



Loose Id

Sheri Gilmore

The Preacher's Daughters:

Eye for an Eye



Praise for the writing of Sheri Gilmore

Hot House: Dante & Hayley

Dante and Hayley are amazing characters who really touched my heart... Ms. Gilmore is a fabulously talented author who never fails to grab my attention and keep it. I hope to read many more books by her in the future.

-- Susan White, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Hot House: Dante & Hayley is a shockingly powerful story... [A] fascinating book and well worth reading.

-- Chrissy, *Euro-Reviews*

Filled with heat and compelling scenes of betrayal and the emergence of faith, *Hot House: Dante & Hayley* caught my attention and wouldn't release it. I love a book that has the ability to pull the reader into the story, and that is what Sheri Gilmore has created.

-- Angel, *A Romance Review*

Sheri Gilmore seamlessly blends fact and fiction, rumor and legend, and light and dark together to create something otherworldly in the extreme; she wraps it all in lust and blood and serves it up piping hot.

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

You have to read this book! It's amazing and you can't put it down!

-- Teri, *Enchanted in Romance*

Hot House: Dante & Hayley is now available from Loose Id.

THE PREACHER'S DAUGHTERS: EYE FOR AN EYE

Sheri Gilmore

Loose Id
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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (BDSM, some violence).

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The Preacher's Daughters: Eye for an Eye

Sheri Gilmore

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Author's Note

While investigating the two religions of Voudon and Santeria, I was surprised at the similarities between the two. They are similar, but very different.

Both have origins in West Africa, but their differences appeared when they began developing in the different regions of the Americas. Voudon developed mainly in Haiti (French), while Santeria developed largely in Cuba (Spanish). Both religions were heavily influenced by their “masters” religion, Catholicism.

Their gods are similar, but the Santerians believe the Catholic saints and their *orishas* are interchangeable. Voudon separate their *loas* from the Catholic faith. I tried very hard to be authentic in my presentation of the information I found. I should emphasize that Shango-Elegba is a creation of my mind. I combined two Santerian gods -- the god Eleggua, “the trickster,” sometimes equated with the Devil; and the god Shango, “the essence of male sexuality.”

Both religions use ecstatic dancing, chanting, and animal sacrifice in their rituals, but it has to be noted that the sacrifices are usually cooked and eaten afterwards as a meal, the way anyone in rural America goes out to the coop, chooses which chicken or rabbit they want, then slaughters the animal, saying a prayer of grace before their Sunday dinner. The only notable difference is in which “god” is being honored.

If I portrayed one religion in more of a “darker” light, my only intention was to heighten the suspense of the story. As in all religions and all aspects of life, you always have those few “bad seeds” which will give the many “good seeds” a bad reputation.

-- Sheri

Chapter One

“Do you, Mark David, take this woman, Regina Marie, to be your lawfully wedded wife? To love, honor, and cherish until death to you part.”

“I do.” He looked down at her, but she refused to meet his gaze.

The priest’s robes rustled as he turned to her. The sound echoed, loudly, through the stillness of the cathedral. Her gaze wandered over the stained-glass windows to the left and right of the altar area, resting, finally, on a bee. The wings flitted up and down as the little creature flew from one arrangement to another, trying to gather the nectar to make his honey.

Behind her, someone coughed and the faint swish of a program gave witness to the late afternoon heat.

Regina swallowed against the lump, growing larger, in her throat. Sweat beaded under her breasts compressed into pancakes by the tight bodice of her gown. Why had she agreed to wear a binding? *Because Isabel thinks boobs are vulgar.*

“And do you, Regina Marie, take this man, Mark David, to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love, honor, and obey until death do you part.”

... until death do you part ... do you part ... do you part ...

“Death.”

The priest’s eyebrows rose, accompanied by a gasp and a snicker from the audience gathered to witness such a holy sacrament. Or was it?

Neither of her sisters was present. Isabel had not wanted “a pagan” at her son’s nuptials, and if Starr couldn’t come, then Becky had said she couldn’t be there, either.

Yeah, right! Her sham of a wedding. Wonder what they’d think about old Markie laid up with her maid-of-honor last night? Her gaze narrowed on her fiancé, then on Kimberly standing there as sweet as pie, holding the groom’s ring. *The slut.*

His eyes pleaded with her to say the words everyone expected her to say, especially his mother, Isabel Comeaux, society matron of Bay St. Louis.

She turned and looked at her future mother-in-law, sitting in the front pew closest to the altar. Pursed lips and an arched brow met Gina’s gaze. Cold, hostile eyes stared back at her in a silent threat, promising retribution if she embarrassed Isabel and her precious son at the altar. Oh, Isabel knew what had happened, all right. Because it had happened under her own roof!

Seconds seemed like hours, as Gina pictured her future as the wife of Mark David Comeaux, favorite son of Bay St. Louis’s esteemed society. She bit the quiver from her lip, smoothed a hand down the satin skirt of her gown. When she spoke, her voice rang clear and firm.

“I do not.”

Silence followed only a second before the Bitch Mother rose. Her face flamed red and her eyes sparked with fire. She whispered with a hiss, “How dare you, you little whore!”

“I think we know *who* she’s speaking to, don’t we?” Gina slapped her bouquet against Kimberly’s chest and glanced from her ex-future mother-in-law back to her maid-of-honor. Gina smiled. “Good luck. You’ll need it.”

Turning to face Mark David, she pulled the one-carat diamond ring from her finger. With a calm she hadn't known she possessed after all the tears she'd cried last night, she tucked the gaudy jewel in his tux pocket. It had been in the family for generations. Well, he could have it. She'd always hated diamonds.

"Can't say it's been fun." She gave the pocket a pat. "Hope I never see you again, you jackass."

Another gasp rose from the crowd. "I can't *believe* she said that!"

A hand wrapped around her upper arm as she turned to go, pulling her up hard. Mark David smiled reassuringly to the crowd, but his voice whispered in her ear with a cold promise. "You'll regret this, Regina."

She took a step away. The hand tightened.

"I'll make you pay for the embarrassment and money you've cost my mother."

Gina looked up into his face. The features she'd thought so handsome were marred with hatred and bitterness. Blond hair parted on one side and slicked over his high forehead, combined with pale blue eyes that sparkled with anger, made him a male version of his mother. She jerked her arm free. "Just call this payback for the embarrassment you've caused me over the last three months with your infidelities." She cast a glance at Kimberly.

The other girl stood straighter. She smiled with one of those big, fake expressions that the upper crust seemed to manage so well. Kimberly smiled, but through her teeth she muttered, "Maybe if you'd given him reason to stay close to home, he wouldn't have been making love to me the night before your wedding."

The priest choked on a cough; the ring-bearer snickered. The flower girl turned tear-filled eyes to her mother, sitting somewhere in the congregation. "Does this mean I can't throw my flower petals?"

"If you want him, Kimberly, you can have him. I hope he's worth all the pain and misery he and his mother are going to put you through."

With that, Gina turned and headed for escape. Four steps, and Isabel blocked her way. Before Gina could tell her to move, the older woman slapped her hard across the face. Gina staggered back a step, but didn't retaliate. She refused to give Isabel grounds to have her arrested for assault. And she had no doubt that Mark David's mother would do just that. The woman was pure evil.

"You little bitch. This is good riddance. You were never good enough for him. You or your trashy family."

Gina resisted the urge to punch the older woman. The only one in her family deserving of being called trash was her father, and he was dead. She lifted her chin, meeting Isabel's glare. "Takes garbage to know garbage."

Isabel gasped, clutching her chest.

Gina moved around her, marching up the aisle toward the doors.

Toward freedom.

* * * * *

Heavy-metal rock blasted through the crowded club. Gina tried to look inconspicuous, but that proved to be difficult since she stuck out like a sore thumb. She sipped her drink and looked down at her wedding gown, then up at the club's patrons. Now, if her bridal attire had been black, she'd have fit right in.

Everyone in the place wore some type of black or other dark color. She had to admit they looked fabulous, but that black lipstick ... She took another sip of her third bourbon and cola -- or was it her fifth?

She lifted the glass and frowned at the dark whiskey and ice. She couldn't remember. The soft *buzz* in her head told her she'd had enough, but the ache in her chest told her otherwise. She placed the cool glass to her forehead. "I just want a man to want me for myself."

"Can I buy you a beer?"

She turned toward the male voice beside her. Both her eyebrows rose at the sight of the guy's red-and-purple hair. *Well, it's not black.* She smiled and shook her head.

He didn't seem put off. "So, you wanna dance?" He nodded toward the small crowd on the dance floor, rolling their hips and contorting their bodies in sinuous, graceful movements she'd only tried while dancing alone in her bedroom.

She shook her head.

"Smoke?" He shook a cigarette out of the pack from his back pocket.

Again, she shook her head.

He finally frowned. "So, you don't drink; you don't smoke --" He ticked off the growing list with his fingers. "-- probably don't body pierce or do tattoos ..."

Gina laughed, liking the guy's direct approach and feeling a little too bold and relaxed from the buzz of three -- or more -- alcoholic drinks. She scanned him from the toes of his black boots to his head. Despite the colored hair, his physique looked pretty darned enticing.

"What the hell *do* you do?" the guy continued with a look of utter curiosity on his face.

She lowered her gaze, studying her hands clasped around her drink. When she looked up without lifting her head, his dark eyes were watching, waiting.

She could feel an impish smile tug at the corners of her lips, knowing the reaction she'd get, but not caring. She was tired of always being a good girl. Look where it had gotten her, dammit. Her fiancé had fucked everyone in south Mississippi just because she'd wanted to stay "pure" for her wedding night. It was time for some fun. She took a deep breath, plunging ahead with a line she'd heard one of her goth girlfriends use a few times to pick up guys.

"Nice boots. Wanna fuck?"

The purplish-red head snapped back. She lifted her drink and took a sip.

Quin Tertulliano shook his head at the girl's boldness. *She's either drunk or stupid -- or both.*

The sound of her giggle tickled over his skin.

Drunk! He should have known. She'd had *down, depressed, and dangerous* written all over her when she entered the place. The bouncer must have let her in because of her dress. Although the color was wrong, they got quite a few "brides" frequenting the joint. Just what he needed -- another clash with the society elite over one more of their belles blackened by his patrons. He clenched his jaw at the memory of another belle wanting to experience the "low life," at his expense. He shook the memory from his mind, refusing to go there.

He pushed closer through the crowd to save her from herself. By the sudden lustful look on Romeo Roman's face, he might have a fight on his hands. *Shit!*

"Hey, Roman."

"Hey ..." The younger man's voice drifted, but his eyes never left the girl's face -- or was that her chest?

Quin leaned forward for a better angle, pulled his head back hard, and sucked in his breath. *Jesus!*

Up close, the sight of those curves all but hypnotized a man. Lush and beautiful. He couldn't remember ever seeing such gorgeous breasts before. He stood speechless with Roman for a few seconds, admiring the view.

"Well. What's it gonna be?" The girl's slurred speech broke his reverie.

Quin blinked hard, grabbing Roman's hand just before impact with the girl's ... gifts.

"What are you doing?" The younger man's voice held disbelief and anger.

"Roman, the girl's drunk." Quin flung an arm around Roman's shoulders and leaned closer, man to man. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Miss Debutante frown and lean forward, as if to hear better.

He snorted. If she could hear him over the noise and music in this place, she had bionic ears. "She's also not part of the scene."

They both turned and glanced at the subject in question.

Her frown increased. "Hey, what are you tellin' him?" She scooted toward the edge of her stool.

"That means she's off limits."

"But ... *look* at her, man."

They turned again, studying the body of a goddess. Besides the Playmate chest, her waist could be spanned by a small man's hands, and her hips flared into a heart-shaped curve, if his back view of her had been accurate. His hand itched with the desire to smack that white skin until it turned a nice rosy pink.

Quin's eyes flickered upward to her hair, blond and curly, arranged with some kind of dainty flower he'd heard his sister call baby's breath.

He fought the sudden urge to pull the clip out and let the curls spill around his hands and her shoulders. Pursing his lips, he looked for deficiencies, but couldn't find any.

She sat bent at the waist, with one high-heeled foot caught on the rung and one on the floor. A little further, and both breasts would be toppling over the top of the dress for all to see and worship.

Quin's grip tightened around Roman's shoulders, and he gritted his teeth.

"She's. Off. Limits."

Roman sighed and shook his head. "Damn, Quin. I had this one in the bag."

"Yeah, and what do you think her reaction would be tomorrow morning after you'd banged her to hell and back?"

Roman hesitated, but nodded. "See your point. She's all yours."

The girl slid the rest of the way off the stool, landing on all fours on the floor at his feet, laughing. She held up her glass. "Look, I didn't spill any ... any ... anything."

Then she was out, colder than a corpse, flat on her face.

Quin rolled his gaze to the lights on the ceiling. "Thanks."

* * * * *

Sunlight shafted across her eyelids. Gina groaned and flung an arm over her eyes. *Who opened the drapes?*

Birds twittered outside the window. The sound pounded through her mind like a sledgehammer. *God bless, who opened the windows?*

The faint scent of coffee wafted across her nostrils. She twitched her nose in appreciation of the dark, rich aroma. She sighed and rolled onto her side. Everything would be okay when she got her first cup of --

Her arm brushed warm skin. One eye opened. She froze, letting her gaze continue to move over the body next to hers. *Make that warm male skin!*

The naked man rolled over, pulling the sheet with him. The movement exposed the firm muscles of the tightest ass she'd ever seen. She gasped.

Drool dampened the side of her mouth, forcing her to swallow. She opened her other eye to view the clean, sculpted lines of his back and shoulders. Black hair, shiny like a raven's wing, fell halfway down his back.

Her fingers itched to stroke the silky mass, but she pulled her hand back an inch away from temptation. She realized she was clutching the sheet that had fallen from this god's body. Horror shot through her with the realization that she lay as naked as he beneath the sheet. A flame of heat spread over her body and up her face. "Oh, my God, what have I done?"

Beside her, the man shifted his weight. Muscles flexed and relaxed beneath the deep-tanned tone of his skin. Even his buttocks were the same rich color, like he sunbathed in the buff. Temptation returned.

An ache clenched hard in her abdomen and traveled to her clit. She had to close her eyes to force the shaft of need back where it belonged -- buried deep. She'd not given into her baser needs all these years; she wouldn't start now. *Or had she already?*

The man emitted a deep sigh. Gina held her breath and watched a strand of black silk fall to the other side of his back. If she'd already "known" him last night, surely she could sneak a feel of his hair. Hoping she wouldn't wake him, she bit her lip, but eased her fingers forward the small distance that separated them.

Her fingertip touched a hank of hair gathered at his side toward the mattress. Another finger dipped further into the mass. She sighed at the contact. Warm and silky, but richer than the fabric. The black strands had a life of their own, gliding through her fingers over and over. She traveled higher, to where the base of his skull met his neck. The warmth grew hotter there.

She scooted closer, careful not to rock the bed. The need to smell his hair rose so fast and hard within her, she couldn't stop herself. Flush with his body, she felt his heat through the sheet, from her head to her toes. She breathed in deeply, closing her eyes in appreciation of the chicory scent of his hair mingled with the scent of ... sandalwood.

"Umm." She threw a hand over her mouth, hoping he hadn't heard her.

"Don't stop, babe. I liked that." The deep voice, slurred with sleep and a heavy New Orleans accent, rumbled through her body.

Damn, what do I do? If they'd been lovers last night, he'd think it strange if she screamed and jumped out of his bed, especially after she'd been stroking his hair. Gina sucked on her bottom lip, but eased her hand forward to tunnel under the thickest part, near his neck.

“Um, yeah, like that.” He sighed, leaning his head back into her fingernails, letting them scratch his scalp. He wriggled his hips closer to her, brushing the tops of her thighs.

Gina swallowed hard. If she weren’t so scared, she’d laugh at how he reminded her of her black tomcat, Hades, the way he would arch his back whenever she rubbed him.

Rubbed him. Her fingers stilled with that thought. Her gaze traveled the length of the long, lean body. This close, she could see over his hip. She shut her eyes, quickly, but slowly opened them again to study the cock that she had apparently taken into her body the night before.

Even at rest on a nest of black hair, his penis lay at least six inches long. The darker skin contrasted with the creamy brown of his body, making her wonder at his ethnic background. A long vein ran the length of the shaft up to the dusky purple, mushroomed head.

I fucked that monster? Oh, my God.

She felt his muscles stiffen before he sat up on the side of the bed with quick, jerky movements.

“W-What’s wrong?” Her voice sounded scratchy and hoarse. Hell, she’d probably screamed her head off if she’d been doing him all night. She reached out to stroke his back, but he angled his head and body, arching away from her touch.

“If I offend you so much, I don’t want to be in the same bed with you.”

“What?” She thought over the last few minutes and realized she’d spoken out loud.

“Oh, oh ... that’s not what I meant.”

He stood up, ass bare, and stalked across the room to a pack of cigarettes lying on a small, black wrought-iron table with matching chairs on either side. He picked up the pack and shook a cigarette out, lighting it with the same jerky motions, angling his face so she could only see the barest profile over his shoulder.

He's pissed. Crap. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud. It's just ... I don't ... sleep around ... a lot --" *That's an understatement.* "-- and your, well, your ... penis ... took me by surprise, that's all."

The only response was a puff of smoke as he ran his left hand through his hair to let the dark mane fall gracefully down his back, shining and crackling with life. Such a feminine gesture, but on him the action appeared masculine, like a panther flicking his tail in irritation.

"It's very large." Her stomach growled with those whispered words, but not from desire for food. She bit the right side of her bottom lip. "Please ... come back to bed."

His right hand stopped in midair on the way to his lips. Smoke circled around and above his head, forming a wavering halo.

Gina smiled. God trying to tell her the man in front of her probably leaned, like the smoke, more toward the demonic side than the angelic. *At least, I hope so.*

"You want me?"

Gina stuffed an imaginary fist in her mouth to stop a groan. Did she *want* him? Every nerve in her body screamed for him to touch her. Her pussy clenched and dripped with the need to experience him between her legs, but with her memory intact this time. Her gaze traveled over his buttocks and long legs. She wanted to remember what he felt like inside her. She closed her eyes, her voice husky with need. "Yes. I want you."

Chapter Two

The raw need he heard in her voice shot through his cock, forcing an answering response. He wondered if she'd change her mind when she saw his face in the full light of the day. She'd been intoxicated last night, and the club lights had been dim. Most of the women he bedded didn't seem to mind his deformity, but he knew what type of response he received in the real world.

Quin turned. She gasped. He refused to respond, except for a quick tightening of his jaw. He watched her clutch the sheets tighter around her breasts. The memory of her nipples barely touching the skin of his back ignited another streak of desire to tighten his abdomen and lengthen his cock. A drop of moisture pooled on the tip, but he wouldn't turn away first. A niggles of doubt flashed through his mind, knowing she thought they'd already had sex the night before. She said she wanted him. Well, here he stood.

Her round blue eyes grew larger in her pale face. She had that peaches-and-cream skin people associated with southern belles. A little pink tongue darted out to moisten her top lip before she bit the bottom one.

He wondered if she knew she did that a lot. *She's nervous*. His lips twitched at the thought, but didn't form into a grin. *Or scared*. His eyebrows crashed down over his eyes, and the twitch disappeared.

She should be scared. Hell, coming in here last night, getting plastered. What if someone else had rescued her from Roman? She'd be crying this morning, instead of ...

He hesitated, angling his head to study her closer.

Her cheeks were flushed, eyes bright -- his gaze traveled down -- nipples hard! His gaze flew back to her face to see the tip of her tongue disappear behind lush lips, again.

Hell! She's excited. He took a long deep breath, clenched his jaw, and willed his body to not move.

"Well, will you?"

"Will I *what*?" He could barely force the words through the barrier of his teeth.

She flinched, blinking as her flushed cheeks grew redder. "You don't have to be so angry anymore. I said I wanted you."

Quin could feel his heart pounding harder against his chest. A goddess sat in the middle of his bed, offering her body, and here he stood, naked and hard, debating whether or not he should fuck her! What was wrong with this picture?

He raised the cigarette and inhaled deeply. Lowering the butt, he narrowed his eyes and blew a chain of smoke at an angle away from her. He knew what bothered him -- the past repeating itself.

The memory of another peaches-and-cream belle waking in his bed, screaming rape after she realized she'd fucked someone below her income bracket and beneath her social status. He'd spent two long years behind bars for something he didn't do.

"I tell you what, sweets ..." He flicked the remainder of the cigarette through the open window and over the wrought-iron railing. "... you come over here and show me you want me. Then we'll see if I climb back into that bed."

Her throat convulsed on a swallow, and he thought he heard her gulp. Slowly, she rose, lowering one pale leg to the floor. The creamy skin shone smooth against the dark satin of the sheet wrapped around her petite frame. The material opened long enough to expose a tempting line of pale flesh all the way up to her waist before her body was enveloped and hidden from his view.

Quin's throat went dry from the combination of tobacco smoke and pure, unadulterated lust. The gods or fates had decided to place this woman in his path, and he'd be damned if he could refuse the gift. But --

He watched her take a few more tentative steps toward him. He didn't want, or need, a pity fuck. "Stop."

She halted with a start, two tentative steps from the bed. Her pupils dilated at the brusqueness of his voice. Small hands gripped the sheet tighter, making him feel like an asshole. He had to be sure this woman knew what she wanted.

Quin's gaze roamed over the luscious figure in front of him. He knew what *he* wanted. "If you really want me to fuck you, drop the sheet and let me see you in the daylight."

She flinched, her flush turning a pale gray, like he'd sometimes witnessed right before someone puked or fainted. *Here come the excuses* --

The sheet rustled to the floor.

"Shit." He couldn't think of anything else to say at the sight of her body, bare and beautiful before him. Her breasts were even more magnificent bared than he remembered them being in the tight bodice of her dress. The satin outlined her nipples, hardened from the brush of the material and the breeze from the overhead fan. Her areolas spread dark against the creamy globes of her breasts. He'd undressed her in the dark last night so he wouldn't see her body. But he remembered the feel of it, as the wedding dress had proved a mother to get off and over her curves.

Quin clenched his fingers into a fist, needing the bite of his fingernails in the palm of his hand to prevent him from marching over and sucking her nipples as the hunger in his gut demanded. He released a strangled breath, but the flame of lust kept burning, brighter and hotter, as she drew nearer.

