Sweet, loving and dependable she is. Without Aunt Pesty, after my folks died, my sisters and I would have been lost. But you'll become a believer if you get hit with the aftermath of one of her errant spells."

Jack and Hugh were lost in thought. Their auras blazing with curiosity flowed in an ever-changing energy pattern. She knew they were trying to piece together how or if one of Pesty's spells brought the three of them together.

Finishing her meal, Cinnamon thought about Salina, and the favor she had asked of Aunt Pesty. What part of that favor had gone wrong? Salina said the spell had gone completely haywire, but in what

direction and what price were each of them paying for that error.

She was good at crossword puzzles, but there were clues missing. Remembering something Salina said, she thought of a way to figure some of them out.

\* \* \* \*

With plates of warm apple crisp topped with vanilla ice cream and mugs of hot coffee and tea on the coffee table, they settled around the blazing fireplace.

"Who made the quilts hanging on the walls and the one on my bed?" Cinnamon asked.

"My sister, Beth. She claims that just because I live alone, the house doesn't have to look like a bachelor pad. Every summer, while her husband's fishing in Alaska, she comes to visit me, and our sister Maggie. By the time she leaves, the whole house has been rearranged."

"You and Uncle Gus have that in common, too. You love every minute of the fussing, but act like it's an annoyance."

"Humph."

"Salina said we each had information that would dovetail together. This might be overkill, but I think we need to make up a crime board."

"What do you know about crime boards?" Jack's eyes turned steel gray.

"Relax, I don't have firsthand knowledge. And don't deny that was what had you turning three shades of green. Crime boards are mentioned regularly in mystery novels. Salina admitted she allowed us to keep some secrets. I keep running through everything and keep coming up with interesting twists of fate, but no answers. Since there's not much difference in the definition of evidence and knowledge, I was thinking it might help to write down what we know."

"It beats sitting here doing nothing. I don't have a chalkboard but..."

Beside Hugh's chair a large green chalkboard, on rollers, materialized.

"I'll be damned." Hugh turned on a table lamp and moved the chalkboard so all three of them could see the board. Hugh wrote their names across the top. Down the left side he wrote Grover, Evan, Thornton, Uncle Gus, Sidney. When he paused Cinnamon said, "Add Helen Owens, Salina, Gus Owens, Walker, Rosemary, Ginger, Cole and Aunt Pesty."

Hugh looked at Jack. "Terry and Betty Jo, and you might as well add Miss Jayne."

"Cinn, Salina mentioned you know something about a connection between Helen and Gus Owens and Sidney."

"Helen and Sidney are involved in a lifelong affair. Gus knew about the affair, but a few months ago he learned that the pregnancy Helen used to lure him into marriage was Sidney's doing not his."

"How do you know they are still involved?" Hugh asked.

"Helen bragged about their relationship when we hypnotized her."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. "Please tell me this wasn't a stunt like the one you pulled in the casino to get Walker's attention?"



"Not exactly; it was more thought out and planned. If you think about it, you know some of the story.

"Helen lived in Palm Springs; Gus lived at the casino. The two barely tolerated each other, but Helen refused to agree to a divorce. When Salina became pregnant, she wanted marriage. Gus was working on arranging a divorce, but it wasn't going well and he didn't tell Salina the problems Helen was causing. Salina got impatient, went to Palm Springs to confront Helen, lost her temper and cast a spell to turn Helen into an old hag. Helen used that episode to blackmail Gus into not getting a divorce.

"Last year, she used a tape showing her aging into an old hag, to blackmail Walker into giving her ownership of Dreamland.

"Using a lie to get an appointment with Helen, Gin hypnotized her. Condensing that whole production to the bottom line, Walker replaced Helen's copies of the tape with a different one."

"If I had known that when the story broke on national news, I would have..."

"Done nothing. Jack, we had no choice. If Salina's abilities were exposed, Walker and Juanita's lives would have become a living hell. How long do you think it would have taken a reporter to dig up the fact that my sisters and I are related to Salina? Don't bother checking it out; Cole did the research. Thanks to the Internet, it only took him three weeks of searching genealogy sites to find the family connection. Three weeks. What do you think our lives would be worth today if our powers became public knowledge?" By the time Cinnamon finished, she was pacing in front of the fireplace.

"Jack, did you talk to Walker about the offer Sidney made on the sale of Joker's Wild?" Ignoring the tension sparking the air, Hugh served himself a second helping of pie.

Jack didn't take his eyes off Cinn. "He called me back just before dinner. On the surface, Joker's Wild looked like a good solid investment. When Rose sat in on a couple of meetings with Sidney, she noticed a couple of nervous habits. Figuring the odds, she calculated that every time he opened his mouth, he was lying. Walker hired an outside firm to check the books and found they'd been altered. Instead of confronting Sidney, Walker told him he wasn't interested in buying at this time."

Hugh studied the names on the chalkboard as he finished his pie. "Altered books aren't uncommon when someone is selling a business. But why target Walker? If, like you say, Helen and Sidney are still involved, the blackmail scheme could have gained control of Dreamland and Sidney would have still owned Joker's Wild."

"Maybe Sidney was in financial trouble and wanted to tap Dreamland before Helen took over."

"That's certainly possible. Cinn, can Rosemary figure the odds on something without being in the room with the person or touching an object?"

"She doesn't use psychometry. All you have to do is ask her a question."

Hugh handed Cinnamon a portable phone. "Please call her; after the call connects, hit the speaker button."

"Hi Walker. I've got you on a speakerphone. Hugh wants to ask Rosemary a question."

"I'm here, what's the question?" Rosemary said.

"Jack just told us about the falsified financial records for Joker's Wild. What are the odds that Sidney was using the casino to disperse the income from the counterfeiting?"

"Clever thinking. The odds are perfect; it's one hundred percent accurate."

"We know Sidney came to Idaho to meet with Thornton and a man named Grover. Is Sidney the brains behind the counterfeiting ring?"

"No, absolutely not."

"Shit, why couldn't it have been that easy?" Jack muttered.

"We know Thornton is a link to the counterfeiting, but not the brains. We know Grover found the engraver who made the counterfeit plates. But I don't think Grover is the brains," Hugh said.

"You're right on that."

Jack fidgeted. Green-eyes' comments kept popping into his head. "Rose, is Evan related to Thornton or Sidney?"

"Yes." There was a pause on the line. "I redid the question to be more specific. First I separated it to Evan and each man, still got the positive. Then I broke it down to relationship. Would love to be able to see your faces right now; Evan is Sidney's son."

"Before you waste time searching, Sidney and his wife had one son and two daughters. Sidney Jr. is mid fifties, married, two kids. He has a law degree, and for what it's worth, he's a pompous ass. Unless you call watching Sidney's back a job, he has never been employed." Walker's smooth southern drawl carried clearly over the line.

"I think I know the answer, but I'd be a fool not to ask. Are Sidney Jr. or Evan the king pins?" Hugh asked.

"No." Rose paused. "I don't get that Sidney Jr. is directly involved in anything. Yes, he knows what is going on. No, he doesn't know any details."

"You can be slapped on the hand for not telling, but chances are you won't do jail time. Smart move on Sidney's part," Hugh mused.

"I've been going through questions just to see what happens. It might mean nothing, but I think it's odd that Sidney and Evan get perfect scores on being involved with the leader. Thornton's odds are real low, but within the yes range. Grover gets high yes scores, but not perfect."

"Rose I've got one question, is the drug smuggling and counterfeit ring controlled by the same person?"

"No."

"Is Grover the brains behind the drug smuggling?"

"You've picked the right target, Jack. The answer is positively yes."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 16

Punching his pillow, Jack flopped on his back. He'd replayed everything Rosemary told them a dozen times. He'd tried a dozen different ways to cram the pieces together. Nothing worked.

Falling into a deep sleep, he was no closer to finding answers than when he crawled into bed.

*The ocean heaved and rolled.*

*Breakers crashing around the rowboat sent towering sprays of icy water in the air.*

Without paddles or a motor, Jack was trapped, dependent on the unseen power controlling the boat to get him to shore safely.

A rising wave caught the underbelly of the tiny rowboat. Propelling the boat forward, the seawater continued to rise. Like a seasoned surfer, the boat slid under the white-capped curl and rode the pipeline.

The wave curling around him sounded like thunder, but he could still hear his heart beating wildly against his chest. Jack was dreaming; at some level, he knew that, but it didn't stop the claustrophobic fear of being out of control.

Upon reaching the shore, Jack hopped out. His boots splashed through the foaming surf. Walking to a slight rise, he watched the purple black sand shift and bubble with each onslaught of angry surf and sea foam.

Forcing himself to walk away from the mesmerizing site, Jack headed to the forest.

After the hair-raising ride, he was surprised to see the gold strewn path and the trees had not changed. Reaching the glen, he walked the parameter of the small clearing. He found no paths; not even the one he had taken.

By the time he sensed Green-eye's presence his patience had run thin.

She was just inside the meadow when she stopped.

"You bring me here then keep me waiting, why?"

"You could have left; no one forces you to stay."

"In case you haven't noticed, there is no path leading out."

"Has that stopped you from leaving in the past? If you had wanted to leave all you had to do was process the thought and it would have happened."

The logic of her answer didn't set well; in frustration, he snapped, "What is the meaning behind these trips?"

"What do you think they are?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't ask. There is more to the trips than the information and riddles you share."

"Has it taken you this long to figure that out?"

"No, it didn't seem important before."

"What has changed?"

"I don't know. I don't know your name. I've never seen your face. But I share more of my thoughts with you than any person I know."

"What does that tell you?"

"Not a damn thing."

"Are you lying to me or yourself?"

Jack growled. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I see I hit a raw nerve?" Hearing the laughter in her voice, he refused to be baited.

"The sea was angry. It's never been like that before. Why the change?"

"Because your life is changing. Some changes are pleasant, others are not. Right now, you believe your life to be turbulent; like the sea."

"Because of the nature of my work, my life has never been calm."

"I wasn't referring to work. Since you are unwilling to speak the truth, or more accurately accept the truth, I will tell you why you were summoned. There has been a breach in your cover."

"I realized that a minute before Grover shot me."

"This goes deeper, much deeper."

"I'm only working on the counterfeiting ring and the drugs coming into the country through Pete's network. With them being related, how can it go deeper?"

"The man you call Grover, his hate ran deep. Still does. He had access to a lot of information; information that could be used against you and people you call friends and family."

"Shit. Has he sold the information?"

"For a handsome price, he sold his soul. The information went for pennies."

"Can you give me names?"

"If I could, I would. He is a clever man. He uses all the tools available. What he can't find he buys."

"Are you saying he hacked into the agency's computer?"

"He did not have to use illegal means."

Jack frowned. "Who is he paying for a password?"

Her eyes twinkled.

*"You're clever. You'll figure it out."*

\* \* \* \*

A mug of steaming Lipton tea sat on the marble countertop. Standing at the kitchen sink, Cinnamon had a perfect view of the backyard.

During the night, another foot of snow had fallen. Gray clouds hanging low in the sky continued to spit out random snowflakes.

Hugh had been right when he'd predicted the weather would have the elk moving closer to their meals. One of three covered cement pads, empty of the bales of hay it had once held, now housed a good portion of the elk herd. The rest of the elk made themselves at home in various parts of the yard.

Seeing the men head towards the house, Cinnamon turned to the stove to finish breakfast.

They were quiet when they entered the room and didn't have much to say as they settled at the table.

"You spent half the night up. What did you figure out?"

"How do you know that? And don't say our auras told you," Jack mumbled.

"Simpler than that. There was half a pan of apple crisp when I went to bed. The pan is now in the dishwasher. If you ate the pie for breakfast you wouldn't be digging into the French toast and bacon like you were starving."

"Who eats pie for breakfast?"

"Me."

"Is this another of your sugar balances protein theories?"

"What's healthier, the apples in the pie, or a cake donut with icing?"

"You make a good argument." Jack gave an almost smile as one corner of his mouth curled upward.

"Did your brainstorming session come up with any answers?"

"Nope. So you'll stop the twenty question routine, we made some phone calls. Covered a few bases that needed covering."

The tone of his voice, the delivery of the statement, Cinnamon didn't know what, but something put her senses on full alert.

"Where are my sisters and Aunt Pesty?"

"Your sisters, Pesty, her husband Martin, Cole's mother, Rocky and the baby will be with Juanita and Joe at the ranch. Pesty said to tell you not to worry, if someone shows up at the ranch she'll turn them into a horny toad."

"Hell's bells, please tell me you're joking."

"I'm not."

"I need to call them."

When she started to stand Jack grabbed her wrist.

"Relax. I warned Rosemary. She and Gin will keep an eye on her. And Walker was sending someone to help Joe and Martin keep an eye on the property."

"What about Walker and Cole?"

"Cole headed to the family ranch to help his dad and brother. Walker is staying at the casino. Uncle Gus is keeping an eye on everything in Kansas."

"What did you learn that had you making the calls?"

"Nothing concrete. And don't claim my aura says differently. Grover knows how the agency works. He personally knows a lot of the agents. Sidney met Rose and knows she married Walker. Rose and Gin were on national television when Helen pulled her blackmail stunt. Because of Helen and Sidney's relationship, if Grover doesn't already know all the family members and close friends, he can easily get the information." Jack words were matter of fact.

"Does Evan or Grover know we're here?"

"Grover knows Hugh. No one had to tell him the ranch was my hideaway. We weren't being watched until yesterday. When we were out yesterday, the snowmobile helmet covered your red hair. The conclusion was that you are Hugh's lady friend."

"You say that like you're positive. The man on Bear Ridge?"

"Is cooperating." Jack's expression stopped Cinnamon from asking any more. "Are Molly and her granddaughter safe?"

"They left for Florida a week ago. This morning they started a seven day cruise to the Caribbean," Hugh said.

"What do we do now?"

"Sit tight and go about our business. Do you know how to make a lemon meringue pie from scratch?" Hugh looked hopeful.

Cinnamon laughed.

"With a little help from one of your cook books, I can manage that."

\* \* \* \*

"Where are you?" Cinnamon asked as soon as Ginger answered the phone.

"At the ranch with Juanita and Joe."

"Already?"

"Jack called at four. We were on the road within an hour. Aunt Pesty didn't even complain about traveling in Martin's Mercedes instead of the Dreamcycle." The orange and white Volkswagen bus, a wedding gift from the triplets was Pesty's favorite vehicle for trips longer than half an hour.

"Rose, Rocky and the baby should be arriving within the hour. Virginia was here when we arrived and Cole's plane landed in Houston a little while ago. How are you doing?"

"Fine."

"How's the seduction of Jack coming along?"

"Salina is..."

"Stop. Mom told us. She's worried about you, Cinn."

"I know, but I want to have a normal life. Is that too much to ask?"

"No, it's not. Rose and I don't blame you for feeling that way. Mom doesn't either. Just be sure it's what you want."

"That's the problem. Jack remembers being shot in the stomach with a rifle. I don't remember anything, but from what you've told me I was like that morning, I had to have helped close his wounds. Gin, if I didn't have my power, Jack would be dead. He could get shot again. If I couldn't help, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"That's a tough one. I don't know what to say. What's going on with your destiny dreams?"

"Not much. My soul mate has a problem with commitment."

"Commitment or marriage?"

"Who knows, could be both. He makes comments about me being too good for him. Seems paranoid about keeping me safe, but he won't tell me what is putting me in danger. Frankly, none of it makes sense."

"Do you think he might realize you aren't fully committed to the relationship?"

"Don't know how. I have no problem responding to him on a sexual level and I've certainly tried to get him to talk to me. His attitude is annoying as hell. At the same time, when I'm flirting with Jack I feel like I'm cheating on a husband."

"It doesn't sound like it could get any more complicated. Have you done any astral travel?"

"Not since Jack was shot. I'm not complaining, but it's one more thing to add to the unusual pile."

"I'm not going to tell you what to do, but maybe you should hold off on sleeping with Jack. Not because I think it's wrong, but what if the universe is shifting, again?"

"Already thought of that. I don't think we've begun to realize the changes or damage Aunt Pesty's spells are inflicting."

"That's a scary thought. Rosemary just arrived."

"And the timer just went off; I need to take cookies out of the oven."

"Tell everyone hi. Rub your belly and tell George and Gracie I love them."

She was in love with Jack; it had been building since the first time they met. The kiss at the hotel cemented the contract. Being with him the last two days had shown her how it could be. The zaps of electricity when they touched, the easy banter, the simple sharing of the little things that happened during the day, were nice window dressings to the relationship.

She wasn't naïve or blind, Jack was attracted to her. Love was a different matter. She knew he cared and maybe in time that could be built on.

The question came back to her, was she willing to give up her *gift* with no guarantee of marriage, family or happy ever after?

She hadn't been pulled through a vortex and dumped into a nightmare for almost two months. She didn't miss the drama, or the after effects. Nor did she feel guilty about not wanting to be a broom flying, astral

traveling, healing witch.

Then there was the other side of her *gift*. The men and woman who had been helped in the last two weeks of stage shows, they would never know what she had done. But she did and it mattered, a lot. The same was true for the visits she made to children's wards. There, she had to be careful not to do too much, but little miracles made big differences; to her, it mattered.

She didn't want to give that part of her *gift* up, which meant she was right where she started: in limbo.

Jack was flesh and blood.

Eros was a dream, a future she hadn't yet met.

She was in love with Jack, a man who put his life on the line daily. Giving her love to Jack meant giving up her *gift*. Not being able to use her gift of healing to help the man she loved was not an option she could choose.

Instead, thanks to a three hundred year old spell, she would marry her soul mate. The destiny dreams proved they were sexually compatible, but they were working from a different set of agendas. She wanted a partner; he wanted to fly solo. She trusted him; he had trust issues. She wanted a family; he was allergic to marriage. But no matter what type of relationship they worked out, she wouldn't lose her ability to use her *gift*.

\* \* \* \*

"Peanut butter cookies are my favorite!" Jack was munching on his third cookie as he set the table for lunch.

"Really? I never would have guessed."

Watching the two of them, Hugh smiled. "A man could get real spoiled with you around the house. That lemon meringue pie looks like a slice of heaven."

"The heavenly contributions come from Salina. After walking through her a couple of times, I told her to leave or help. The applesauce cookies and the lemon bars are her contribution."

"Did she have new information?" Jack asked.

"Salina related one story. There's more, but she wasn't sharing."

"It seems that Miss Jayne had already figured out how to collect her energy. Meaning she can move objects, pick up small items, and at times, her touch can be felt. Salina kept her promise to take her to a gym. After one hundred and thirty years of abstinence, naked men were too much of a temptation. She copped a feel on more than one man in the shower stall and locker room." Cinnamon filled bowls with tomato soup as she shared Salina's story.

"I would have paid admission to see that," Hugh said between chuckles.

"It gets better. There was a brawl. Salina said Miss Jayne's fan was fluttering faster than hummingbird wings. She was miffed when the police broke up the fight. When Salina convinced her to leave the gym, Miss Jayne followed some couples into a nightclub."

Cinnamon took a bite of her grilled cheese sandwich.

"What's it going to take to find out what else happened?" Hugh asked.



"You're both smart, you'll figure it out."

With perfect timing, a pink haze appeared. Salina dressed in a black silk form fitting wrap dress stepped out of the haze. Sitting in a kitchen chair, she crossed her slender legs. As the dress' skirt slid apart, a good portion of her thigh was exposed.

"You look as lovely as ever, Salina. I understand we have you to thank for the delicious applesauce cookies and lemon bars." Hugh reached for a cookie as he spoke.

Not one to brush off a compliment, Salina flashed a hundred watt smile.

"Sounds like you had an interesting trip into town with Miss Jayne," Jack prompted as he reached for a lemon bar.

"The first stop was strictly Laurel and Hardy slap-stick. Warren, Gus, and Cinn's father are still laughing."

"What did Miss Jayne do once she was inside the nightclub?" Jack asked.

"We cruised the room. She checked out the men, I checked out what the woman were wearing. The band was mediocre, but they had mastered loud. We were just about to leave when in walks Evan. Jayne wanted me to notify you, but he wasn't doing anything illegal."

Jack's eyes narrowed, he'd gotten no call saying Evan had gone downtown.

"Did he meet someone there?"

"No. He flashed a picture of Cinn at the men bracing up the bar. It looked like a copy of a newspaper clipping. When he didn't get any bites, he sat at the bar, nursed a beer and scanned the crowd. The man knows how to pick his marks. The woman he approached looked like she'd never been inside a bar, much less one known as a meat market. She never saw him doctor her beer."

"Why didn't you contact us then?" Cinnamon was outraged.

"No need. She only got two sips before I managed to knock the glass over. The poor woman was mortified, kept apologizing. Evan kept his cool, kept telling her not to worry. When he went to the bathroom to dry off I kind of screwed with him."

"Kind of?" Jack couldn't believe she said that with a straight face.

Salina chuckled. "I tapped the back of his knees. On his way down to the doggy position he hit his forehead on the sink. While he was trying to figure out what happened Jayne copped a feel and grabbed the vial that was in his pants pocket. Let me tell you, that got his attention. I thought he was going to pee his pants. He all but ran out of the bathroom.