Flared hips swayed in a gentle rocking motion, like an ancient Voudou dance. The desire to pull her close and move against her in a rhythm all their own, echoed with the *whir* of the fan -- *fuck her, fuck her, fuck her.*

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face from his dampened forehead. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"Hot?" The teasing syllables of her voice crashed against the sensitive nerve endings of his skin. She stood directly in front of him, looking up at him with the smoldering gaze of a seasoned whore. The contrast between the innocence she'd exuded the night before in that damned dress and the way her sexual heat penetrated his wall of defense now crashed within the confines of his mind.

"You could say that." He reached forward, wrapping his fingers around each of her upper arms so tight, she wouldn't stand a chance of escape. He didn't want to, but with his cock throbbing, he asked through gritted teeth, "Still want me in that bed with you?"

If she said "no," he'd die from frustration, but he'd let her go. No way would he push the situation and make a similar mistake like he'd made years ago. From experience he knew that women could say "yes" one second, but mean "no" the next day. He narrowed his gaze on her face. "You're over twenty-one, right?"

He held his breath and watched an angel smile.

"Yes." Her eyes sparkled, and the rosy lips parted to reveal the whitest teeth he'd ever seen.

Have to taste ...

His mouth crashed into hers. She tried to pull back, but he held her tight. In a matter of seconds her struggles became small whimpers of desire. Instead of pushing him away, her small hands wrapped around his arms and his waist, pulling him closer. Their tongues twisted and mated, imitating what he intended to do to her cunt with his cock.

Quin opened his eyes without releasing her mouth. The bed stood not more than two feet away. He took a step, backing her closer to where he wanted her. Her teeth nipped; her lips suckled. He closed his eyes with a groan.

Something soft wrapped around his ankle, tripping them. Their combined weight forced them to the floor. Quin rolled at the last second so his weight wouldn't land on top of her. With a *thud*, he hit the floor first. Her lighter frame hit him hard, knocking the breath from his lungs, but their kiss continued.

"Ba-baby." He managed the word through the onslaught of her mouth and his lack of oxygen. He tried again, finally gaining enough air to speak louder. "Babe, give me a second."

She lifted her head with a stinging spray of hair across his face. The soft strands whirled and floated around her shoulders. She breathed hard, her chest rising and falling in a fast tempo, like their heartbeats. Her eyebrows twitched at the same time her mouth curved into a naughty smile. "Why? Have I worn you out already?"

Quin snorted. "Not hardly, woman. If you hadn't noticed, we fell over the sheet you dropped. I saved your ass from taking a beating from this hardwood floor." He rapped his knuckles against the floor for effect. "Believe me when I say it would have hurt." He rubbed his hip.

"Who said I wouldn't enjoy a good beating?" She laughed, throwing her hair back to cascade around her shoulders, with an impish gleam in her eyes.

Quin's mouth dropped open and stayed there as she continued.

"Want me to rub it for you?"

A flash of heat speared into his groin at her words and the sight of her on all fours, bending to rub his hip. Her ass rose in the air, curved into a perfect heart shape. "Or, better yet, let me kiss it better." Her lips touched his hip, burning in their quest to reach the spot he complained of hurting.

Quin closed his eyes at the nibbling sensations across his skin. He scooted back a foot, letting his back hit the side of the bed. *Close enough!*

Grabbing her shoulders, he lifted her up to face him. He shook his head and watched her eyes cloud with confusion and hurt. The pretty mouth turned down in disappointment.

"Kiss this." He nodded his head slowly toward his groin. "It hurts worse."

Her gaze followed, and he watched as understanding replaced the pain of his refusal in her expression. The pouty lips turned upwards, and her confusion lifted into pure, impish delight.

Okay, this she knew. She might be a virgin in the technical sense, but there were several pleasures to be enjoyed without coitus. Oral sex happened to be her favorite, and her specialty.

She wondered how he had reacted last night to her inexperience with intercourse. No doubt, he hadn't been satisfied with her lack of experience. She'd make amends this morning. He sure seemed to know what he was doing, and he sure as hell didn't kiss like Mark David. Not one bit.

Mark David rarely opened his mouth with his kisses, preferring to nip and peck.

This one ... well. He devoured.

A rush of juice tickled between her legs at the thought. If he licked and sucked her clit the way he took her mouth, she'd be in heaven -- or, according to the people in her community, more probably hell.

She giggled. *See you there, Daddy.*

“What’s so funny?” An edge of tension had returned to his voice.

Gina glanced up to find him studying her. A frown formed across his brow. Not wanting him to think she could possibly be laughing at him, she replied, “I was thinking of my father.”

Anger raced across his face before he moved away to stand.

“Wait.”

He stopped with his body turned sideways to her. “Why? I don’t like to play games. I told you, if you don’t want me, tell me.”

“I do.” She stayed on her knees, looking up into his stony face. The side covered with the long scar and tattoo was turned toward her. The sight had frightened her when he’d first turned around, but the more she studied the intricate design and the way the artist had woven the work into the scar, making them one to form the body and legs of a spider, she could appreciate the difficulty of the art.

His eyebrow rose in disbelief. “That’s why you shivered with revulsion just now when you were looking at my face.” He didn’t ask, but stated the words like a fact.

Gina’s anger rose. “Don’t stand there telling me what I’m thinking, or feeling. You don’t have a clue, mister.”

He turned toward her, putting his cock within an inch of her face. A spark of challenge shown in his eyes. “Show me, by all means.”

Gina could feel the angry flare of her nostrils. She’d show him, by God. He wouldn’t know what hit him -- or, better, ate him. With hands that shook, she grasped the sides of his thighs, bringing her body and mouth directly beneath the head of his cock. The shaft, hardened now, extended out from the base a good -- she gulped -- ten inches. With the head, he had to be twelve inches long. Not just long, but thick! She gauged the circumference at about seven inches, with the head even larger. *Just like she’d thought ... a monster.*

His hands lifted to rest upon his waist. She glanced up and saw his eyes narrowed. He didn't believe she'd do it. Gina smiled, tightened her fingers into his muscles, and swiped her tongue across the head of his cock without taking her gaze from his face. She wanted to watch his downfall.

The muscles beneath her hands tightened in response, and his cock twitched upwards. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Gina scooted her butt and legs into a more comfortable position. This might take longer than she had anticipated, but one way or another -- she frowned -- he'd be going down, preferably between her legs. But first things first. With a deep breath, she latched her mouth onto the throbbing flesh in front of her, liking the faint, musky scent of male.

No response. She quit looking at his face and concentrated on her purpose. Increasing the suction of her mouth, she flicked her tongue down the length of his cock. The silky smoothness of his skin teased and throbbed against her lips. A drop of semen escaped to coat the inside of her mouth, the taste a salty and sweet combination.

"Mmm." She twirled her tongue around the head, sucking the shaft in quickly to gather more of the thick, creamy mixture she desired.

The muscles in his thighs contracted, causing him to shift his weight. Long fingers entwined in her hair and massaged her scalp.

Gina smiled around his cock, but continued to work his flesh. His fingers tightened and pulled. She looked up. His nostrils were flared with desire, and the muscles around his mouth were tight with the effort to maintain control. But his eyes glinted with a mixture of pleasure and threat. She shivered.

"While you're enjoying my moment of weakness, just remember -- your turn is coming, sweets." His fingers tightened to the point of pain before he released his grip. He continued to massage her scalp. When she sat there staring up at him, stunned, he pushed his hips forward, forcing her head down, back to her task.

The triumph she'd experienced momentarily evaporated as she wondered what exactly he had in mind for his revenge. The thought terrified and excited her at the same time. She could literally let him, or ask him, to do whatever she wanted. No one knew her here in New Orleans, unlike the close community of Bay St. Louis. She could let her inhibitions free and be whomever, or whatever, she chose to be without fear of public condemnation of herself or her family.

With a renewed vigor, she released his cock. She laughed at his groan of frustration and patted his leg. "Sokay, baby. I'm going to take care of you."

She kissed the inside of his leg, trailing her tongue up beneath his balls. Keeping her eyes on his face, she watched him watching her. She discovered she liked sex in the daylight hours. The pleasure on her lover's face turned her on, made her bolder. Her teeth bit into the soft flesh that her lips had nibbled a second before.

His balls drew upwards; his cock jumped. He hissed from between clenched teeth and promised payback with a silent, smoldering gaze. An eye for an eye. A clit for a cock.

The moisture between her legs flowed freely, pooling onto the hardwood floor. Gina released him and leaned back on her elbow, legs spread wide, watching his reaction. With her forefinger, she circled her clit before traveling down the outside of her vulva to the pool beneath. She dipped her finger into the puddle of her own juice and twirled once, twice, before lifting her hand to her lips.

His gaze burned between her exposed pussy and her mouth. A red flush sat high on his cheekbones, and his lips parted in anticipation. His chest rose and fell in short gasps of air.

When her fingers entered her mouth, his eyes widened at the same time his hand wrapped around his cock, stroking to the speed she licked her hand. Gina's chest burned at the primitive need to have him masturbate for her at the same time she masturbated for him. Her fingers left her mouth to travel south into the curls surrounding her cunt. With a low growl, she dipped her forefinger deep into the heat of her body. Her back arched at the

sudden invasion. One finger became two, then three. As she pleased her body, he pleased his.

His long fingers choked the massive width of his cock, pumping the length from base to head, over and over. If she slowed, he slowed. If she pumped into her flesh harder and faster, so did he.

Sweat rolled between her breasts and streamed across his chest. *An eye for an eye. A clit for a cock.* The quip became a mental chant, timing the pumping of her hand. The wet sounds of their pleasure rose into the quiet and heat of the room, blending with the mantra in her mind. The scent of sex mingled with the smell of coffee and bacon, cooking somewhere below them, bringing forth two separate hungers.

Pressure built low in her abdomen, spreading across her hips and back, down her legs to her feet. She opened her mouth on a silent gasp. Any second ...

"Yeeesss!" Her back arched as the orgasm took her high, wracking her body with one glorious spasm after another. Her fingers kept moving, slower and slower. Her heartbeat calmed and her breathing quieted. She looked up and across at her partner.

He still watched her, pumping faster, but without success. Gina crawled to him, rising on her knees to reach his cock. Her eyes found his as her mouth closed around the head, stretching her mouth wide. His hand kept pumping the base. She sucked him in deeply; his body jerked hard. Hot, creamy semen flowed into her mouth.

"Umm." She moved forward to get a better angle, accepting all of his juice. With an eagerness she'd never known, she lapped him clean from root to head. After several seconds, a large hand, shaking but firm, stopped her efforts. She blinked up through the haze that surrounded her mind.

A dazed face stared down at her. His throat muscles worked hard as he swallowed. The voice that came out sounded husky and dry. "I think ... you got it all, sweets."

Gina smiled. He smiled. They laughed together.

“If I didn’t tell you last night, my name is Gina.” Her voice sounded soft and shy. She could feel a blush spreading across her chest, up her throat and face. Her eyelashes flickered, and she glanced down at the floor. She’d never before done what she just had with this guy!

Long fingers curved over her cheek and under her chin, lifting her face to his as he kneeled in front of her. Dark eyes stared into hers. Kissing her lips with the briefest of caresses, he whispered, “I’m Quin, and I’m damned glad to meet you.”

Before she could respond, his mouth devoured hers.

Chapter Three

Gina didn't move. His lips pressed warm and wet against hers, the taste of his cum salty in her mouth. Sure, she'd had oral sex before, but not to the point where the guy came without her withdrawing. Her reactions to Quin surprised her. Strangely, she didn't feel the revulsion she had always experienced with Mark David when he had tried to insist that she swallow.

A smile teased her lips, to be licked away by Quin's tongue. She felt invigorated, empowered with the knowledge that she'd been able to weaken such a powerful man.

Slowly, her fingers slid up his biceps, trembling beneath her touch. She wondered how much more control she could exert over him. She turned her head, breaking contact with his luscious mouth. Her tongue played over her bottom lip, aching and tender from his ministrations. "Um, why don't we move to the bed?"

"We're at the bed." His voice sounded lazy, content, and sexy as hell.

"Why don't we get in the bed?"

"Are you uncomfortable?" He nuzzled her neck with his nose, trailing his tongue, hot and moist, just below her ear.

Oh, God, was he good! “Aren’t you?” She pulled back, raising an eyebrow and glancing at his bare ass against the wooden floor. With care she avoided looking at the area between his legs, scared she might run in fear of the huge beast nudging impatiently against her thigh. She now knew exactly the length and width his cock possessed. A large thread of anticipation mingled with the doubt, and she knew she had to have him in her.

“I’m fine, but we’ll move if you’d like.” He reached a long finger out to trace the perimeter of her nipple.

Gina jumped, shivering as goosebumps raced over her chest and arms. Her nipples hardened to stab into the humidity of the room. *God, it has to be one hundred degrees.* Or was the heat related to the close proximity of Quin’s body?

Strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her forward to straddle his lap. Her knees wrapped around either side of his narrow hips. His cock pushed against the lips of her pussy.

Gina bit back a groan. She was supposed to be exerting her newly gained feminine powers of persuasion. But from her vantage point, Quin had things well under control and right where he wanted them.

He angled his head; his lips nipped her chin and bottom lip. “Let me in. I want to feel your heat around me. I bet it’s tighter than that mouth and twice as hot.”

Gina closed her eyes at the vivid picture his words painted. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, and she let her head fall back. Her curls swished against the curve of her buttocks, tickling. A fist wrapped into her hair and pulled, keeping her neck extended and open for the exploration of his mouth. The shaft of desire that shot through her made her eyes close.

He shifted his hips beneath her, pressing the head of his cock into the opening of her vagina. Gina hissed at the sensation. Not pain, but a sharp stab of pleasure at the throbbing intensity of his cockhead, like an angry, hungry snake. Her entire body shook with the need to feel that shaft piercing deep into her body. She opened her mouth on a groan.

Sharp teeth bit into the flesh of her throat at her collarbone.

"You have the creamiest skin I've ever touched, ever kissed." He bit harder. "I just want to tie you up and eat you whole."

Gina swallowed hard, her throat convulsing within the strict confines of muscles pulled taut. He wasn't hurting her, just controlling her, which had her pussy clenching with a spasm of need. Why didn't he advance further into her body? She liked what he was doing. "Why don't you?"

"You'd let me bind you?"

She nodded within the constraint of his hold. Muscles tensed beneath her legs and around her arms, lifting her for the briefest of seconds before she sailed through the air toward the bed.

She squealed as she hit the mattress with a *whoosh* and bounced once. Scrambling backwards, she pressed her back against the headboard. A braided wicker design dug into her back, but she welcomed the contact, hoping the coolness of the wicker would help her concentrate on what had happened. He had to be strong to have picked her up like that. A thread of unease slipped through her euphoria.

"You're strong."

A black brow arched, and his teeth flashed with a wide smile. "I work out."

"A lot."

He hesitated. "Does male ... dominance ... bother you?"

Her mind registered that they were discussing something deeper here. Something dark and hidden within her secret fantasies. Her gaze wandered downward. Her tongue circled her lips.

His laughter bounced off the walls. "Obviously not."

Heat scorched her cheeks. Her gaze snapped up to meet his. The expression on his face looked good-natured, but a wicked gleam shone from his eyes. He knew exactly what she wanted. And he planned on delivering.

The mattress dipped with the weight of his hands and arms, followed by his knees. The silk sheets rustled as he slithered up the length of the mattress to her drawn-up legs. Her arms tightened around her knees in a protective gesture. His eyes never left hers.

“Ah, Gina, you’re so sweet.” The words flowed softly from his lips.

Gina closed her eyes, letting the honey warmth of his voice caress her skin and nerve endings. Mark David had never spoken to her in that tone. Whenever they’d petted, his touch had felt cool and impersonal, his lips hard and unyielding.

Fingers wrapped around her ankles. Her eyes opened. She hadn’t realized he’d moved so close. She tried to pull her legs together tighter, but Quin’s strength wouldn’t allow her the leeway. Their gazes clashed.

One second she had her back to the headboard, the next she lay flat on her back, looking up at the ceiling fan as it twirled slowly, cutting through the thick humidity like a knife through fresh-churned butter.

The fan disappeared, to be replaced by Quin’s features.

“Who were you daydreaming about that time? And don’t tell me it was your father.” A frown marred his brow. His jaw clenched tight, making the scar inside the spider tattoo stand out in detail.

Gina swallowed hard and shook her head. His long frame pressed down and between her legs, spreading her thighs further against the mattress. Deft fingers grasped her wrists, pulling her arms above her head. The movement forced her breasts higher onto her chest, with her nipples even with his mouth.

“I can make you tell me.” His breath fanned hot against her skin.

Her nipples tightened. “Yeah? What do I get if you can’t?”

She almost laughed at the surprised expression on his face. He hadn’t expected that one, but neither had she. What was she doing goading this guy? She knew absolutely nothing about him, but deep down she knew he wouldn’t hurt her, not intentionally.

The surprise eased from his features. He examined her through narrowed eyes. A calculated grin turned up one side of his mouth. "You can have whatever you want --"

"Really?"

-- but you aren't going to win."

"Don't be so sure, mister." This little game could be fun if he was willing to play. He'd said he didn't like games, but the more they teased and taunted, the higher her desire rose. The mattress beneath her dampened from the increased flow of her juices with each shot of their repartee. "I can be very stubborn."

"And I, very persuasive." He dipped his head and wrapped his lips around one nipple, sucking hard on the tightened bud.

"God bless!" Gina threw her head back and arched her spine against the pleasure that shot from her chest, through her abdomen, and to her clit. Her thigh muscles clenched hard, squeezing his torso tight. His erection throbbed hot and hard against her abdomen, increasing the tension.

A rumbling erupted from her abdomen and gained momentum to surround the breast beneath Quin's mouth. He was laughing!

Gina bucked her hips beneath his weight. "Why, you --" Sharp teeth bit her nipple. "-- *aah!*"

He eased off; she panted hard. If he kept this up, she'd come within a few seconds. Then he'd win, because she'd tell him anything he wanted to hear. *But how do you tell the man you're in bed with you were thinking of the fiancé you just dumped yesterday?*

"Quin --"

"You give?" He moved to suck her breast in further.

"No." She twisted to the side to avoid his marauding mouth. "Wait ... wait, I was thinking of my fiancé." There. She'd said it. And from the look on Quin's face, he had the

exact reaction she'd known he would. No man wanted to hear the woman he had naked in his bed was thinking of another lover.

His body tensed. "I forgot the damned wedding dress."

His eyebrows met in a black slash, forming one line in the center of his forehead. She had never seen someone frown so hard.

He propped himself up on one elbow. "You married yet?" His other hand slid down to rest, stiffly, on her belly.

"No. I ran out on him during the ceremony, after he cheated on me."

His eyebrow rose. "So, this is payback?"

"No."

He opened his mouth, but she interrupted.

"I was only thinking how he never spoke to me the way you did." She waved a hand at him. "I mean the tone you used ... he never spoke to me that way."

She sighed, dropping her hand onto the bed. Her gaze left his face and stared at the rumpled sheets. Guess she'd never know if sex with Quin would be good or not. She'd offended him. Gina turned, easing to the edge of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

She stopped and looked over her shoulder with a quick motion of her head. Curls danced around her face. With an impatient hand, she swept them out of her view. "I thought you wanted me to leave."

He rose on hands and knees, like that big, black panther she'd pictured earlier. His dark hair swung forward, covering one side of his face, but allowing the intense gleam of his hidden gaze to peek through. Without batting an eyelash, he moved toward her.

"If I wanted you to leave, I would have said so." His hot breath brushed her shoulder and the dampened skin of her back where she had pressed against the headboard. "One thing you might want to remember about a dominant is that we like to give the orders."

She closed her eyes against the shiver of desire racing up and down her spine at the sound of his voice touching her, caressing her, like a lover's hand.

"When you do something without permission, you are showing a will to control the situation."

Long fingers traced her jaw as he held her face for his kiss. Not hard and demanding, but soft and coaxing. In his own way, he let her know he could be as gentle or as rough as she wanted.

"Rebellion is usually punished."

"I don't want to rebel." She opened her eyes and stared into his. Her nipples tightened at the same time her abdominal muscles clenched tight. Slowly, she reached up and traced the spider etched into his skin around the jagged scar; then she tilted her head. Like a mother easing her child's boo-boos, she wanted to offer comfort and acceptance for the pain he must have suffered from such a gruesome injury.

His mouth covered hers in a kiss, no longer gentle, but possessive. Just as quickly, he pulled back, circling her waist with his arms. He rubbed his dark head against hers, as if marking his territory. "Come back to bed, Gina. You can't leave yet."

She nodded slightly, but that was all the acknowledgement he seemed to need. His arms tightened. His large frame rolled, pulling her back beneath his long body, while his arms prevented his weight from crushing her.

She looked up into his face, millimeters from her own, and traced her fingernails over the muscles in his arms. "What if I want to be on top?"

He threw his head back and laughed, the sound deep and hearty.

She stared, fascinated at his lack of self-consciousness. Mark David never showed his emotions, especially in public. Even yesterday, he'd kept his voice low and had continued to smile in the face of her denial, all the while threatening retribution. No one, except her, had heard him.

“You’re thinking of him again.” The laughter died in Quin’s voice. “What do I have to do to erase him from your thoughts while you’re in my bed?”

Gina’s fingers tightened, digging into his muscles. She swallowed against the sudden dryness of her throat, knowing Quin could give her what she wanted and needed before she returned home to face the consequences of her actions. No moisture could be summoned. Her voice, when it came, sounded like the croak of a dying man in the desert, searching for that last drop of water to save his soul.

“You could always ... fuck me ... senseless.”

Chapter Four

Quin didn't seem to need any further encouragement. His kiss scorched her lips, her neck, her breasts, licking in swirls down and across her abdomen. Each swipe sent ripples of need and desire through her nervous system, tightening her clit and vaginal muscles to the point of orgasm, but keeping her just out of reach.

"Oh, pleeease, Quin." She panted and pleaded. Her fingernails dug into his hands as they held her arms out of reach. She wished he would tie her like he'd hinted he would, making her vulnerable to his touch and sexual needs. Never would she have braved telling Mark David of her secret fantasies.

She raised her head to watch Quin engrossed in his quest to arouse her to the point of insanity. With him, she could let her true self free. He'd accept whatever she desired of him, without judgment. She shuddered in total ecstasy, her knees jerking hard against the shaft of pleasure he created in her body. "Now, please, please."

He moved further down her body, looking up into her gaze with an intensity that made her gasp. He flicked his tongue out slowly, barely touching the sensitive skin around her clit.

Gina moaned and arched, raising her hips closer, but he pulled back, refusing direct contact. “Why do you torture me?”

He smiled, tracing her feminine lips with his forefinger. He blew gently against her heated skin. “In Voudon and other circles, sex is considered an act of magick. Drawing out the moment of orgasm helps build the power needed to project the desired outcome into the universe.”

His finger probed the recesses of her body, but not far enough to ease the pressure building deep within her womb. “Yeah? Well, we’re not trying to erect the Taj Mahal or anything.” She panted hard as his finger slid deeper. “C-Can we just get to the projection part of the process?”

He laughed and kissed the inside of her thigh. “Are you on birth control?”

She blinked. His question shattered the haze around her. “I -- No, I’m not.”

His eyebrow rose, as did his body over her. “He wanted to start that family soon, huh?” He kissed her lips hard and pressed her hands against the headboard. “Stay right here.”

Gina nodded and swallowed. *This must be some of that domination stuff.* She wondered what he’d do if she moved, but somehow didn’t think she was quite ready to find out. She stayed exactly how he left her, not moving a muscle.

Across the room she heard a drawer slide open and the rustle of paper. The bed dipped with the return of his weight. She watched, fascinated, as he crawled between her legs, ripping a condom package with his teeth.

His cock rose, proud and eager, jerking twice when he attempted to cover the head with the latex. Quin cursed beneath his breath, raptly focused on his task.

Gina observed it all without moving an inch. Had she really relinquished her virginity to a complete stranger? Hadn’t she always prided herself on saving that most precious gift for her husband? She snorted silently. *Right!*

Mark David hadn't cared enough to keep his dick in his pants, so why feel guilty over spilled milk? All she could do was to enjoy the moment -- this time sober.

Quin moved further between her legs, his gaze trained on hers. His fingers brushed over her stomach, her breasts, her arms extended over her head. "You've been a good girl, Gina. I think I need to reward you."

The weight of his body crushed hers at the same time his mouth absorbed any protest she could have made. His hips rooted deeper between her legs, with his cock straining at the opening of her vagina. He lifted his head briefly. "Pull your legs up. Let me in."

She obeyed, liking the feel of his big body dominating her, taking what he wanted ... what she needed to give.

He took her mouth again.

Wrapping her ankles together behind the small of his back, she heard him grunt his approval. Her smile turned into a silent scream as his cock slid in, stretching her wide, burning deep within her body. Her muscles tightened in rejection of his invasion. She felt him hesitate.

He lifted his head, releasing her mouth. The pain and his stare told her everything. They had not had sex the night before, and he was madder than hell at the knowledge she was a virgin.

Her muscles clenched around him in a spasm. He shut his eyes and swallowed hard. His throat moved in a swallowing motion, as though a golf ball might be going down. His chest heaved in a deep, shuddering breath. Sweat broke across his forehead, and his speech came out shaky. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Gina released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, waiting for his reaction. *Weren't men supposed to be proud to be a woman's first?* She heard the anger lacing every word of his question and knew to what he referred. Before she could respond, he continued.

“Didn’t you think that might be a vital piece of information for me to have before we started this little charade?”

“Charade?” Her anger accelerated to boiling point. She wiggled, trying to put some distance between them, but only succeeded in causing both of them to gasp at the intense pleasure shooting between their joined bodies. “You could have told me we didn’t have sex last night!”

“For the gods’ sakes, don’t move, woman.”

“If the feel of my body around yours is so repugnant, then get the hell off me!”

Quin’s body shuddered. “I would, but if I, or you, move another muscle, I’m going to come.”

Gina froze at his words, then relaxed. “You’re wearing a condom --”

“That’s not the fucking point, Gina.”

“Well, what is?” She truly didn’t understand what his problem was. They were both consenting adults; they were using precautions ... what was wrong with him?

“The point is, you didn’t tell me you were a virgin!” The critical point had passed, and Quin could move without ejaculating, but he found he liked the snug feel of her pussy wrapped around his cock. Even if she had planned using him to “deflower” her.

“What difference does it make?”

“You were obviously holding out until you were married. Why change your mind and allow a complete stranger to pluck your cherry?”

The punch of her fist into his chest took his breath.

“You bastard!” Her legs thrashed and her hips bucked, sending his libido on the rise again.

Quin clamped a hand around her wrists to protect his face from her claws. The little hellcat was pissed. *Well, good, so am I.*

"Was all this some well-planned ruse to sucker me in so you can sue me if I don't marry you?"

"What? Are you insane?"

"Let's just say, it's the voice of experience speaking." He moved his upper body out of the way of her snapping teeth, but that forced his pelvis deeper into hers. They groaned.

Gina's sultry voice tickled against the nerve-endings of his chest. "Oh, Quin."

"Gina." He fell into her, giving in to the lust she aroused. His mouth crushed hers as he ground his hips into her liquid heat. Her sharp, fast pants told him she was as close to the edge as he. A few more thrusts --

"Ahem, uh, excuse me, brother. Am I interruptin'?"

Quin and Gina froze for a second before Gina squealed in horror. Quin lifted his hips, moaning at the sucking sound and feel of her body trying to hold his cock in place. Gina rolled from beneath him and to the other side of the bed, away from his sister's eyes. He heard Gina's whispered "Oh, my God" through the squeaking mattress springs and the slither of silk sheets.

He pulled up the sheet crumpled at the end of the bed and covered her body and his hips. He didn't really care if his sister saw him nude, but he didn't want to embarrass Gina further, whether she'd lied to him or not.

"Vivian. You been here long?"

"Long enough." She looked at her watch. "It's a little late in de morning for ... trysts, no?"

Her Haitian-French accent washed over him with sarcasm, biting and familiar. His sister didn't approve of his "trysting," as she called it, nor his refusal to participate in their

Voudon heritage. He also knew she'd probably caught the entire episode of his escapade with Gina in living color.

He shrugged and reached around to smack Gina's ass.

"Ow!" Gina raised her head up from beneath the covers to glare at him. Blond curls cascaded around her shoulders and into her face. She blew one strand away with a fierce *huff*.

Quin smiled. *She's adorable. I might have to keep her.* "This is Gina. Gina, meet my sister, Vivian Desmond."

Gina's scowl turned to utter embarrassment. Her neck and face flamed red, and her blue eyes widened in horror, but she glanced toward Vivian and gave a weak smile. "Hi."

Quin threw his head back and let his laughter escape into the room. He did so admire her bravery in the face of mortifying circumstances. He watched his virgin lover's mouth open in shock before she dove beneath the covers again. He laughed harder.

Vivian scolded him, slowly, in Creole, adding several French phrases. His sister knew he didn't understand her language completely.

"You should be ashamed, humiliating her that way. She is but *une petite*."

His laughter died. His gaze narrowed on his sister. He also responded in his sister's native tongue. "She may have been an innocent but a few minutes ago, but she has guile and cunning like a fox."

Vivian *tsked* at him. "You are so cynical, brother."

"No more than I should be after what that little bitch did to me, or have you forgotten the two years I spent in hell for something I did not do?"

Vivian waved a hand and looked away. "I do not forget anything, but you must push de past behind you if you are to move forward towards a future ..." She motioned toward Gina. "... a wife."

Quin snorted and patted Gina's hip. He rubbed his hand across the soft curve beneath the silk. "I think not. This one is good, but I will not be made to feel guilty because she decided she wanted to be fucked by a real man instead of the apparent sap she ran out on."

Gina stiffened beneath his hand. Quin realized his mistake as the blond head rose again. Her bottom lip trembled, and her beautiful blue eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

Shit! He hadn't intended to hurt her feelings. He'd only wanted to get his sister off his back. How was he to know that Gina was bilingual -- or multilingual, for that matter? He didn't know anything about her, except she was good in bed. Hell, she was great in bed!

Gina stared at him with nostrils flaring and said in perfect Creole, "Fuck you, too."

"Gina --"

She held her hand up, silencing him.

Quin threw his hands in the air, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. "How was I supposed to know you spoke Creole?"

The hand again, as she wrapped the sheet around her sarong-style and searched for her clothes. "That's beside the point. You said what you said."

He circled around in front of her, but she side-stepped him without looking into his face. He turned to Vivian with a silent plea for help, not caring that he paraded around in the nude.

His sister raised an eyebrow and shook her head.

Gina continued. "If you'd really been interested in me, you could've asked me what I do for a living."

Women! "Gina --" He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to a stop. "Okay, what do you do for a living?"

"Hah! Like you care." She jerked free from his grasp.

"Where are you going?" He touched her shoulder, knowing a moment of satisfaction when she didn't pull away.

“Back home.”

“To the prick?” Quin asked, trying to sound nonchalant, but even he heard the note of jealousy threading through the question. He frowned, not liking the quick turn of his emotions.

“I thought that was you.” Gina shrugged his hold off.

“You misunderstood what I was saying.”

That brought her up to her full height of no more than five-foot-four in bare feet. “I speak the language fluently. I didn’t misunderstand anything. I taught foreign languages at my town’s high school.”

Quin’s six-foot-two body shrank from the anger blasting off the fiery woman in front of him. *Goddammit*. No one made him feel inferior. He stood straight and took a step toward her, asserting his dominance.

But Gina wouldn’t play that game. With narrowed eyes, she brushed past him, silk sheet and all, snatching her wedding gown and paraphernalia up in a wad. Silk rustling in a cloud around her, she marched for the door. “Nice meeting you, Vivian.”

“You also.” Vivian moved forward. “You will come again some time?”

Gina glanced quickly at him before turning back to his sister. “No, thank you. I don’t think I will. I hope you understand.”

“Perfectly.” Vivian shot him a venomous glance.

“Now, just a minute.” He moved to catch Gina as she strode out the door, but Vivian blocked his path.

“You cannot possibly go chasing after her without your clothes.”

“I can do whatever the hell I want.” He managed the words through clenched teeth. “Why are you stopping me? You were the one preaching about a future. And a wife!”

Vivian smiled and patted his arm. “She is angry with you. You must let her cool off, then she will be thinking of you in a better light.”

“What good is that going to do when I don’t know her last name or where she’s from? How am I going to contact her if I don’t know anything about her?”

Vivian stood there waiting for his waving arms and shouting to die down. She was always so calm. Quin wanted to strangle her. “Why did you have to intrude?”

“She was a virgin! You dare to bring bad luck on our heads by ignoring dat fact and taking her anyway, because you can’t keep your dick in your pants?”

“You are so superstitious, Viv. All the freakin’ virgins in the world losing their cherries before they’re married can’t possibly cause that much of a problem.”

Vivian went into a tirade in Creole.

Quin shook his head. “You know I can’t understand a word you say when you speak that fast.”

Vivian placed her hands on her hips, lips pursed. When she spoke, her nostrils flared and her voice shook with remnants of her years in Haiti.

“Quin Tertulliano, you bedda do right by dat girl.” Vivian moved toward him, pulling a talisman from her pocket. “I seen dat girl in trouble in my dreams. She needs you.”

“Come on, Vivian. You know I don’t believe in that hocus-pocus shit.”

“You bedda, boy. Dat girl needs protection, and it gots somethin’ to do with you.”

“Okay. I’ll try to find her.”

With a flick of her hand Vivian strode out the door. “And get a shower. You stink like beer, sex, and cigarettes!”

Quin sat in the chair nearest the bed. His elbows resting on his knees and his head lying in his hands, he stared at the floor. He hadn’t planned on having sex with Gina. It had just happened. She’d been so drunk last night, he’d barely gotten her upstairs.

After fighting with that damned dress for forty-five minutes, he’d stripped to get a shower, but had lain down for just a second. The next thing he knew, she was playing with

his neck and hair. He smiled, remembering how her fingers had stroked through his hair, against his scalp. He'd always loved when a woman --

A rectangular brown object caught his eye. He squinted, but couldn't quite figure out what the object was sticking out from beneath the ottoman. He reached down and pulled a woman's billfold from where it had obviously fallen. His heart raced as he flipped the folded leather open. He smiled at the name and address he saw inside:

Regina Marie Chappel
1015 Sea Heron Lane
Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

Quin grabbed his jeans, black tee-shirt, and biker boots. He'd made it down the stairs when Roman spotted him.

"Hey, man, was that the babe you told me to leave alone last night?"

Quin kept walking. "Yes."

Roman fell into step beside him. "What's the deal? Looks like she ended up spending the night with you."

Quin stopped and looked his friend in the eye, reading what Roman's question really was. He didn't think he needed to justify what had happened between Gina and him. So he said, "She did. We did. What of it?"

Roman held up his hands and stepped back. "Hey, it's cool."

Quin grabbed his keys off a hook and his helmet from beneath the bar counter.

"Who you headin' out to see?" Roman stacked beer glasses across the back of the bar for use that night.

"A stubborn blond in Bay St. Louis."

Chapter Five

Gina walked slowly through the living room into the kitchen, ignoring the stares and frowns she received from her two sisters, Becky and Starr. The drive from New Orleans had been uneventful, thank goodness. The image of a tall, dark stranger had kept her occupied, all too well.

She picked up a small pot, clanging it against the granite countertop, wishing the aluminum could be Quin's head. "Sonofabitch."

"You've got that right. The way he carried on with your maid-of-honor, I'd have dumped him at the altar, too."

Gina swiveled to see her middle sister standing in the doorway, munching on an apple. Her fly-away red hair cascaded almost to her waist, with a single long plait hanging along the side of her face. Starr Chappel looked every bit the Wiccan store owner she was, with her wild hair and long, flowing tie-dye skirt. Large green eyes frowned at Gina. "What I don't understand is why you didn't leave his ass a long time ago."

"Starr!" Their oldest sister pushed her way into the kitchen, taking Gina in her arms and offering her a hug. "That's Gina's business." She smoothed a gentle hand over Gina's hair,

offering comfort as she always had to both her younger sisters since the death of their mother five years before.

“Sweetie, don’t answer that. You thought you loved him, but he let you down. We all know how much a man can hurt the woman who loves him.”

Silence filled the small space, allowing each sister the opportunity to remember the deception and pain their father had caused their mother, each of them, and the community in which they’d grown up.

The Reverend Harold Chappel had brought them to Bay St. Louis when they were small girls, along with his wife, Clarisse. Everything had been so perfect for them all. A small community where everyone knew everyone else had been the ideal place to grow up.

No one ever locked their doors or worried about break-ins. Not until their own mother had been murdered in her bed by her younger lover.

Gina closed her eyes as images of her mother’s nude body, brutally beaten, rose to haunt her. She shook her head hard and stepped from the circle of her sister’s arms. She wouldn’t go back to that fateful night that had changed not only her life, but her sisters’ lives, as well. What was done was done. No one could change the evil their father had released upon their idyllic existence.

“I’m not upset over Mark David.”

“What?” Becky’s soft voice sounded shocked.

“Way to go, sis,” Starr’s husky tone joined in approval.

Gina smiled. “I had a feeling he and Kimberly were fooling around several weeks ago, but I never had proof until the night before the wedding. I thought a little payback -- humiliation at the altar -- would serve him right.”

Becky gasped.

Gina patted her arm. “I’m sure she’s not the first woman he’s cheated on me with, Beck. And if I’d married him, she wouldn’t have been the last.”

Starr snorted. "Bastard."

"Starr, watch your language." Becky threw a disgusted sideways glance at Starr.

Starr rolled her eyes and stalked from the kitchen. From the living room they heard her call out, "Don't act holier-than-thou with me, sister dear. One day some man's going to come your way and make you cuss a blue streak. Just you wait. They're all demons. Every last one of them ... Well, speak of the head devil himself. Hello, there, Reverend Mason. I was just leaving. I've got some pagan herbs I need to sell."

Becky moaned and rushed out of the kitchen, leaving Gina alone.

Gina sighed and listened to her oldest sister making excuses and apologies for their middle sister. Ever since their father's death, Starr had rejected anything that resembled her father, including his religion. Becky, on the other hand, had drawn closer to the small Protestant church they'd grown up in, despite the smirks and gossip of the small-minded parishioners.

Gina knew what they said behind their hands whenever the Chappel girls walked through town, or when Becky attended church. *There they go -- the Chappel girls. I hear say they're just as wild and evil as their parents. Just look at that Starr, running a pagan supply store. Just unthinkable what's happening in our society with the likes of them!*

Our society ... Boy, she'd heard that phrase enough from Mark David and his mother to last her a lifetime. You'd think they were the only people on the planet and everyone else was there to serve them just because they could trace their roots all the way back to the first Comeauxs who had set foot in Bay St. Louis!

Gina shook her head and poured milk into a saucepan for her hot cocoa. The drink had always had a way of calming her in moments of crisis. She had to decide what to do with her life now. She'd quit her teaching position four months earlier to prepare for becoming Mark David's wife and hostess for his family's numerous charity events.

After her little performance in the largest Catholic church in town, with everyone who was anyone in Bay St. Louis present -- including the entire school board -- she doubted if they'd let her have her job back.

"*Psst!*"

Gina frowned, glancing around for the barely audible noise.

"*Psst, psst*, over here!" Starr's harried whisper urged her over to the laundry room door, which stood open a few inches.

"What are you doing?"

"Is he gone?"

"Who?"

"The *honorable Reverend* James Edwin Mason III, of course. Who else?"

Gina glanced over her shoulder, hearing the muted voices of Becky and her guest. She shook her head. "No, he's still here. Why are you hiding from him?"

"Because he's driving me nuts, like all those holy-rollers, trying to coerce me to visit his church and become a member."

"You're already a member."

Starr snorted, covering her mouth when the sound echoed loudly around the room. She grabbed Gina's arm and pulled her in, closing the door quickly.

"I revoked my membership when I became Wiccan."

"Maybe it's just a phase --"

"Gina, I am Wiccan now. And truth be known, I always have been. It was just a little hard to exert my rights when we had such a puritanical father lording over us all the time."

Gina nodded. "Just tell Reverend Mason that you're not interested."

"I have! The man is a determined bastard."

"I don't think it's nice to call a minister a bastard."

"Why not? Our father was the biggest bastard that ever walked on two legs."

Gina took a deep breath and exhaled, slowly. "Yes, you're right. But maybe James isn't so bad. Not every preacher is like our father. There are those who truly believe what they preach."

Starr looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. Gina held up her hands in surrender. Her sister had made up her mind about ministers a long time ago. "What do you want me to do?" Gina asked.

"I forgot my car keys. They're sitting on the coffee table."

"Ugh! Now I have to walk in there and chit-chat with him."

Starr opened the door. "Just smile and be brief. I have to open the shop. I'm already an hour late," she hissed in Gina's ear before pushing her out and sending her stumbling into the living room.

"Jeez ... Oh, hi." She smiled at the surprised expressions of her sister and the preacher. They sat huddled rather close on the sofa, perusing some brochures. Gina squinted, but couldn't make out what the material pertained to. "I was just trying to find my keys before I headed out later."

They nodded at her, but remained silent, watching her progress. Gina frowned at their odd behavior. Snatching the keys off the table, she headed back to the laundry room. Before she could turn the doorknob, the door opened, emitting a hand that grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. Gina yelped.

"*Shhh!* Do you want them to find me?"

"They're pretty wrapped up in something. I don't think they'll notice."

"Really? What?"

Gina shrugged and studied Starr's frown at the news that Becky and the preacher-man were wrapped up. "Maybe he likes her."

“What?” The question came out sharp and louder than Starr had obviously intended. She slapped a hand over her own mouth, glaring at Gina.

Gina shook her head at her sister’s theatrics. “Look, I have enough problems with gorgeous men without trying to keep up with yours or Becky’s --”

“What do you mean?” Starr grabbed Gina’s arm. “By the way, where exactly did you spend the night?”

Ah, crap. She’d done it now. No way would Starr let that slip of information go. If it had been Becky, her oldest sister wouldn’t have even noticed what she’d said, but Starr always had ESP when it came to hidden meanings in what people said, or how they said it.

“Come on, Gina. Who were you with?”

Gina hesitated, not sure she should tell anyone about Quin. What was the use? She didn’t plan on ever seeing him again. But she might feel better getting her adventure off her chest. “I-I went over to this bar in New Orleans and got a little plastered after I left the wedding ceremony.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t --”

“Now, wait, it’s not that bad ... not really.” Gina watched the expression of understanding on Starr’s face. Her sister caught on quickly!

“Who was he?”

“His name was Quin.”

“I assume you used protection.” Starr’s dry tone rankled.

“Of course I did!” Gina stamped her foot, placing her fists on her hips. “What kind of idiot do you take me for?”

Starr raised her eyebrows and cocked her head to the side. “Well, let’s see ... remaining a virgin until you’re twenty-four for *Mr. Right*, getting engaged to Mark David, having sex with a complete stranger, getting engaged to Mark David --”

“You already said that.”

"Well, that was the most stupid of the list. I had to repeat it."

"Thanks, sis." Gina couldn't help the hurt in her voice. Her own sister thought she was stupid.

"Oh, sweets, I'm sorry." Starr hugged her tight. "We all live and learn. At least you came to your senses and didn't marry Mark David. I'd commit suicide if I had to have Isabel Comeaux as a mother-in-law."

Gina giggled. "Yeah, she was one of the major drawbacks to the marriage."

Footsteps sounded from the living room, followed by Becky's voice, "How about some coffee, James?"

Gina and Starr froze. Starr recovered first, snatching the car keys from Gina's hand. "I gotta go. We'll talk later, okay?"

"Sure."

Starr turned back to face Gina after stepping outside. "*James?*" She inserted her finger in her mouth, making a gagging motion.

Gina giggled, waving Starr along and closing the door. If she wasn't mistaken, her middle sister might have a thing for the preacher-man. She just hoped her older sister didn't, too.

She rolled her eyes. *One crisis at a time, Gina.*

Chapter Six

Gina groaned and pulled harder, tightening the muscles in her thighs and back.

“Come on, baby, give it to me ... that’s it ... that’s it.” A loud *pop* resounded and she dropped, exhausted from her exertions. She propped against the cool wall for support, allowing her breathing and heart rate to return to normal. *Damn, she hadn’t exerted that many muscles having sex with Quin.*

A warm nose and mouth nuzzled her cheek. She smiled, wrapping an arm around Max’s neck. “You devil, making me work that hard.”