"When he got back to the table, he guzzled his beer. He ordered a second round before realizing the bottle wasn't in his pocket. Caitlin was monitoring his thoughts. She said he was having a hard time keeping his, 'aren't I a nice guy' composure."

"What did he do?"

"Went back to search the bathroom. When he couldn't find the vial, he figured it rolled down the drain in the middle of the floor. Back at the table, he drank his beer and was making excuses to leave when he started slurring words."

"Hell's bells, fire and damnation. How did you know how much to give him?" Cinnamon exclaimed.

"The vial was a fourth empty. Since he was twice the size of the poor woman, I gave him double the amount."

"What would you have done if that amount killed him? And why didn't you just call the police?"

"Warren assured me it wasn't his time to die. The jerk made it to his car before passing out. As for calling the police, I had a plan. It's called poetic justice, Sweetie." She paused, looked around the table and smiled.

"The pause is dramatic. We hear the drum roll, now spit out the rest of the story." Cinnamon, finished with her soup and sandwich reached for a lemon bar.

"Jayne put the vial back in his pocket. I made sure the car doors were unlocked and the headlights were on. Then we went back into the club. I stirred a little magic and the woman called the police to tell them she'd been drugged."

"I could kiss you," Hugh said.

"That's sweet, but Gus has a rule, look don't touch."

"Can you manipulate anyone's thoughts?" Jack was frowning. The thought scared the hell out of him.

"No more than Cinnamon. Like behavior modification hypnosis, I planted a suggestion. It was far stronger than what Cinn does on stage and a couple of beers had relaxed the woman's resistance. In her mind and subconscious, she did exactly what she told the officers.

Jack nodded. Punching a number on his cell phone, he didn't bother with niceties.

"Where the hell are you? Evan isn't inside. He was arrested last night outside a nightclub. See if you can find out what's going on."

Hanging up he glanced at Hugh. The energy flowing between them was strong, their auras merged.

"Evan slipped out of his place without being seen."

The table was cleared when Jack's cell phone rang.

"Humph ... Damn ... Nine hours before he regained consciousness ... My sentiments exactly ... How long can they keep him? ... First break we've had ... Yeah, keep me posted."

"Salina, add me to your list of admirers. The woman tested positive for GHB, as did Evan and the vial in his pocket. The only fingerprints on the bottle are Evan's. Because GHB is a clear liquid and leaves only a slight salty taste, it's a popular date rape drug.

"The woman might have been naive but her brother-in-law's a lawyer. She's already pressed charges. She told the officers that a funny feeling made her purposely drop the first glass of beer. When Evan wasn't looking, she switched her second glass with his."

"I'm impressed. Salina, the next shoe-shopping trip you get to do carte blanche with my credit card. Is Evan in the hospital?" Cinnamon said.

Jack smiled, a genuine teeth showing smile. "Nope. They threw him in the tank with the drunks. Guess he was spitting mad when he came around."

"If his car was still at his place, where did he get the car he was in?" Salina asked.

"Stolen from a convenience store parking lot. The other good news is because he's not a resident, the judge denied bail. For now, he's out of the picture and he has no one but himself to blame for being behind bars."

"Now what?" Cinnamon asked after Salina had left.

"The meeting is scheduled for tomorrow; until then we sit tight." Jack said.

"Cinn, did you pack a swimming suit?" Hugh asked.

"No. But Salina will have one laying on my bed by the time I walk up the stairs. Why?"

"Jack, take Cinn up to the hot springs?"

Effectively boxed into a corner, Jack knew Hugh well enough to know he was gloating over his victory.

"Wear your swimsuit under your snowsuit," Jack said as Cinnamon left to change.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 17

Walking into the mudroom, Cinnamon gasped. Backing up, she ran into Jack's solid form. Her mind wasn't on the electrical current shooting up her spine. "There's a skunk eating the dog's food."

"Petunia. She must have run out of food options."

"Is she another one of Hugh's feeding projects?"

"Not voluntarily. Must be two years since she found the doggie door. At the time, she wasn't more than a kit. In the wintertime, she chows down on dog food and makes herself at home in the bathroom off the mudroom. She sleeps during the day and wanders outside at night. Come spring, she disappears."

Inside the barn, Jack headed to a stall. "Petunia's in the house."

Hugh, filing the hooves on the red roan Clydesdale in the stall, grunted.

"She's huge, and pregnant." Cinnamon ran her hand over the red roan's protruding belly.

"Betsy's seventeen hands. She's due the end of the month."

Rubbing the white blaze on Betsy's face, Cinnamon spoke softly. "Bet you're like my sister and can't wait for this part to be over. Gin is getting really grouchy. If you could talk would you be whining about your fat belly? Just think, in a few days those two little boys are going to be racing around the stall and pulling on your tits. Aren't you lucky?"

"Foal. Colt," Hugh said automatically.

"You sound like Cole and his brother. Babies. Boys. In my book, they are the same thing."

"Horses have one foal at a time."

"Not this time." Cinnamon had Hugh's full attention.

"You're sure?"

"Positive. There are two auras. Doesn't matter if you're human or animal, male and female energy is different. Betsy is having two boys." Running her hands over Betsy's side, she said, "Here is the rear, the back, leg, another leg and the head." Running her hands over the other side, she said, "They are in almost identical positions. From what I see in the grid, they are close to the same size. And bad pun that it is, they are as healthy as horses."

"Damn! You two go for your swim. I need to make some calls."

Jack headed the snowmobile in the same direction they had taken the day before. Sweeping past the road, they followed the creek to a rise. Jack slowed as they drove alongside a grove of Douglas firs. Something was bothering him. She didn't need to see his aura; she could feel it in his tense muscles.

There were at least two men keeping an eye on the property. Cinnamon hadn't seen them, but she had heard Hugh and Jack talking to them. Now Jack was checking things out with his own eyes, making himself comfortable with the snow covered landscape.

Reaching the edge of the firs, Jack stopped the snowmobile in front of a narrow trail leading into the trees.

Following the elk trail, they weaved through the thick stand of trees. They heard water splashing long before Cinnamon saw water jetting out of a natural rock formation. The water fell ten feet into a man made, rock rimmed pool. Smaller streams of water kept the rock wall wet and glistening.

"Last one in is a rotten egg." Cinnamon quickly shed the snowsuit and boots.

Jack stopped breathing and undressing when he saw her red polka dot two-piece suit with a halter top and hip hugging bottom. With each movement, a slice of midriff played peek-a-boo and showed off a ruby studded belly ring.

As she slid into the pool, her feet made contact with a ledge built along the side. Floating into the center of the pool, she discovered that she couldn't touch bottom.

"You cheated," Jack stated after dunking his head under the water.

Splashing him, she laughed. "Who me?" Batting her eyes, she dodged a spray of water. Never out of touch, but not close enough to be intimate, their legs and arms slipped and slid against each other as they horsed around.

Putting an end to the teasing, Jack pulled her into his arms. Cinnamon's legs wound around his slim waist. Where their bodies touched, current shot through their veins and the water sizzled. Jack's tongue slid against her lower lip, across her teeth and met the eager slickness of her tongue.

Cinnamon ran her hands across Jack's broad shoulders, her fingers massaged his scalp and a fingernail traced his ear.

Jack shifted Cinnamon. With her lush bottom no longer brushing the tip of his rock hard shaft, some sanity returned. "If we keep this up we're going to drown." His Texas drawl was thick and heavy with desire.

Cinnamon placed a playful nip on his shoulder. "*The National Enquirer* would do a headline story. Our fame would turn us into legends. Our obituaries would be sold on Ebay for thousands of dollars."

"God, I like your sense of humor." Jack's chuckle vibrated through him. Cinnamon's nipples tightened as they rubbed against his chest.

"I like that you get it." Placing a tiny nip on his shoulder, she pushed off him.

Sitting on the ledge, they leaned their heads against the warm rocks and relaxed.

"The silence is breathtaking. I don't think heaven could be better. If I lived here, I'd be out here every day."

"My sentiments exactly."

After his mother's death Jack closed off his emotions. Except for an elderly great aunt he had no real family. Terry, Betty Jo, and Hugh were his only trusted friends.

As an undercover agent, the roles he played weren't the type that led to funny tales to be shared over a beer at the local bar. Nor were they the type of stories told to impress dates. That lack of communication had been a source of irritation and discussions with more than one woman.

Cinnamon, with her 'I'm not going anywhere' presence, was prying the lid off his emotions. Not that there was ever a right time, but with Grover on his tail he couldn't afford to be distracted. And Cinn was

definitely a distraction.

Cinnamon, with her sense of humor, quick wit and sharp senses, intrigued him. He liked the fact that she was good at reading people. He could do without the human lie detector talent, but it was part of her.

She had saved his life. A hell of a lot could be read into that. Sitting next to her, he was just thankful for the second chance. And damn to hell every one of those talents that was connected to her *gift*. No doubt about it, she was a walking, talking, smart, sexy as hell witch. A witch who would lose her *gift* if she connected with him. And no matter what he should do, he wasn't keeping his distance.

"Does the water stay the same temperature year round?" A giant, slightly rusted thermometer securely wired onto a wooden pole lodged against the rock wall read 101 degrees.

"Coming out of the ground, water has to be sixty-eight degrees or higher to be called a hot spring or thermal pool. In the winter the water cool's faster as it reaches the surface. This pool is closer to one hundred and five in the summer."

Cinnamon wrinkled her nose. "Too hot."

Taking hold of her hand, Jack measured her small palm and long slender fingers against his larger callused hand. "For hands so small, they hold a lot of power. Tell me what you felt when you were working your way over Betsy's belly."

"Imagine a piece of grid paper."

"Okay."

"Now take that grid and make it three dimensional as it forms around a body. It doesn't matter if the body is human or a horse, it works the same way."

"Do you see the body inside the grid?"

"No. The body is the paper, the grid is blue lines."

"Okay."

Jack was stroking her inner wrist with his thumb. Each stroke of his thumb shot jolts of electricity up her arm. The awareness was short-circuiting her brain and playing havoc with her concentration.

"Ahh. Each square on the grid is assigned a pattern. I think of each square as a kaleidoscope because the patterns are symmetrical and colorful."

Shifting, he didn't drop her hand, but he stopped the stroking motion. Cinn didn't know if she wanted to cry or say thank you.

"You've memorized every grid?"

With a leg drawn up for support, he sat sideways on the bench. His eyes were an interesting shade of pale gray blue.

"Yes, but that is just one grid. Blue covers the skin. A yellow grid places all the organs; a red grid shows veins and arteries. The green grid is for the skeletal structure. An orange grid shows me the central nervous system. A few days before you were shot I was shown a new grid. With purple lines it is the smallest of the grids. It covers the cellular level."

"How do you keep it straight?"

"When I first started learning the grids I was overwhelmed. My mom made a joke that stuck; you do it one square at a time. Sometimes it was more like one color at a time or one piece at a time. It didn't take long before I started seeing the repetition of patterns, the overlay. Now it's like breathing; I work the grids without conscious thought."

"How often do you astral travel?"

"I was twelve when I started learning how to use my *gift*. The astral travel started at seventeen. Since then, I've traveled an average of five times a month."

"How bad are the cases?"

"Think of all the different calls a police officer goes out on. If there is an injury involved, I'm usually the first person to arrive. If you're worried that I remember everything, don't. Within a couple of days the memory fades. I record every trip in a log, but I've never read any of them."

"You said if there is an injury involved. Why else would you astral travel?"

"It hasn't happened often, but I've arrived at scenes of domestic violence or an auto accident where the only thing I can do is calm a child until help arrives."

Jack knew how rough that could be, and knew that nothing he could say would change what she had seen, or the protective passion the experience stirred.

"Have you traveled since you arrived here?"

"I haven't traveled since you were shot."

"After traveling so often why the abrupt stop?"

"I don't know. It might have to do with Aunt Pesty's spells or just a shift in the universe."

Cinnamon's voice dropped to a whisper. "Jack, we aren't alone. Behind you, tucked back in the shadows, I saw an aura—male energy—he's walking away from us."

Jack forced himself not to move.

"Tell me what you see."

"Nothing. He's out of sight. It was just a glimpse as he slipped through a gap in the trees."

Scanning the thick stand of trees, Jack shook his head. By the time he put on the jumpsuit and boots the guy would be long gone. "How the hell ... we're heading back."

"Jack, don't shut me out. Do you want to check out where he went?"

"Sweetheart, don't go there. We're heading back. After I'm dressed, I'll shield you with the blanket so you can get out of the wet swimsuit before putting on the snowsuit."

"Were you a boy scout?"

"Why?"

"That's not an answer." Jack stood behind her. She was tempted to sneak a peek. The unmistakable

aroma of her father's pipe tobacco was an effective warning to behave.

"Made it to Eagle scout. Why?"

"Jack, it's called communication. You share, I share. It's what people do when they spend time together. I understand you're pissed. Nothing I can do to change that, so we'll talk about something else."

"I'm not good at sharing."

"Try. What did you do for your community project?"

"Cleaned up an abandoned corner lot in the older section of Harlingen, Texas."

When he didn't elaborate, she said, "And?"

She couldn't see Jack shrug his shoulders, but she felt it in his voice. "Local businesses donated the money for a basketball hoop, monkey bars, flowerpots, benches and old-fashioned street lamps. A contracting firm supplied bricks for a sidewalk and sand for the play area."

"Your turn; I'm dressed."

The air was frigid. She didn't waste time stripping and pulling on the snowsuit.

"Why did you ask if I was a boy scout?"

Pulling the blanket down, she stood on her toes to look him in the eye. "Because as much as I appreciate your protectiveness, I am not a naïve sixteen-year-old. I know that you've worked undercover and have a lot of history you would rather not talk about. I also know that whoever was just here pushed your temper and your protective instincts over the edge. I understand the first and appreciate the second. So you know, outside of us, there isn't a trace of human aura here. My dad was just here, if we'd been in danger he wouldn't have left."

Before he could comment, she gave him a lightning fast kiss. Sitting on the pool's rock rim, she pulled on her boots.

*Well, hot damn.* Just when he thought he had everything under control, she tripped his emotions in a new direction.

Folding the blanket and towels, he stuffed them and the wet swimsuits into a duffel bag. When she stood, he set the bag down.

Jack placed his arms around her waist and lifted. From pelvis to chest, their bodies were a perfect fit. "So there's no mistaking my thoughts, I'm exactly where I want to be."

The kiss left no doubt that he meant what he said.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## Chapter 18

Jack stopped short.

Whoever had paid them a visit left a calling call. The snowmobile was tipped on its side.

A whiff of gasoline caused Cinn to wrinkle her nose.

"Smells like he emptied the gas tank."

From a jacket pocket, Jack pulled out a cell phone. "We had a visitor. The snowmobile's tipped, there's gas on the ground ... He's long gone ... We'll be here."

"Terry Robinson arrived. They'll be here shortly."

"Umm. Giving the snowmobile a wide berth, Cinnamon struggled through deep snow to walk around the tipped over machine. "Something's off."

Following Cinnamon's footprints, Jack scanned the machine. "Besides the obvious, what's bothering you?"

"Don't know. The keys are still in the ignition," she mused.

"Saw that."

"Auras are like a backdrop; they're there, but I don't pay attention to them unless they change. The machine's aura has changed. I don't know what, or how, but something about this machine is different."

"Shit," Jack said under his breath. In his book, different meant trouble. On the flat, the snow was crotch deep. Taking Cinnamon's hand, he tugged. "Follow me."

Weaving a path through the inner edge of the tree line, they trudged through knee high snow. Sixty feet from the trail, they sat on a downed tree. They had a full view of the clearing, and trees covered their backs.

When Jack's lips met hers they were warm and seductively tender. His tongue traced her lower lip. Her soft sigh granted him further access. Yearning and tenderness surged through her veins as the kiss gathered momentum.

Within a breath of losing control Jack reined in his emotions. He cupped her face with his hand and lightly rubbed her lips with the pad of his thumb.

Hell's bells, she felt like the wind had been knocked out of her and the only part of them that had touched was their lips.

The sound of snowmobiles shattered the last of the bewitched spell Cinnamon cast.

Jack squeezed her hand.

Four snowmobiles stopped in front of them. Cinnamon recognized Terry Robinson. The other two men looked like father and son. Jack didn't make introductions.

"No sense starting to track from here. Tell me where you spotted him last." As the older man spoke, he strapped snowshoes across his back and slung a rifle over his shoulder.

"Follow the path to the pond..."

The explosion was deafening.

Cinnamon was lying face down in the snow.

Spread eagle, Jack covered her backside.

Lifting her head, Cinnamon wiped snow off her face and spit it out of her mouth.

Over the high-pitched ringing in her ears, she heard someone shout, "Son of a bitch."

Jack tried to stand. His foot sliced through the thin layer of ice capping the snow. Off balance, he landed on his side. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. You?"

"Pissed as hell. There's egg on my face, and my pride is tattered. Other than that, it doesn't feel like anything's out of order."

"Glad to hear you're going to live," Cinnamon countered.

Rolling into a sitting position, she scanned the area. "Hell's bells and damnation. The snowmobile blew up. Guess a bomb was the something different?"

Jack roared with laughter. Damn, the woman was under his skin. Instead of crying or falling apart, she was handling the situation in stride and with her own brand of humor.

Hugh was cursing a blue streak as he picked his way over broken tree branches. "You two okay?"

"Yes. Who's hurt?" Offering a hand, Hugh helped Cinnamon stand.

"Matt's fine. Bart's got a nasty cut. Terry's not talking, but he's favoring his right arm."

Bart turned out to be the tracker. Lying on his back, Cinnamon saw the piece of metal protruding from his shoulder. "Hugh, did anyone ever mention that you have a way with understatement? We need to cut open the jacket without jarring the metal."

"Put me on a snowmobile. I'll make it to the hospital."

"Glad to hear that. With all that testosterone running through your veins you're not going to bitch when I set you on fire. Jack, if you can find the duffel bag we could use the towels and blanket."

Kneeling beside her, Hugh held a nasty looking, curved hunting knife.

Cinnamon arched a brow.

"Keep it with my fishing gear in the snowmobile's storage unit. It's great for filleting fish."

"I bet. I'm going to check Terry. Let me know when you're done."

Terry sat on a snowmobile staring at the grave size hole blown in the ground.

"Arm's got to hurt like hell. The wrist is broken, maybe a couple of fingers. The shoulder's not busted but don't imagine that's much comfort right now."

"How's Bart?"

"He'll live."

Cinnamon placed her hands on Terry's shoulder. "I'd hypnotize you but you don't look in the mood to cooperate. And if I knocked you out you'd never forgive me."

"You got that right."

"If the heat gets too hot, scream, or teach me a new curse word, but don't move."

Jack made his way to her side. "Bart's ready. What's wrong?"

Not taking her eyes off her hands, Cinnamon nodded.

"Dislocated," Terry said between clenched teeth. Pain etched his face. When his shoulder slipped into place it sounded like a twenty-two popping off a round.

"I'll work on the wrist and fingers when we get back to the house. Don't try lifting anything."

"As if," Terry muttered.

"What do you need us to do?" Jack asked.

Cinnamon ignored him.

"Hi, Bart. That's a really impressive tattoo on your arm. I bet the sexy woman's boobs jiggle when you flex your muscles. Mind if I have a closer look?"

Through golden brown eyes glazed with pain, Bart took her measure and nodded.

Cinnamon placed her hand on Bart's shoulder. Dropping her voice two octaves, she spoke in a measured tone.

"Bart, you're lying on a glacier. The ice is really, really cold. You need to be warmed up, you need heat; the more heat the better. Your tattoo girlfriend wants to help you. She comes to life and begins an exotic dance. Bart, close your eyes and tell me when you see your girlfriend dancing?"

Before Bart's eyes were fully closed, he nodded.

"Your girlfriend's hips are slowly swaying. The swaying relaxes you. From the neck down you are totally relaxed, so relaxed you can't move. But that's okay, because she's so pretty; her boobs are jiggling and you like feeling the warmth spreading through your body. Your girlfriend dances faster. The heat gets hotter. You embrace the heat. Welcome the heat, Bart."

Bart's breathing became shallow; his body was limp.

"Jack, you're going to work with me to pull the metal out. Hugh, how well do you know Bart?"

"He's my brother-in-law."

"Good. I'm going to tell him he needs to listen to your voice. If he gets uncomfortable, add naked beach bunnies to the mix or anything else you think would keep his attention."

\* \* \* \*

Back at the ranch, a road grader was clearing the snow off the driveway.

After a quick hot shower, Cinnamon was glad to see that the stonewashed jeans and bulky knit red sweater Salina provided that morning hadn't done a disappearing act. She was snapping the jeans when she heard Jack walk past her room.

After the explosion, Jack had stayed within touching distance. It was nice to be protected, but she refused to be shut out. With their minds in working mode, if the men had time to talk privately, she'd never pry their thoughts out of them. Grabbing a hair clip, she sprinted to the landing. Walking down the wide stairway beside Jack, she twisted her damp hair into a loose knot and secured it with the clip.