Max’s tongue flicked across her cheek and ear, causing her to laugh and squirm away from his onslaught. “Quit. That tickles!”

She scooted away, with Max following. She’d been in the middle of loading the washing machine when he’d caught her, pinning her between the washer and the back wall of the laundry room. He was a determined male; she’d give him that.

He snatched the sock she’d picked up off the floor and tugged hard.

“Oh, no, you don’t. We’re not going back on that floor again, mister.”

The game of tug-of-war ensued, with Gina squealing in delight. She turned her body to keep him from escaping into the kitchen. With her foot she caught the edge of the door and

kicked it shut. It slammed into the frame with a loud *crash*. After several more seconds of raucous play, a knock sounded on the door leading to the outside.

Gina released the sock as she drew in labored breaths. Smiling and wagging her finger at Max for his spurt of playfulness, she pushed a riot of curls out of her face as she moved to and opened the door. "Yes?"

The smile evaporated at the sight of Mark David.

"Am I interrupting something?" His gaze scanned her from head to toe.

Gina smoothed her hand over her battered jeans and faded tee-shirt. Realizing what she was doing, she stopped and narrowed her gaze on her ex-fiancé.

"What do you want, Mark David?"

"I came to talk to you, but if you've got company ..." He let the words trail off, leaving his meaning clear.

"If you must know, I was using the washer --"

His eyebrows rose. "Didn't know you were so perverted, Gina, love."

Gina's palm itched with the desire to wipe the lewd smirk off his face. Instead, she opened the door wider and allowed Max to move beside her. At the sight of Mark David, the big mutt growled low and menacing in his throat.

She patted his shaggy head. "Good boy." Max had never liked Mark David since the day Gina had brought him home to meet her family.

"Put the damned dog in a pen, or I'll have the animal shelter come pick him up."

"He's in my house."

"I'll swear he bit me. They'll put him to sleep, then cut his head off to see if he has rabies."

"He's had his shots!" Gina bent and hugged Max to her, horrified that a man she had been in love with would ever threaten a defenseless animal.

Mark David leaned close, wrapping his hand around her upper arm.

Max's growl intensified.

"Call him off, Gina, or I'll do exactly what I promise."

She looked into the cold blue eyes and knew he told her the truth. She nodded.

Standing, she grabbed Max's collar, pushing him into the laundry room and shutting the outside door behind her. A *thud* sounded behind her against the door as Max threw his body into the wood, trying to reach her, barking constantly.

"When we're married, I know you'll leave him here with your sisters, where he belongs."

"We're not getting married. You ruined your chance to marry me by having your little fling with Kimberly."

He jerked her arm into his hand again, tightening his grip.

She couldn't stop the cry of pain from escaping.

"Listen to me, you little bitch -- you're going to marry me." He leaned close again, his lips close to hers. "You're going to go to the priest, confess your 'pre-wedding nerves,' and receive counseling. Afterwards, we'll have a quiet ceremony."

"What is wrong with you? You don't want to marry me. You never did."

"Oh, you're wrong. I know for a fact no one has had their dirty paws on that sweet little cunt of yours. I want my wife, the mother of my children, to be pure."

Gina swallowed hard, the night before flashing across her mind. With that murderous look in his eyes, there was no way she would tell Mark David she wasn't a virgin anymore. His behavior screamed "bloodthirsty maniac" too loudly.

"I know your daddy and your mama weren't the most upstanding citizens, but you have been the model of moral fortitude. An exemplary model of what a perfect southern politician's wife should be."

"I think that went out of style about forty-something years ago."

He kissed her cheek. Gina closed her eyes, fighting the bile that rose in her throat. She'd known his mother had wanted him to move into politics, but had never realized to what lengths he'd go to please Isabel. "Not to me."

"I-I'm sorry, Mark David, I can't marry you. I can't live with a man I don't trust."

He jerked her arm harder. "Remember what I said about your dog? It'd be a shame if something similar happened to one of your pretty sisters."

Gina gasped, trying to break his hold on her. She had never seen that crazed look in his eyes before. A flash of fear raced through her that he would carry out his threat if she didn't obey him.

He swiveled her around, pressing her back against the outer wall of the house, pinning her arms up on either side of her head. His large frame pushed into her body, keeping her from kicking him with her feet. The outline of his erection pressed against her belly, and the bile rose hotter and bitterer than before into the back of her throat.

"No!" She turned her head back and forth, trying to avoid his mouth.

He laughed. "I like a good fight, Gina. It turns me on. When I do take you on our wedding night, I'll beat that stubborn streak down where it belongs."

"Hate to interrupt, but I found your billfold under my bed after you left this morning, Gina."

Mark David's body tensed. He looked down at her with a look of disbelief on his face. Slowly, he turned toward the voice behind them.

Quin, standing three feet away and holding her billfold, had to be the sweetest sight she'd ever seen. The firm set of his jaw and the narrowed gaze he focused on her and Mark David told her he wasn't too thrilled at the situation.

"Quin --"

Mark David turned back to her quickly. "You *know* him?"

The grip on her wrists tightened, causing her to cry out louder.

“Answer me.” He slipped his hands down to grasp her upper arms and shook her so hard her teeth snapped together. “How do you know him? What’s he doing with your wallet?”

“I --”

Quin’s steady voice cut her off as he took a step toward them. “She dropped it when she took her wedding dress off to get into my bed. Now, let her the fuck go, mister, or you and I are going to have a big problem.”

Once again, Mark David turned his attention to Quin, giving her some relief. Gina blinked back the tears that stung her eyes from the pain in her arms. She could make out Quin’s stance, alert and ready to attack if Mark David so much as moved the wrong way.

Both men stared at each other for several seconds. The tension grew so thick, Gina could barely breathe. She didn’t know if Quin would really attack, or if Mark David would throw the first punch without knowing his opponent’s strengths. It might be in his makeup to threaten someone in private, but he would never take a chance on being brought up on charges. The embarrassment to the family’s good name and their political ambitions would be too much.

He inclined his head and gave Quin a nasty smile. “This round to you, *friend*.”

“I’m not your friend.”

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Tertulliano.”

Mark David turned back to her, still holding her arms. He placed his mouth close to her ear where only she could hear what he said. “This isn’t over, my dear.” He kissed her cheek. He pushed away from her, releasing her. With one finger he reached out and stroked her jaw.

Her head snapped back as instinct kicked in. The wall behind her impeded her progress, and his thick, clammy forefinger traced down across her jaw.

“Revenge is so much sweeter.” He smiled, turning away from her.

Gina leaned against the wall for support and watched her ex-fiancé walk past Quin, carefully avoiding contact with the taller man. Her legs trembled from the aftershock of her ordeal. If she stepped away from the wall, she knew she’d fall.

She looked at Quin. He hadn’t moved, but continued to stare at her. In the distance a car door slammed, and the rumble of an engine told them Mark David had left. Only then did Quin move toward her, slowly.

The shaking traveled from her legs into her belly and then up to her arms. By the time he stood directly in front of her, her teeth chattered as though she were freezing to death. She wrapped her arms around her midsection, but that didn’t ease the chill that wracked her body. She looked into Quin’s dark eyes, seeing concern and anger mingled together. “I-I’m c-c-cold.”

Without a word, he bent and scooped her up into his arms. Gina drew her body tight, seeking every ounce of warmth his body could give her, but still she shook.

Quin opened the back door, side-stepping Max, who sniffed his leg, but didn’t bark or growl. Gina would have laughed, but a new wave of spasms hit her, making her groan and jerk harder in the circle of his arms.

They made it through the kitchen, and Quin headed for the sofa in the living room. Max followed, his tail tucked beneath him like he was ashamed that he’d failed his mistress. Gina held her hand out to Max as Quin lowered her into the thick, plush cushions of the couch. “It’s okay, M-Maxie. Y-You tried to help me, baby.”

She turned back to Quin, who had sat beside her. Their gazes met. A muscle in his jaw flexed and his nostrils flared. Gina’s lips parted at the sight of his anger. Her fingers tightened in the thickness of Max’s fur. Had she gotten rid of one madman in exchange for another?

Quin watched Gina's eyes dilate with fear, but he couldn't quiet the bone-jarring, mind-numbing anger that rolled over him at the thought of her with that bastard.

"So that was the fiancé you dumped at the altar yesterday?" He had hoped for his question to come out calmly, but the anger and pure hatred that had flared within him when the other man had hurt Gina could not be confined. He took a deep breath and tried again, running an agitated hand across the top of his head. "I can definitely see why you left the guy. He has a very ... intense ... personality."

Quin watched her grip on the dog ease up, allowing the whiteness of her knuckles to fade back to pink. The sound of her unsteady laugh sounded like music to his ears. Her shock was abating.

He slipped his fingers beneath hers, lifting her trembling hand to his lips, where he kissed each finger in turn. With his other hand, he massaged the delicate digits, trying to infuse some warmth into her cold hands. "Poor baby. He scared the shit out of you, didn't he? The bastard. I should have pulverized his ass."

Gina shook her head. "No, Quin. You did the right thing. You don't know the power and clout Mark David and his mother carry in this town. They are the law. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." He slipped an arm around her shoulders and cradled her close. The trembling had slowed to an occasional shudder. Quin knew Mark David had meant every threat he'd issued to Gina. "I've lived my entire life with people like little Markie and his mother lording over people like me. I spent two years in prison because of people like them. I won't be intimidated anymore, Gina. If the bastard so much as looks at you wrong, the next time I see him, I'll beat him to an inch of his life. He'll wish he had never been born."

Gina's fingernails bit into his forearm. "No! You don't even know me. How can you say that?"

He curved a hand around the base of her neck, drawing her mouth to his. The soft, sweet taste of her lips made his head swim. He had wanted her this morning, but he craved her touch, taste, and smell now. Somewhere between his bed and her sofa, he'd come to think of her as his. He pulled away, liking the glazed expression in her eyes.

Quin smiled and cupped her face with his hands, strumming the pads of his thumbs across the creamy silk of her face. This close he could count the spatter of freckles across her nose.

Her long lashes fluttered, the blue gaze clearing as she focused on him.

His smile disappeared. "I know you more intimately than your fiancé does."

Her swollen lips, pink and pouty from his assault, parted. "Yes, you do."

Quin's body tightened with the need to taste her again, but this time he wanted to lick and suckle another set of lips, lush with the scent of a woman. His woman. "I'm sorry for saying what I did this morning."

He didn't give her a chance to respond, but leaned forward and sucked her bottom lip between his, flicking his tongue over the lush flesh before pushing between her teeth and forcing her to accept his invasion of her mouth. His hands reached beneath her shirt, pulling the material up and over the expanse of soft, smooth skin on her stomach.

Outside the day had turned to dusk. A lone seagull screeched into the darkness. Crickets chirped in the light breeze blowing up from the Gulf of Mexico. The soft *clang* of the channel markers floated on the air, but Quin ignored them all. The only sound he concentrated on was Gina's breathing, telling him her body recognized and mirrored his need.

Soft pants issued from her throat at his playful nips to her lips and neck. When his mouth ventured further into the valley of her breasts, her surprised gasps left him hard and aching, but he fought the urge to pull her jeans down her shapely legs and bury himself in

her heat. With impatient fingers, he pushed her shirt over the swollen globes, revealing tightened nipples, begging for him to suckle.

He groaned, fighting the temptation. Instead, his mouth latched on to the sensitive skin surrounding her navel, nibbling and sucking until she bucked her hips. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, telling him she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Working his hips over the side of the sofa, he pushed her thighs apart. With slow precision, he lowered his mouth onto the junction between her legs. Inhaling, he took in the heady scent of her pussy, closing his eyes as a deep wave of utter need swamped his senses. Exhaling, he blew hot air onto her clit through the denim and worked his mouth and teeth against the spot where her swollen nub would be.

Her fingers left his shoulder to dig into his scalp, pulling his hair from the ponytail he'd secured earlier in the day for his ride over on his motorcycle. The sharp shot of pain through his scalp only added to the heightened awareness of her and him, alone, together.

He lifted his head and caught her staring down at him with lust-glazed eyes. "I want to taste you."

She nodded. Her hands smoothed over her hips and thighs, up and down, before her fingers settled on the waistband of her pants. With one *snap*, the closure opened for easy access. The entire time, she kept her gaze locked on his face. The pupils of her eyes dilated in the growing darkness of the room.

Her thumbs dipped into the waistband and slid across to either side of her hips. Lifting with her shoulders and feet, she raised her hips to release her weight off her backside. Her sweet core hovered within centimeters of his mouth, causing his mouth to water in anticipation.

With a quick *swoosh* of denim, the jeans and panties lay tangled around her feet. She tried to kick them loose, but he stopped her with his hands around her ankles, staying her movement. He liked the idea of her semi-trapped where she couldn't escape what he wanted

to do to her. His cock strained against the front of his jeans at the thought of her tied to his bed, taking and receiving whatever erotic fantasies he offered. With that little fantasy playing havoc with his libido, Quin pushed between her legs, spreading her thighs up and out as far as the constricting jeans would allow.

“Put your arms behind you and wrap your hands and wrists together.”

She hesitated a second, but did as he instructed.

“Good girl.” He leveled a stare at her, trying to make her understand exactly what he desired. “Whatever I do, don’t move your hands. Do you understand me?”

Her gaze narrowed, and she pursed her lips. He thought she’d refuse his command even though the increased scent of her feminine musk told him she was more than aroused. He knew she had a strong will and stubborn nature. Playing the submissive wasn’t for every woman. Many women these days refused the pleasures that could be shared in the sexual games he liked to play.

“Yes.”

He sighed in relief at her agreement. Leaning forward, he swiped her clit with his tongue once, as a reward.

Gina hissed, arched her back, and closed her eyes.

Quin gave a deep laugh. “Ah, Gina, Gina, what I want to do with you.”

He propped up on one elbow, pushing her right thigh further outward. Sitting on his heels, he traced the lips of her vulva with his forefinger, spreading the viscous fluid from her arousal around her clit. With each rotation, he pinched the tight little nub and could feel her muscles tighten to the point she would explode from frustration. Her neck and back arched off the sofa, and the hissing sound continued from between her clenched teeth.

“You want to come?”

“Yeeees!” She drew the word out like a starving woman begging for the last crumb of food. Perspiration dotted her forehead and her chest, sliding between her breasts to pool on her belly. Her flushed cheeks blushed harder with her answer.

He eased his finger into her pussy, liking the hot, slick feel of her cavern sucking him deeper. He curved the finger to better get to her G-spot. Scooting closer to her hot little body, he grasped her pubic hair with his other hand and pulled tight, making her cry out at the pain.

Her hand touched his forehead. Quin stilled his questing finger.

“You broke the rule, Gina. Now, I’m going to have to punish you.”

“I-I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.” She smiled and tucked the offending hand behind her back.

“I know you won’t. Not after I spank you for your insubordination.” This was the moment he had been waiting for. He watched her smile fade into a frown.

Chapter Seven

She rose to a half-sitting position, with her hands on her hips. "Now, just a --"

Ignoring her protests, he flipped her onto her stomach. Her jeans still trapped her legs, preventing her escape from him. With her body half on the sofa and her legs hanging off the side, Quin laid the full weight of his body across her back, trapping her arms beneath her breasts. He rubbed her naked ass cheeks, liking the smooth texture beneath his roughened hands. With his right foot, he pushed her knees apart, exposing her pussy, which dripped with arousal.

He inserted one finger, then two, hearing her muffled moans. Slowly, he moved his fingers in and out. The sucking sounds added to his anticipation. He felt her push with her knees with every stroke of his fingers and knew she would come any second.

Removing his fingers, he trailed her juices up the crevice of her ass and over her virgin skin. *So soft, so sweet ...*

Whack! His hand smacked her right cheek.

"Oww ..." She bucked hard. He pressed his weight more firmly over her.

Whack! He smacked the left cheek, watching the red imprint of his hand bloom across the right one. His cock throbbed. "Ah, baby ..."

“Ouch.” She bucked, but not as hard.

He smacked the left one again, but followed the contact with a swirl of his tongue and a playful bite to the ravaged flesh.

Gina moaned and buried her head deeper into the sofa cushions. Her feminine juices ran in a stream down her thighs as Quin watched her sweet pussy spasm with the need to come. He kissed the right cheek, knowing she’d had enough for her first time.

“It’s okay, babe. You’re gonna be a good girl, I know.” Easing between her thighs, he unzipped his jeans to free the part of his anatomy that throbbed with a pain only she could ease. He positioned his cock at the entrance of her vagina before reaching into his back pocket for a condom.

Without thought, he smoothed the latex over his eager flesh the same way he’d smoothed Gina’s ass. With both thumbs he spread her cheeks, smiling when she tightened her muscles.

“Sokay, just looking. I’m not going to play there ... yet.” Not giving her time to contemplate that last, Quin pulled her cheeks wider and pushed into her cunt.

Beneath him Gina raised her head and gasped. He could make out “Oh, my God,” but that was all as the heat of her body wrapped around his cock, sucking and pulling him into the total oblivion he’d only ever experienced during sex ... or a Voudon ritual.

Shaking his head, he cleared his mind of the last and pumped faster and harder, willing his orgasm up through his shaft and outward into the receptacle that was Gina’s body. He forced himself not to think, only to feel. *Clench, pull, push ... clench, pull, push ...*

The orgasm hit with such force, he didn’t experience the usual tingling in his feet, legs, and balls. He threw his head back, grabbed Gina’s hips, and pumped, pumped, pumped until the very last spasm left his body weak and deflated. He fell across her back, their sweat mingling to dry with the cool breeze of the air conditioner. The scent of sex surrounded him. In the distance he heard a car’s wheels crunching on a shell driveway and the rhythmic

ticking of a clock, but he kept his eyes closed and concentrated on regulating his breathing.
Slower ... slower ... slower ... slow ...

He looked into the velvet darkness surrounding him, not blinking, but staring at the faint dot of light. He squinted, trying to bring the light into closer focus. Drums pounded in an ancient rhythm around him, drawing closer and closer.

He concentrated harder on the ray of light, not sure if it grew larger with the beating of the drums. He refused to blink and lose the image. He breathed in, slow and deep, releasing the air just as slowly, controlling his body's natural rhythm, slowing his heart rate, slowing his mind ...

Rays of light flashed on either side of him in a blur of multi-colors of red, yellow, and black, swirling around him until they rested in front of his face. His sister's voice called his name in Creole, but she sounded far away, as if in a tunnel, and he couldn't make out her words.

His heart calmed after the sudden rush of light and colors, and still he didn't blink or remove his gaze from the lights. Slowly, he watched the colors take shape to form a long multicolored ribbon, winding around in a circle, where an orb of white light glowed.

The orb pulsed with amorphous shapes until one shape formed and remained -- the shape of a human head. The ribbon circled around and around, winding and twirling the whole while.

Features formed -- eyes, ears, nose, mouth. Gina!

The ribbon hesitated in its graceful movements, coiling into a tight knot with one end suspended upright. With a flash, the end turned into a serpent's head, striking and biting at the features of his lover. Her pain and misery screamed silently from her mouth, but Quin couldn't reach her.

His body felt heavy and hot. His heart pounded out of control. The colors merged with the white features of Gina, twirling within the surrounding blackness ... Snap!

Quin woke with his head throbbing and the rumble of a late-night train vibrating the small house. Sweat soaked his shirt, making him shiver in the cool room. He shifted his weight, realizing Gina lay beneath him, asleep, her delectable backside snuggled against his cock. What had he been dreaming? He frowned as the fringes of the dream came into focus --

Ring, ring! Ring, ring!

He and Gina jumped at the unexpected sound of the phone. Her head lifted from the cushion at the same time she groaned.

“God, I feel like that train ran me over ... Move, Quin. Let me get the phone.”

She pushed her back against his weight, forcing him to focus on his surroundings with a new clarity.

He rolled off her, allowing her to struggle to stand and pull her jeans up. While she reached over to the telephone, he rubbed his face, frowning into the darkness of the room, trying to remember the dream. The sense of urgency remained, but with his head pounding, he couldn't focus. It was always like this after the visions, but it had been several years since he'd had one. They had stopped when he'd refused to practice his sister and mother's religion any longer. He wondered what had brought the gift back.

His gaze rested on Gina moving through the darkness to flick on a lamp. He blinked at the sudden glare and focused on her. The hair on the back of his neck stood at attention, and a sense of danger hit him in the gut so hard he doubled over. He had his answer. Gina's life was in jeopardy.

Quin held his breath, watching her walk toward him with a smile, half minx and half little-girl shy. When she drew closer, the smile faded. Her hand smoothed over his skin, cool and comforting, as she leaned down and kissed him on the lips.

"What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm not sure you'd understand." He stood, pulling his jeans closed. He looked around for the cordless phone Gina had used earlier. "I need to make a phone call."

* * * * *

Mark David positioned the air conditioner vent to blow directly on his face. The car idled slowly past the Chappel family house for the fourth time since he'd left that afternoon. This time he pulled to a stop, watching the couple through the picture window of the living room. Since the house faced the bay, there were no curtains or blinds to hinder the occupants' view, or his. His knuckles turned white as he dug his fingers into the steering wheel.

How could she let that mixed-blood cur touch her? It was plain the man between Gina's legs didn't have anything that resembled a respectable family tree. Some Creole she'd picked up in New Orleans, judging by the scum's coloring and accent. With that dark skin and black hair, he definitely didn't have much in the line of western European blood running through his veins.

"Goddammit, Regina!" Mark David slammed his fists against the steering wheel twice before a calm settled over him. He reached for his cell phone and dialed a number he had memorized long ago. "You want to play the little whore, my dear, well, so be it -- but not without a price."

The phone rang twice before the call was answered. "Yes, Val, it's me. I have a job for you, my friend."

Mark David's nostrils flared in distaste as the man called Quin pinned Gina to the sofa, fucking her like a dog in heat.

Well, that dog's dead! "Valery, I need you to dispose of my loving fiancée."

There was a moment of silence on the other end. In a flash, Valery Breaux threw a stream of questions at Mark David so loud and long, he had to pull the phone away from his ear. When the tirade had subsided, Mark David continued.

"No, not a sudden accident. I want her to have a series of mishaps that look like coincidental accidents, which can be blamed on her lover. When the time comes for the finale, I want him to be found at the scene of the crime with no doubt as to who killed my unfortunate runaway bride."

Another blast of questions flowed from the receiver.

Mark David shook his head. "No, I don't care what means you use to accomplish your task, whether natural or supernatural. You're the expert. I'll leave that decision to you. The less I know, the better. After all, I am the distraught fiancé, left high and dry at the altar, while my whoring bride-to-be was fucking her New Orleans stud."

Mark David couldn't disguise the acid in his last comment. With renewed anger, he ended the conversation, knowing Val would do the job without further contact.

"You'll wish you had never betrayed me, Gina."

Mark David mentally reviewed the erotic copulation scene from moments earlier. Despite the anger and hatred, his cock had hardened at the sight of Gina helpless and aroused beneath Quin.

It should have been me fucking her like that! Disgust settling in his gut, he shifted into drive and pulled away.

* * * * *

Vivian lit the candles in a circle on the floor of her brother's room. The sense of impending danger had grown throughout the day since Quin had left to find his woman. Vivian knew the girl was the one to tame her brother's wild and restless heart, but

something stood between the two besides her brother's stubborn pride and sheer male stupidity.

Inside the circle she stood bare-footed and spread-legged. Her skirt pulled up and tucked into the waistband to form pants, she sprinkled a white powder from pinched fingers into a design. Drawing horizontally, she hoped to invoke the spirit whose *veve* would allow her to divine Gina's fate. As she drew, she chanted beneath her breath, trying to bring the vision forward from the depths of her psyche.

After completing the *veve*, Vivian sat beside the sigil, the "access code," continuing to chant and rock back and forth. The *loa* should come forth, attracted to the rhythm of dance and music, especially drums ... but not today.

Vivian sighed, opening her eyes upon the *veve* in front of her. With a weary hand she wiped the sigil away. She would have to contact her *eskot* for a more favorable response.

A bumping sound startled her. Turning, she saw Roman watching her from the doorway. Hurriedly, she wiped the floor again, making certain none of the magickal art remained for others to scrutinize or misuse.

"You needed me?" She stood and stepped toward him.

"Quin's on the phone downstairs. Says it's urgent." He glanced over her shoulder at what was left of the drawing as she walked near. "What was that?"

"Nothin' dat needs concern you, boy."

Roman's eyes narrowed on her. Vivian hesitated at the intense glare. Maybe there was more to this one than met the eye. He was as tall as Quin, and though he was younger than her brother, his muscles were taut and firm.

She pulled Quin's door shut behind her, stepping further into the hallway, forcing Roman to take several steps back. Quickly, she pushed past him, not liking the sudden flicker of sexual tension in her body for the younger man.

A hand wrapped around her arm, bringing her to a sudden halt. Roman's voice whispered into her ear. "Someday, you will have to trust someone with your secrets, *mambo*."

She jerked her arm away from Roman's disturbing touch, rubbing the spot where his skin had touched hers. "But not today, *boy!*"

Shoving past Roman to head downstairs, she heard him utter something in a language that sounded familiar, but foreign to her ears. Vivian picked up the telephone. "Hello."

"Viv, it's Quin." His voice sounded muffled, like he spoke into the receiver with his hand over his mouth.

She placed her finger in her free ear and pressed the receiver closer to her other ear. "Have you found Gina?"

"Yes." He hesitated, sighing. "I had some kind of a ... vision ... and I don't know how to interpret the images."

Frustration and anger in her brother's voice pushed along the line, reaching her miles away. He had always fought against what he considered "trickery" in their mother's native religion. Vivian had always known Quin had the power and ability to become a great *houngan*, if he'd only allow the *loa* access to his mind and body. But he had fought the spiritual experience every step of the way. Maybe now, with the danger to his woman's life, he would embrace the Haitian side of his heritage. She would assist him in anyway she could.

"Tell me what you saw."

Chapter Eight

Quin cradled the phone closer to his ear, covering his mouth and the mouthpiece. Gina clanged a pot behind him in the kitchen. When he'd told her he needed to make a personal phone call, a strange expression had crossed her face and she'd left the room.

A cabinet door banged shut.

Quin glanced over his shoulder to see Gina dumping a can of what looked like soup into the pot, her actions short and jerky. His eyebrow rose. If he wasn't mistaken -- and well he could be since women were so damned hard to understand -- she was pissed about something.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. The only thing he could think that would have upset her was the way he'd had sex with her. Not all women liked what he did. Although two years ago another woman had professed to want things "rough," she'd changed her mind quick enough. *Shit!*

Viv's voice brought him back to the problem at hand. "I will make a protection talisman for her. I will need a lock of her hair."

“She’s not going to go for that Voudou-Houdou stuff, sis. She’s pretty much the all-American wholesome, apple-pie kinda gal, if you know what I mean. I’m telling you, she probably won’t want to have anything to do with your brand of ... worship.”

“It’s *our* brand. You are as much Voudon as I, if not more so. You just refuse to accept your roots.”

“I’m only half Haitian. You and Maman were the ones who believed in all that crap.”

“Well, dat crap is going to save your woman’s life!”

He heard the disdain in his sister’s voice for his denial of a religion he had never understood. “I can’t help it if I was born here and grew up differently than you or Maman. Hell, my dad would have had an ape fit if he’d known his wife and stepdaughter were practicing that shit under his roof!”

“I loved your father as if he were my own, but he was a very close-minded individual. I hope you do not make de same mistake.” She sniffed. “Get me de hair as soon as possible, brother.”

He jumped at the sound of a ceramic bowl thudding onto the table along with the clatter of silverware. “I’ll try. Right now, I gotta go.” He disconnected the call without hearing his sister’s goodbye. Somehow he’d made Gina angry, and he needed to diffuse the situation, if possible. He turned toward the kitchen, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Hey, that smells good. What is it?”

She didn’t look at him, but continued to ladle soup into the bowls. “Soup.”

That told him a lot. “I need to wash up first.”

“Bathroom’s down the hall to your right.” She jerked her head to the opposite wall from the laundry room. Pulling out a chair, she sat without glancing his way. The spoon looked heavy in her hand, but she brought the broth to her lips with graceful movements.

His cock tightened at the sight of her lips blowing a steady stream of steam outward from the spoon.

Quin didn't respond, but headed down the hall. A picture on the wall in the hallway showed him a beautiful family of five, two parents with three daughters. Each girl was different and unique, one each with red, black, or blond hair. He nodded. That made his mission easier.

Stepping into the bathroom, he turned the faucets on to block the sound of his rifling through the cabinet. In the top drawer, he located a brush with strands of blond hair. Quickly, he pulled the hairs loose and wrapped them into a tissue. Stuffing the tissue into his pocket, he washed up. He glanced around at the neat bathroom, liking the seashore motif the women had picked. A small window over the bathtub stood open about three inches. He frowned. *Must need the ventilation for the shower's steam.*

Making his way back to the table, he saw that Gina had finished her meal. His soup lay cooling in the bowl. As much as he wanted to talk to her and discover why she was angry, he needed to get to his sister as soon as possible. He leaned down, planning to kiss her cheek. "I really need to get on the road, sweets."

She twisted and angled her head, forcing his kiss to land on the top of her head, while her lips pushed out further into a full-blown pout.

Quin couldn't contain his frustration. "What's going on, Gina? Why are you acting like my touch carries leprosy, when just a short while ago you allowed me access to more than your cheek? Second thoughts about fucking someone from the gutter?"

A gasp ripped from her lungs. Wide blue eyes stared up at him in accusation. "I am not like that. You should know better than I what's wrong." She waved her hand at the phone.

Quin frowned. "What? Me calling my sister?"

She snorted when he said "sister."

Quin shook his head, not sure why she would be upset over that. "Look, I don't have time to play guessing games. I need to get back to New Orleans."

Before she could stop him, he grabbed her chin, holding her still while his lips caught hers in a quick kiss. "I'll call you later. Make sure you lock all the doors when I leave." With that, he headed out, but hesitated on the back step until he heard the deadbolt slide shut.

Gina listened to the rumble of his motorcycle fading into the night. Her bottom lip trembled in anger and misery, but she refused to cry. Instead she busied herself cleaning up the meal he'd refused.

That task complete, she listened to the messages on her machine. One from Becky reminding her she would be out of town for the weekend at a church retreat. Gina's eyebrow shot up at that one. Would James Mason be at the retreat, too? Hmm ...

The second message was Starr, telling her she would be late due to some new inventory that had arrived at her store.

Gina sighed and wandered into the living room. The sight of disheveled cushions reminded her of the precarious position she'd placed herself in last night and again today. What did she really know about Quin? And that phone call, so sudden after they'd made love. Had he honestly called his sister?

Picking up the cushion, she fluffed it and then smashed her fist into the center. She'd ignored all the signs of Mark David's cheating -- receiving and making mysterious phone calls at strange times. She only had herself to blame for evading what her subconscious had known to be the truth. Nothing like the cold reality of finding her then-fiancé in their bed, fucking her maid-of-honor, to bring to light how gullible she'd been. All the subtle signs had been there, if she'd just taken the time to focus on them. *What was that saying? "Hind-sight is twenty-twenty"?*

The pillow landed on the sofa with a thud. She refused to be duped again, especially by a man she'd met in a bar, with a spider tattoo on his face, who had confessed to being in prison.

God, can I pick them, or what?

Two hours later the phone rang. Gina checked the caller-id, but didn't recognize the number. She *did* recognize the New Orleans area code -- 504. Her heart quickened with the thought that it could be Quin, calling to check on her and let her know he'd made it home okay, but she squashed the tide of excitement.

She refused to be the type of woman she abhorred, sitting by the telephone waiting on that one phone call that never came -- wasting her life away, like her mother. First for a husband who could never be faithful, then for a lover who only wanted to control and, ultimately, kill her.

Had her mom, lonely and aching to be touched, felt the same gnawing hunger that Quin had made Gina experience at the control he had wielded over her body?

"No, I won't be like you, Mama." Gina turned the ringer off, then the lamp, and headed off to bed. Tomorrow she'd begin her search for a job, and she didn't have time to mourn over either Mark David or Quin. Both men were mistakes she'd rather forget, as soon as possible.

* * * * *

"Goddammit!" Quin beat the receiver against the wall for the fifth time that night. "Pick up the fucking phone, Gina." He punched her number into the handset again. Nothing but the incessant ringing. Quin growled.

"Do not abuse my phone again." Vivian stepped out of the shadows of the hallway. The colorful turban around her head matched the dress she wore, giving her an old-world beauty that never ceased to take his breath away. His sister, with her toffee-colored skin and coffee eyes, was as beautiful as their mother had been.

It was no wonder that his father had fallen in love and married Jacqui Desmond when she first came to New Orleans over thirty years before. Their marriage had produced him,

providing his ten-year-old sister with a living doll she could pamper and baby until he had reached the age of five and decided girls weren't all that fun to play with.

He looked at the phone in his hand. *They still aren't.*

"I can't get her to answer. Something's wrong."

Vivian shook her head. "No, I do not feel de danger at present." She held her hand out. "Give me her hair so I can make de talisman."

Quin removed the tissue from his pocket. With a heavy dose of doubt, he handed the package to his sister. He'd watched her and their mother make talismans and potions all his life and seen positive results, but his ... faith had decayed over the past few years. It was all mumbo-jumbo, as far as he was concerned. But ... there was that vision he'd had.

He shrugged. "I don't think it will help, but you can try, if it makes you feel better."

She snorted and spoke, her accent coming through as it did when she was upset or excited. "Right. Dat why you rushed home with dat girl's hair in your shirt?" She shook her head. "Remember dat time you thought de Voudou doll would make your teacher have dem headaches, so you could skip a test? Poor woman in de hospital for a week before Maman found out what you be doing."

"What-*ever*." Quin rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "I was a kid. All kids believe in magick."

"You just refuse to admit dat de *loas* are for real. If you want to save dat girl, den you betta listen to me."

"Calm down, sis. Your accent is running all over *de* place." He bent, rocking his body in front of her, teasing her like he had when they were younger. "They'll be trying to deport your ass if you keep it up." He turned toward the hallway.

A plastic cup flew through the air to catch his shoulder. Quin ducked through the door leading to the bar to escape his sister's wrath. He laughed at the flow of Creole behind him.

Spotting Roman behind the counter, he decided to put his own magick into play. Gina needed protection from something or someone, and he had a good idea from whom.

"Roman, did you check out that name I gave you earlier when I called?"

"Hey, man, where've you been?" Roman quit wiping the bar and gave Quin a frown. The younger man motioned to the crowded bar. "I'm about to drown here, with all these customers and no help."

"I know. Sorry, but I got ... tied up at Gina's."

Roman's grin let Quin know that the other guy knew exactly what had gotten tied up. The younger man's sexual tastes were even kinkier than his.

Roman popped the towel at Quin's chest. "Way to go! That's one hot babe."

Normally, Quin would have laughed and joked with his friend, but somehow joking at Gina's expense didn't appeal to him. He frowned. "I don't like you talking about her like that."

The shocked expression on Roman's face at the warning in Quin's voice said it all.

Quin took a deep breath. "Look, it's not like that --"

Roman held up his hands. "Hey, no sweat. If you want to claim the lady as yours, I can respect that."

"She's not *my* lady."

"Really?" Roman moved behind the counter. "Can I have her address and phone number?"

Quin didn't remember moving, but the next thing he knew, he had Roman by the neck, half-sprawled across the top of the counter. Several customers around them grew quiet and moved, taking their beer bottles with them.

Roman's hands clawed at Quin's, trying to ease the grip around his windpipe, his voice a mere whisper. "Loosen up! I was kidding." His face turning red, he coughed. "Man, I can't breathe."

“Quin, let him go!” Vivian’s voice rose shrill and demanding behind him.

The red haze that had engulfed him at his friend’s words died at the realization of what he’d almost done. He released his grip on Roman’s throat and watched the younger man slide to the floor behind the bar. Looking around, he saw several people gulp their beers nervously and head for the door. *Great!*

“What de hell wrong with you?” Vivian knelt beside Roman, petting his hair and whispering words of comfort.

From Quin’s standpoint, his friend was milking the situation for all it was worth, placing his head on Vivian’s chest and whimpering softly. He ground his teeth together to prevent himself from cussing. “I’m worried about Gina.”

The words were out before he could stop them or think about what he said. Vivian nodded, handing him a necklace. A leather thong formed the chain, with a wooden-and-leather talisman braided together with Gina’s hair at the bottom in the *veve* of Ayza, protector *loa*. “Then go to her and make her wear dis. Do not leave her.”

Roman moaned, and Vivian stroked his hair gently. Quin rolled his eyes.

“I will gather my *eskot* together, and we will perform a protection ritual for her.”

Quin motioned toward Roman. “I’ll call you later to find out about that name and with instructions for what I need you to do.”

Roman looked up with a gleam in his eye, hiding a small smile of acknowledgement from Vivian’s quick eyes by ducking his head down and moaning louder.

Quin shook his head. “Good luck.” If his friend was planning on seducing his sister, Roman would need more than a talisman for protection or fortune. His sister had been known to scare an entire legion of *loas* away with her temper.

Chapter Nine

Bzzzzzz.

Gina reached a hand out, slapping here, then there to stop the infernal noise in her ear. Finally, her hand connected with the alarm clock. Sitting up in bed with her eyes closed, she moaned at the throb in her head that had kept her awake most of the night. *Coffee. I need coffee.*

Standing, she stretched her arms over her head and yawned, rubbing her exposed belly. Frowning, she flipped the lamp on to locate her house shoes. Not wanting to open her eyes to the bright light, she felt around the floor beside her bed with her foot. Her toe hit something fuzzy and soft, with long projections sprouting from the end. "Um, one down ..." She opened one eye halfway and squinted into the light of the room, spotting something pink under the edge of the bed. "... one to go."

Her gaze fell on the clock. *Six a.m.!* "Ugh, how do people do this every day?"

Finally, she had her other house shoe. Yawning some more, she stumbled into the kitchen. On autopilot, her hands prepared the coffee pot, switching the machine on when the grounds, filter, and water were in place. She leaned her head against the bottom of the upper cabinets, her eyes closed.

The scent of the coffee brewing flowed around her in the dim light of dawn. She loved the peace and quiet of early morning. Too bad she wasn't more of a morning person so she could enjoy it like her sister Starr, who took a predawn jog down the beach and back every day.

"What in hell do you have on your feet?"

Gina let out a scream at the same time as she jerked her head up at the unexpected male voice behind her. Her head collided with the cabinet, forcing her to stumble backwards away from the counter into a pair of masculine arms. Pain streaked through her already pounding head. The urge to vomit made her gag, but she struggled, kicking out with her feet and hitting with her fists, connecting with a hard shin and firm chest.

A couple of grunts later, two arms tightened around her, pinning her arms and preventing her from escaping. "Gina, it's me. Quin. Relax."

She gasped and sagged in his arms with relief. Anger erupted and replaced the gentler emotion. She pushed away from him. "You bastard! You scared me to death. What are you doing in my house? Where's my sister?"

"Whoa, whoa, settle down. Your sister invited me in on her way out. I told you I'd be back." He was looking down at her feet with a raised eyebrow. "Nice little pussies you have there."

"Bunnies! You said you'd call."

His big body stilled. "I did. You didn't answer, so I came over."

Gina hung her head. Where was all her resolution from the night before? She straightened. "I think it would be better if I didn't get too involved with you."

"Really?" His arms dropped away from her, but he didn't step back.

Her nipples tightened from the heat of his body penetrating the cotton undershirt she'd worn to bed. The man was a veritable heater. She shivered at the thought of snuggling against him on cold winter nights, sure he'd find an assortment of creative ways to keep

them both warm. Her panties grew damp while her toes curled into the softness of her slippers.

"Yes." Taking a deep breath, she took the steps that would separate them. Gina glanced up and watched a muscle twitch in his jaw and his eyes narrow as his gaze followed her into the living room. She turned away, chastising herself for her body's weakness for him. Through the picture window, she could see the dawn break to the east and along the coastline. Gentle waves lapped the white sands as people jogged or walked on the shore.

He didn't try to come closer, but stood in the opening between the living room and kitchen, blocking her escape. He shrugged. "It's your choice, but my sister and I think you're in danger."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your ... boyfriend." That last came out short and strained.

"Mark David?"

"Yeah."

"He's all hot air. Granted he and his mother can make life around here pretty miserable, but I don't think they'd personally commit physical violence." She didn't tell Quin about Mark David's threat to Max and her sisters. She couldn't believe a man she'd thought she'd been in love with would do something like that. He had been angry; that's all.

"The guy had you pinned to a wall yesterday. I'm having some friends of mine check him out. He's bad news." Quin took a few steps closer, his words becoming more urgent.

"Hmm, seems another guy had me pinned to a sofa." She turned back to him from facing the window. "With his dick up my --"

"All right, already. I get your drift. But Vivian is pretty sure."

"What exactly makes Vivian think I'm in danger? She's never met either Mark David or Isabel."

A look of uncertainty raced across Quin's features before an inscrutable mask took its place. "I'm not sure I can explain how she knows."

Gina snorted, raising her hands in frustration. "And I'm supposed to just believe you because you say so?"

"No." He scrubbed his hand over his hair. "Look, my sister is a *mambo*. A Voudon priestess."

Gina stared at him. What else could she do? Sure, she'd always heard of Voudou, but she'd never encountered anyone who believed in it. "Do you believe in Voudou?"

His lips thinned and his face looked strained. "I don't know what I believe in --" He reached out, stopping her when she made to move past him. "-- but I do know I've witnessed things that I can't explain."

She searched his eyes, but she couldn't tell if he lied. "So, what, she had a dream about me?"

Quin's features became even more drawn. "Not exactly."

Gina shook her head and pushed past him. "I'm getting a shower. I hope you're gone when I get out."

"I'm not going anywhere. You need protection."

She whipped around, pointing her finger at him. Her anger-level meter had hit the red zone. "If you can't answer my questions when I get out, you're gone." Without giving him an opportunity to respond, she made her way into the hall bathroom. It took all her willpower not to slam the door.

Gina stripped her pajamas off, letting them hit the floor in a puddle of cotton. With agitated jerks she managed to turn the hot water on in the shower. Taking a deep breath, she tested the water with her fingers, adjusting the cold water to blend into the hot for a comfortable temperature. She stepped in.

When the warm spray hit the back of her head and neck, muscles she hadn't known were tight and tense released under the gentle massage. "He drives me frickin' crazy."

As she scrubbed her body, the smell of the lavender soap rose into the steamy atmosphere of the bathroom, causing a haze to settle around her. Gina closed her eyes at the comforting caress from the showerhead, refusing to think of Quin Tertulliano and his wild declarations. She turned this way and that, letting the spray tingle over different areas of her body. The image of his body riding hers flashed across her mind.

Her fingers glided over her breasts, pinching the nipples lightly.

Her clit throbbed.

Working the bar of soap lower over her stomach and pubis, she slid her soap-slicked fingers into her vagina over and over. With the other hand, she eased the soap up the crease of her ass, rubbing the opening to her anus. She flung her head back into the spray. Her muscles clenched tight in a gentle orgasm. Slowly she relaxed, as the seconds turned into minutes.

Bang, bang, bang! "Gina, what's taking so long?"

Gina jumped, dropping the bar of soap. "Just a minute!" *Damn, he's the most impatient man I've ever met.* Water stung her eyes, forcing her to squint, as she bent to retrieve the slippery soap. She groped around the tile of the tub floor, then stopped.

Her fingers encountered what felt like a rubber hose, but she felt positive that rubber hoses did not wind around one's finger by themselves. She drew back sharply from whatever she'd touched, and her eyes flew open.

The scream that tore from her throat bounced around the tiny room, but she couldn't do anything but stand like a statue and stare down at the coiled body of a multicolored snake at her feet, ready to strike.

The door crashed into the wall, cracking the sheetrock from the brutal contact of the handle.

“What’s wrong?” Quin stood in the doorway, eyes wild, nostrils flared. He took a step toward the tub.

Her heart hammering, Gina moved her forefinger slowly, pointing at her bath companion.

“Shit!” Quin took a step back.

Gina flinched. The snake coiled tighter, its forked tongue sneaking out to get a feel for the new threat.