With hair still damp from his shower, Terry Robinson sat in a recliner by the fireplace. He had an ice pack on his right shoulder and a long neck beer in his left hand.

Lifting the ice pack, Cinnamon placed a hand on the shoulder. "Looks good. Swelling's not too bad. By tomorrow, the bruising will look nasty. How do the wrist and fingers feel?"

"Like I played too many games of handball. When I think of the alternative, I feel great."

Hugh placed a tray stacked high with cookies and a teapot on the coffee table.

Cinnamon laced the hot herbal tea with a generous helping of sugar. With a handful of chocolate chip cookies to help recharge her internal batteries, she settled next to Jack in the double recliner. She was shaky, had a slight headache and she was bone tired. She'd experienced worse.

"Did Matt get his dad home without any problems?"

"Sleeping like a baby. Matt gave his mom your instructions. Maggie would like to talk to you before you leave. I won't ask all the how's; but answer this, how did you get him hypnotized so quickly?"

"Pain is a natural hypnotizer. With Bart already focused on the pain I used an acupuncture pressure point and his tattoo to narrow his thoughts down further."

Terry watched Cinnamon grab more cookies. "That first day in ICU, I watched you. You were still as a marble statue. When we walked back to the waiting room your body was shaking. Your sisters pumped you full of sugar. You're doing that now. The healing energy you generate depletes your energy."

"You're partially right. The universe provides the healing energy. I'm nothing more than the conductor. My energy focuses on the healing grid. The two work together to create a power surge that travels through my hands to the injury. You're right about my energy being depleted, but I am not the only source of the heat."

"What happens when you deplete your energy?" Jack's voice was clipped, his eyes soft with worry.

"I get a headache and the shakes. Sugar helps both symptoms." She wasn't about to tell Jack that Cole had run some tests and found that her heart muscles were weak. Rose had worked the odds and found that the combination of the astral travel and the energy depletion were the cause. Cole had assured her that as long as she didn't deplete her energy she wasn't physically in danger. But how did you draw a line on how much was too much when working to save someone's life? "Who hated the snowmobile enough to kill it?"

"If the timing hadn't been off, that question wouldn't be funny. Jack said you saw a man's aura. Any chance you saw something more?" Hugh asked.

"No. He was moving away from us. With the foliage, distance, and lighting, it was just chance that I got a glimpse of color."

"Thought you didn't believe in chance," Jack said.

"I don't. But with the snowmobile tipped over, he wasn't trying to hide the fact that he'd been there, so I don't think my seeing him was orchestrated. What I don't understand is if I hadn't seen him, we would have still been in the pool when the bomb exploded. Why do that, why go to the trouble just to grab our attention?"

Hugh and Terry made busy with their beers.

Jack shifted in his seat.

"The explosive wasn't on a timer, it malfunctioned. We think it was set to go off when the snowmobile was set upright."

"Hell's bells and damnation. I wonder who we need to thank for that bit of luck?"

Terry broke the silence.

"Took your advice and made a stop at Walker's aunt and uncle's ranch on the way here." Looking at Cinnamon, he said, "Your sisters have interesting abilities."

"True. But why did Jack send you there?" The look she shot Jack clearly said she wasn't happy he hadn't told her.

"We went through every land deed within a hundred miles without finding anything. Jack suggested asking Rose to use her odds making abilities to narrow down the search."

"Did it work?"

"Better than hoped."

Terry didn't continue.

Cinnamon did a slow burn. "I'm not leaving." If she hadn't been watching Jack, she wouldn't have seen his slight nod.

"Nine years ago, Grover bought twenty acres of land. He paid cash and put a dead man's identity on the title. Bear Ridge is part of the property."

Cinnamon arched her brow. "The ridge where the man was watching us. Call me dense, but if Grover owns the property, why hire someone to keep an eye on us?"

"Most likely he was and he probably laughed his ass off when we fell for the red herring," Hugh said and huffed.

"Why would he go to all that trouble, let alone the expense, to keep an eye on the ranch?"

"Until his staged death, I was his boss."

Crossing her arms, she tapped her finger as she studied the three silent men. "You didn't retire or at least not totally. You're the counterfeit expert."

Hugh didn't confirm or deny the comment.

"What are the chances Grover had someone working on the counterfeit plates nine years ago?"

"Not impossible."

"Who's checking out the property?" Jack asked.

Before Hugh could answer, his cell phone rang. "Humph ... Yeah ... You do that." Disconnecting, he stared at the fire.

"That was Matt. He followed the guy's trail to an old logging road. From there, he followed snowmobile tracks to the highway. He found the machine parked under some trees. There were also plenty of tire tracks. The road is about half a mile up from Grover's driveway. There are no tire tracks on the road leading into his place, so most likely he's been parking there and walking to his place."

"There's no fence line. What would happen if you just happened to wander over the property line?" Cinnamon asked.

"No need. I've walked every inch of that property, several times. There's nothing there."

Facing the crime board, Cinnamon chuckled. "I think my Dad's giving us a hint. The words 'mole' and 'literally' just flashed on and off like a neon light. Is there a reason the words are underlined?"

Jack dug his fingers into his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Green-eyes called Grover a snake who slithers underground when he doesn't want to be seen. How could he have forgotten?

"How hard would it be to dig a hole in the hillside without anyone being the wiser?"

Hugh stroked his mustache. "There's only three pieces of property in the valley. First you have Bart and Maggie's place, then mine. Grover's property starts at the tail end of the valley where the ground starts to rise. The other side of his place butts up against national forest land. Until five years ago, I was still doing a fair share of traveling. Without reason, Bart wouldn't have nosed around up there."

"Local help would spread rumors of a nutcase digging a bat cave. But illegal immigrants would have worked cheap." Hugh didn't add, 'and they would be disposable', but he knew Jack and Terry were thinking the same thing.

"Salina," Cinnamon called.

The dogs lifted their heads, but didn't move when red and blue lights started flashing off the living room walls. Salina's blonde hair was styled in a smooth shoulder length pageboy. Black slacks brushed the top of black pointed toe, stiletto heels. A crisp white blouse, unbuttoned to indecent, gave a healthy view of cleavage.

"Police Woman, Sergeant Pepper Anderson. I hadn't noticed before, but you look a lot like Angie Dickinson," Hugh said.

Salina preened. She gave Terry one of her coy smiles. "I've heard good things about you from your daughter."

Terry closed his gaping mouth. Then opened it again to swallow a swig of beer. "You know Hanna?"

"When you headed to Idaho, Warren talked to Hanna. With a chance that you would be able to see me, Warren wanted to make certain my appearance wouldn't cause undue problems."

Cinnamon shot Terry a smile. "Welcome to my world. I'll explain Warren later. Why couldn't you appear and introduce yourself to Terry when he was talking to Hanna?"

"Rules. Things were shaking and rattling, but you hadn't figured anything out. Now you have."

"More like Dad used his light trick to bring my attention to the words on the blackboard."

"I saw. Warren had his back turned and Herb was getting impatient. Because you called I get to help. Simple as that." Hugh got the full impact of Salina's flirtatious smile. "Are you going to swear me in? A badge and one of those snub nose revolvers would be so cool."

"Salina, get real. You with a gun would be more volatile than a stick of dynamite. Oh God, are you responsible for the snowmobile blowing up early."

"Funny thing about that. Right before the machine blew, Warren disappeared. When he returned, he wore a self satisfied smile and brushed off our questions. Now tell me about my assignment."

"Can you weave in and out of the ground?"

"Good grief, why would I want to do that?"

Jack gave Cinnamon's hand a squeeze. "Smart thinking." He gave Salina a tug of a smile. "We can get you the badge, the gun is an absolute no. Have you been listening to what Terry told us?"

"No, I was giving Hanna some advice on clothing and makeup. Why?"

"We believe Grover has built an underground bunker on the property adjacent to here. If it's there, we need to find it as soon as possible."

"Damn, this is one of those times I wish I knew everything and could just answer your questions. I really don't like the idea of crawling in holes. What we need is an expert on popping in and out of graves. I'll be right back."

"She vanished," Terry said to no one in particular.

Hugh went to the bar and pulled three long necks out of the small refrigerator. "Cinn, would you like a beer, wine or a wine cooler?"

"A tropical fruit cooler sounds good. Terry, are you staying here tonight?"

"I was. Now I'm not sure. Are any other ghosts going to appear? And why would she be talking to Hanna about clothing and makeup?"

"I'm going to check the lasagna and put the garlic bread in the oven. Someone else can answer those loaded questions."

When Cinnamon rejoined the men she wondered what had been said to have their aura's zapped with tension.

Before she could sit, Salina appeared without the usual fanfare.

Miss Jayne appeared beside Salina; she wore a forest green ankle length riding skirt and a day jacket with a small pleated bustle. She held a matching felt cowboy hat in her hand. Her ankle high button shoes had sensible low heels.

"Sorry that took so long. I had to persuade Jayne to change clothes. She's really got a hang up about her butt and bustle cages."

Miss Jayne huffed. "I am a lady."

"Stuff the dramatics, no one's impressed. Cinn, what did you have in mind?"

"A vision of Casper the friendly ghost weaving in and out of things had me thinking you could put new meaning into the phrase 'ground search'. I have a feeling that while I put the garlic bread in the oven and set the table, the men got a better handle on an idea."

"I saw you in action when you visited the mall with Cinn. How long can you hold onto an object?" Jack asked.

"I'm better at knocking things over." Salina gave Cinnamon a wink. "I can hold things for short periods of time. Why?"

"While you are searching the property we'd like to be in contact with you. Could you hold a two way radio for an extended period of time?"

Salina gave a throaty, sexy laugh. "Sweetie, I can do better than that."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## Chapter 19

Ten minutes later, Salina's voice filled the kitchen.

"Jayne, what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm not going to do this twice. I'm marking the corner. We'll work a section at a time."

"As anal as you are about clothing, I should have figured you for a geek! Okay, what next?"

"Concentrate on your hearing. It only takes stumbling into the wrong grave once to learn that the ground gives off different vibrations. If there's a hole beneath us, the sound will be hollow. Counting the seconds until the sound changes gives you the depth of the hole."

"Damn, she's talking sonar," Jack muttered.

"I'm talking about not lying on someone else's bones, sir."

"Remind me to tell Betty Jo I want to be cremated," Terry murmured.

Catching Jack's eye, Cinnamon saw his amusement. Hell's bells, why couldn't Jack be her soul mate?

"Thanks for the image, Miss Jayne. You mentioned seeing auras; do you see any around you?" Cinnamon asked.

"Nothing human."

"What does that mean?" Terry demanded.

"Nothing sinister. Jayne was talking about animals, mainly rodents." They could hear Salina's shudder.

"What section of the property are you on?" Hugh asked.

"We started with the section by Bear Ridge. With a direct view onto your property, it made sense, but there is nothing here."

"Yes, there is." Salina's excited voice bounced off the walls. "Look out the kitchen window."

"We see a red light on the ridge. What did you find?"

"Moonlight just happened to travel through the cloud cover and hit the metal on a camera. Warren's the only one with that kind of power, so thank him."

"How many cameras?" Jack asked.

"One. Want me to look for more?"

"No. He might have an entry up that way, but closer to the road would be a surer bet. Go down to the road and work your way up," Hugh suggested.

"There's a camera down here," Salina said a few minutes later. "Now that I know what I'm looking for, it wasn't hard to spot. From the angle of the camera, it covers the entrance to the highway. Jayne, let's go left."

"Why?"

"The ground rises quicker. If I were going to dig into a hillside I'd do it where the ground rose quickly. The land to the right follows the creek and is a more gradual incline."

"You are also a geek."

"Say that again, and I'll make your ass so big you won't need a bustle cage."

"An ideal threat. Warren would take away your powers."

Salina muttered something they couldn't understand, but they clearly heard Miss Jayne giggle.

"We've covered the property from the road to the end of the property line and back. There isn't anything interesting. We're about a third of the way up the hill now."

"Interesting. What is that?" Miss Jayne said.

"What is what? I don't see a damn thing."

"It's not what I see; it's what I don't see. The aura for that rock is wrong."

Salina tapped the rock Miss Jayne had pointed out. "Hot damn. We found a plastic boulder. The snow hasn't been disturbed. Do you want us to go through or look for another opening?"

"If he hasn't used that entry let's see if we can find the one he's using. Go back to the road and follow the creek. It's not a hot thermal, but it's warm enough to keep snow off the rocks," Hugh said.

"Can do," Salina said.

Ten nail biting minutes later, Miss Jayne said, "Oh my, this one is clever. The plastic boulder has water cascading over it. Except for the aura, it looks like it's been here forever."

"How far from the road are you?" Jack asked.

"You've got to be kidding. I wouldn't know a quarter mile from a city block. Besides, we're gliding, not walking."

"At eye level there's a horseshoe nailed to a tree on the other side of the creek. A camera's mounted about arm's length above the horseshoe. Not real noticeable, but if you're looking, it's easy to spot. We're going in."

"Jayne has better night vision than me, so I've illuminated the tunnel and frankly I'm impressed. The tunnel's supported with railroad ties and four by fours. I can touch the ceiling, so figure six-foot high. Sensor lights are strung along the floor. Luckily they can't detect us."

"Look. That's got to be the first tunnel we found and I see a light up ahead," Miss Jayne exclaimed.

"Ohmigod. You should see this place. This isn't a bunker; it's Captain Nemo's digs underground. It's one huge room, but it's cleverly laid out. Real Persian carpets cover a wood plank floor. The kitchen looks like it came out of a fancy motor home. There's a well stocked bar, a comfortable sitting area and a full bookcase covers most of one wall. He used folding screens to completely section off the bedroom."

Sitting in the ranch's kitchen, they could hear drawers being opened and closed.

"The guy has some sick interests and a store full of toys stashed in drawers. And pictures," Salina's voice faded.

The men exchanged glances. "Salina, I'm sorry you saw those, but try to push the pictures out of your mind. What about an office?" Hugh's voice was laced with fatherly concern.

They could feel Salina pulling herself together with a heavy sigh. "Not yet. What do you think, Jayne, behind the bookcase or behind the tapestry?"

"The tapestry is hung over a solid wall."

"Bingo, third bookcase from the left. We're in the office. There are ten cameras recording different scenes. He's not cheap with equipment. The setup looks similar to the security at the casino."

"Holy shit. I can see inside your barn. Smile and wave."

"Why?"

"Because I can see all of you sitting at the kitchen table."

Four sets of eyes looked at the picture window opposite the dining room table. With no curtains and the lights on, any one sitting at the table would be clearly visible from outside.

"Another camera is directed at your driveway. There's also a third tunnel, and I mean tunnel. It's nothing more than a crawl space leading into the office. It exits in the woods, which doesn't tell us anything since most of the twenty acres is covered in trees."

"How many computers?" Hugh asked.

"Two. One is on a really nice cherry wood desk. The other computer is on the table with the camera monitors. Both of them are turned off."

"There are three metal plates hanging on the wall. Next to the plates, are framed copies of twenty, fifty and hundred dollar bills."

"There's some other pictures on the wall and newspaper clippings about a death and memorial service. If this obit picture is what Grover looked like before his death, he had a damn good plastic surgeon."

"Crap. Grover just entered the same tunnel we came down. What do you want us to do?"

"Will he be able to hear us talking?"

"No."

Jack couldn't believe they were getting this lucky. Containing his excitement, he said, "Then, stay put. If we're lucky he'll turn on the computers. If he does, try to watch him type in the password."

"Jayne, stop touching things. He might notice."

"Pooh, men don't notice that kind of detail. Besides this is interesting. I'm reading a letter from a bank. Where are the Grand Cayman Islands?"

"It's in the Western Caribbean. Is there anything on the paper that says 'account number'?" Jack asked.

"No, sir. Besides, a number wouldn't be any help; this letter is a phony."

"Why do you say that?" Jack asked.

"Because it says here that they received a money transfer of a hundred and fifty-three million dollars."

Nobody has that much money."

Cinnamon watched Hugh, Terry, and Jack exchange glances. To anyone else they looked like none of this was phasing them, but she knew differently. Their auras were doing victory dances.

"The bookcase is opening. Jayne, stop moving things," Salina hissed.

"Grover booted the computer. Now he's checking each of the cameras. Jayne, stop touching things! He's going to notice."

They heard Miss Jayne mutter, "Is not. He sure has pretty things."

"He's going back into the other room.

"Now I'm jealous. He's making a dry martini.

"Okay. Down to business, he's back at the computer.

"I love it. He's a one-finger hen pecker. Here goes, a,1,l,3,a,1,d,4,i,9,n,5. He's in MSN; account name is Keith Johnson. He's opening an email from someone using the same name and the number 666 after the name.

*"Warning, Robinson headed your way. Tried to hitch on for the ride, but it got vetoed. Betty Jo has vanished, ditto for the son."*

Terry's back stiffened.

"My, my, that didn't make him real happy. He's going into another secure area. The password is 'masterlion'. He's pulling up a file on Betty Jo Robinson."

"Salina, look at this," Miss Jayne said.

"I don't have time. Stop moving things. I tell you, he's going to notice."

"Is not. His back is to me. He can't see a darn thing. Besides, what can he think; he's the only one here?"

"Wait a minute, he can't do that. He's keyed Betty Jo's name into a master list of airline passengers."

Like an ocean wave, the kitchen floor rolled.

Tackling Cinnamon, Jack pulled her under the table and used his body to shield hers.

Terry and Hugh followed.

Cabinet doors flew open.

Dishes rattled.

From the foundation up, an explosion rattled the log house.

Dishes shattered against the hardwood floor.

The dogs barked.

When the repercussion faded, Terry was eyeball to eyeball with Petunia. "Holy shit."

"Ignore her. Petunia won't spray unless she's threatened."

"I think the blast qualifies." Slowly backing up, Terry headed for the back door. As he hit every outdoor light switch, the backyard took on an eerie quality.

"Holy shit." The air was thick with dirt, dust, small tree branches and pine needles. Elk were bugling and skittish. From the barn, they could hear horses kicking the sides of their stalls. "As far as I can see, everything here is intact and there are no fires."

Picking up a phone, Hugh punched a number. "Hi, Maggie, you guys okay ... Good. Tell Bart we're fine. If you have to, hogtie him to the bed, but keep him out of sight. The newshounds will be three steps behind the cops. Matt knows how to handle the press. Have him stick around and tell him to play dumb. Do you need plywood for the broken window ... Good deal."

Terry was keeping one eye on Petunia, talking to the police and rubbing his injured shoulder when Hugh hung up.

"I'm going to go check the horses." Hugh, with the dogs at his heels, headed to the barn.

Jack looked ready to murder someone. "Are you okay?"

"Shaky but fine." When his eyes narrowed, Cinnamon gave him a shaky smile. "Really, I'm fine."

Gathering her into his arms, Jack inhaled the scent of her hair, her perfume, her. He felt Cinnamon's adrenaline-fed heart beat out of control. And he felt her tremor of desire; it matched his own.

Jack placed a kiss on her hair, then on her forehead. Cinn placed her hand on his cheek...

Salina's yelling stopped them cold.

"Didn't I tell you to stop touching things? Didn't I? But no, you had to keep snooping. So help me, I could strangle you. I ruined my manicure clawing through rocks. My ears are ringing louder than church bells."

"Tuff titty. Stop acting like a baby and stop yelling at me. You're a ghost; you didn't have to claw through anything."

"I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"Be careful. You might break another fingernail."

"You are so dead. I'll have your sorry ass sent to the all girl school for rehabilitation. Or better yet I'll have Warren send you to the nunnery."

"All I did was try to open that little bitty drawer," Miss Jayne whined.

"It wasn't a damn drawer. It was a CD compartment, in a computer hard drive. Don't you know anything?"

"I know the stupid thing blew up. In case you've forgotten, it blew up in my face, not yours. Your ears can't be ringing any worse than mine, so stop yelling."

Salina and Miss Jayne materialized in the center of Hugh's kitchen. Fueled by their anger, a tornado shot out red-hot sparks as it danced around them.

"Welcome back, ladies." Jack didn't allow Cinnamon to draw back.

Miss Jayne beamed. "Oh, so sorry. Bad timing on our part; do you want us to leave?" Like water gurgling down a drain, the tornado disappeared.

Hugh walked in the back door. Headed for the safety of the bathroom, Petunia scurried between his legs.

The black labs' nails clicked on the hardwood floor as they made a mad dash towards the living room.

"Who the hell are you?" Terry bellowed from the living room.

Salina chuckled.

Miss Jayne snickered.

"Who do you think arrived?" Jack asked.

"My folks. I can smell Dad's pipe. I bet Grand central station offers more privacy," Cinnamon murmured just loud enough for Jack to hear.

Jack gave her a ghost of a smile and a squeeze before dropping his arms.

"Hi Mom, Dad, Gus. Have you introduced yourself to Terry?"

"They did." Terry was at the bar. "Before this place gets overrun with cops and feds does anyone besides me want a drink?"

"Martini, dry," Salina purred. Protectively, her husband, Gus Owens, stood beside her.

"She's kidding, right?"

Cinnamon joined Terry behind the bar. "She's serious. At Thanksgiving, I learned that given an incentive, a soul can eat and drink, sort of." Cinnamon mixed the martini. After pouring the mixture into two glasses, she placed the crystal glasses on the bar top.

"Thanks, Sweetie. I earned this." Looking towards the ceiling, Salina hesitated. When nothing happened she dipped a finger into the martini, then in typical Salina fashion made sucking her finger look provocatively suggestive. "Perfect."

Not to be outdone, Miss Jayne copied Salina's actions. As she slowly licked her lips she gave Gus a wink.

"Back off," Salina growled.

Jack took a healthy sip of scotch. He watched Miss Jayne and Salina's shenanigans as he vacillated between fury and amusement. "Without pointing fingers or yelling, what happened?"

"I finished reading the papers Grover placed on the table. There was a box on the floor. It looked just like the one that was under the pretty desk. There was a slim drawer with a flap that opened when I pushed it. I pushed the button next to the flap to see if anything would pop out. I thought it might hold more papers. But all it did was start a clock." Miss Jayne shrugged her shoulders. "The clock must have been broken because only the second hand moved and it made a terribly loud noise. Grover's head whipped around. When his eyes reached the clock they were frantic. He started to stand and reach for something, but he only took one step before the place blew up."

"That's an understatement. The top of the bunker lifted a good two feet. Didn't last long, but it felt like the ceiling was suspended for an eternity. Caitlin, what was going through Grover's head?"

"A clever variety of profanity. His last thought was, 'how the hell?'"

"Too bad I can't be the one to clue him in. Once the ceiling crashed we got the hell out. I marked our exit spot with a cross. Don't ask how far underground we were. I don't have a clue and you couldn't come up with enough reasons to sweet talk me into going back with a tape measure.

"Topside looks worse than the aftermath of a tornado." Salina seductively sucked a few more drops of martini off her finger.

"I went back down to check the tunnels. All three collapsed. The two entrances we located are blown open. Before returning here, we checked for fires; there weren't any," Miss Jayne added.

"I wouldn't mind having five minutes alone with him." Absently rubbing the spot on his thigh where the bullet had entered, Jack's eyes unfocused.

"Jack, revenge doesn't ease pain," Caitlin said kindly.

At the fireplace, Herb and Caitlin sat on the hearth. Cinnamon was sandwiched between them. Cinnamon was a younger version of her mother. Herb, with his pipe in hand and his bare feet crossed at the ankles, looked relaxed. But looks were deceiving.

"Never thought it did. The information Salina gave us was priceless. But dead men can't talk. He took information to his grave that we needed."

Miss Jayne fidgeted. Sticking the tip of her index finger in the martini, she managed to drink a few more drops.

With a sigh, she stepped up to Jack. "It's been a long time since someone was kind to me. You and Hugh are real gentlemen. I appreciate that."

Miss Jayne ducked her head.

Jack waited.

"My momma taught me better, but this is real pretty and I haven't had a diary in a long time. Only the first few pages have writing on them. I was going to cut them out but maybe they will help you."

Pulling the red leather diary and several pieces of mail tucked inside the front cover out of her coat pocket, Miss Jayne handed them to Jack.

Jack wanted to know how she could conceal solid objects, but he didn't ask.

Placing the mail on the coffee table, he concentrated on the first page of the diary. The writing was nothing but dates and initials, but the longer he looked at the page, the wider Jack's grin spread.

"Miss Jayne, I could kiss you. When I get to town I'll buy you a dozen red diaries and pens to match."

Bosom high, Miss Jayne fluttered her fan. When she caught Salina's eye, she stuck out her tongue.

"You have company arriving. We'll be back tomorrow." Caitlin gave Cinn a hug. Placing a hand on Jack's shoulder, he felt comforting warmth spread through him. "Shielding Cinn with your body didn't go unnoticed; it says a lot about your character. Your mother sends her love. It's too bad you don't

remember your dad; you're a lot like him."

Herb gave Cinnamon a hug and placed a lemon drop in her hand. Unable to shake hands, he placed a light squeeze on each man's shoulder before disappearing.

Gus repeated Herb's gesture. When he got to Cinnamon he put an arm around her shoulder. "How's my girl doing as a fairy godmother?"

"She's at the head of the class."

"I'm real proud of her. She did really good today."

"Yes, she did. Why don't you go visit Walker? He needs to know."

\* \* \* \*

Bone tired, Cinnamon was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

*The television was on, the sound muted.*

*She regretted the promise she had made to Eros. It bound her to the room, a room she was utterly sick of, but she wouldn't go back on her word.*

When the door opened she barely glanced at Eros.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No, not mad. Disappointed."

"What have I done?"

"You don't trust me. You leave me here for two days. I don't know if you are safe or when you will return."

"That is my life. It is not predictable or by the clock. Have I not told you that?"

"Yes, I'll give you that. How can you be my soul mate and not find it in your heart to trust me with who you are, and what you do?"

"It is man's work."

"Don't give me that. There is little in this world a woman cannot do."

"Perhaps. But it doesn't mean I want you doing what I do or tainted by the ugliness of the scum I deal with. Nor would I want you putting yourself at risk because of me."

"Are you saying that I have no say, no thoughts or vote in the matter?"

"Yes, that is what I believe."

"So, am I nothing more than a decoration? Someone to dust off, drape on your arm, play with for an hour or two, then put on a shelf until the next time you think it is safe to take me out?"

"You are putting words in my mouth. That is unfair."

"All right, in your words, explain your actions."



He paused. His eyes darkened, but they didn't reveal his thoughts.

She could tell he hadn't expected the question. He was out of his depth and uncomfortable with the sharing part of a relationship.

"I've done things, things that don't need repeating."

"Then don't repeat them. I don't need to know."

"They taint me."

"Bull! Except by their own thoughts, their own fears, their own prejudices, no one is tainted."

"I have enemies; enemies that don't play fair, or by the rules. I refuse to put you in danger."

"Isn't that my choice? If you won't put me in danger, if you don't want to share your life, why are you here?"

"Because I can't stay away."

The admission was reluctant; he hadn't wanted to hear the words much less say them aloud.

Mad as she was, she didn't resist when he pulled her into his arms.

"How long are you staying?"

"Long enough to kiss you hello. Then we must leave."

"Why?"

"The enemy knows you are here. It is too dangerous for you to stay."

The kiss was demanding. Their tongues tasted, sucked and probed. Eros slipped his hands under her sweater, caressed her back and slid his fingers under the waistband of her slacks.

Sitting in a chair, Eros settled her on his lap.

As he pulled her sweater over her head he murmured, "This is insane." But he didn't stop. His warm lips and tongue suckled a breast. His hands gently massaged and his thumb and finger squeezed and tormented. When she begged him to take her to bed, she didn't recognize her voice.

Not until Cinnamon tugged at the snap on his jeans did his sanity return. Gently he pulled her bra back in place and clasped the closer. Pulling the sweater over her head, he smoothed it down and brushed her hair away from her face.

Satisfied that she was properly dressed, he kissed her forehead.

She could feel his tremble.

"I'm sorry, really sorry. We have to leave. We shouldn't have stayed this long."

Eros checked the hall before allowing her to step out of the room. At the stairwell, he repeated the process.

*They were at the service door of the hotel, ready to step outside, when someone called out, "Eros, it is time..."*

Cinnamon woke with a start.

Her heart was pounding.

The dream.

The tenderness.

The panic.

Cinnamon didn't know what to think. Sexually, Eros wanted her. The same could be said in reverse.

Cinnamon trusted him.

Eros didn't trust her.

That hurt.

\* \* \* \*

*With his thoughts focused on meeting Green-eyes, Jack didn't notice the rock hardness of the rowboat's seat. Before the bottom of the rowboat bumped the pearl black sand, his feet were splashing through the surf. With an unwavering tread, he reached the glen in record time.*

*Green-eyes appeared immediately.*

"You are impatient."

"I want to thank you for your help. Grover is dead."

"You are frowning. Does his death not make you happy?"

"Yes. No. Hell no. I wanted to beat the shit out of him first."

"Paybacks. A nice sentiment, but you wouldn't have put your badge on the line for the likes of him. What annoys you is that a wisp of a ghost did what you couldn't legally do."

Jack's chuckle held no humor. "Annoyed is putting it mildly. Did you know the outcome before it happened?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Over the years, you've given me information that helped crack cases wide open. Until ghosts and Cinn complicated the mix, the outcomes have been cut and dried."

"I have no control over your ghosts, or Cinn, for that matter. And know this: at times, the unexpected is the most direct path to a positive result. Grover's death is past, work with what is now."

"You called me here for a reason; are you going to tell me why?"

*"It will come as no surprise that Grover's death will stir up a tornado of problems. Not all will come from those you know to be involved. Watch your back. I regret not having names, but I've told you what I know."*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 20

Cinnamon stood in front of the kitchen window sipping a cup of tea when Jack slipped his arm around her shoulder. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Last night. Not going all female when the hill exploded."

"Have a lot of women gone all female around you?"

Jack winced. "I didn't do a good job of wording that. But yes, I've seen a fair share of women fall apart over less."

"I think I've mentioned I'm not most women. What I've seen during astral travel was never nice. Can't say that I never cried a few tears after the fact, but falling apart during the crisis was never an option."

Looking out the window, she said, "Are you antsy to get into the thick of the hunt?"

"Not much to hunt. I have no problem letting others sniff around."

"You believe there were three sets of plates for each denomination and possibly something else that made it easy to change the serial numbers."

"Right."

"Sidney and Trenton won't be bringing anything to the table. But I don't think you were expecting them to have the plates. What's going to happen tomorrow?"

Jack hesitated. *Trust*. The word echoed through his mind. "For answers, I'm supposed to be buying into the organization."

"I hadn't thought of that scenario. You're giving them connections and information. Their giving you what? The name of the king pin? How the organization works?" Jack's aura gave her the answer.

"I figured out something else. Last night, when the local agents were here, the red diary wasn't mentioned. You think someone in the group was talking to Grover?"

"The password Salina gave us belongs to an active agent."

"The agent that attempted to track down Betty Jo and tried talking Terry into allowing him to come here?"

"That's the one. My gut's telling me there's someone else involved."

Reaching up, she pulled Jack's face towards hers. The kiss tasted like maple syrup and coffee. She would have lingered but she heard Hugh's boots connect with the wood deck.

"Thank you."

"For what."

"Trusting me with the truth."

"Last night there wasn't a single agent here that was not telling the truth."

"Everybody lies," Jack countered.

"True. But there are layers to a lie. Years ago, I color-coded them. A polite white lie is a light gray smudge over the gut.

"A medium gray spot ups the lie to a fib that's more fiction than fact. Not necessarily said to cause harm, the lie covers one's ass. Boastful lies also fall within this color."

"Dark gray is a nasty lie. One said to hurt. The lie could be based on truth, but not necessarily.

"All black spots are blatant lies. The only thing that changes the color is evil intent. When that is present the gut shines like patent leather."

Nodding towards Hugh, who was pouring himself a mug of coffee, Cinnamon said, "You two and Terry have a constant smudge, but not at the gut; it's lower, about navel level. It's what I dubbed the cop syndrome. You have an innate awareness to guard what you know and pick lies and half-truths that will fit the circumstances. Everyone here last night fit that profile."

"You can tell if a cop's corrupt?" Hugh sounded dubious.

"Let's put it this way, I can tell if the person has something besides the normal job requirements to hide."

"Damn, I wish I'd known about your talent ten years ago. I need to think about what you just said. I'm heading up the hill. Are the two of you coming along?"

Huddled close to their food source, the elk didn't act like they were in a hurry to leave. Cinnamon couldn't blame them. The property was dusted with dirt, bits of pine needles, and small rocks. The air held a musty damp odor.

Sitting on the snowmobile seat behind Hugh, the two black labs hitched a ride.

Tucked up against Jack's backside, Cinnamon enjoyed the feel of him against her. Unlike the first ride, her arms circled his waist. As Jack maneuvered the machine across dirt crusted snow, their bodies moved together. It was an intimate dance that both noticed.

On Bear Ridge, few trees still stood upright. One was the tree where Salina had discovered the camera. Removing it from the tree, Jack slipped it inside a pocket.

A few minutes later Hugh and Jack parked the snowmobiles close to the road where Jack had seen the hidden truck.

At first glance, the devastation looked haphazard. Trees were snapped in half. Uprooted firs, with their root systems intact, lay on top of broken tree trunks and branches. On closer inspection, it was easy to see how the explosion had worked its way up then outward. The result was a widening circle of devastation that spread open like a flower in full bloom.

"The property line runs from the highway to just past Bear Ridge. We're about at the halfway mark. With the trees down, you can see where the hill starts sloping towards the road. From what Salina said last night, I'm thinking the bunker was on the far side of the property. If we're lucky, directly across from us," Hugh said.

"This is fun," Cinnamon muttered. Jack gripped her hand as she jumped from one log to another. "Do you think Salina would clear a path if we said pretty please?"

"She's having too much fun watching us struggle."

About twenty feet to the left of them, Salina and Miss Jayne were talking to Hugh.

"I'm the only one struggling. Your long legs aren't having any trouble jumping from log to log. There's the cross Salina made. The bunker wasn't as far over as Hugh thought." If Cinnamon hadn't had a death grip on Jack's hand as she leaped to the next log, she would have lost her balance and tumbled backwards.

"Doesn't look that way."

When they reached Hugh, they stood on a patch of sunken ground covered in small broken tree limbs. Jack didn't let go of Cinnamon's hand.

"Jayne went back down," Salina said in lieu of a hello.

"Sounds like a fun excursion," Cinnamon said.

"Not so bad. Old graves smell worse."

"Thanks for sharing. What were you hoping to find?"

"A dead body."

"Now I wish I hadn't asked. Do I dare ask why?" Cinnamon asked.

"During the gold rush, it wasn't uncommon for mine shafts to collapse. The way support walls fall there were always air pockets and holes. I've seen more than one ghost rise out of the debris days to weeks later. Maybe because this was an explosion, the support walls didn't hold up as well. The cubbyholes are smaller, but they are there. Saw Grover's head; he isn't as pretty as he was yesterday."

"Now I want to strangle you." Cinnamon's muttering had Salina chuckling.

"Main thing is, Grover didn't stick around to cause trouble."

"Now that Jayne's shared her good news, what are you hoping to find out here?" Salina said.

"Not a dead body. I'm not sure I expected to find anything, but it never hurts to look. Is there any way you can figure out how deep down you went, Miss Jayne?" Hugh asked.

"Not much deeper than my grave."

"Jeez, couldn't you think of another reference for six feet? Will they dig the site up?" As Cinnamon scanned the landscape, she couldn't stop the shudder that crawled down her spine. Like a low lying fog, death sat heavy on the ground as root systems sent out harsh jagged auras.

"Not our decision. With Miss Jayne's testimony I'm inclined to let Grover rot in his bat cave," Jack said.

Since arriving, the black labs had been sniffing and poking their noses into crevices. Like kids that had found a treasure, they started barking and excitedly scratching the ground.

"Good boys. Let's see what you found," Hugh praised, then handed out doggy biscuits. Breaking branches off a tree limb, Jack checked out the ground.

"I'll be damned. Give them an extra biscuit." Brushing back twigs and debris, Jack carefully picked up a torn bag. Placing the bag of white powder on a log, he tugged at a piece of metal sticking out of the loose

ground.

"It's one of the pictures that was hanging on the wall. How the devil did it land up here?" Miss Jayne asked.

"The explosion propelled it upward at a force greater than what fell down on it." Jack was running his hand over the hundred dollar counterfeit plate as he spoke. "As far as I can see there isn't even a nick on the metal."

"Looks like excavating this place went from option to reality." Picking up the bag of powder, Hugh stopped short of placing it in his pocket. Opening his hand, Hugh pulled small metal pieces out of the torn bag. "I'll be damned. They look like typewriter keys. Do you think these could be the pieces that change the serial numbers?"

"They're the right size. Salina, if I didn't say so before, thanks for marking where you exited. We are indebted to both of you," Jack said.

"Give me Trenton, and the debt is paid," Miss Jayne said.

"Tomorrow. I promise," Jack answered. "I don't fancy digging through this mess with my hands; let's head back to the house and start making calls."

\* \* \* \*

Hugh and Terry drove to Boise with the counterfeit plate, the bag of cocaine and the red diary.

Shortly after they left, Jack's cell phone rang.

"What's happening? What did Evan do to get arrested? Stupid ass. He got what he deserved ... His sorry ass being in jail doesn't change my plans ... Yeah, heard about it on the news. Bastard blows himself up, that's his problem ... Never met him ... What can I say, he might have known me, but the name Grover doesn't mean a damn thing to me ... Is everything still set for tomorrow? Good. I'll be there."

Jack slipped the phone back in his shirt pocket and headed for the back door. "I'll be in the barn if you need me."

Cinnamon was restless. She made more peach cobbler and a marinating sauce for pork chops.

She thumbed through several Louis L'Amour books; none of the story lines caught her interest.

With a cup of hot green tea in her hand, she sat in the double recliner and studied the list of facts and observations written on the chalkboard.

Everything was neat and tidy. There didn't seem to be any holes. Salina had said the three of them knew things and people that interlaced. She could see that, but they were missing something, something as big and obvious as a wart on a witch's nose.

She heard Jack enter the kitchen. He walked into the living room carrying a cup of coffee and a warm mini pan of peach cobbler.

Sitting next to her, Jack pushed the recliner back. With the coffee mug braced between his thighs, he offered her a bite of cobbler. Sharing food and using the same utensil was a cozy intimate gesture. With no fanfare to mark the moment, they had crossed the bridge from friends to something more intimate.

"What are you thinking?"

"How do you know I'm not relaxing?"

"You relax by cooking. What on the board has your attention?"

"Wish I could answer that. We're missing something. Grover was the mastermind behind bringing the drugs over the border."

"Right."

"Rose agreed that Grover found the guy who made the counterfeit plates. Miss Jayne said Thornton was real unhappy at Grover for killing the man before they found out where he hid the third set of plates. But Grover did find out. The set of plates he had hanging on the wall were the extras."

"Agree."

"What do you think he was going to do with them?" Cinnamon asked.

"At this point, everything would be speculation. He could have kept them for insurance."

"You don't believe that."

Jack didn't deny the statement.

"What was written in the red diary?"

"Names and dates. Most we already had. And if we're lucky, some bank account numbers."

"A red diary, with a cheap lock clasp, fits Miss Jayne's girly charm. I would have thought Grover would put important information on a computer with a fist full of passwords and an encrypted file that would destroy the computer if someone got past the passwords."

If Jack had his way, Cinnamon would never find out that in the back of the diary was the name of a teenage runaway who had been missing for five years.

"Grover covered his ass, but he was cocky. He never expected anyone to find the bunker. Counterfeit plates hanging on the wall, his framed obituary, and mail on the desk proves that."

"What was in the mail Miss Jayne gave you?"

"Bank statements, phone and utility bills."

"Handy stuff to have your hands on. The odds said Helen doesn't know Evan, but she knows Sidney intimately. Grover also received a perfect score for knowing Helen. Do you think Grover and Helen were screwing each other?"

Jack choked on his coffee. "I keep thinking I need to protect you. Then out of the blue, you ask a question like that."

"I've told you before I'm a big girl. Let me give you a piece of information that came out during Helen's blackmailing attempt. Helen's into S&M and she likes younger men."

Jack frowned. He drank the last of the coffee. "She and Grover shared the same tastes."

"There's an image we could both do without."

"All four men are related, know each other, and are working the counterfeit ring and the drug smuggling"

together. Helen has never met Evan. What do you make of that?"

"He's lucky!"

"Yeah, I'll go along with that. But there's more."

"Could be Sidney didn't think his bastard son was any of Helen's business. Evan could be blackmailing Sidney to get a cut of his inheritance. Or Sidney could have accepted Evan into the fold in exchange for Evan keeping his mouth shut. Not having seen them together, we don't know how the wind blows in that relationship."

"Sidney could have financially supported Evan since birth. An arrangement like that could have started out as a way to protect his wife and grown into an idea to use Evan. Make him believe he's a valued member of the club. It would be a way to keep the legitimate heir's hands clean if the feds came sniffing."

"Not a bad idea. If Sidney covered his tracks, it could work," Jack admitted.

"I keep coming back to Sidney trying to sell Joker's Wild to Walker. Don't know why but I feel that the offer to sell the casino and Helen's blackmail attempt were staged at the same time for a purpose."

"If Helen had gotten her hands on Dreamland, she could have demanded ownership of Joker's Wild, too. But Sidney was asking top dollar, so that doesn't make a lot of sense." Lifting the fork, Jack offered Cinnamon the last bite of peach cobbler.

Later, Jack would wonder how it happened. One minute their eyes were locked, the next he was pulling Cinnamon into his arms.