So, the vision was accurate. Somehow, that didn’t make him feel any better. Quin hated snakes. His stomach knotted at the sight of the scaly, slithering form curled at Gina’s feet. The hair on the back of his neck tingled, standing erect. The palms of his hands itched as a clammy sensation spread from his head to his toes. He’d seen many of his sister’s *hounsies* handle the reptiles during their rituals. The beasts gave him the creeps.

“W-What kind of snake is it?” Gina’s frightened voice chased the memories from his mind. She was scared, and it was up to him to help her.

That was what his vision had been telling him. She was his responsibility. If he failed her, he would fail himself and his *met tet*.

Quin rubbed both hands over his face, swallowing the fear of snakes he had always carried since watching a young girl being repeatedly bitten, falling into a coma, then ultimately dying. He associated snakes with evil. Easing forward, he peered closer.

He blew out a deep breath, concentrating on the snake’s markings. “Well, it has a black nose followed by a yellow band, then another black band.” He swallowed, ignoring the sweat running down the side of his face. Clearing his throat, he continued his study of the agitated creature. “There’s another yellow band followed by a red band --”

“So, it’s got a fucking rainbow on his back! Is it poisonous?”

Quin stood in shock at Gina's language. Her body shook from head to toe, and he realized she walked a thin line between hysteria and calm. Her eyes were wide and scared as water streamed down her head, face, and body, but she didn't move.

He nodded. "I'd say it's a coral snake, babe, and yeah, they're poisonous."

Her face paled to a sickening gray color, and her body swayed.

Below her the snake raised its head.

"Don't move, Gina. Stay with me now, and don't move a muscle."

"E-Easy for you t-to say. You d-don't have a damned snake a-at your feet!"

Poor baby. He could see the shaking growing worse. Her nerves had just about had it over the last few days. Quin looked around for something he could kill the snake with, or trap it long enough to get Gina out of the tub.

Her arm jerked involuntarily, and the snake drew back.

Damnation, he had to distract her so she'd be still. "I never told anyone this, but I'm afraid of snakes." He gave a halfhearted laugh, but saw her focusing on him.

"R-Really?"

"Uh-huh." He opened the basin cabinet and spotted a large white bucket. "I was about ten, and my mother and her students were performing a ritual." He bent down and emptied the bucket's contents onto the floor. "Maman was a *mambo*, like Vivian."

"What happened?" Her stuttering had stopped.

Good. "I sneaked into the woods close to our house, where they held their rituals at night." He shuddered. "I watched a teenaged girl dancing around the fire with this snake wrapped around her neck. The more she danced, the more the snake looked ... drugged." He frowned, still not understanding why that had been. "For hours, she danced and danced, hypnotizing this snake."

He had moved parallel with the side of the tub. Pulling back the curtain, one section at a time, he palmed the bottom of the bucket and eased it above the snake. With his other arm

he encircled Gina's waist. His hand slid across the slick skin made all the more smooth by the soap she'd used. This close, the lavender scent tickled his nose.

"Okay, slowly put both arms around my neck. I'm going to count to three, drop the bucket over the snake, and yank you outta there. Got it?"

He watched her nod with trusting eyes. He hoped he didn't drop the bucket at a wrong angle, or worse, drop her slippery body back into the tub. Quin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Ready? On the count of three. One ... two ..." Her arms tightened around his neck, like a vise. "... three!"

The bucket clattered onto the tub floor at the same time as he pulled Gina's wet body on top of him, falling backwards into the small space of the bathroom. Once they hit the floor, both of them scrambled, with their legs entangled, out into the hallway, slipping and sliding as fast as they could away from the reptile in the bathtub. Their breaths panted in irregular patterns, loud and harsh in the stillness of the house, as they leaned against each other.

Something rough and dry trailed up the outside of Quin's arm.

"Holy shit!" He jerked to his left, taking Gina with him, scooting further down the hall with both feet. He didn't stop until his back hit a closed door.

"What was it?"

"I don't know. Maybe another snake." He pulled her close, feeling her heart pound hard in time with his. He searched the end of the hall, ready to bust the bedroom door down to reach a safe area.

Something long and black twitched. His heart stopped at the sight of ... *a long, black snake?* "What the fuck?" He pushed Gina behind him and squinted at the image in front of him. "Looks like another one."

Gina moved to his side on her hands and knees and stared into the dim morning light. After a second she burst out laughing. She held her stomach and rolled onto her side.

"What are you laughing --"

"Meooow."

"Well, hell." *A frickin' cat.* He'd given himself heart failure over a cat!

Gina wiped her eyes. "I-It's okay, Quin. I'll save yooou ..."

Laughter bounced around the hall. Quin wanted to be upset she was laughing at him, but he couldn't. This was what they needed to alleviate the tension they had both experienced in the bathroom. He wrapped his arms around her naked body. "Very funny." With that, he tickled her, liking the way she squealed in that high-pitched, girly voice. Soon laughter had control of him, too.

They were so engrossed in playing, they didn't hear the back door open or the footsteps through the kitchen. A shadow passed over them. Quin jerked to attention, pulling Gina behind him.

"Hey, don't mind me. I'm just glad she's laughing." Starr munched an apple, stepped over them, patting Quin on the head. "Nice job, man." Max trotted behind Starr. He licked Quin on the cheek, following Gina's sister into her bedroom.

Quin looked at Gina; she looked at him. He noticed for the first time Gina's lack of clothing. He watched her nipples draw tight in the air conditioning. Her breasts were so full, they would overflow his hands if he cupped her. His gaze wandered over her tiny waist and her flared hips. His cock grew taut and painful. "Gina."

Her name came out husky. He glanced up to find her watching him with a look of need on her face. Quin leaned forward, letting their lips graze in a gentle nip. One nip turned to two, then three. Soon they were chest to chest, her nipples stabbing through his wet tee-shirt. Their mouths fused in an ongoing kiss that a man could drown in. The lavender scent of her skin mingled with pure, musky human arousal. He groaned.

After a second, she broke contact, leaving him needing more. He leaned in, but she angled her face away and shook her head. "Don't."

“What’s wrong?” He fingered a wet curl, darkened by the water. He loved her hair, so thick and wild.

A short laugh escaped her. “Well, let’s see. I ran away from my fiancé and wedding two days ago and gave my virginity to a stranger; my ex threatened to have my dog beheaded; I had sex with said stranger again --” She ticked the list off on her fingers. “-- and a snake turned up in my shower, mysteriously, right after said stranger made wild accusations about my ex-fiancé and some Voudou dream.”

“Vision.”

“Oh, right, I forgot. Vision.”

She stood. He stood, too, and stared down at her, waiting. He wanted her to believe him, but he wasn’t sure if he believed. He understood if she thought him crazy.

“You need to leave.”

“I can’t.” He traced a thumb across the satin skin of her bottom lip. Tiny shivers raced along his spine. “If I don’t protect you and something happens to you, I’ll never forgive myself.” He pulled Vivian’s talisman from his back pocket.

“I don’t know you.”

“But you do. I am the man you chose to give your virginity to.” He leaned down, kissed her briefly, and slid the talisman over her head. “Wear this for me, please. It will help protect you from evil.” He turned and strode into the living room. She needed space to think about things. He needed space to keep from throwing her over his shoulder, taking her to the bedroom, and fucking the daylight out of her.

Yeah, Tertulliano, that would win her over big time. He snorted.

A few minutes later he heard a bedroom door open and Gina’s voice. “Starr, we trapped a snake in the bathtub. Don’t go in there. I’ll contact Mr. Davis and see if he can come get the thing.” The door closed, shutting off the sound of her sweet voice.

Quin sat alone and watched the sun rise higher across the beach. His thoughts turned to the snake in the tub. Someone had been in here and planted the snake after Gina's sister had left the house and before he'd come in.

Coral snakes weren't something one just picked up off the road. He stood, debating leaving Gina. Finally, he decided. She had the talisman. He had to find out who had bought the snake.

Chapter Ten

Gina adjusted the short jacket over her blouse and skirt for the fiftieth time. She glanced in the glass panel beside the lobby door. She'd pulled her damp hair into a French twist, hoping the style made her look more professional with the suit. This was her third stop on her list for submitting job applications. Someone had to need a person with a college education and the ability to speak five languages fluently!

She glanced around the small lobby of the Hancock Bank Building. The black-and-white marble floors gleamed. The granite-and-wood counters with their glass partitions sparkled so bright she had to blink. She opened her eyes wider, then blinked again.

Oh, no. She slumped in the leather chair, hoping the man who had just entered didn't see her. You would think that on a Saturday morning, everyone would be at home asleep.

He turned and looked directly at her. A frown flickered across his face for an instant, to be replaced by a smile that rivaled the sparkle of the glass, before he sauntered over to her. Mark David Comeaux at his most charming.

Gina pursed her lips and sat up straighter.

"Regina, my dear, what brings you into town? It's not like you to wake up this early in the morning. You're a night owl, sleeping until midmorning at the earliest."

Gina bit back the urge to tell him to keep his voice down. Everyone and their mother could hear him. Prospective employers did not want to hear about their applicants' desire to sleep all day and stay up all night!

Gina stood and put an arm through Mark David's, drawing him closer to the back of the lobby. She smiled up at him for the benefit of the Koch sisters, two elderly spinsters who loved to gossip about everything and everybody ... especially the Chappel daughters. "Mark David, I didn't expect to see you here."

She turned her head and lowered her voice. "I'm checking on some papers that I need to sign."

Mark David nodded, his eyes narrowing on her. "That man isn't trying to extort money from you, is he?"

Gina frowned, not sure she understood. "Who, Quin? No! Why would he do that?"

Mark David's expression registered surprise. "Regina, you are a naïve child. I checked him out."

"Funny, he's doing the same with you."

Mark David snorted. "I assure you my sources are more reliable than his. Did you know your friend has a prison record?"

Gina released a deep sigh, glancing around and smiling at Mimi Townsend, the school librarian. "Yes, I do," she said without moving her lips. She waved at Judith Criss, the choir director at the First Baptist Church. *God, everyone she'd ever known was in the bank this morning. It was more popular than church.*

Mark David leaned closer, reminding her of the previous day. She dropped her hand from his arm and took a step back. His eyes flickered with irritation.

"I have never physically harmed you, Regina. I apologize for yesterday, truly I do, and I apologize for what I did with Kimberly. You are a good woman, and I just want you to be

happy. You must understand how distraught I am over all that's happened between us the last few days."

Gina's mouth opened. He looked and sounded so sincere, like he always did. She nodded. "Yes, I can understand, but that doesn't mean I will forget."

"That's why I must implore you to examine everything this man is telling you. He was arrested and incarcerated for rape, Regina."

"What?" She hadn't known that. Bile rose in her throat at the possibility that she'd allowed a rapist to have sex with her. She shook her head. "There has to be some mistake."

"Make certain, the men who work for me are very precise in their information. I pay them a handsome sum to be accurate."

Gina knew that statement was true. Mark David detested anything not done to perfection. He'd even insisted she label her shelves as to what canned goods went where. Starr had thrown a hissy fit over that one. She had ripped every label off, not caring if she peeled paint in the process. *"That bastard isn't telling me how to do anything in my own fucking house!"*

Becky's response had been milder, of course. *"Starr, honey, don't curse. Gina, don't you think that's going a little overboard?"*

Gina cleared her throat. "But ... rape?" She moved closer to him again as the Koch sisters walked slowly by, smiling and tilting their heads toward Gina and Mark David.

"Yes, rape. Seems the girl was a young debutante. She had gone to his club one night and unfortunately imbibed too much. The next morning she woke in Mr. Tertulliano's bed, hungover and debauched."

Gina's stomach cramped; she swallowed hard. "What do you mean?" she whispered.

Mark David patted her hand. "I don't think a fine lady like you needs to hear any of the details."

"No. I need to know. Please tell me."

Her ex-fiancé looked uneasy. He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. Glancing around the lobby, he adjusted his perfect tie. Finally, he sighed. "Very well. You asked, my dear." He took her hand in his and looked her in the eye.

"Tertulliano sodomized the poor girl, but before he did that, he strapped her to his bed and performed cunnilingus on her." He cleared his throat. "From my report, he repeatedly spanked her, forcing her to give in to his demands. Why, the poor girl had to be sent to a mental hospital for several months just to be calm enough to testify against him in court."

Gina wanted the floor to open and swallow her. Everything Mark David described had been the very acts that Quin had performed with her, except for the sodomy and the strapping down. And, God help her, she had almost begged him to do that. She shook her head.

"Regina, are you okay? You don't look so well."

"I-I'm sorry. I don't ... I think I'm going to be sick." She covered her mouth and ran for the bathroom. Mark David supported her with an arm around her waist.

"Is there a doctor in the house? This young lady is very ill."

There was no response except a few heads shaking in a negative response. He eased her into the ladies' room, then turned on the cold water in the sink. Paper towels, cool and wet, were applied to the back of her neck.

"Now, breathe through your nose and blow slowly out of your mouth. That's it, my dear, you're doing fine." His calm, quiet voice washed over her.

The nausea subsided. "I feel much better. Thank you." Gina looked up at the man she'd abandoned. She'd made the right decision with him, but maybe she'd handled things the wrong way. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"It's all right, my dear. It's the least I can do to make things right between us." He held up his hand, stopping her from interrupting. "I know we're not getting married, but we can at least be friends."

Gina shook her head. "I don't think that's possible. Too much water under the bridge, so to speak."

Mark David's lips pressed together like they did when things weren't going his way, but he didn't push the friends issue.

"Please be careful, Regina. Quin Tertulliano is a dangerous man. There are rumors that he and his sister dabble in Voudou, offering blood sacrifices to their *loas* -- their gods."

"What kind of blood sacrifices?"

"Rumor has it that they choose a young virgin every few years. They mark her with a talisman, handmade from wood, leather, and the victim's own hair woven into the design of the *loa* for whom she is to be sacrificed."

A chill raced down Gina's spine. Quin had given her such a talisman. It hadn't fit under her blouse well enough to be hidden, so she'd thrown it up on the shelf above her bed.

"I just want you to be safe, my dear." Mark David kissed her forehead. "There are so many bad people out in the world today, waiting for a chance to eat someone like you alive."

A chill eased its way down her spine at the clammy feel of his lips on her skin. She pulled the wet towels from her neck and stood. Her gaze traveled over the expensive suit and clean-cut looks of the man she'd almost married. "I will be, now that I know what to look out for."

Mark David's eyes narrowed, but he smiled. "Good. I'm glad you understand me."

"Perfectly." She straightened her skirt. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find Quin."

* * * * *

Riiing. Riiing. "Hello?" There was a pause as Valery Breau took a draw on his cigarette, listening to his employer on the other end. "She bought the lies about Tertulliano, eh?"

He narrowed his gaze on a cockroach crawling up the wall across the room.

"I'll take care of her, boss, not to worry. The snake was to scare her. If it had bitten her and she'd died --" He shrugged. "-- so much the better. But my *aborishas* will make sure that Tertulliano gets blamed for Miss Chappel's rape and murder."

He drew his arm back, then forward, sighted down his arm with one eye, and then repeated the motion more quickly, releasing the object he held in his hand.

Thwack! The roach crunched against the wall beneath the weight of Valery's knife. Yellow ooze seeped down the wall, while the body remained stuck to the plaster.

"Don't worry." Valery stood and walked over to the roach and pulled his favorite knife out of the wall. The bug broke in half, with one piece falling behind the desk piled two feet high with porno mags. "I'll have all her parts pinned down."

He laughed and clicked the phone off. Wiping the knife on his pants leg, he flipped through the magazine on top of the nearest pile. "She won't be able to move by the time the *orisha* gets through with her."

* * * * *

Gina pulled into the driveway, but couldn't see Quin's black motorcycle anywhere. Starr's yellow moped stood propped against the carport wall. Had Quin left? She sighed.

Seashells crunched beneath her heels as she walked across the drive and through the back door. She rolled her head, arching her shoulders. The aches from the trials of yesterday had finally decided to take their toll on her muscles. She threw her keys onto the kitchen counter and walked into the living room.

"Jesus, this has been the day from hell." She closed her eyes and stretched again, pulling her jacket off one shoulder.

"Ahem."

Gina stumbled to a halt, opening her eyes to see Starr sitting on the sofa with Reverend Mason, and a tea service on the table in front of them. She blinked twice, turned, and looked

behind her to make sure she'd come into the right house. When she looked back, the two still sat where she'd seen them, the tea service still in place, with Starr holding a china cup on her lap.

"Uh, did I miss something?"

Starr actually blushed. Gina's eyebrows rose in amazement.

"Aren't you going to say hello to the reverend?"

Gina nodded. "Hi."

James Mason smiled, revealing a row of even white teeth that a model would kill for. Gina had to blink again. The preacher-man was pretty darned good-looking. Not in that earthy, animalistic way Quin had going on ... She mentally shook herself.

"You've been having a bad day today, Regina?" His voice was deep and clear.

Gina stared at him. No wonder he had such a boom in attendance lately. Half the female population in Bay St. Louis would follow him to hell with that kind of voice.

She nodded. "A couple of days, really, but I won't bother either of you with the details." She turned to go to her room, trying to connect the dots to how Starr and James Mason came to be sitting on the sofa, having tea! She rubbed the spot above her temple, where her headache throbbed.

"Oh, James got rid of your snake!"

"Ohmigod! I forgot to call Mr. Davis, didn't I?" Gina turned to find Starr glaring at her.

"Luckily, I came by looking for Becky," the reverend said. He took a sip of his tea, but continued to stare at Starr. A hungry, desperate look stole over his features before he coughed and his usual polite mask replaced it.

"Yeah, he took it out back and got rid of the poor thing." Starr gazed up at James with admiring eyes, the smile on her face almost worshipful.

"Amazing," Gina said, still not certain she hadn't walked in on a scene from the *Twilight Zone*. She had had her suspicions that Starr secretly liked the preacher, but seeing

the two of them actually staring gaga into each other's eyes was almost sickening. What would this do to Becky?

"I'll just go freshen up ..."

She let the words trail off, realizing they weren't listening to her. She couldn't get caught up in her sisters' affairs, not while her life was going up in smoke all around her. *Where the hell is Quin?*

Chapter Eleven

Quin followed the man he'd identified as Valery Breaux, hitman from New Orleans, who occasionally did "odd jobs" for Mark David Comeaux and his mother.

His jaw tightened. He had wanted to force the guy to admit he'd put the snake in Gina's house, but had held his temper, following him all day as Breaux made stops at various local shops. Several had produced large sums of cash. The hitman didn't have a problem counting the shakedown money in public before climbing into his expensive, antique black convertible. *Typical for a thug.*

Quin glanced at the black-and-silver frame of his bike, then shrugged. What could he say? Some considered him a thug, too. He knew Gina had her doubts about him. If he could prove to her that Mark David was behind the snake incident, she'd trust him.

"Why the fuck I'm doing this, I don't know." He took a swig of his cola, letting the burn of the carbonated drink slide down his throat. He wiped his forehead, adjusting his bandana over his eyebrows before replacing his helmet. Judging by the horizon and the setting sun, daylight was almost done. So far, following this slime had gotten him nowhere.

His shirt clung to his back and chest with his own sweat. His muscles ached from crouching over the motorcycle all day or standing in the sweltering heat. Mississippi in the

summertime was not the place to be wearing a black tee-shirt and black jeans, riding a black motorcycle.

Quin kicked the bike into gear. The big machine rumbled to life between his legs. Grudgingly, he admitted why he still followed the man. Something told him to stay with Breaux. The man was dirty and could lead him to Comeaux; he could feel it. His *ti bon ange* told him.

According to Voudon followers, everyone had two parts to their soul -- a *gros bon ange* and the *ti bon*. When he was small, Quin had believed his guardian angels could talk to him, but they'd deserted him the day he needed them the most, the day his mother had died. He'd been fifteen, a terrible age for any rebellious teenager to lose a parent, especially him. Torn between his mother and sister's world of Voudou and his father's Christian beliefs, he had called upon his angels to help him cure his mother, but to no avail. They had deserted him, leaving him bereft of any desire to know any god or any religion. He'd learned how to survive on his own.

Quin touched the scar on his cheek, tracing the ragged lines with his forefinger. Some of those lessons had been rougher than others, especially the two long, lonely years he'd sat in prison for some woman he didn't know. *What the hell am I doing?*

Breaux pulled up to a house four streets off the beach. Quin pulled in a few houses down, careful to hide his bike and himself in the shadows of some flowering pear trees. Glancing around, he got his bearings and realized they were only a couple of blocks from Gina's house. Quin frowned.

In fact -- he got off his bike and walked over to the fence row of the house across from him -- if Breaux cut through a few yards, he'd be in the copse of woods Quin had scoped out the first day, directly behind Gina's house!

"Sonofabitch. You've been watching her all along." He'd turned to go back to his bike when a movement to his side and behind him made him turn, but too late. A glimpse of

something bright flashed in his peripheral vision before something hard crashed into the side of his head. The pain faded to black.

The heavy throb of drums danced across Quin's consciousness. His eyelids flickered open and shut, catching sight of flames nearby. He tried again, this time keeping his eyes open, squinting across the dirt and leaves of the black earth into an open fire. Around him he could hear the rustling of feet, the murmur of voices. A mosquito buzzed lightly around his ear, tickling the lobe with its gentle lighting against his skin.

He moved to shoo it away, but couldn't move his arms. He frowned, not sure what was wrong. His head throbbed. Someone had bashed him with what had looked like a machete, but he couldn't be sure. The glimpse he'd gotten had been too brief.

He shifted his head, using his shoulders as leverage, trying to get a better handle on where he was and who had him tied like a pig. He moved his legs, but found his feet tied up at an angle to his bound hands behind his back. "Motherfucker."

To his left, a *thump* sounded. He turned his head, groaning at the wave of dizziness that assailed him.

Several people looked in his direction, but no one seemed concerned that he was awake. *Hell, why would they? I can't move a damned thing.* "Hey, come here. Somebody come here."

Two young Hispanic women glanced at him, putting their heads together and whispering. One wore a red dress with white beads; the other wore a white dress with red beads.

Quin focused on that, realizing everyone was wearing the same color combinations. The one color that stood out was red. Something stirred in his mind, but he couldn't remember why red was important. This wasn't Voudon, but -- he frowned -- something similar. Something his mind didn't want to open to and allow him to see.