Jack licked a drop of whipped cream off her lip and teased her with his tongue. The kiss deepened; the sparks of awareness that happened each time they touched ignited. The flame licked around the edges, singeing Jack's sanity. Cinnamon's soft kitten mew had the flames flicking hotter.

Shifting their bodies, Cinnamon's soft feminine curves pressed against his hard frame. Cupping her bottom, he pressed her closer. Shockwaves of desire short-circuited his nervous system. Gathering momentum, the current rushed to the only place in his body with a mind of its own.

Cinnamon ran tiny kisses along his jaw. Her tongue and teeth played with his earlobe.

Their lips met. Their tongues met. Slipping his fingers inside her slacks, he massaged the dimple in the small of her back.

"Excuse me. The sparks coming off you are starting to smoke. The two of you need to come up for air." Salina's throaty chuckle doused the flame.

"I am going to kill her," Cinnamon muttered.

"Do you want help?"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## Chapter 21

It was a conspiracy.

Someone was making sure they were never alone for more than a few minutes.

True, the situation had gotten out of control and she still hadn't decided if she was ready to give up her *gift*. But she had the right to make her own choices.

With her hands on Jack's chest, Cinnamon pushed herself into a sitting position. Jack popped the recliner's footrest down. With his elbows braced on his knees, he ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Salina, this had better be good," Cinnamon warned.

"Betsy needs you. I'll be in the barn."

When they reached the barn, Salina was outside Betsy's stall.

"Hi girl. How are the babies?" Instead of taking the carrot Cinnamon offered, Betsy nudged Cinnamon's shoulder with her big head.

"Do you want some extra TLC or are you trying to tell us you don't feel good?" Running her hands over Betsy's protruding belly, she saw the foals' steady heartbeats. They were quiet, like they too were conserving their energy. A ripple ran down Betsy's belly.

Three times, Ginger had made her watch a video on childbirth. Several times during the show the camera zeroed in on the woman's tight belly. Horse or human didn't much matter; pushing a baby out meant contractions.

"Jack, how long is a horse normally in labor?"

Jack punched numbers into the wall phone hung on a support beam. "Hugh, how long does it take a horse to deliver ... Shit. Get your ass home ... Will do."

Jack ran his fingers through his hair. "The answer is normally under an hour. Hugh is calling the vet. I'm going inside to get the portable phone; it has a speaker."

As soon as Jack was gone, Salina cooed, "That was a steamy scene I interrupted."

"Your point is?"

"I'm not judging. Just wondering if you've made a decision?"

Cinnamon blew out a sigh. "Yeah, I want to bed two men?"

"It happens all the time. I call it insanity lust."

"Insanity works. My soul mate and Jack both struggle with trust issues. And both of them have this macho male idea they need to protect me. I'm not a china doll who will break if dropped."

"In Jack's line of work, I'm thinking trust would have to be earned. Those XY chromosomes that give males that sexy tool between their legs also produces a few male orientated personality traits. When something threatens their world, their first reaction is to strike out. Their second reaction is to wrap us in

cotton. Use their shortcoming to your advantage."

"How?"

"As much as it pains me to say this, I'm dead. It's a once in a lifetime experience, but that didn't stop Gus from hovering after the explosion. I let him; it strokes his ego and doesn't cost me anything. He knows I can take care of myself, but that testosterone mentality needs to know I appreciate his protection."

Cinnamon didn't know a woman stronger than her mother. But she could remember times her mother had smiled and said nothing when her dad had gotten overly protectively. She'd assumed Uncle Gus had been hired to protect her and her sisters. But maybe he was also there to protect her mom.

"You and Jack were doing some serious tongue swapping. How does he rate against your soul mate?"

Cinnamon arched her brow. "Is rating one guy against another kosher?"

"Go into any bar and you'll hear men comparing female asses, tits, and legs. In public, polite women only compare men's kisses and asses. Now answer the question."

"Eros is more demanding. Like he's impatient or maybe it's frustration. He's always saying we need to leave, there isn't time, or we aren't safe. I can't fault his style, but I never feel like I have all of his attention.

"With Jack, I feel his desire and he makes me feel like we have all the time in the world. It's like he's concentrating on me, nothing else."

"Different situations, different reactions. No different than real life."

"Are you saying Jack and my soul mate could be the same person?"

"Not me. That would be against the rules. Lord knows this fairy godmother would never break the rules." Salina's tongue-in-cheek statement was followed by a stomp of Betsy's dinner-plate-size hoof.

Tossing her head, Betsy whinnied; water gushed down her hind legs.

"Hell's bells. Betsy, I hope to heck you know what you need to do." In answer, Betsy's muzzle butted Cinnamon's shoulder and she whinnied.

"Hugh's on the way," Jack said as he walked into the barn.

"How long before the vet arrives?"

"Not coming." Jack entered the stall. "Betsy's water broke."

"Tell me something I don't know," Cinnamon said as she ran her hands over Betsy's belly.

Jack bit back a smile. "Hugh's on the phone. I was telling him."

"Oh, shouldn't we boil water or something?"

"Not necessary. Jack, get the bottle of alcohol in the tack room and a couple of clean towels." Hugh's comment could be clearly heard from the phone's speaker.

Betsy circled the stall a couple of times. She lay down, stood up, circled the stall several more times, and lay back down.

Not knowing what would help, Cinnamon rubbed Betsy's belly. In the same voice she used to hypnotize people, she handed out words of encouragement.

Like a tight band, Betsy's stomach contracted. Hoping to help ease the pain, Cinnamon stroked the horses belly and sent energy through her hands. When the contraction ended Betsy was breathing heavy.

Cinnamon and Betsy worked together through several more contractions.

Jack paced.

"I can see two hooves," Jack shouted into the phone.

In reply, they heard boots hitting the ground. Hugh and Terry entered the stall at a run.

"She's starting another contraction," Cinnamon said.

"Tell me when the contraction starts to ease." With the foal's nose out of the birth canal, Hugh grabbed the hooves and pulled.

"The contraction's easing."

The foal was half out.

Betsy was breathing heavy.

Cinnamon didn't stop her soft words of encouragement.

Using one of the clean towels, Hugh cleared mucus away from the foal's nose.

"The contraction's starting."

Hugh pulled.

"You're about to become a mommy, Betsy. Sorry I didn't get you something to focus on. Can you pant? Gin says that's supposed to help ease you through the contraction. Don't tell Gin, but it sounds funny when she practices her breathing. She goes ha, ha, he, he."

Betsy snorted.

"Okay, a snort works. You're doing good, baby. Once you see your healthy boys, you'll forget about the pain, I promise."

Before the contraction eased, the foal was out. Lifting her head, Betsy looked over her shoulder. As if the sight of the colt gave her strength, Betsy laid her head back down and another contraction rolled over her belly.

"Look at them. The babies are beautiful and Betsy's so gentle with them." Cinnamon wiped tears from her cheeks.

Standing behind her, Jack folded Cinnamon into his arms. Kissing her on the top of the head, he ignored Hugh and Terry's grins.

"So are you, Sweetheart," he whispered.

\* \* \* \*

Dinner was over.

The kitchen was cleaned.

With one leg drawn up, Cinnamon half-faced Jack in the double recliner. Jack's arm rested on her leg. With Terry and Hugh sitting in the other two recliners, there would be no repeat of the afternoon's entertainment.

Nodding towards the chalkboard, Cinnamon said, "I still think we're missing something."

"I agree. I keep thinking this has something to do with Walker and the casino," Jack said.

"Sidney has a reputation for being a ruthless businessman. When Walker told him he was going to decline the offer to buy Joker's Wild, Sidney lowered the asking price to well under value. That doesn't fit."

"I saw Sidney in the lobby at Dreamland. His aura gave me the creeps. Could he have been desperate for cash flow?"

"We checked that out. His bank accounts are solid. And that's not taking into account any money he has offshore," Terry said.

"Were there any names in the red diary you weren't expecting?"

"Grover recorded dates and first initial with a last name. There are several unknown names. They could be the names of the people switching the counterfeit bills at the casinos or some side deal he had going. As for the known names, there were no surprises."

\* \* \* \*

"I'm going with you."

"No, you're not."

"Think again."

"I can help." Cinnamon didn't know how, but she wasn't going to be left at the ranch.

Walking into the kitchen, Hugh settled the discussion.

"You can ride with me."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 22

Grover was dead. Problem solved.

Evan was in jail. Problem shelved.

That left Thornton, Sidney, and at least one unknown.

On his side were Terry, Hugh, and a handful of ghosts that were sure to cause trouble.

And Cinnamon, as determined to help as he was determined to keep her out of the crossfire that was sure to follow.

Life couldn't get better.

As Jack pulled to a rolling stop at the entrance to the gated community, the guard gave Jack a friendly wave through.

The earth-tone stucco houses dotting the community blended with the hillside and draught resistant landscapes.

Pulling into the curved driveway of a sprawling ranch style house, sitting on half an acre of prime view property, Jack parked the pickup behind a black Mercedes.

Under his suit jacket, Jack tried to roll the tension out of his tight shoulder. Donning his Mr. Nice face, he rang the doorbell.

Thornton answered the door.

A wide expanse of gray slate led them directly into a vast living room. Wall-to-wall tinted windows offered an impressive view of Boise and the Owyhee Mountain ranges in the distance. A white on cream décor offered two sitting areas. A slate fireplace dominated the far wall and a slate and glass bar was set between the living room and formal dining room.

A man with an Alfred Hitchcock profile handed him a scotch on the rocks. "At last we meet. I'm Sidney Lutz."

"Jack Abbot. You're the owner of Joker's Wild."

"You've done your homework."

"I'm a gambler. I like to know who owns the establishments where I win my money."

"Not Joker's Wild, I hope. I can't afford the loss." Like his limp-as-a-dishrag handshake, Sidney's smile did nothing to garner an ounce of friendliness. "Have a seat; the other investors will be here shortly."

Picking a barrel chair that placed the window at his back and gave him a full view of the living room and dining area, Jack rested an ankle on his knee.

"When Thornton approached me, I was told I would be the only investor."

Miss Jayne materialized directly behind Thornton. Wearing a leather outfit that would have made Annie Oakley proud, she gave him a finger wave. To stifle his groan, Jack lifted the tumbler to his mouth.

"True. True. You're the only one we approached. I was referring to the others in our elite society." Sidney sipped his neat Gin and tapped a finger on the armchair.

Behind Sidney, the sun-streaked air turned iridescent. Like puzzle pieces coming together, Salina appeared. Her charcoal-black leather pants were painted on. The sleeves of her bibbed white blouse were rolled to the elbows. A charcoal-black leather vest didn't hide the holster strapped across her shoulders. Jack could see the black butt of a handgun resting in the unsnapped holster.

Salina gave him a cocky smile.

Jack pulled himself back to the conversation.

"Interesting term; how many members in your elite society?"

Thornton took a healthy gulp of his scotch.

Sidney frowned. Polishing off his gin, he walked to the bar and filled the tumbler to the brim.

Sticking her finger in the amber liquid, Salina flicked her finger in Sidney's face. While he was trying to figure out what happened, she helped herself to a finger-licking sample of his booze.

"Good stuff, Sidney. With your diabetes, this stuff will kill ya'. Jack, Sidney has a peashooter strapped to his ankle and a knife in his left pocket. He's been drinking since he rolled out of bed.

"Thornton is unarmed."

Picking up the crystal tumbler, Sidney took a healthy swallow before walking back to his chair.

"I think you've been given an erroneous impression. I'm not the head of this little group. What exactly have you been told?"

"You need someone who can tap into government sites without getting caught. Having useful connections, on both sides of the border, was mandatory. Thornton indicated there were five main players." Knowing lies made good bait, he added, "Evan mouthed off that there were double that."

"Evan miscounted." Frowning, Sidney concentrated on the drink in his hand. "There were seven of us. Last night, that number dropped by one." That said, he drained the tumbler.

At the rate he was guzzling the gin, Jack was afraid Sidney would pass out before he got straight answers.

"Thornton mentioned that he knew the guy who blew up the mountain top last night. I didn't think they had found a body or given out a name."

"They haven't. I was talking to him just before he entered that rat hole. Not much in the paper yet, but if there's any body to identify, it will come out that Grover used to be FBI. What they won't say is he had a screw loose."

"If that's the case, why trust him with your business?"

Sidney gave a cold, heartless chuckle. "Never trusted the SOB. In the early years, he needed seed money to start an operation. Things didn't work out; he owed me. I made sure he never forgot that. A few years back, Grover got lucky. He set himself up as a drug lord in South America and got another operation going. After that, he faked his death and we built an empire."

"Couldn't have had too many screws loose to do all that." Jack's head was buzzing. What other business?

"Yeah, he could. He was like his old man, sharp as a tack, didn't have a conscience and he was mean to the bone. Ruthless SOB, he was never satisfied with what he had. He'd get something in his head and no amount of reason would stop him. That made him stupid."

"You worked with his old man?"

"Family," Sidney said and sneered.

Jack didn't say anything until Sidney had a fresh drink in hand.

"Was it greed or stupidity that killed him?"

"Probably both. He bought that hillside for one reason, to spy on a guy who's considered the expert on counterfeiting. Can't remember how many times we argued about that one. Took him four years to dig an underground bunker. It was nothing more than a fancy rat hole, but he'd spend days holed up in there."

"Interesting place to run a business." Jack voice was casual. To anyone who didn't know him, his posture was relaxed.

Sidney didn't act like he'd heard Jack. "He had all kinds of equipment set up in that rat hole and more up top. Most of it was high tech stuff he ripped off the government. Claimed he recorded every conversation within a five-mile radius. That's going to be a problem now."

"What's going to be a problem?" Jack was surprised his voice was steady.

"We argued continually about the risks. But I have to admit those listening devices were better than paid informants when it came to learning what the feds knew about our operation."

Jack thought he heard Cinnamon say, 'hell fire and damnation,' or maybe it was his sentiment. Just the information Grover would have learned in the last three days had Jack breaking out in a cold sweat.

While Sidney talked, Salina and Miss Jayne had headed into the dining room and then out of sight.

"Should anything the feds know concern me?"

"No."

"Could be what Grover didn't know got him killed."

"Not likely. The bunker's security was first class scary. Ten feet inside the openings there were fingerprint identity pads. The wrong fingerprint activated two gates that closed off the tunnel. The minute the locks were set, the space filled with a deadly gas. If a person was smart enough to get past that security, Grover had a camera, computer and DVD player rigged to explode."

"Three items a person doing a search would pick up and turn on. Smart thinking."

"Exactly."

"See, I told you looking inside that cubby hole wasn't dumb." Miss Jayne, high pitched, gloating, drifted into the room.

"Jack, the rest of the house is empty." Salina looked pissed when she entered the living room. "There's a

fully equipped playroom behind a false wall in the master bedroom. It's more elaborate than Grover's setup and recently used. If you want me to check out the computer in the office, fake another sip of that scotch you're wasting."

Resisting the urge to glance at Salina, Jack didn't move a finger. "You're saying this guy blew himself up?"

"Grover had a real hate for two people. He claimed they were the only two who could possibly compromise the bunker. A couple months back, one of the two got too close to the truth on the operation south of the border. Grover eliminated him. Like I said, Grover was a cocky SOB. The last time we talked, he was bragging about hitting it big. Said he'd learned something that was going to make him king of the world."

"He didn't tell you what he'd learned?"

"Nah. Grover just kept laughing like a hyena and talking about settling the score with his old boss. The guy liked his tequila. I figure he had a little too much, and set off one of the bombs he was making."

"Gotta piss. Thornton, pour me another drink and top off Jack's."

Salina stood beside Jack's chair. "These two are wearing pretty smug smiles for having lost a partner."

"Thornton used to wear that same smile when the dealer slipped him an ace from the bottom of the deck," Miss Jayne said.

"My, my. Caitlin just told me your thoughts. You're right, Sidney is known for being hot-tempered and close mouthed. You can thank me later for casting a teeny tiny spell to loosen his tongue. From the way he's pouring the booze down his gut, the spell worked with more than one inhibition. Let's keep our fingers crossed that he doesn't pass out before the main show."

Jack didn't give Sidney time to sit back down before saying, "You called Grover a drug lord. If he is gone, there will be a war to establish a new pecking order. What makes you think the new drug lord will work with you?"

"Won't matter. We're cutting off that end of the operation." Sidney grunted around his tipped glass.

"Thornton? Our agreement was that I buy into a full service organization." Jack's voice was stone hard cold.

"We're streamlining the organization. Before you blow off the opportunity to make billions, let Thornton explain a few facts." Sidney's words were slightly slurred.

"Grover, Sidney and I shared the expense of financing the making of three sets of counterfeit plates."

"I was told there were two sets."

"That was what Sidney and I were led to believe," Thornton said.

When Sidney glared at him, Thornton slunk deeper into his chair and guzzled his scotch.

"Grover was double crossing you?"

Thornton ignored the question.

"The third set was put up for auction. When we learned the truth, Grover wasn't able to cover his ass fast enough. He had a little talk with the engraver. That didn't go well, or so Grover claimed." Thornton's



half-drunk chuckle was sinister.

"Okay, I'm listening." Jack was getting a real bad feeling.

"Shortly after going up for auction, two of the plates disappeared."

"You think Grover got them?"

"We know he did. Shortly after that, we got word that the hundred-dollar plate had been sold to a drug dealer on this side of the boarder. The guy had balls, but no brains. He called us to offer a deal. You know Pete?"

No doubt about it, the gut was twisting tighter.

Salina placed her hand on his shoulder. The warmth spread through his veins and dissolved the fist size cannonball in his gut.

"Know a few. Give me a last name."

"Doesn't matter, the guy's dead. To get his hands on that plate, Grover killed him."

"Grover was a busy boy."

"Covering your ass is busy work. But like I said, he wasn't fast enough."

"And you're still a long winded pompous ass," Miss Jayne muttered. "Get to the point or I'll take Salina's gun and shoot you in the balls."

"You knew he got his hands on the set of plates and you didn't demand he turn them over? What type of organization are you running?"

Sidney's face tightened. He polished off his drink. "Fair question. We wanted to know where the plates were before confronting him. His death took care of a sticky situation, nicely."

Jacks eyes narrowed.

Sidney walked to the bar for a refill.

"You have the third set of plates?"

"No. They're buried with Grover."

"How do you know that?"

"Pillow talk. A friend of his owed us a favor. Goes to show you can't trust anyone."

"If the cops dig up the hill, they'll find them."

"Who cares, we have two sets."

"You were his laundry service for the drug money."

"Right."

"Grover had contacts, and you knew how to work the counterfeit operation. Without his demise, it doesn't sound like you needed me at all."

"That's where you're wrong. When Grover took a set of plates for himself, he made a big mistake," Sidney said.

"I'm listening."

"The society works because everyone has information and individual talents that hold it together. You can't have a renegade in the group."

"You picked me as Grover's replacement?"

"We did our homework. Your name kept coming to the top of the list as the person to contact."

The front door opened as Jack said, "My credentials are good, but from what you've been telling me, my connections don't run as deep and wide as Grover's."

"You're selling yourself short, Jack."

A willowy blonde, wearing a hundred-watt smile strolled into the living room.

Beside the blonde was a bone-thin older woman who had obviously had several facelifts. She headed straight to a wingback chair. As she took a long, staged drag off an ivory cigarette holder, the woman's eyes narrowed when they landed on Thornton. "Where's my drink?" The smoke damaged voice was raspy hoarse.

"I look better dead than that one does alive." Miss Jayne snickered. "This other one, the skin covers her bones real pretty like. But I wouldn't turn my back towards her or you'll be feeling the point of a knife between your shoulder blades."

"Jack Abbott, since these two fools have no manners, I'm Helen Owens, and this is Kate Bradford." Taking a sip of a Tequila Twist, she didn't offer her hand.

"Nice to meet you ... at last." The voice was silky soft, with no identifying accent. Jack couldn't find a mental file that fit the face or the body. But the perfume, there was no mistaking the memories or the scent, White Diamonds.

Her handshake held the same direct firmness. Her gaze was level. They said the eyes mirrored the soul but Jack couldn't remember ever paying attention to her eyes. Her name had been Kathy Brantford. As Kathy, her hair had been a nondescript brown and her compact body had nudged a scale towards one sixty.

The last time he'd seen her, she'd been dead.

"Have we met?"

"I think we'd both remember an event like that, Jack. Grover expressed high words of praise for your work. In fact, he considered you his equal."

When Jack returned to his seat, he saw that Sidney was frowning as he nursed another drink.

"Considering that the man blew himself and half a mountain sky high, that might not be a compliment."

Kate's laugh was practiced; nice with just the right pitch, but it held no substance of truth or mirth.

Helen watched the byplay with speculation. Whatever she was thinking was hidden under her taut botox frozen face. "How much have you been told?"

"You were ready to remove Grover from your elite society; his untimely death made the break clean, quick and painless. Because of information you have been given, you believe my talents would dovetail nicely with your needs."

"Nicely said. Kate was the first to bring your name to my attention. Then Thornton mentioned he met you when you worked with Walt Kipfer. Your computer skills have made you a reputation. As much as those skills will be appreciated, it's your prior connection with Walt that persuaded me to talk to you."