A chicken squawked somewhere within the perimeter of the fire's light. *Sacrifice*. Sweat broke across his forehead. He was going to witness some kind of ritual. He watched the circle forming around him. The outer perimeter was made up of the drummers, while the women would dance on the inside. The combination of the two would attract the spirits. *Loas*, in Voudon. Quin wasn't sure what this group would be calling forth. He only knew he didn't want to be a part of it.

Two feet appeared in front of him. "Ready to meet your destiny, Senor Tertulliano?"

Quin's gaze traveled upwards over bare feet, red pants, and red shirt to the face of Valery Breaux. The bastard's grin widened. His arms spread wide to encompass the circle.

"We are the *aborishas* of the *orisha* Eshu-Elegba."

"Shit!" Santerians. Quin tried to roll his body out of the circle that surrounded him. Feet and hands impeded his progress, pushing him further into the circle, refusing to allow him to escape their plans. Laughter echoed around him as dirt and twigs filled his mouth and eyes, scratching his face.

"*Basta!*" Silence erupted with the halt to the pushing and shoving from his antagonizers.

Quin spit several leaves and the taste of earth from his mouth. One stream of spittle hit Breaux's foot. *Take that, you fucker*.

The roots of his hair felt as if they were being ripped from his scalp. His head jerked back in Breaux's grasp. Cold, black eyes stared into Quin's.

"Don't worry, Tertulliano. We're not going to kill you, *amigo*." His laughter sounded harsh and wild in the humid night air. "Oh, no. We are going to call the *orisha* and offer your body for his possession. As sacrifice for his favors, we give him your woman."

Quin's nostrils flared, and he bucked against his binds. "I'll kill you if you lay one finger on her!"

Breaux pulled Quin's head back further, harder. Quin's neck stretched tighter, cutting off his oxygen supply, forcing him to open his mouth and gasp for air, like a fish stranded on the beach.

"We're not going to touch her, *mi hermano*." Breaux released him, shoving his head into the dirt. "You are."

Quin raised his head, tasting the blood from his busted nose flowing into his mouth, but the minor injury didn't compare with the horror he felt at Valery Breaux's words. They were going to use him to rape and kill Gina.

He searched desperately in his mind for any type of protection he could use to keep the Santerian god from possessing him. Nothing came to mind. He called to his *deux anges*, but no response. Had he really thought otherwise? They hadn't been there for him when his mother died; why would they hear him now?

"*Empezar!*" The drums sounded in a slow, rhythmic beat, like a heartbeat. The women swayed in place, their feet barely moving. Valery Breaux shook a gourd, painted red and white, the seeds inside making a hissing sound that blended with the beat of the drum.

Quin closed his eyes, trying to shut out the sights and sounds that surrounded him. *I will not be possessed. I will not!*

The dancers were moving their hips and hands now. Valery's voice rose above the percussion that had increased in volume and rhythm. "We call you, great Eshu-Elegba, opener of ways, master of the crossroads, to bear witness to these gifts we lay before you. We call you, great Shango, essence of male sexuality and power, to bear witness to these gifts we lay before you."

Damnation. Breaux isn't calling one orisha; he's calling two! Quin's heart rate jumped, pounding harder in his chest, as he fought against the binds. He raised his head, watching Breaux lift the colored beads from around his neck and hold them to the light of the fire.

All around, the women moved their bodies, gyrating to the drumbeat and the hiss of the rattles. One or two carried coral snakes around their necks, kissing the creatures as they swayed to the music that would summon the Santerian gods. The snakes' bodies of black, red, and yellow gleamed in the firelight, swirling to and fro, causing Quin's view of them to go in and out of focus.

The swirling colors of his vision came back with a rush. This was what it had meant. Gina's life was in danger -- from him.

"Nooo!" Quin opened his mouth, screaming his frustration. Frustration at himself for not being able to understand the vision. Frustration at the very entities who were supposed to help him, but had abandoned him over and over through the years.

Breaux moved toward him, eyes narrowed and mouth curved in a nasty grin. Quin tried to roll away from him, but two men grabbed him, forcing him onto his side, pulling his head back to face the *Santero*.

"Behold, great Shango, your new body." Valery Breaux opened his palm, revealing a powdery white substance, and blew hard into Quin's face.

Quin coughed and strained against his captors, to no avail. The powder invaded his nostrils and throat, choking him. His eyes and tongue burned, turning numb with the coating of whatever herbal drug Breaux had chosen to force him into susceptibility to the *orishas*.

"Damn you, Breaux. Damn you to hell." Quin wheezed and coughed again, trying to clear his lungs and mind. Already his vision twirled and blurred from the effects of the hallucinogen.

Breaux smiled. "There is only the visible world, *Aye*, and the invisible world, *Orun*. Santeria does not recognize the Christian concept of hell." He forced Quin's head back, pulling his eyelids open, as if checking his captive's pupils. Again he blew the white powder into Quin's face, laughing at his feeble attempts to escape. "Why do you recognize that

concept, *amigo*? You are Voudon. Your sister is *mambo* and you are *houngan*, both powerful in your own right. Call to your ancestors, your *loas*, to save you.”

Quin couldn’t respond. His stomach churned with the bile that rose in his throat. The powder burned his eyes, mouth, and nose. Tears streamed from his eyes, further blurring his already unfocused vision. The colors of the dancers swirled in a red-and-white kaleidoscope.

“Bah! Leave him. His *ti bon ange* has left him. He will not resist the possession.”

The two men let Quin fall face-first into the dirt. Valery Breaux raised his hands, a machete in one, a chicken in the other. “Come and claim your body, Eshu-Elegba. Together you and Shango may combine and have free reign tonight to take the offering the *aleyo* brings to you.”

With one motion, the chicken’s head fell, rolling within inches of Quin’s face. Blood flowed down Valery’s arm, splattering onto the ground. From Quin’s mind sprang nightmarish images of women twining around his body, only to turn into snakes. Blood covered his hands, face, and body until he had to swim, or drown.

The images stopped. He stood at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere, but he didn’t know which way to go. He turned in a circle, around and around, growing dizzy with each rotation.

Now, he was falling from a great height into a never-ending pit of darkness. The ground met him with the force of an atomic bomb. His teeth rattled; his ribs and spinal column erupted from his skin with the force of impact.

He screamed. On the ground, his body thrashed, consumed in the throes of a seizure. His eyes rolled back in his head, and white foam spewed from his mouth.

Valery Breaux moved forward. He looked around the circle, a smile on his face. “It is done. *They* have joined to form a new force. He is with us.” Breaux opened his bloody palm against Quin’s forehead. “Cut him loose.”

Standing, Valery moved away several feet. The drums continued beating; the dancers continued swaying, sweating in the suffocating heat.

The bonds were cut. Quin's arms and legs flopped onto the ground to lie quiet and still as death. Several seconds passed. His finger twitched.

Valery held up his hand. The music, dancing, and chanting stopped. No one moved, or barely breathed, as the man on the ground rose to stand before the *Santero*. Valery bowed his head. "Welcome, Great One."

The *orisha* glanced at the *Santero*, raising his head to sniff the air filled with the scents of decaying leaves, sweat, and ... blood. The need for nourishment forced him forward, but he hesitated after the first step.

He looked down at the appendage beneath him. Lifted the weight up, then down. His gaze fell upon another appendage higher up on the body; he focused on the digits protruding. They moved. His gaze narrowed and he thought, *What is this?*

His thoughts boomed across the clearing in the form of speech. Several women flinched from the deep resonance of his voice. He lifted his head higher and looked at the man in front of him.

"You are one of us, Great One."

"Why am I here?"

The *Santero* bowed his head again, offering the chicken. "Please, accept our offerings."

"I see but one meager offering. Have you nothing worthy of my natures? The natures of Shango-Elegba?"

"Yes, Great One, we offer you the woman who belongs to the man of the body you possess."

Shango-Elegba glanced around at the women, cowering at the outer edges of the circle. "Where is this woman you offer me?"

"She is there, waiting for you in the dark. Yours to do with as you will."

The *orisha* turned, following with his eyes the direction that the *Santero* pointed. A small house sat on the edge of the trees, dark and deserted to the naked eye of a mere man. But he was no man, now. The essence of two gods flowed through his body and mind, mingling with the original human essence to form one entity.

That essence craved the woman's sex. The need to fuck rose in its basest form from deep within the human body the *orisha* possessed. His cock throbbed as blood engorged the fleshy rod between his legs. He growled, low and deep.

Shango-Elegba strode into the night, toward the house and the woman whose orgasm and blood would appease the hunger within his gut. When he took her power, he could return to the darkness, away from these silly humans and their struggle to survive the rigors of earthly life.

Valery Breaux smiled into the night that enveloped the figure of Quin Tertulliano. "Goodbye, *mi amigo*. Enjoy your last night of freedom buried in the warm cunt of your woman. Tomorrow will find you dangling at the end of a death sentence for her rape and murder."

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and hit Send. The person he called answered on the first ring. "It is done."

The only response was a sigh of pleasure before the line disconnected.

Chapter Twelve

Gina gave up trying to pretend she was camping and kicked one foot out from beneath the covers. The air conditioning unit had crashed earlier in the afternoon. Good thing Becky had gone to that retreat. Starr had decided to spend the night at a friend's when the repairman had informed them he couldn't come out until sometime next week.

The oppressive heat felt like a heavy blanket pressing Gina into the mattress. She'd pulled her hair into a braid, hoping the easy style would allow a cool breeze to fan her hot neck.

The whir of the ceiling fan mingled with the sound of crickets and tree frogs from the woods and bayou behind the house. Their gentle music lulled her into a half-sleeping state in which she drifted in and out of consciousness, her mind relaxed and open to the swirl of thoughts passing through, but not stopping on any particular image. In the distance the rhythmic sound of drums blended into the symphony of nature outside her window.

Time became inconsequential as her eyelids flickered and the lights from the distant campfires of the bayou played across her bedroom wall. Seconds became minutes; minutes became hours, as she drifted off to sleep.

Restless dreams skimmed her mind with images of people dancing around a fire, multicolored beads clicking through someone's fingers, the flash of a machete coming down toward her.

Gina sat up with a gasp, clutching the rumpled sheet to her chest. Her nightshirt bunched high around her thighs, the outline of her pubic hair showing through the thin cotton. She hadn't bothered with panties. Her skin already felt sticky from the thin sheen of sweat produced from the dream. She lay back upon the pillows, but the sense of dread wouldn't leave.

Tossing left, then right, she sat up and stripped the cotton shirt from her body. Throwing the shirt into the corner, she stilled as a shadowy outline caught in her peripheral vision. Slowly, she turned.

The shadow wasn't there.

She rolled her eyes. *Jeez, Gina, it's always like that. You see something; you look; it's not there.* She flopped down onto the mattress and faced the wall, enjoying the momentary cool afforded by the lack of clothing. She knew it wouldn't last; as soon as her skin adjusted to the new temperature, she'd grow hot and miserable again.

Her eyelids flickered as her vision blurred on the pattern across the wall. The shadow cast by the weeping fig tree in the corner threw eerie shapes for her imagination to play with. She yawned and closed her eyes.

A slight breeze brushed the skin along her back. She opened her eyes, focusing on the wall. As she looked closer, she noticed the patterns had changed. What had been individually defined patterns of leaves was now one large, smooth shadow.

The tiny hairs on the back of her neck tingled a second before she heard the sound of someone breathing. The smell hit next, a mixture of manly sweat, fresh dirt, and blood.

Gina turned quickly, but not quickly enough. Strong hands grasped her ankles, pulling her to the end of the bed.

She screamed and lashed out with her fist, connecting with muscular arms and chest without much success in thwarting the intruder. She angled her body, twisting sideways so she could reach the bedside table. Her fingers stretched as she strained to get hold of the paperweight.

Sounds of material shredding filled the darkness, raking invisible claws up her spine at the unexpected sound.

"Oh, my God, oh, my God." Her fingertips touched the cool glass, only to be snatched away as he pulled her further down the length of the bed, securing her ankle with strips of what she recognized as the cotton shirt she'd abandoned.

"Help!" Gina kicked out with her other foot, delivering a blow to the guy's gut.

He grunted in response.

"Who are you?" she screamed, tugging and kicking against her binds.

He didn't answer, but went for the other ankle.

Gina sat up, planning to free her foot, but he caught her, pushing her back into the mattress with a shove. She bounced once before he straddled her.

His clothes reeked of sweat and blood. Grains of dirt filtered onto her skin and onto the sheet beneath her. She could feel the grit digging into her skin. Desperation took control, and she went for his chest with her teeth, snapping, trying to grab anything that would make him get the hell off her.

A hand covered her face, pushing her away, but forcing her to breathe in the man's smell. She gagged, then coughed. A small whimper escaped her throat. Helplessness washed through her, making her furious with her inability to fight her attacker. She glanced up through grimy fingers, and her mouth opened in shock. "Quin!"

What the hell is going on? Quin struggled to break free of the mental bonds that had him in their grip. He could see and hear Gina, but when he tried to answer, his voice choked

as though a hand were around his vocal chords. He knew what he was doing, but it wasn't him. He wouldn't hurt her. He wouldn't force her into sex.

He struggled to force his hands not to tie her other ankle, but his mind didn't have control anymore. The horror of the reality crept through his awareness. He was a prisoner in his own body. For how long, he didn't know.

Panic rose, but he tamped it down. If he couldn't control his body, he'd have to control his brain. Maybe there was a way to make himself heard to the entity in charge. He searched his memory of everything Vivian had ever taught him about his *met tet*.

He knew it corresponded to the equivalent of a patron saint, but he couldn't remember whose his was. Desperate, he called out to the only *loa* he knew, Obatala. *Help me. I've never asked you for anything, but I need your help now.*

The *orisha* stopped in his task of securing Gina to the bed. He angled his head, as if hearing something.

Quin realized the god had heard him. He tried again. *Can you hear me? Don't hurt her, please. Please don't hurt her.*

"I will not hurt her. I will fuck her."

The look of utter horror that crossed Gina's face prompted Quin into further contact. Her blue eyes were wide, and her lips trembled with her fear. If the Santerian god worked like the Voudon gods, Quin knew the *orisha* wouldn't release her. The god expected to be allowed to take his offering in any way that pleased him. "Rape" was not a word in the entity's vocabulary.

Let me talk to her. Wouldn't it please you more if she gave herself to you willingly?

"I know that she will not. Her fear is tangible."

I can convince her. I've had her. I was her ... first. Fuck, he hated this, but he knew the only way to save Gina was to let the entity enjoy her.

The one thing he didn't want to think about was that in the entity's pleasure, Quin would benefit from the arrangement, too. He only hoped Gina gained some measure of satisfaction from whatever happened.

"Very well. Speak to her." The *orisha* closed his eyes. A shudder passed through his body as Quin pushed forward with a gasp. They had traded places.

He fell forward, catching himself. Slowly, he stood and flexed his fingers, holding his hand out in front of him. He laughed. "Hah, I'll be damned."

"You sure as hell will be, mister, as soon as I'm free of these restraints!"

"Gina, baby."

"Don't 'baby' me, you bastard!"

I thought you said she would be more compliant if you spoke to her.

"Quiet!"

Gina yelped at his command, her eyes growing rounder with increased fear.

Quin leaned forward, stroking her hair and forehead. "Oh, no, not you, babe. I was talking to ... to ..."

He felt the god stand taller in his mind.

I am Shango-Elegba. His presence swelled within Quin's mind, causing a shifting dizziness.

"Stop, you're making me sick." Quin covered his eyes with his free hand.

"What's wrong with you?" Gina whispered, pulling away from his hand. "Are you going to rape me?"

"No!" He lowered his voice, trying to keep his anger from erupting. "I've never raped anyone in my life."

"But, that girl ..."

"I didn't do anything to that debutante that she didn't beg me for, Gina." He looked straight into her eyes without flinching.

"Do you believe me?"

She had to believe him. He held his breath as he watched the uncertainty flicker in and out of her eyes.

"Yes, I believe you."

Quin released a silent sigh. He felt a stirring deep within his mind and knew Shango-Elegba was losing patience.

"I like kinky sex; you know that from the other night."

She nodded toward her ankles. "Is that what this is all about?"

How much to tell her before she thought him crazy? Quin took a deep breath, hoping the lie wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass. "Yes. I thought you liked being my submissive."

She lowered her head. "I do."

He had to lean forward to hear her whispered response. He closed his eyes in relief. "Good, baby, that's real good."

Quin picked up another tie and proceeded to bind her hands together, wrapping the cotton around her wrists twice before he tightened the bindings with the remaining cloth. Shifting his body above hers, he hooked the cloth through the circle of her bound arms, then looped it around the headboard. Her arms were stretched out straight, but the length would allow him to turn her onto her stomach for what he had in mind.

He pulled on the cotton, testing its strength in case she decided to fight. That was something she couldn't do. If Shango-Elegba figured out Quin had lied about Gina wanting to play rough, and that Quin had tricked the entity, all hell would break loose in this bed tonight. As it was, he had a distinct feeling that their sex life was about to be kicked up a notch or two.

“Okay, we’re set. I’m going to get a few things from the bathroom and I’ll be right back.” He eased his body off the bed.

“Quin?” Her voice was shy and unsure.

“Yeah?” He kissed her mouth, wanting to ease her uncertainty.

“You smell. Could you possibly grab a shower while you’re in there?”

Laughter erupted inside his mind, and the image of Shango-Elegba doubled over, holding his stomach as he laughed heartily, flashed across Quin’s awareness. *She’s got spirit, this one. I like her.*

His fingers traced the edge of her jaw, and Quin realized he wasn’t controlling the action. The *orisha* had taken momentary control. A flash of jealousy shot through his gut at the idea of anyone, or anything, touching Gina, even if that thing happened to be in his body.

Quin tested his voice and found it worked fine. “Uh, sure. I could use a good scrubbing.”

The sound of water running vibrated through the adjacent wall.

What the hell was she doing? Gina tugged against the remains of the cotton shirt that held her to the bed. Here she was lying spread-eagled and naked, like some offering to a pagan god. The niggle of fear returned, but she tamped it down. She believed what Quin said about that other girl.

She vaguely registered the water stopping. Her thoughts were preoccupied with her secret daydreams of what Quin had shown her the other night. Deep down, Gina admitted she wanted what he offered her. She knew he’d stop if things got too rough and she asked him to. She swallowed the lump growing in her throat, acknowledging that he’d take everything he wanted up to the point she told him to stop.

Quin Tertulliano was a highly sexual man with a healthy appetite that included spanking and anal sex. The thought didn't help slow her heartbeat.

A flow of moisture tickled her ass cheeks as warmth settled beneath her from her excitement at thinking about what he would do to her. She shifted her hips, but didn't alleviate the pleasant discomfort. Her clit throbbed and her nipples tightened at the sound of the bathroom door opening.

She watched him stalk into the room, lithe and sleek. His black hair hung long and silky down his back, just like she loved it. Her palms itched to clutch the dark mass in her fists and gently feather the strands through her fingers. She moaned at the sight of his cock, hard and long, outlined in the light shining through the window.

The image of herself lying on her stomach with her ass up in the air submissively, as some kind of an offering to him, surfaced with such force that a flood of juices streamed from her pussy. The thought of her legs spread wide, but bound, tightened the bud of her clit so tight, she squirmed against the mattress.

She knew he loved the knowledge that he'd be the first to take her ass, pumping his cock into her tightness for his pleasure. And hers.

To her amazement, he stopped, raised his nose into the air, and sniffed, as if he could smell her arousal. In the dim light she caught the reflection of his eyes as he stared down at her body.

He dropped a towel onto the bed. Various items bumped and clattered as he moved closer to her, inhaling the scent of her skin. He licked the undersides of each breast as her chest rose and fell. The sensation of his caresses caused ripples of desire to cascade from her nipples to her clit.

When he reached her abdomen, he took his time licking, sucking, and biting around her navel. The sensations were so strong, she dug her fingernails into her palms to keep from screaming. Each assault of his mouth left her panting and wetter than before.

He lifted up onto his knees, trailing his hand over her torso and thighs. His thumbs traced either side of her pussy, teasing with their light caress.

"I'm going to shave you, then eat you like an ice cream cone."

The brazen words evoked a vivid image in her mind of him between her legs, licking and swirling his tongue around her clit. She closed her eyes and moaned.

Items rattled as he shifted between her legs. She could smell her lavender soap on his skin. Funny, but on him it didn't smell feminine at all. It brought out the scent of his maleness all the more.

A cool spray of foam coated her skin between her legs. Long fingers entwined into her pussy hair, spreading the foam in circles. He pulled, forcing a gasp of surprise from her at the rough gesture, but she kept her eyes shut, trying to imagine what he'd do next. She didn't have long to wait.

A scraping sound and sensation ensued as he lifted her hair, scraping, lifting again and again. His fingers slid over her lips, stopping to run the edge of the cool blade over her skin every few seconds, as if he checked for any stray stubble.

"Your pale skin is like alabaster in the moonlight. Cool and smooth."

His tongue and lips replaced his fingers, licking and kissing between the folds that hid her most sensitive spot. Gina bit her lip and grabbed the cotton restraint with both hands, pulling and arching her hips as much as was allowed by the ankle bindings. The more he fucked her with his tongue, the more she wanted.

Juices and saliva combined to pool beneath her bottom, but the wet stickiness didn't detract from the pressure building low in her body. In her mind she kept repeating, *Please, please, please*, to the point that she screamed out loud. "Please!"

Quin raised his head from between her splayed legs. "What do you want?"

Gina swallowed, trying to control her erratic breathing. Her clit tingled and throbbed. Her skin crawled, like an electric current ran through her, shocking her with every touch he

administered. She didn't know what she needed, only that he could give it to her. She stared into eyes that revealed pupils dilated and the whites streaked with red. His nostrils flared, and his cheeks flushed to mirror his wild, glazed gaze.

She shivered in the presence of such naked, hungry desire.

"Everything. I need everything you can give me." The words, husky and raw, scraped from her throat and mouth into the still, humid room.

His gaze narrowed as his hands skimmed down the inside length of her spread legs to her ankles, trailing his fingernails over her skin.

Gina's head and neck arched against the mattress and she released an unexpected hiss.

The scent of their mutual arousal grew thicker in the heavy air. Untying each restraint, he released her, but didn't allow her to flex her strained muscles very much before he grabbed her around the waist and flipped her over onto her stomach.