Kathy and Grover had risen from their graves. Last Jack knew, Walt was still breathing, but the case against him had been closed for years. Instead of death coming in threes, the dead were coming to life. Whatever reversed the process had a wicked sense of humor.

"Haven't talked to Walt in years."

"He did mention that because of some problems it was best to cut contact, but when you save a man's life he doesn't forget."

"Tell him I appreciate the vote of confidence. Who is in charge of this elite society and what exactly do you expect from me to become a member?"

"I'm CEO." Helen sat straighter in her chair. "Kate is in charge of our entertainment division. Sidney runs the laundry service; Thornton is in charge of employment and handling the small details."

"And Evan?"

"Evan worked in entertainment with Kate. Because of the unfortunate circumstances he is currently experiencing, that will no longer be possible."

"You are cutting him out of the group?"

Helen looked at Sidney as she spoke. "No, he'll stay. Evan has talents that will make him useful in other areas."

"Is the woman flipping insane? He was going to date rape a woman and she calls it unfortunate circumstances. So help me, Jack, I'm going to pop that broad's fat lips."

Salina drew her arm back. Instead of hitting Helen, she swept through her and swiped a glass bowl off the sofa table behind her. Shattered glass sprayed across the hard wood floor.

Helen's hand went to her throat. She visibly shrank into the chair and her rail-thin body began to shake. "What happened? Who's here?"

Kate walked to the table. Picking up a calico cat, she rubbed the cat's head against her cheek. "Relax. This cute little pussy knocked a bowl off the table." Kate gave Jack a 'come screw me' smile.

"Jeez, the woman's needs to learn the meaning of subtle. Please tell me you never scratched that gal's itch?"

Jack's answer was a slight shudder.

"Thornton, get that damn cat out of here," Helen demanded.

"Hell, how did it get in here?" Thornton mumbled as Kate handed him the calico.

"Sidney mentioned that Grover's end of the operation was going to be closed down."

"Already done. Grover ran the operation. The only US contact we were aware of is no longer available."

"Why doesn't the old biddy just say Pete's dead?" Sticking her face inside a closed black lacquered entertainment center, Miss Jayne's voice was garbled.

"With what we hold in our hands it's not worth the time or the effort to continue with Grover's end of the operation," Helen gloated.

"Bills can only be used for a certain amount of time before the serial numbers are posted on every Wal-Mart cash register."

Miss Jayne pulled her hand back and punched Thornton in the arm. Thornton swatted the air. Miss Jayne giggled and punched him again.

Salina, churning up dust devils as she paced in front of Helen, stopped. "Knock it off. You're distracting Jack."

"And your temper tantrum wasn't distracting?" Miss Jayne huffed, but she didn't attempt to hit Thornton again.

Jack took a breath of relief.

"What if I were to tell you we can change the serial number for every run or for every bill made?"

"I'd be impressed," Jack answered.

"It takes a little doing to get the numbers set properly, but the engraver was clever. With two plates per denomination, we can print a couple hundred bills an hour."

"That seems slow."

Before Jack could calculate the dollar value, Miss Jayne said, "That's thirty-four thousand dollars an hour. My goodness, in three days they could have a million dollars."

"Quality. Any faster, there's problems with ink running and smearing." Helen took a sip of her drink. Over the rim of the glass, she watched Jack.

Jack gave a slight nod. "Thornton told me about the practice runs done at casinos over the last few months. It won't take long for someone to figure out a way for the slot machines to detect a phony bill."

"By the time that happens, we will have moved on. With American currency accepted in most countries, the only limits to the possibilities are the ones we create." Helen's artificially plumped lips twisted into an odd mixture of half sneer, half smile.

"Jeez, you're a greedy bitch. You're older than dirt. With one foot in the grave, what the hell do you think you're going to do with the money?" Salina was shouting in Helen's face and from the frantic look in Helen's eyes, she was feeling something. Jack wouldn't mind hearing the answer, but not at the expense of losing what little control he had over the meeting.

As he looked at Kate, Jack's smile didn't reach his eyes. "What is the entertainment part of this operation?"

"Anything your heart desires. For the right price, we offer pleasure in any package, age, and gender you request."

"And Thornton had the nerve to call *me* a whore." Miss Jayne slapped him. There was enough force behind the swing to make his head nod.

"Thornton, instead of falling asleep, make yourself useful; get me another drink," Helen demanded.

He rubbed the side of his head. "I'm not—" A look from Sidney cut him short.

"What was Evan's job?" Jack asked.

"Why, are you thinking of applying for the position?" Kate's chuckle was coy, her body language inviting.

"Hardly. My connections are part of what brought me to your attention. I might know someone who could fill Evan's position."

"Too bad. We could have had a mutually rewarding working relationship." With a sigh, Kate said, "Evan met the new arrivals. Before delivery, he made certain the merchandise was worth top dollar and amenable. He also arranged for delivery of merchandise to the clients."

Jack's stomach recoiled at the implications.

"Evan was busy."

Kate shrugged. "Toys were shipped within seventy-two hours of the order date. Evan traveled to delivery sites. Don't feel sorry for him; he had plenty of playtime! If you change your mind, I'd be happy to join you on the overseas deliveries."

"Contacts?" Jack looked at Thornton.

"My job. No one touches my computer program but me." Kate sounded defensive.

"I thought Grover was the computer whiz."

"Grover was a lot of things. An overconfident, overzealous fool was one of them. He didn't touch my program or my merchandise."

Jack didn't know what to make of Kate/Kathy. She'd been Grover's bed partner and informant during an undercover operation that had taken them south of the border. Thornton and Sidney knew Grover had been FBI. Surely Kate had the same information. And she recognized him; she'd made that clear.

"Your end of the operation is located where?" Jack hoped he sounded casually interested, but his gut was tied in knots. Getting the answers he needed was becoming a painfully slow operation.

"Thanks to the computer age, I can conduct business from anywhere. I spend a fair amount of time in Hong Kong and Europe, but it's always nice to come home and visit old friends."

"Can't fault her outfit, it shows her toned body to perfection. But my God, a hooker on a street corner couldn't be more blatant," Salina said.

"You have half the operation based in Atlantic City and the rest out of a computer. According to Sidney, Grover did his research out of a hole in the ground. I have legitimate businesses to run. Where do you expect me to be located and what do you want me to do?"

"As long as you get the job done, the where doesn't matter. During our research, we were never told where you are located." Kate gave Jack a sexy pout.

"Is that a problem?" Jack shot back.

"Not really, but I like to know how handy my partners are and how willing they are to fit into our elite society.

Jack took a breath. "Fair enough. I have a place in Vegas and another in Miami."

"Isn't that convenient?" Helen's plumped lips almost smiled. "Our first priority is to expand the laundry operation to Vegas."

"Won't be easy. What do you have in mind?"

"We were working on a plan last year. Things didn't work out as hoped, but we're ready to finalize a deal." Helen glanced at Sidney as she spoke.

"I hadn't heard that there was a casino on the market."

"I'm not going to pay a dime for what I rightfully own." Checking her watch, Helen paused.

"I'm listening."

"My deceased husband and I were full partners in Dreamland Casino. His bastard son and the company lawyer conspired against me. Shortly before Gus died, he changed his will. I spent years fighting Walker, but in the end the will stood and I lost the casino."

"You lying bitch. I will kill you before you can hurt Walker," Salina shrieked.

In the backyard, a bolt of lightning hit the ground.

The women yelped.

Sidney and Thornton headed for the bar.

Salina took her hands off Helen's throat. Muttering under her breath, she paced the room.

"What is your plan now?" It took all of Jack acting skills to not overreact.

Visibly shaken, Helen polished off her drink. "Kate tried sweet talking Walker into marriage, but he wasn't interested. Sidney worked on another plan that would have made it easy to implement Walker in illegal activity, but that didn't work out. Grover came up with a plan to set up a bank account in Walker's name. The counterfeit money we've turned at the casinos has been deposited in that account.

"The next phase started last night. Our band of merry men and women visited several casinos in Vegas. All the money was deposited in Walker's account today."

"An investigation won't get you the casino."

"No it won't. But his new wife will," Helen replied.

For a split second, Jack didn't hide his surprise.

Kate smiled.

"Rosemary Owens has been invited to this meeting. I expected the driver to deliver her half an hour ago."

As if on cue the doorbell rang.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 23

Brushing past Thornton, Cinnamon marched straight to Helen.

Salina placed a warning hand on Jack's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jack, I couldn't warn you."

"Walker's waiting at the airport; you have ten minutes." Cinnamon crossed her arms and impatiently tapped a finger.

"I don't take threats, I make them. Have a seat." Helen swept her arm towards the couch.

Cinnamon took the barrel chair between Jack and Sidney.

"Hello, Jack. I thought you had better taste in friends."

Turning, she nodded to Sidney. Passing over Thornton, she arched her brow when she reached Kate. "We've met, but you'll have to refresh my memory."

"Hello, Rosemary. It was at a garden party Francine Ergot gave."

"How could I forget? You're the bitch in heat that tried shoving your tongue down my husband's throat. I've taken a seat. I've made pleasant chitchat with your friends. I'll take a rain check on a drink and cookies. Now what the hell do you want?"

"I want the casino." Helen acted like she had asked for something cheap like a new doll instead of a multi-million dollar business.

"What, you think just because you say 'I want', I'm going to wrap the casino in birthday paper and give it to you as a gift?"

"That is exactly what I think." Helen lifted her glass as if toasting the question.

"This had better be good, because so far you're wasting my time."

Salina placed her hand on Cinnamon's shoulder. "Caitlin wants you to know that the attitude is perfect. You're pushing all the right buttons."

"I came into possession of some information that you might not know. Shortly before you were born, your mother was abducted."

It took every bit of control Cinnamon had not to lose her poker face. "Okay, you got my attention. Keep talking."

"The man and woman who detained your mother had reason to believe she was a witch."

"Oh please, not again. You already tried that once with Salina."

Like red-hot lava, Helen's aura churned, bubbled and rolled black around the edges. "Don't mention that bitch's name in my presence."

"Kind of hard not to do, if you're going to play the same game. Is there a meaning to this story?"

"After your mother was released unharmed, your father hired a bodyguard to protect your mother and his three darling identical daughters."



"I bet the Globe will pay big bucks to know a man hired a bodyguard to protect his family from crazies like you. Since I've never heard that story and you have a history of making up lies about people that can't deny or confirm what you say you're losing my interest. Need I remind you what happened the last time you went to the media with a half cocked story about Salina turning you into an old hag? Don't bother trying to snarl. Your botox is shifting; it isn't a pretty sight."

"You insolent bitch."

"I'll take that as a compliment. You've told a beginning and an ending that mean nothing. Is there a middle to this story?"

"We did some checking..."

"Who are *we*?" Cinnamon demanded.

"I did the checking," Kate said.

Cinnamon arched her brow. "Okay. You tell me what you found."

"There is a distant relationship between you and Walker. Your mother could read minds. Walker's mother could cast spells," Kate said.

"Claims who? A woman who, after going to the media with a falsified tape, is being investigated for fraud? Or an old newspaper clipping I've never heard about?"

"That's a lie, the tape was not falsified."

Cinnamon ignored Helen's outburst.

"Reading minds and casting spells sounds like fun. But what you're saying is nothing more than a fantasy I can repeat during sleepy time when babies need a nap. Maybe if we dig deep, deep down you can find a thread of truth that will not induce sleep for the next few hours."

Jack had kept his eyes focused on Helen and Kate. But with Cinn spurting words that didn't make sense, he glanced at her. Her left hand was rocking back and forth. Sidney was fixated on the sparkle coming off the huge green stone on her ring finger.

"Rosemary, be reasonable. We both know Salina cast a spell on Helen. If she hadn't, Gus would have followed through with his plan to divorce her. The media never got a hint about your mother's abduction. The information I have comes from a highly classified file a friend provided. Your mother was able to read minds. According to the report, there were witnesses to that fact. There are also documented incidences that happened when your aunt was present. Need I say more?"

"Prove what you're saying. Back up your words with something besides allegations."

"Grant you, everything is rumor and hearsay, but it all adds up. You and your sisters have healthy bank accounts that continue to rise in an unhealthy economy," Kate said.

"Which means what, we got lucky? We have insider-trading information? We have a damn good financial planner?"

"We don't have the type of information you're demanding, but I guarantee you what we have will destroy your family. There is enough truth to make people speculate. Cockroaches, wanting their fifteen minutes of fame will crawl out of the woodwork. Your every action will be watched. Everything you say will be

analyzed. Unless you get Walker to agree to our terms, we are prepared to make your lives a living hell. Think of what that will do to Ginger and the babies she's expecting, the children you might someday have and your sister Cinnamon. We are prepared to be fair, but you need to be reasonable." Kate acted like she was talking to an unreasonable child.

"Fair and reasonable. Give me your definition of the words."

Thornton hadn't uttered a word since Cinn arrived. Sidney's glassy stare confirmed he was in la-la land.

Helen had come on strong and demanding, but since Kate had taken over the conversation and negotiations, she sat meekly, with her hands folded in her lap.

Jack was having a hard time sitting back and not asking questions, while Cinn played tough. But she was doing a good job of pulling information.

"We are willing to allow Walker to continue as the figurehead of Dreamland. He would run the hotel, food concessions and continue to manage the casino staff and shop owners that lease retail space. For doing that, he would receive a generous salary and our word that no discriminating information about his mother or your family will be made public. Let me make this perfectly clear, Walker would have no say in any restructuring of the casino, the cash flow or the security staff we will hire."

"In your dreams. That's never going to happen."

"The second option is you sell me the casino. The offer will be for a minimal amount, but with the information we have and the damage we can inflict I have no reason to be generous."

Cinnamon tilted her head. She looked from Kate to Helen and back to Kate, and thought, *auras don't lie*.

"You were doing good, real good in fact. Had me fooled, but you just slipped up. I don't care if you have pictures of Salina turning people into jackasses and a revolving door of people willing to say whatever about my mother or my aunt; you aren't getting your hands on Dreamland."

"You're a little fool. I will bury you alive," Helen spat.

"Which is it, Kate: we or me? Is the old hag running the show or are you?"

Helen shot out of the chair.

Kate and Helen gasped when Salina materialized.

Drawing the snub-nosed revolver out of the holster, Salina fired.

Not to be outdone, Miss Jayne materialized. Holding a double barrel shotgun, she had it pointed at Thornton's crotch. "I dare you to move, Sweetie Pie."

Thornton's Adam's apple bobbed. Lifting his hands in surrender, he didn't take his eyes off Miss Jayne's trigger finger.

"If I were you, I wouldn't do that." Materializing, Caitlin stood beside Kate. "The couple that kidnapped me thought it would be easy to outsmart me. Think one thing and do another, sounds simple. But your brain doesn't work that way; just before you act, you transmit your thoughts. Pull the gun out of your purse, but use the tips of those pink painted claws. Set the gun on the floor and slide it towards Jack. Because if you don't, Salina and Miss Jayne will make you wish you had."

"Too bad, I was hoping for a opportunity to deck her," Cinnamon said when Jack had the Beretta in hand.

"Sidney." Helen, curled in a fetal position, moaned and cried.

"Sidney can't help you. He's asleep and won't wake up until I tell him to." Slumping sideways in the chair, the man started snoring.

Kate's eyes narrowed. Cinn watched her aura change as she calculated, weighed the odds and formed a conclusion. "You're not Rosemary."

"Never said I was."

"You mentioned the garden party."

"I said you looked familiar. You mentioned the garden party. When Rose told me what happened at that party, we were looking at a picture of you tacked on the wall in the casino's security room."

"She cheats at cards?" Salina laughed.

"Worse, she bragged to Walker that she cheats at cards."

"You're the one that came to town to do the cop show. I can't believe I didn't think of that possibility." A hint of admiration bled through Kate's aura.

"Salina shot me. I need a doctor; I'm going to bleed to death," Helen whimpered.

Kate started to rise.

Aiming the snub nosed revolver, Salina pulled the trigger.

"You bitch. Jack, I'm bleeding, help me."

"Give it a rest. No one's ever died from a water pistol filled with strawberry KOOL-AID." Caitlin shot Kate a disgusted look.

"I ... Shit, this is a new dress and that stuff stains worse than blood. Helen, shut-up or I'll wrestle that gun out of Jack's hand and really shoot you," Kate shouted.

"Peroxide will get the stain..."

"Salina." Caitlin's tone stopped her cold.

"A ruined dress can't be near as bad as the bullet I saw you take in the back, Kathy. Or do you prefer Kate?" Jack asked.

Dabbing at the KOOL-AID with the corner of a decorative pillow, Kathy/Kate stopped. "How did you recognize me?"

"You should have changed perfumes, Kathy. You used to bathe in White Diamonds; it's not a scent I'd ever forget. And you still have trouble pronouncing R's without a slight accent. Grover carried your body to the church. The two of us gave the priest every dime we had to give you a decent burial. What happened?"

"For months, I was more dead than alive. The priest and his cook nursed me back to health. A year

passed. We heard rumors of a ruthless gringo building a large drug business. Because no one knew what he looked like the locals called him Shadow. One day when passing through town, Grover saw me. By then he had a small army working for him. He needed someone he could trust to cover for him when he was gone.

"You're good at what you do. For two years, I've researched you, made discreet inquiries and followed the work you did with Pete. You have a reputation for taking jobs no one else wants, and accomplishing them. That impressed me when you worked with Grover in South America and it still does. I never got a whiff of a connection between you and Walker. Whatever he's paying you, I'll triple the offer."

"Not interested."

"I need to pee," Thornton whined.

"Then I guess it's time to put you out of your misery. Too bad you don't remember killing me; pulling this trigger would have so much more meaning if you did."

Lowering the shotgun, Miss Jayne shook her head. "What a shame. Salina and I spent all that time looking for the right present and Thornton pees his pants and passes out before the rubber darts hit his pride and joy."

\* \* \* \*

Jack was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and typing a report into his laptop.

The aroma of pot roast simmering in the oven filled the room.

Cinnamon was rolling out a piecrust.

Terry and Hugh walked into the kitchen, waddling behind them was Petunia.

"I thought the stunts Salina and Miss Jayne pulled at the house were funny, but it got better." Hugh's grin widened.

"Who saw them?" Cinnamon arched a brow and held her breath.

"Relax. I saw one cop shudder and look over his shoulder a few times. No one else noticed anything unusual. Miss Jayne, Salina, Gus and your folks did several rotations through the interrogation rooms. Helen cried when she saw Salina and Gus and begged for mercy when she saw your folks and Miss Jayne. Kate tried negotiating deals where they got a cut of the profits. Sidney has a really sick mind; he propositioned the women. Thornton whimpered and covered his crotch every time he saw Miss Jayne."

"What are the chances of them being released on bond or being declared insane?" Cinnamon asked.

"None."

"Good."

\* \* \* \*

*When Cinnamon arrived at the little café, Eros was sitting at their table.*

*"Has hell frozen over?"*

Eros kissed the palm of her hand. "I deserved that. I've missed you."

"It's only been a couple of days since we met."

"The feeling has nothing to do with time."

"Flattery, how nice."

"In the last few months, I've been preoccupied."

"Really? I never noticed."

"God, I've missed your sense of humor."

"Then you haven't been listening. It's been right here with me."

"That's what I'm trying to say. Physically I've been here, but my mind has been elsewhere. That wasn't fair to you."

"Don't expect me to disagree. What made you see the error of your ways?"

"The problem that was occupying my time has been resolved. When I thought back over the time we've spent together I realized I spent half the time stressing about what I wasn't doing. The rest of the time, I was looking over my shoulder for the bad guys."

"Admitting I couldn't take your mind off some guy is not helping my ego."

Eros chuckled. "How about this. I love you."

"You have my full attention, tell me more."

"You were right when you said they were hard words to say. Not because I didn't feel them, but I didn't trust my feeling."

"Or mine."

"I don't know." Eros grimaced.

"When you're living a lie, it's hard to trust what others say. Maybe, it's impossible. For what it's worth, I wanted to believe."

"I won't say I understand, because I've never been in that situation, but I appreciate your honesty. You said the problem has been resolved. How does that affect our future?"

*Eros squeezed her hand. "I wish I had an answer."*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 24

"I'm starving. What smells so good?" Ginger asked as she walked into the kitchen.

"Ohmigod, I thought you weren't arriving until late this afternoon. Cookies, better grab them now because when the guys come in, they'll disappear faster than an ice cube floating in hot water. Where are your two guys and Wolf?"

"A storm front changed the plans. Three guys. Uncle Gus is with us. They headed to the barn to check out the colts and Cole wanted to get a closer look at the elk. Wolf abandoned us when he saw the two black labs," Ginger said.

"There's a skunk under the table?" Rosemary edged toward the opening to the living room.

"Petunia. If you ignore her, she's harmless. Normally, during the day she sleeps in the bathroom off the mudroom. Since the explosion, she's been huddling under the kitchen table."

Opening beady black eyes, Petunia sniffed the air, then scurried to the mudroom. "How cute, she waddles just like Gin." Dodging a slap to the arm, Rosemary grabbed an oatmeal raisin cookie.

"That is not funny."

"Admit it, you waddle." Rosemary smirked.

"Maybe, but you don't have to gloat about it."

"Paybacks are going to be a bitch." Cinnamon arched her brow, glanced at Rose and waited.

"I know."

"You're pregnant!" Ginger squealed.

"How do you feel?" Cinnamon placed a hand on each of her sister's bellies. One of the twins punched her hand. The blue sparkly aura of Rosemary's tiny creation spread warmth through her hand.

"Don't want to talk about it. But if you make coffee or fry bacon before noon, I might have to kill you."

"Without caffeine in your veins, you must be a whole lot of fun in the morning. When did the morning sickness start?"

"The day after you left on tour. You could have told me I was pregnant."

"Not my job! The discovery will be part of your memories."

"Lousy memory. I thought I had the stomach flu. The third morning, Mom stood at the bathroom door watching me lose my stomach. She had the nerve to smile. I haven't been to a doctor, but Mom is calling him her birthday present."

"Mom popped in this morning and gloated. Guess we know where everyone will be August ninth. Who let the sex slip?" Cinnamon asked.

"No one. But thanks for the confirmation. Before we married, Walker had visions of me nursing a baby wrapped in a blue shawl. Today, just before leaving the ranch, we told Juanita and Joe. I asked Juanita if Walker's visions were present or past life. She said when she looked into our future she saw a miniature

version of Walker running around the kitchen riding a stick horse and wearing Joe's cowboy hat. Then she laughed. It sounded just like Grandma's laugh when we pulled one of our stunts and she'd say to Mom, 'paybacks are a bitch'."

Reaching for another cookie, Ginger said, "Mom does the same thing when she looks at my belly. Rose, maybe you should check out stock options for aspirin manufacturers."

\* \* \* \*

The Nine Springs Ranch painting hung on the wall beside the fireplace.

"It's hard to believe you got the details so exact without having been here or seeing a picture." Hugh used his thumb to straighten the edge of the frame a fraction of an inch.

Uncle Gus laughed. "Imagine my reaction. Gin called and said to meet them at the airport with a painting. When I asked her what painting, all she said was, you'll know when you see it."

"You said you added the cloud and the haze at the tree line *after* Cinn arrived at the ranch?" Hugh filled his coffee mug, grabbed a couple of snickerdoodle cookies and settled in his favorite recliner.

"I did. We've come up with a couple of interpretations, but I'd like to hear what you think."

"The puffed up cheeks and puckered mouth says it's storming or a storm is brewing. But with Bear Ridge overlooking my property, metaphorically, Grover was breathing down my throat. Steam around the hot springs isn't an unusual occurrence, but that is also the spot where, with a little help from spirits, the snowmobile blew up. What are you thinking?" Hugh said.

"We came up with the same ideas and they all have merit. Take a closer look at the cloud and the haze," Ginger said.

"I don't see anything."

"In the upper left corner of the cloud, it looks like a set of eyes. Knowing you add ghosts and goblins to every painting, there is probably a ghost in the haze, but I don't see one," Jack said.

"Two ghosts. I'll give you a hint, two figures merge together in the haze and there's a surprise," Ginger said.

Putting on a pair of reading glasses, Hugh walked to the painting and traced faint gray shadowing with his finger. "That could be a bustle and a long skirt. There's a fan and cleavage." Moving his finger a little to the left, he said, "This looks like a very nicely shaped leg, a hand holding something or pointing, and more cleavage. Well I'll be damned! Miss Jane and Salina, their likeness is outlined in the bark on these two tree trunks. This is amazing work."

"Yes, it is. Wish I could take credit for the clever details. I know I painted the picture, but until today, I had no idea I'd painted the faces, or the eyes in the clouds."

"Then how..."

"The painting was propped on the seat across from me. I took a nap. When I opened my eyes the details jumped out at me. Besides the eyes in the face, there are nine sets of eyes hidden in the cloud," Cole explained.

"Ten cameras," Jack muttered. "With everything happening in winter why do you think you painted the ranch as it looks in late spring?"

"How much has Cinn told you about Aunt Pesty's *gift*?" Ginger asked.

"She casts spells that have a tendency to not be accurate."

"Politely said. Most of her screw-ups are annoying but quickly fixable," Rosemary said.

"Like a stuffed monkey coming to life?"

Cinnamon groaned. "Who, where, when?"

"Early this morning. Just before Cole and Walker arrived. Bobby is teething and has a stuffy nose. Aunt Pesty thought making his stuffed monkey dance would make him smile," Ginger said.

"Rose, you're auras doing funny things. Tell me the good news first," Cinnamon begged.

"Salina saved the day; Bobby laughed and clapped his hands and Rocky didn't freak out."

"The bad news."

"Rocky talked Aunt Pesty into demonstrating how she used to create miniature stage productions for us. Aunt Pesty now has a fan club."

"Heaven help us! Rose, what does your intuition say about the season in the painting being different?"

"How much do Hugh, Terry and Jack know about the latest spells?"

"Nothing. Between Mom, Dad, Gus, Miss Jayne, Salina and Grover they had enough to deal with."

Rosemary lifted a brow, but let Cinnamon's defensive tone slide.

"We know Salina asked Aunt Pesty to cast a spell to stop Helen from blackmailing Walker. Over the last year, she also cast spells to give all of our destiny dreams a nudge. The last spell is still a question mark, but it was cast shortly before Miss Jayne made her first appearance."

"Having known Pesty for thirty years, I've seen her spells cause some interesting effects but this sounds more serious. What went wrong with the spell she cast to help Salina?" Uncle Gus asked.

"All Salina and Mom will say is that the spell tangled with something happening or about to happen in our lives. As far as we know, the only other thing Aunt Pesty was trying to manipulate was our destiny dreams," Cinnamon answered.

"Is it possible that what happened only involved you indirectly?" Jack asked.

Everyone looked at Rosemary. "The odds say no, that's wrong. We, or more accurately our energy had to be involved."

"Your destiny dreams do connect you to your soul mate," Jack stated.

"Right," Rosemary answered.

Jack frowned. "What is the definition of a soul mate?"

"I don't think there is a definite answer. Meaning that if you ask ten people, you'll get ten different answers." Ginger gave Cole a sweet smile. "From experience, I will say that life with your soul mate is not perfect. They are an intricate part of your past and future, but they are not your life. You complement each other, you share, you argue and you support each other. There's a bond that goes beyond husband



and wife or friendship. I relate it to the birth connection twins share; what I share with Rose and Cinn."

Ginger's words hit a nerve. The relationship Jack had formed with Green-eyes and Cinnamon was a bonding. Built slowly, over time it was based on ... trust. Damn, how had he not seen that?

"The past connection and bonding you talk about, could Pesty's spell make the same connection?"

"In what way?" Cinnamon asked.

"I'm not sure. The destiny dreams, how do they work?"

"Different for everyone. Cole and I experienced a series of dreams; among other things, the dreams warned us of danger. That danger brought you into our lives."

"Our destiny dreams took Walker and me back to a past life."

"I didn't realize the destiny dreams were experienced by both parties. I've done some reading about metaphysical beliefs. If I remember correctly, the theory is that if you both had dreams about a past life together you had a karmic connection before you met." Jack looked puzzled.

"Agreed," Cole said.

"When a spell is cast how is the universe able to separate that type of karmic connection?"

"Hell's bells. Good question," Rosemary said.

"It seems to me, that if destiny dreams are experienced by both parties, Pesty's spell would or could manipulate both parties' lives. The second spell was supposed to stop Helen from blackmailing Walker. When the second spell was cast, your energy and Walker's energy were already connected through the destiny dreams."

"You're thinking the second spell read my energy and Walker's as one."

"Yeah, something like that."

"If that's true, besides the destiny dreams the two things going on in Walker's life were Helen's blackmail scheme and the counterfeit ring," Rosemary mused. "The odds favor the spell connecting with both events, but the score isn't high enough to be conclusive. We're still missing something."

"The counterfeit ring brought Jack to the casino. He was shot shortly after that. My being at the airport at the same time Jack and Evan met Thornton at the airport put me in danger and brought me here to the ranch."

"That makes a tidy set of circumstances."

"There's no such thing as circumstance. Cinn, you're thinking Aunt Pesty's spell bypassed me to influence Walker's life, but that it also affected you."

"Aunt Pesty refuses to say when she cast the spell to jumpstart my destiny dreams. She could have cast one spell to cover both our destiny dreams."

"Hell's bells, that sounds like something guaranteed to cause problems," Ginger said around a mouthful of cookie.

"And something Pesty would try," Uncle Gus added.

"Helen's lawyers filed papers to contest Dad's will the day after it was read. She didn't lose the last lawsuit until after I met Rose. Since Helen also blackmailed Dad, I don't think a misguided spell had her using the same blackmail stunt to try to control me."

"You're right," Rose said. "But without some cunning witchcraft and your parents' ghostly presence, you would have given Helen the casino to protect your Aunt Juanita and Uncle Joe."

Walker rubbed the back of his neck. "That's exactly what would have happened."

"Thornton approached me early last fall. That was just after they found out about the third set of plates, but before the counterfeit ring hit Dreamland. With Grover's contacts inside the agency, it would have taken a miracle to keep that bit of information from him," Jack said.

"A miracle provided by a poorly worded spell," Cinnamon said.

"That's possible. Could any of your parents have done something to block that information from Grover?"

"No. Something like that would fall under the rule: 'we can't disclose or interfere in anything that might influence your choices'," Cinnamon said.

"The society's original strategy for distributing the counterfeit bills never included hitting a major casino.

"Why not?" Cinnamon asked.

"Too risky. They didn't want to tangle with the possible ramifications of some of the club owners.

"Pete contacted Sidney and offered to sell him the third stolen plate and Helen lost the last appeal on the will around the same time. Those two events started the domino effect of events. The counterfeit bills were distributed at Dreamland. Grover eliminated Pete, his US contract for the drug distribution. Thinking I was close to identifying him, he tried to eliminate me. Without Cinn's *gift*, he would have succeeded."

"If I hadn't seen you at the airport, Evan wouldn't have focused on me and you wouldn't have brought me to the ranch. If Miss Jane and Salina hadn't intervened, Evan wouldn't have been arrested. If Grover hadn't posted a guard to watch the ranch and if Miss Jayne hadn't touched the computer, Grover would still be alive. That's a lot of *ifs* strung in a row. With the listening device, Grover heard conversations you had with Hugh. He knew about your talks with Thornton. He wasn't stupid; he had to have figured out that the society was going to replace him. He also knew when the meeting was scheduled for you to meet Helen, Sidney and Kate. And with events moving that quickly, it could have changed the time line from spring to winter," Cinnamon said.

"All true."

"Grover had a plan. What was it?" Walker's voice left no doubt he expected answers.

Jack appreciated the sentiment.

Terry answered. "Miss Jayne likes to snoop. After the police left, she told me about a box she saw inside a cupboard. She described it as looking similar to the box that blew-up. The box turned out to be a radio and CD player, wired for remote control detonation and packed with enough explosives to knock the house off the hillside."

"Holy shit," Uncle Gus muttered.

"The day before he died, Grover purchased a small motor home. He parked it in a Wal-Mart parking lot. When it hadn't been moved for three days, management called the police. Grover had it fully stocked with food. We found maps marked with back road routes to Vegas and Kansas and the detonator for the bomb. In the mail Miss Jayne lifted from the bunker, was a utility bill for property in a remote part of New Mexico."

"What's on the property?" Walker asked.

"A small house. The authorities didn't find anything unusual, but I'm hoping Miss Jane and Salina will check the place out."

\* \* \* \*

Rosemary and Ginger found Cinnamon in the barn.

"Hugh told us a funny story about you telling Betsy to pant through her labor pains." Offering Betsy a carrot, Ginger scratched one of the colts behind an ear.

Cinnamon chuckled. "So the guys claim. All I remember is running my hands over Betsy's belly and sending energy during her contractions."

"Just remember, when you talk me through my contractions, I don't whinny."

"I'll try."

"How do you feel about all that's happened?" Rosemary asked.

"Are you talking about what happened yesterday, the troubles Aunt Pesty's spell created or the fact that Jack is my soul mate?"

"Should have known your direct to the point logic wouldn't allow us to ease into that last fact," Rosemary said.

"It was hard to miss if you accept the theory that connected Rose and Walker's energy to the spell Aunt Pesty cast for Salina. Without that soul connection, there was no reason for Aunt Pesty's spell to extend that energy to Jack even with him being assigned to the counterfeit case."

"The odds say you're right. You know I can't use my ability to figure out the odds on Jack being your soul mate. But unless you and Jack are connected Aunt Pesty's spell shouldn't have pulled you into the case," Rosemary said.

"I was having similar thoughts."

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

"I don't know."

"Last week you were ready to jump his bones and give up your *gift*. What changed your mind?" Rubbing the bottom of her swollen belly, Ginger sat on a bale of hay.

"Last night's destiny dream. Eros admitted he loved me."

"Sounds promising."

"I'll admit the words gave me a nice buzz."

"I hear a 'but' coming," Ginger teased.

"BUT, wouldn't you think that after declaring his love, I would have been able to see Jack's face?"

"I ... Hell's bells. Eros declares his love. You declare your love. In a happy ever after, that should be the end of the story."

"Have you talked to Mom or Salina?" Rosemary asked.

"Not since yesterday. They haven't appeared, or given a hint that they were hanging around. I tried calling them. There was no response.

"That usually means that something isn't right and they don't want to be questioned."

"Which is why I'm not going to jump Jack's bones, do a victory dance or go shopping for a wedding dress."

"You really think Salina is going to let you pick out a readymade gown?"

"I'll elope."

\* \* \* \*

*As far as the eye could see, the deep blue water was calm.*

*At the highest point of the cliff, Cinnamon listened to waves as they splashed against the rocks.*

The message put her in a melancholy mood. But there was no changing what had to be said.

*Turning towards the forest, she hesitated. Looking over her shoulder, Cinnamon saw the reflection of two golden yellow stars shimmering across the water's surface.*

\* \* \* \*

*Jack sat on the rowboat's narrow bench.*

*The dark blue depth of the water slowly lightened, blue turned to turquoise, than turquoise became crystal clear. The black sand beneath the clear water sparkled like a million stars on a pitch-black night.*

Jack took his time walking to the small rise overlooking the calm beauty of the crescent beach. The tranquil scene touched his soul; a feeling of contentment washed over him.

At the edge of the golden path, he paused. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the reflection of two golden stars floating on the water.

The gold strewn path seemed shorter.

Always impatient to see Green-eyes, he'd never appreciated the quiet restfulness of the small meadow. Now, sitting on the familiar boulder, he looked around him with a new awareness. The different shades of warm soft greens that made up grass, moss, ferns and pine needles were soothing and welcoming.

Lost in thought, he didn't see Green-eyes approach.

The green fabric of a form-fitting gown skimmed her hourglass figure and matched her eyes.

"Congratulations, the case is almost closed."

"I should be thanking you. Without your help, the outcome could have been far different."

"You used your head, the outcome was meant to be."

"If I used my head it was to pound a hole in the wall while trying to figure out your riddles."

"I would apologize for causing you undue harm, but we both know you are hard headed."

"True, but you could have been nice and not pointed out the obvious."

Green-eyes laughed. The sound reminded him of someone, but he couldn't think beyond what had to be said.

"You have something on your mind."

"I do. The last time we met, you talked about trust."

"As I recall, you scoffed at the idea."

"I was wrong. I trust you with my life."

"Thank you. That means more to me than a walk in the moonlight. You spent over two years working the case. What will you do now that most of the guilty parties have been arrested?"

"There will never be a lack of bad guys to chase. By this time next week, there will be a stack of new case files on my desk. Why do you ask?"

"Three men knew your real identity and your undercover identities. They leaked information about the case, they tried to kill you and they jeopardized the safety of people you care about. Grover is dead. The agent is in custody. The third man is free. With what he knows, your worth as an undercover agent is minus zero."

"I know a woman who might be able to identify the third man. With that knowledge, we can eliminate his threat."

"First, she would have to meet him. That will never happen. I do not doubt that you will destroy his reputation and power. But with what he knows about you and your department, your undercover days are over."

"Did Grover feed this man information or was it the other way around?"

"It was a two way street. They shared information and contacts that benefited both of them, but Grover was not the man's only source of information. The man has enough influence to destroy the case against the society. In fact, he has already started working on doing that."

"With Grover dead, who contacted him?"

"Kate. As one of her top customers, she has the man's private phone number on her speed dial."

"How much damage has he done?"

"Very little, but by tomorrow that will change. The time for riddles is past. The man is Senator Waters."

Jack flinched. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he forced a lid on his anger. "There's no possibility your sources are mistaken?"

"None. The friendship between the two men goes back to Grover's teen years. I won't bore you with details, but when the Senator realized they shared the same sexual appetites, he became Grover's mentor. You're clever with computers. He has a bank account at Community Trust. It is under his father's name. The Senator used the account to pay Kate for entertainment services. From the same account, he pays child support and hush money for a ten-year-old daughter."

Jack pursed his lips.

"Jack, you can't change the past. Don't beat yourself up over something you had no way of knowing."

"Once again, I'm indebted to you. What will you do now?"

"Are you tired of my company?"

"Never that. I just have the feeling that our time here is over."

"I always did say you were smart. This isn't an ending. It's a beginning, a new beginning with all kinds of possibilities."

"Before you leave will you tell me your name?"

"You already know my name."

Green-eyes disappeared.

"I thought you said the time for riddles was over," Jack mumbled.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 25

"It's snowing." Ginger stood at the dining room window sipping a cup of coffee.

"So I saw." Cinnamon stood at the stove stirring a large pot of oatmeal.

"Salina's outside with Terry and Cole."

"I know. They were trying to figure out where Grover hid the cameras that showed this room and the inside of the barn. Miss Jayne appeared and offered to help them look. When they walked outside, Salina joined them."

"She's still avoiding you?"

"Apparently. The same goes for Mom. Without appearing, she told me Rose needed hot tea and crackers."

"Did you have a destiny dream last night?" Ginger asked as she set the table.

"No. Instead I had the dream where I stand on the cliff overlooking the ocean."

"Did anything change?"

"Nope. The water was calm; whatever message I was given is forgotten." Cinnamon arched a brow and bit her bottom lip. "I'm wrong. Something did change. At the end two gold stars, like the one Dad hung over my bed, appeared. It was a reflection in the water. When I think of it, that's weird, because the sun was shining."

"Dad gave you the star as a reward for being patient. Do you think the two stars in the dream meant the same thing?"

"Since the only thing I recall about those dreams is standing on the cliff and receiving messages I never remember, it's impossible to say."

"What's impossible?" Jack asked as snow crusted cowboy boots hit the tile floor.

"Keeping the cookie jar full. If everyone's headed in, you can take the bowl of scrambled eggs out of the oven for me."

"Miss Jayne found the cameras. Hate to admit it, but Grover was clever. Two cameras were tucked inside bird nests in the blue spruce trees. The camera showing the driveway blended in with wires and equipment on an electrical pole," Cole said as he poured fresh coffee into several mugs.

"Salina said there were ten cameras. Three showed the entrances to the tunnels and one showed the road leading onto Grover's property. The three on the counter and the one on Bear Ridge make eight. Any idea where the other two are?"

"One showed the hot springs pool. Miss Jayne found that one and left it on the pool's ledge. Salina said one screen showed a field of snow. It might have overlooked the land where the Elk normally stay. Salina and Miss Jayne are checking out the trees edging that field," Jack said.

"Are you going to share what brought you back downstairs last night?" Cinnamon, sitting next to Jack, nudged his leg.

"The empty cookie jar..."

"Never lies."

"Hugh and Terry ate their share."

"Now you sound like Gin sacrificing Rose and I to save her butt when Mom caught her with her hand in the cookie jar."

Jack gave one of his rare smiles. "Next time, I'll refill the jar with some of the cookies you've been hiding in the freezer."

Next time—that sounded promising. "And here I was blaming Hugh for sneaking outside with some of those cookies."

"Petunia likes snickerdoodles," Hugh inserted into the conversation.

"She has good taste. What happened?"

Cole and Walker chuckled.

"You guys aren't helping." Jack shot them a disgusted look.

"They know better than to side against the person that makes their favorite cookies. What happened?"

"I received some information. We made some phone calls." He'd also spent time hacking into bank records, but that was not to be shared.

"The information was about the unknown informant?"

"Are you reading my mind?"

"Not one of my talents. It was the only loose end in the case. Will you be able to stop him?"

"We're working on that."

\* \* \* \*

"Great idea," Cinnamon said as she slid into the warm waters at the hot springs

Jack didn't take his eyes off her backside.

"I thought so." Settling onto the rock ledge beside Cinnamon, Jack relaxed.

"Your aura's all fuzzy and spiked with orange. What's bothering you?"

"Cole explained what happened during the destiny dreams he and Ginger shared. Have your dreams revealed your soul mate?"

"If you're asking for name, address and phone number, the answer is no. Do you want to hear what's happened so far?"

*Hell no!* "If you want to tell me."

"We make arrangements to meet at a little outdoor café. The cobblestone street is lined with expensive boutiques. A park with a reflection pool is close by."



"Sounds like Little Tony's. The reflecting pool at the mall leading to the Lincoln Memorial is within walking distance."

"When were you there?"

"About three years ago. I spent time there during an undercover operation."

"About the same time I was back there doing some hypnosis shows at the hospitals," Cinnamon mused.

"Besides meeting at the café, what do you do?"

"Not much of anything. Eros is always worried about someone seeing us, or more precisely seeing me with him. During one dream, we ran down a back alley to get away from some bad guys. A couple of times, we've sat inside a half circle of trees to have a little privacy."

The water rippled as Jack's body stiffened.

His aura shrunk closer to his body.

"A few doors down from Little Tony's, there's a small park. In one corner, there's a half circle of trees that affords that type of privacy."

"Bet it has a reputation for being a great place to make out."

"Sucker bet. Is that what you and your lover did?"

"Never a lover. You can pull your mind out of the gutter. We had a picnic."

"I have a hard time believing a soul mate wouldn't take the opportunity to kiss you senseless."

"I didn't say we didn't kiss. But within a few minutes of arriving, he would insist we leave. Most of our conversations were about protecting me."

"Sounds familiar."

"How so?"

"The case I was working at the time. A woman got in the middle of a sticky situation at work. When she refused to leave town, we decided to have me pose as her live-in boyfriend. She refused to stop sitting at the café to people watch. Most of our conversations were about her putting herself in jeopardy."

"Did you take her to a hotel room and tell her not to leave?"

"What does that have to do with your dreams?"

"I'll take that as a yes. Did she listen to you and not leave?"

"No, as a matter of fact, she didn't. She slipped out to get a latte. Someone followed her back to the hotel."

"What happened?"

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose then ran his fingers through his hair. "Some guys roughed her up. She spent a couple of weeks in the hospital. Now what is this about?"

"I honestly don't know. Until age eighteen, all of our destiny dreams were nothing more than prom dates

and a few stolen kisses. Rose and Gin's dreams heated up, but didn't change much until the time they met Walker and Cole. After high school, my dreams took a different path. Eros and I traveled and talked."

"You call your soul mate, Eros, the god of love, and claim you traveled and talked?" Jack scoffed. His Texas drawl slipped into his voice.

Cinnamon hid her smile. "He took me to an authentic pub in Dublin. In Venice, we took a romantic gondola ride. In New York we rode the ferry and visited the Statue of Liberty. In Alaska we snuggled in an igloo. More than once, on a hilltop, under a canopy of a million stars, in the middle of God knows where, we danced. Those are very romantic places to share a kiss or two."

Damned if they weren't, and damned if he wasn't eaten up with jealousy. He'd been every place mentioned, including several unnamed hilltops.

"Last summer, those romantic trips abruptly stopped. The dreams shifted to the café. Eros always arrived late. The 'let me protect you' lecture was the prominent theme. From the first dream to the last dream there wasn't much deviation.

"In a recent dream, Eros pulled me down alleys before taking me to a hotel room. He made me promise I wouldn't leave the room. For the next two nights, I popped into the dream long enough to know I was furious at being ignored, but I hadn't left the room. On the third day, Eros returned, thanked me for not leaving, told me the bad guys knew I was at the hotel and we had to leave. Two nights ago, he told me that the danger was past and that he trusted me."

Trust. Jack felt the word hang in the air between them.

"And last night?"

"Last night there was no destiny dream."

"But you had a dream." Jack's Texas drawl thickened.

"It's not much of a dream, really. I stand on a cliff, look at the ocean, receive a message and enter a forest. End of dream, or at least as much as I've ever remembered."

Sliding off the seat built into the pool's side, she floated to the center of the pool. Treading water, she faced Jack.

"Something's bugging you. What did I say to make that cute little dimple at the corner of your mouth appear?"

"You don't remember what the messages are about?"

"No. The first few times I had the dream, I remembered walking into a small clearing and meeting a man. I've always thought the dreams had something to do with my astral travel and healing. Have never figured out what, but Rose got a twenty percent positive on that being true. Are you going to share or do I hypnotize you and pump the information out?"

"That could be interesting. Because I don't want to drown, I'll share the highlights. The dreams started when I was in training. A ride in a small rowboat takes me to a crescent shaped beach. From there I enter a forest and walk to a small meadow. A woman appears and gives me information about cases I'm working or warns me about danger. Does any of that sound familiar?"

"No." Using her fingers, she flicked water in Jack's face. "Who is the woman?"

"I've never seen her face. I know that during the dreams, her hair color intrigues me. There's something about her gowns that also grabs my attention. Once I'm awake, those memories haunt me, but they never materialize."

"During my dreams, I see Eros's face. A few times, during the dream, I tried describing his features. I couldn't do it. Same for when I wake up. As for clothing, he favors black jeans, shoes and shirts."

"When I'm working, I do the same thing. If you have to run, black blends into the shadows."

"How often do you have the dreams?"

"The longest lapse was the six weeks after I was shot. Mostly once or twice a month, but there were a few times during the end of jobs that I found myself taking a trip in the rowboat a couple of times in a week."

"I've taken the trip—it sounds like you believe in astral travel."

"It was the dreams that got me interested in the supernatural. A few urgent warnings that saved my ass, and gut feelings that have panned out, made me a semi-believer. Your family made me a full fledge believer. Astral travel is nothing more than a way of labeling an experience so others can identify with your experience. The rowboat, water, sand, meadow, and the boulder I sat on were tangible. Until a couple of years ago, all I saw of the woman was her eyes. After that, I was able to see her body. The lighting was dim, but she looked solid."

"You don't need to convince me, I've done my share of traveling. People have held my hand, hugged me, and cried on my shoulder. If I hadn't been solid that couldn't have happened. The woman gave you information?"

"Green-eyes gave me a name."

Cinnamon's laughter filled the air.

"Why did you pick that name?"

"She would never tell me her name. For a while, I made a game out of giving her funny names. The name Green-eyes annoyed her, so that's what I called her."

"Like a little boy pulling a girl's pigtail, you hid your interest by teasing."

"I won't deny I was attracted."

"Did you ever kiss her?"

"A meadow stood between us. We never touched."

"That's too bad; if you had, it would have felt like this."

Cinnamon ran her hands up Jack's arms. A red-hot current shot up her fingertips.

With her hands on his shoulders, Cinnamon leaned into Jack's warm torso.

As their lips met a blue arc danced between them. The current bit their lips.

"Ouch. Maybe it's a good thing we never touched. The sparks would have set the forest on fire."

"I thought you said you don't remember being in the glen."

"I don't. Until last summer when the dreams shifted to the café, Eros called me Green-eyes. He said the way my eye color changed with my mood was mesmerizing."

"Hmmm."

"You had an ulterior motive when you suggested we come here."

"Did I?"

"You figured out you were my soul mate."

"I hoped. Except for the times spent with Green-eyes I don't remember dreams. The meetings couldn't be called romantic. But there was always flirtatious banter that put a sexual tone to our encounters. For the theory of a spell to read Rose and Walker as one energy to be true, the same theory had to be true for a spell to affect my cases. You were the only sister without a soul mate."

"Be careful, that type of flattery goes straight to my head."

"You're lucky I can talk. Unless we're talking shop, I get tongued tied when talking to you."

"Hmm. I didn't think you were having any difficulty expressing your thoughts just before Salina sent us out to help Betsy."

"As I recall we weren't talking. Cinn, I don't want you to risk losing your *gift*. I need to know this isn't hopeful thinking?"

"Would it make a difference if I told you that before you were shot, I was ready to give up my *gift* to be with you?"

Jack watched the color of Cinn's eyes change from soft pine green to clear emerald.

"You were that sure?"

"The only thing I was sure of was loving you. Realizing that my *gift* helped saved your life is the only thing that made me reconsider my decision. Knowing you could need my help, I knew I couldn't give up my *gift*."

"If your soul mate turned out to be someone else you were willing to marry him to help me?"

"During the dreams, I told Eros he needed to learn to trust. I realized the same was true for me. I needed to trust the universe to provide me with an answer that wouldn't force me into that type of situation. As much as I hate admitting it, I had to trust Salina to help make that happen."

"Our dreams shared a common thread. On several occasions, Green-eyes told me I needed to learn to trust. It was only last night that I admitted I trusted her."

"When you walked into Thornton's posing as Rosemary, I was furious. As I watched you manipulate Helen and Kate, a calm settled over me. I'm not good at picking fancy descriptive words, but my gut told me to trust you; I did and I do."

"Look." Cinnamon nodded towards the center of the pool. Two golden yellow stars shimmered over the surface of the warm water.

"Last night, just before I entered the forest, I saw stars just like these."

"Me, too. A few months ago, Dad hung a large gold star over my bed when I said I'd earned one for having patience. Truthfully, since the day we met, I've been totally impatient."

"The first day we met, just after introductions were made, everyone was talking. I was standing by the French doors when you walked up to me. Do you remember what you said to me?"

"I can't believe I talked to you. Every time I looked your way, my heart did a funny dance and my tongue froze to the roof of my mouth."

Jack chuckled. "I know that feeling. But you walked towards me with a confident strut. When we were toe to toe you gave me a smile that's had me taking cold showers for months."

"I didn't."

"Then, in that same seductive tone you used to seduce the Denver Chief of police into singing love songs..."

"How do you know about that?"

"At the police station, there are copies of the show for sale. Hugh bought two. Last night, after you went to bed, we watched it. Now, as I was saying, like a graceful feline you strolled towards me. When we were toe to toe you purred, "You are an old soul with the most beautiful and unusual aura I've seen this side of the veil. You also brought a bushel full of talents along with you this time around. Too bad you aren't using them to their full potential."

"I didn't."

"What's unusual about my aura?"

"Your aura is a clear sapphire blue. What's unusual is a metallic silver overlay. I've never seen that in another person. And I have no idea what it means."

"I know," Miss Jayne's voice whispered.

"What the hell?" Jack growled.

"Oops, I promised not to interrupt. But I didn't think you'd be able to hear me. Oh well, now that you know I'm here, I might as well show myself." Wearing a pale pink day dress and carrying a matching parasol, Miss Jayne sat on the edge of the pool.

"Thornton has silver in his aura."

"No, he doesn't. His aura is olive green."

"With a real pretty silver haze that makes the green shine. That's why I knew who he was when I saw him at the café last week."

"Do you see silver in Jack's aura?"

"Why would I, Jack's not *my* soul mate."

"Hell's bells. Since the day we met, the answer's been right in front of my eyes and I never knew."

"Besides snooping, is there a reason you're here?" Jack hoped that the question would nudge Miss Jayne into leaving.

"My momma always said proper ladies shouldn't be left alone with a man until they are married. I never minded her words and look what happened to me. Watching the way the two of you've been flirting and touching, I'm thinking I was right to be concerned."

"You've been chaperoning us?" Cinnamon looked horrified.

Jack burst out laughing.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 26

Cinnamon peeled off her wet swimsuit.

The clothes she'd worn that morning were gone.

Except for shoes and sexy bras and panties, the drawers and closet were empty.

"Salina!"

"No need to shout. I'm not deaf."

Gray wool slacks and a pale blue sweater appeared on the bed.

As Cinnamon finished dressing, a white spotlight cast a circle on the hardwood floor.

Miss Jayne appeared. The square neckline of her ivory colored, satin gown gave a hint of cleavage. Three quarter length sleeves and the neckline were edged in delicate tatted lace. The attached skirt was softly gathered at the waist. A nosegay of orange blossoms was pinned at her cinched waist and gloves covered her tiny hands.

Lifting the hem of the skirt, she said, "The slippers are simple, but they are made of really soft leather. There's a crinoline hoop and the bloomers are silk with three rows of lace. As she slowly turned in a circle Cinnamon smiled when she saw the corset style closure of the bodice and the floral pattern in the simple lace veil that hung to the tips of Miss Jayne's gloved fingers. Isn't this the most beautiful wedding dress you ever saw?"

"It's beautiful. Did you wear the dress when you married Thornton?"

"No. We got married in a gambling tent by a traveling preacher who was more drunk than sober. I ripped a picture of this gown out of *Harper's Bazaar* magazine and slipped it in my Bible. Salina was nice enough to copy it for you."

"For me?" Cinnamon couldn't hide her surprise.

"I know Salina's your fairy godmother and she can zap a dress out of thin air. And you have a Momma who probably wants to help you pick out a gown. But you and Jack helped me. I thought maybe I could help you by showing you this wonderful dress."

"Mom, I can smell your perfume. What do you think?"

"The gown is lovely." Caitlin was sitting on the bed when she appeared.

"I agree. Thank you, Miss Jayne."

Smiling, Miss Jayne daintily dabbed at a tear.

"Salina."

"You called?" Salina wore an ivory lace teddy, thigh high cream-colored silk stockings and heeled sandals that were nothing more than four braided straps of leather.

"Oh my. What an outrageously wicked outfit," Miss Jayne said and giggled.

"You took away my fun, but I have to admit the wedding gown is gorgeous. But when Jack peels that gown off he isn't going to find bloomers and a cotton chemise."

"Have you all forgotten, Jack hasn't proposed?"

\* \* \* \*

Cinnamon found everyone sitting in the living room.

The television was turned to CNN.

"What's going on?"

"Shhh..." Rosemary said.

The anchorman cued in a roving reporter. Standing in front of the Senate Office, the reporter looked solemnly into the camera. "Minutes ago, Senator Water's in a surprising announcement on the Senate floor, resigned his senate seat. Earlier today, according to inside sources, he cleared his office of personal belongings. Citing a desire to spend more time with his wife and children, he ends a distinguished career. As one of the top candidates for the next presidential..."

"Will that stop him?" Cinnamon asked.

"It's a major step in that direction," Jack answered.

"It's time to celebrate." Confetti and streamers floated through the air. Out of a swirl of pink sparkle, wearing a Valentine red spaghetti strap cocktail dress and matching shoes, Salina appeared.

Standing beside her, Miss Jayne wore an off the shoulder gown in the same eye popping red. She was fluttering a black lace fan.

Without fanfare Caitlin, Herb and Gus appeared.

"They look great, don't they?" Gus said in a stage whisper.

"They're beautiful," Cinnamon corrected.

Gus beamed and his chest puffed. "Yeah, I think so, too."

"I have a couple of announcements," Caitlin said to get everyone's attention.

"Salina, at times you drive me insane but I proudly say you're a dear friend. Thank you for all that you've done to help protect our families and future generations. With Warrens blessing, I am happy to announce that you have been granted full use of your powers. And God help us all, you have officially earned your wings and the title fairy godmother."

"I'm going to cry," Rose whispered.

"Join the club," Cinnamon whispered back.

"Jayne, on behalf of our family I want to thank you for your help. Warren has asked that I extend an invitation to you to join our group."

"I'd get to be with all of you every day?"

"Every day."



Salina gave a good-natured groan.

Hugh stepped into the center of the group. "I'd like to add my thank you to both of you lovely ladies. By traveling where no mortal could go, and creating interesting diversions you helped close two cases.

"Salina, when you signed on to help, you asked for a gun and a badge."

Twirling her finger, Salina opened the gift-wrapped package Jack held in his hand.

A gold star shaped badge, with an engraved silver center, nested against a layer of cotton. 'Salina Owens, FGM Crime Buster, Destiny Inc.'; beside the badge was a silver-plated water pistol and five packages of KOOL-AID in assorted flavors.

"Miss Jayne, without the red diary and the mail you gave us, we would still be scrambling to answer questions. We have been told that we can't move your remains to a different grave site but..."

"That's okay; I'm not going to be there anyway. Is that gift for me?"

Terry slipped the lid off the box he held in his hand.

"Oh look, there's a badge like Salina's and a pretty red diary. My badge says, 'Miss Jayne, Detective, Destiny Inc.'. What's a detective?"

"A snoop who won't keep their hands off things."

Miss Jayne giggled. "What's Destiny Inc.?"

"Guess that's my cue," Jack said.

Taking Cinnamon's hand, Jack kissed her wrist.

"I thought I'd have time to talk to you first, but I'm beginning to suspect that in this family privacy is in short supply. For a couple of years, I've thought about opening an agency that offers computer and personal security checks and discreet investigations. Destiny Inc. is going to be that agency.

"A lot can be said about soul mates, a three hundred year old spell and destiny dreams bringing people in this room together. If that's what it took to bring us together, I'm thankful. But I fell in love with you long before I knew about destiny dreams and magic spells. I trust you with my life and my heart; will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Can I work with you?"

"Do you think you can handle Miss Jayne and Salina?"

"Bribery, it works like a charm."

"Then you're hired."

"Valentine's day is in three weeks."

"It's a date."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter 27

"Do you miss astral travel?" Miss Jayne asked.

Sitting behind her desk, Cinnamon shut down the computer.

"Not at all. Why do you ask?"

"Before meeting Salina I couldn't travel more than a mile in any direction from my grave. It was a real pretty place, but now that can I travel anywhere, I couldn't be happy being stuck in one place."

"During astral travel, I never had a choice where I went and the scenes were anything but pretty. If the travel and healing work hadn't compromised my health, maybe I'd feel differently, but I don't regret that part of my life being over."

"How do you feel about your new *gift*?"

"It's not new, just enhanced. I've always seen auras. But now the energy I used for astral travel enhances my ability to read auras. With the agency, visits to children's hospitals and occasional hypnosis shows, both *gifts* are used equally."

"But with your destiny dreams, you and Jack astral traveled. That had to have been romantic and exciting."

"It was. During the last year we've revisited some of those spot. That was more fun."

"Aren't there other places you want to visit?"

"Yes. And I promise you I will see them. I thought you were going to Boise to help Matt."

"I'm leaving now. I'll be back tomorrow for the big event."

"Cinn, where are you?" Aunt Pesty called from the front door.

It had been a hectic year.

Two months after turning the dining room table in her condo into an office, Jack offered Terry and Betty Jo a full partnership. Not wanting to leave Texas, they opened a branch office in Houston.

Two months later, Hugh and his nephew Matt, started hanging their cowboy hats on pegs, at a branch office in Boise.

Two months ago, they moved into their new home, across the street from Ginger, Cole, and ten month old Lacy and Porter. And right next door to Aunt Pesty and Uncle Martin.

"In the office," Cinnamon answered.

"Rosemary, Walker and baby Gus arrived at the airport a few minutes ago. They'll be here shortly. Where's Jack?"

"Right here," Jack answered as he entered the office from a door leading to the front porch of the two story Victorian."

"Uncle Gus and Hugh have no idea what they volunteered for when they agreed to help baby sit all three

kids."

Cinnamon grinned. "Uncle Gus knows, so does Aunt Pesty and Uncle Martin. Between the four of them and two sets of ghostly grandparents to entertain the kids, they'll manage. What happened?"

"I went to the refrigerator to get Porter more milk. When my back was turned Lacy dumped a bowl of applesauce on Porter's head. Before I could stop him Porter dumped his bowl of peas in Lacey's lap. I had no idea peas and a couple of tablespoons of applesauce could make such a mess. After telling them how talented they were, Salina helped me out by using her magic finger to clean up the mess."

"Where were Cole and Gin?"

"Getting ready for our night on the town."

\* \* \* \*

"How do you feel?" Caitlin placed a warm hand on Cinnamon's swollen stomach.

"My back hurts."

"That's normal."

"Having water gush down my leg at the nicest restaurant in town was a showstopper no one will forget. Did you know I was going to go into labor?"

"No. Birth dates are kept secret."

"Then how did you know baby Gus was going to be born on your birthday?"

"Power of positive thinking. Don't tell Rosemary; she wasn't happy about being a week late."

"It's our secret. Cole's worried about the strain the contractions are putting on my heart, but I'm glad I'm getting to experience a little of what you, Gin, and Rose went through."

"I know."

Herb appeared beside Caitlin. Looking at the monitors attached to Cinn's belly and chest, he frowned.

"A nurse is coming to get you. Mary and Shane, Jack's folks are here. You won't be able to see Mary, but she wanted you and Jack to know she'll be in the delivery room."

"Shane, Walker, and I will be in the hallway pacing."

"Cinn." Her eyes fluttered open. Jack's face was inches from hers.

"Where am I?"

"You're still in the delivery room. Cole gave you some oxygen. You dozed off."

"Our babies?"

"Are tiny, but perfect. Shane Herbert was born first. Kaitlyn Rose and Maire Ginger arrived a minute apart. If there's an Irish pub for ghosts, I know two grandpas who will have hangovers tomorrow. Your mom's still wiping tears off her cheeks. And Gin said my mom sang them their first lullaby."

"Thank you." A tear rolled down Cinnamon's cheek.

"For what, Sweetheart?"

"For loving me and making this the best year of my life."

"Sweetheart, the best is yet to come."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

### **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 Rhonda's website at:

[rhondaplummer.wcpauthor.com/](http://rhondaplummer.wcpauthor.com/)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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