Gina tried to scoot upwards to relieve the tension on her arms, but Quin held her in place, pressing into the small of her back with his upper body. A callused hand smacked hard against her ass. "Ooowww."

"Behave." The cold, authoritative tone denied refusal.

Gina halted her struggles, clamping her mouth shut, realizing the game had started. She'd asked for everything, and Quin was going to deliver. A wave of pure lust spread from her mind through her body to her toes.

These were the kinds of games she'd imagined in the darkness of her room where she could be safe from anyone knowing the wicked thoughts that boiled within the mind of such a "sweet, quiet" girl.

His body pressed in close behind her. Looping one arm beneath her stomach, Quin lifted her into a kneeling position before pushing her head down to the mattress. "Spread your legs, like you're presenting me a gift."

Gina complied. Shaking from the reaction to his hands caressing her body, she tilted her pelvis to where she knew her ass and pussy would be fully accessible to him.

His touch felt so familiar, but not. A finger, long and wet, pushed into her anal opening. Her hips jerked at the spasm of unfamiliar pain. A cry of protest escaped her throat. She stiffened in preparation of her punishment and buried her face against the mattress. But none came.

He slipped off the bed on one side. "Do not move."

The silent threat in his command couldn't be mistaken. He was giving her a reprieve since she was a virgin in this area, but he expected her to follow the rest of his commands without fail.

The slither of cloth around her thigh startled her, but she remained in position, as if her legs were already bound.

Hot breath tickled the stray strands of hair that had escaped around her ear. His voice whispered close. "Good girl."

Quin pulled the cotton tight, bending beside the bed. The whisper of his movements told her that he secured the cloth to the bed frame. From the corner of her eye she could see him stand and casually walk around to the other side of the bed, repeating the same motions with her other thigh.

He bent and kissed her left ass cheek.

Gina shivered.

He stepped away where she couldn't see or feel him.

Somewhere behind her in the darkened recesses of her room, he opened and closed one drawer, another. The sound of yet more material ripping filled the night air.

She frowned, not sure what there was left to tie up. Did he intend to gag her?

Warm fingers gripped her ankle. She bit off the cry struggling to escape her throat and focused on him bending her leg up. The movement unbalanced her enough that her other knee slipped on the slick sheet. “Quin --”

Smack! The skin of her right ass cheek stung from the contact. Gina stifled the cry of pain at the same time her pussy clenched tight.

He tied the cloth three times around her thigh and calf, pinning her lower leg to her thigh. When he had completed both sides he picked up a jar from the towel he’d placed on the bed earlier and moved in behind her again.

Chapter Thirteen

Shango-Elegba pushed the human away within the constraints of this mind. He'd watched with growing interest what this man, Quin, intended to do to his woman. Grasping the purpose of this game, he had mentally encouraged his host to spank the white skin in front of him with wholehearted abandon, but Quin had refused to administer more than one slap of punishment for the woman's outburst.

He studied the jar in his hand. Removing the cap, he observed a white cream inside. Lifting the jar to his nose, he took a tentative sniff, ready to pull back at any unexpected odors, but there were none. He sniffed again, more deeply. "Hmm."

Scooping the cold cream onto his fingers, he rubbed the greasy texture between his thumb and forefinger. His eyes narrowed. "What purpose does this mixture serve?"

The girl whimpered low in her throat; her white ass shifted in front of him. Realization dawned. Shango-Elegba smiled.

Moving closer between her bound legs, the *orisha* grasped her left ass cheek, opening her to his questing fingers.

Her anal opening resisted invasion. He frowned, wondering why she should be so unwilling. He smoothed his left hand over her hip, massaging the tight muscles, and allowed Quin to speak to his woman. "Relax, Gina. Let ... me ... in."

Instantly, her muscles relaxed, and the tip of his finger worked into her opening. He didn't advance far before her rectum clamped down hard around him.

Quin tried to speak, but Shango-Elegba pushed him back. He knew what needed to be done. He had no further use for the man. His teeth bit into the white softness, like he'd seen men eat a peach, plump and juicy.

The woman called Gina moaned, loudly, and Shango-Elegba's finger slid deep. The smell of her juices, flowing from her cunt, teased his nostrils, and he knew she enjoyed what he did.

His cock jerked in reaction to her scent, sending a tingling sensation through his balls and into his abdomen. The muscles in his buttocks tightened as an image of him driving the appendage deep into her receptive body flashed through his mind.

Shango-Elegba pulled his finger free, blinking at the implications of what he could do with the woman bound in front of him. For the first time, the *orisha* fully grasped the pleasure that could be experienced within the confines of this body and a willing sacrifice.

He studied the sensual slope of the woman's slender back to her curved hips, liking the fall of her long, blond braid. He reached out and stroked her soft flesh, then drew her braid to the center of her back, twining his fingers around her hair. Her name came to his awareness. "Gee-nah." He frowned. *That wasn't quite right.* He tried again. "Gina."

She lifted her head, slowly, as if unsure. "Y-Yes?"

Shango-Elegba felt her tremble beneath his hand. Again, the sense of power he wielded over this woman poured into him, but oddly, he didn't wish her harm.

Oh, no ... he stroked his hand down between her legs, inserting a finger into her soaked pussy ... far from it. He pulled his finger out, liking the sucking sensation of her body on his

skin. He smiled and worked two fingers into her tight cunt, pushing hard to find the angle that would give her the pleasure he so wanted her to experience with him.

He searched Quin's mind for the words his host would use. "Come for me."

Two more strokes and her vagina spasmed around his fingers, soaking his hand with her juice. Her hips bucked into him, her back undulating in an age-old rhythm that Shango-Elegba recognized.

Keeping his fingers deep within her, he scooped the white cream from the jar with his other hand and coated his cock from head to base. Then, and only then, did he remove his fingers so he could grasp her hips with both hands, angling her into position. When he was satisfied her hips were aligned properly, his thumbs spread her ass cheeks and he pressed home.

She resisted, but instead of punishing her this time, he offered encouragement to teach her how to please him.

"Push down and back." His grasp on her tightened and pulled her into his thrust. The heat of her passage wrapped around his cock like her scream wrapped around them both in the scalding heat of the night.

Shango-Elegba rode her, pulling her head back with the use of her braid. The sight of her mouth open in their shared passion drove him farther. His hips bucked harder as she tilted her ass, willingly, to accept him.

The ropes hurt, cutting deep into her skin, a constant reminder of the tight bondage he had on her body and mind. Her body spread so open, taking his thrusts, deeper and deeper. The burning sensation had yielded to the most incredible, wonderful pain she could ever have imagined. If he would only --

Whack! His hand connected with her ass, forcing her to jerk into an oncoming thrust. His cock surged forward, spreading her wider, filling her to capacity and beyond.

“Yes!” The orgasm hit with an unexpected fierceness. Gina threw her head back and screamed. A sound like an animal’s tore through her body, but she couldn’t stop, finally screaming silently as the air left her lungs. Bucking uncontrollably, she ground her ass into his pelvis, wanting every last inch of him inside her.

His orgasm erupted, traveling from somewhere deep and primal. The howl that emitted from his gut shook the walls, but Gina responded, arching her back and rubbing the sweat from his body over her skin. She wanted him to mark her as his.

With a final thrust, he ground his fingers into her hips, holding her to him for a second before pulling from her and falling to the mattress at her side.

“Sweet, Jesus.” Quin’s words sounded weak and raspy.

With her legs shaking within their bonds, Gina fell into the curve of his body, her body aching and her ass burning. She smiled. It was such a good hurt.

They lay together for a few seconds, their breathing, hard and uneven, slowly coming back under control. Gina snuggled closer when he threw an arm over her and kissed the back of her head. His hand rubbed her arm, up and down.

He sat up with a start. “Damnation, why didn’t you tell me to untie you?”

With quick movements and a flick of the knife he’d used to shave her, Quin released her bindings.

The prickling of pins and needles rushed into her legs.

“Ooo, that hurts.”

“Gina, I’m sorry.” He massaged the feeling back into her calves. “I tried to make him not be so rough with you. I didn’t mean to let him hurt you.”

Gina frowned. “Who are you talking about?”

“Shango-Elegba. He’s the Santerian god who possessed me tonight.”

Gina stared at Quin, not sure if he’d gone stark-raving bonkers, or was trying to pull a joke on her. Either way, he’d scared her. She tried to remain calm. “Is he here?”

Quin sighed. Gina watched his Adam's apple go up, then down.

"I think he left when I came."

Her eyes widened. "You mean he was the one --" She couldn't continue; it was too incredulous. But Quin finished for her.

"Who fucked you?" He nodded. "Yes."

She shook her head. "No."

"I know it's hard to accept at first. I've always had trouble believing in the *loa* and *orisha*, but they're real, Gina." He took her hands in his, gripping her fingers tight, almost crushing them.

Gina jerked her hands free, turning to the wall, hugging her arms around her. How could she be so blind? Quin was insane.

The image of his pupils, glazed and dilated, surfaced. If he wasn't insane, he had to be on drugs. His agitated movements and crazy ramblings were sure signs.

"I want you to leave."

"Gina --" He wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"No! Y-You have to leave. Now." She shrugged his arm off, facing him.

The pain on Quin's face changed to cold rage.

Gina stood, backing against the wall, but he followed, grabbing her upper arms and shoving her against the plaster, holding her there.

His face lowered to hers. The dark eyes glowed with an alertness she hadn't seen before. "I have not left him, Gee-nah."

A hand lifted to stroke a strand of hair from her face. Gina flinched, but couldn't move away. The way he said her name, like earlier, as if he had never heard it.

"You gave me much pleasure this night. I have decided to stay in this body."

"Oh, my God."

He smiled and leaned forward.

“Noooo!” Gina kicked with her bare feet, but her blows were ineffectual against his muscular form. When his lips grazed hers in an attempt at a kiss, she twisted her head left, then right, avoiding his advance. Gina heard a deep growl rumble from deep within his body.

Again, he tried to kiss her, but she evaded his lips. A hard slap had her gazing into dark, angry eyes that blinked in momentary confusion.

“Why do you resist, when you pleased me earlier?”

Gina froze. “Shango-Elegba?” The whispered words could barely leave her mouth, she was so frightened. Possessed boyfriends didn’t happen to girls like her.

“Yes.” A hand grasped her braid tight, holding her head in place as his mouth descended to hers.

“No,” she whispered as his lips touched hers.

The bedroom door crashed against the wall. Men in uniform rushed in, pointing guns at the two of them.

Shango-Elegba turned, pushing her behind him. When one of the policemen tried to reach around him and grab Gina, he snarled at the officer, hissing in his face like an angry snake.

For a second, Gina remembered the coral snake in her tub, but the image faded when she heard Mark David’s voice.

“Regina! Are you all right?”

Shango-Elegba’s body pressed into her, preventing her from moving.

“I-I think so.”

“Did he ... hurt you?” Mark David’s hesitation left her in no doubt as to what he really wanted to know.

Everyone in the room looked at the bed.

Gina felt a flush spread over her body from head to toe. The thought of her newly shaved pussy jumped out to create a new wave of heat. "I'm okay."

"I have only done what she asked me to do." Shango-Elegba lifted his chin, challenging the men in front of them.

"Yeah, right, buddy." Another cop stepped closer, pulling out a pair of cuffs.

The second he touched Shango-Elegba's wrist, the *orisha* lunged at the two officers. Chaos erupted. Five police officers dragged Shango-Elegba to the mattress, straddling him and forcing him down. Out of nowhere a billy club appeared and swung through the air, connecting to Shango-Elegba's head.

"No!" Gina rushed forward, but Mark David threw an arm around her, pulling her up short against his chest.

"Don't, Regina. He deserves everything he gets for touching you."

A policeman cuffed her lover's hands behind his back and dragged his limp body from the room. The three other officers turned to Mark David.

"Why are you here, Mark David? What do you know about all this?"

"Why, whatever are you talking about, my dear? I'm just concerned for the welfare of my consort-to-be." He stroked a finger down the side of her cheek, then leaned forward. "You know I am the law around here, my dear. My men keep me well informed on what goes on."

Gina jerked free, turned, and slapped him as hard as she could, enjoying the red welts that appeared on his cheek. "Get away from me, you perverted bastard."

His mouth drew into a tight line. He leaned toward her and whispered, "Look who's calling the kettle black."

A finger brushed against her crotch. Gina screamed and hit him again. The officers moved forward, but Mark David waved them off, laughing. "It's okay, boys. Just a lovers' quarrel. You can go on to the station with the prisoner."

He grabbed her wrists, laughing harder when she struck out at him with her bare feet. "That's right, fight me, Regina."

"I will not have sex with you."

"You will, or that boyfriend of yours will rot in jail." He stepped away from her and headed for the door where he turned. "Or the insane asylum. It's your choice. I'll release him when I receive your answer."

"What about --" Did she dare say aloud what she believed? They would surely lock her up with Quin. *He's not crazy!* "What about Shango-Elegba?"

Mark David raised an eyebrow and smiled. "I'm afraid I don't know who you're talking about." At the door he turned. "You know where to find me. Don't wait too long to make up your mind."

Chapter Fourteen

"You don't understand, Vivian. They've got him in jail for something he didn't do."

"Of course I understand, child. He attacked you, like he did dat other white gal."

"No! He didn't. I ..." Gina hesitated. A blush scorched her cheeks. "... asked him to make love to me that way."

Vivian's eyebrows rose, but she didn't condemn Gina. After a few seconds she actually smiled. "I knew you were de one for him."

Gina blinked. "What? You were testing me?" Her anger rose. "Quin's rotting in a jail cell with some kind of god in his brain, and you're here playing games? Unbelievable!"

Vivian kept smiling and placing different items in a multicolored bag. "Love is not a game, child. It is de most important ding you do in your life. If you choose de wrong mate, you be miserable de rest of your days with your decision. But if you choose wisely --" She frowned and glanced across the room at Roman. "-- you just might have a chance at great happiness and peace."

Gina felt the prick of tears behind her eyes, but blinked quickly to chase them away. Vivian's words were beautiful. Gina only wished she knew if she believed in true love anymore. She'd thought she had it with Mark David and had been proven wrong. Did she

have true love with Quin, a man she'd only known for a few days, but who rocked her world like no one else she'd ever met?

Gina took a deep breath, looked out the window of The Spider's Web onto the infamous Bourbon Street, and admitted she didn't know. But she couldn't let him suffer at the hands of a slimeball like Mark David Comeaux. "We have to help him."

"We are, baby-girl." Vivian patted her hand and smiled. "We be on our way now to rescue him."

Gina had already been downtown and told the sheriff Quin was innocent, but he'd just laughed in her face and told her she was "hysterical." Now she stood, following Vivian and Roman to do Lord knew what to get Quin out of the clutches of the Bay St. Louis police and a Santerian god.

* * * * *

"Lookee what we got here, boys." The billy club rattled across the bars of the cell. Quin jumped at the noise before resuming the rocking of his body back and forth, back and forth. That was the only thing that seemed to keep the *orisha* calm. If Quin tried to sleep or be still, the Santerian god wreaked havoc with his mind, switching between that small dark place his psyche was forced and the reality of this hell-hole.

Quin snorted, not knowing which prison was worse. Was Gina going to leave him here to slowly go insane with this *thing* possessing his mind? Why didn't she come to see him? She couldn't really believe he had raped her.

Another officer appeared in front of his cell. One adjusted his belt tighter over his pot belly, while the other sucked his teeth with his tongue and chewed on a toothpick. The first officer smirked.

"Looks like psycho-boy here needs to be cleaned up a little."

"Yeah, you can smell the stink of him all the way across the street."

The second officer grunted, picking up a bucket. "I got just the thing for him."

Ice water hit Quin in the face. He gasped at the shock and stopped rocking.

Mistake! His vision blurred, and he found himself in the dark prison of his mind as Shango-Elegba took control.

Quin couldn't see anything, but he could hear as the Santerian god stood to face his persecutors.

"Why ain't he rocking no more?"

Quin felt his body lunge forward. Through the bars, his arm wrapped around someone's neck and squeezed hard. A gasp sounded, followed by the *thud* of a body hitting the floor. Quin's fingers rummaged through pockets.

"Sonofabitch! I think you killed Jim." The voice stuttered. "Got ... gotta get help. I gotta get some help ..." The voice faded down the corridor.

Keys rattled and the *clang* of the jail-door bars echoed down the hallway. Dizziness overtook him again, and he staggered.

Leaning against the wall, he focused and found himself outside his cell. The man, Jim, lay on the floor, moaning. Quin wiped the remaining water from his face and glanced around. For the moment, his "guest" was behaving himself, quietly within the confines of Quin's brain. "Comforting thought, Tertulliano."

He moved toward the back of the jailhouse, hoping no one would be back here. Three steps into the hallway, the backdoor opened. He stopped, blinked, then stared at his sister. "Viv?"

"Quin!" Vivian rushed forward, grabbing his arm and dragging him toward the back door. "Hurry, we've got to get you out of here. Roman is in de front, keeping de officers busy with some tale you done run down the highway."

Quin dragged forward on feet that felt like lead. He shook his head, nausea rising in his throat. "Viv! I've got this ... thing ... in my head. You gotta help me."

Vivian took his hand and squeezed hard. "I am going to, brother. Now, get to de car before we both end up in dat jail cell." She swatted his ass, pushing him in front of her.

Sunshine blinded him, making him squint in the last rays of the afternoon. Quin raised his hand to shield his eyes. Car doors opened, and several people scurried around him, pushing and pulling him into a vehicle. Once inside, he was shoved onto the floorboard and covered with blankets.

The nausea worsened with the stifling heat of the thick material on top of his body and head, but he stayed down and stayed quiet as the car bumped and swerved to whatever destination his sister had chosen. Quin didn't care. Gina hadn't come for him; his sister had. He closed his eyes and drifted in and out of sleep, letting the *orisha* have control.

Quin heard the rhythm of the drums. First at a distance, then closer. He opened his eyes, only to close them at the glare from a fire. He rolled onto his side and watched as dancers in their red-and-white clothing moved in unison to the beat, dipping and swaying. Hands clapped and feet stomped. The *oru* slowed, invoking a specific *orisha*.

It couldn't be for him. He had one of his own crawling around in his mind, making him crazy. He rapped his fist against his head. "It's already full, folks. No room at the inn."

Quin threw his head back and laughed, over and over. The laughter died as fast as it had come. He stared into the fire, curling himself into a tight ball.

"Help him." Gina clutched Vivian's arm. She couldn't bear to watch Quin hurting the way he was. "He's dying. You've got to do something."

Vivian removed her arm. "I know. Dis is not my magick. I am Voudon, not Santerian."

"Then, what will happen?" Gina glanced back at Quin as he stared into the fire.

"If we don't get a *Santero* to force the god out, he will die."

"No!" Gina tried to run to Quin, but Vivian stopped her.

"Do not go into de circle, child. You will disrupt de flow."

Gina sank down to her knees, bowing her head. Seeing him like this, she knew she loved him. She also knew she would do anything to save him. A lone tear trickled down her cheek at the thought of what she must do. She sniffed and wiped her face with both hands. Standing, she turned to leave.

"Where you be going?" Vivian's kind eyes searched her face.

"I'm going to see Mark David. He said if I came to him, he would help Quin."

Vivian cocked her head to the side. "Did he, now?"

Gina nodded. "It's the only way we can get that thing out of him."

"Let's be asking Mr. Comeaux if dat be so." Vivian turned and walked into a small grove of bushes.

Gina followed, peering into the darkness to see what could be back here of any importance to Quin's cause. She stopped when she saw two men on their knees, their hands tied behind their backs and gags in their mouths.

Gina gasped as she recognized Mark David.

"What is going on?" She glanced from Vivian to Roman, who had changed from his jeans into white pants, white shirt, and bare feet. Red and white beads circled his neck and lay within the opening of his shirt.

"I am not Santerian, Gina, but Roman is an *olorisha*, a priest trained in de oral tradition of Santeria. He can help Quin."

Gina frowned at the unexpected knowledge about Quin's young friend. She stepped forward, ignoring Mark David's muffled demands to be untied.

"You can save him?"

Roman nodded, but looked uncomfortable. He glanced at Vivian.

"What are you two not telling me?"

Vivian stepped forward and took her hands. "You must understand. To call or remove a spirit or god, dere have to be two dings. A person to receive de spirit, and a sacrifice."

The man beside Mark David screamed a muffled curse at Vivian. Roman hit him in the head. Blood, black in the night, trickled from a cut in his eyebrow.

Gina stared at Vivian, who glanced at Mark David, placing a hand on his shoulder before she looked back at Gina. It took that split second for the meaning of Vivian's words to sink in. And in that split second, the horror evaporated into understanding. Gina nodded and looked at Roman. "Do it."

Mark David screamed her name through the gag, but Gina turned away and stepped back through the thicket of bushes to be nearer her lover, her one true love. No man had ever meant to her what he did. For him she would do anything. For the first time since her mother's death, Gina understood why a woman would do whatever it took to be with the man she loved. "I'm sorry I didn't understand, Mama."

The two men were dragged forward and placed in the center of the circle of dancers opposite Quin. Roman entered, stalking around the three men, dancing and swaying to the primitive beat. The firelight flickered over his features, and Gina saw for the first time that he had painted his face red and black. The red-and-purple shoulder-length hair had been dyed black and hung loosely about his shoulders. He presented a very imposing figure as he moved sure-footed, limber, and graceful around the fire.

A pouch hung from his belt. With long fingers he extracted a pinch of powder and placed it in the palm of his hand as he moved in front of Mark David's companion. The man screamed through his gag, his eyes wide, but with his legs and hands tied, he could not fight what Roman intended to do with a single puff of breath.

A white substance coated the man's face. He held his breath and clenched his eyes closed, but eventually he had to breathe, opening his eyes to blink rapidly. Roman took

advantage of the moment and blew the powder into the man's face again, this time forcing the drug into mucous membranes.

Within seconds, the man's pupils dilated. He quit fighting and stared into the fire. The drug seemed to have disabled any mental or physical defenses the man might have had.

The thought that she now witnessed what they had done to Quin surfaced, renewing her anger threefold. She glanced at Mark David to find him watching her, begging her with his eyes to set him free.

Gina shifted her gaze straight ahead, tightening her jaw against any compassion she might have felt. She heard Roman call Shango-Elegba. Her gaze shifted to Quin. He didn't move, but she saw him blink his eyes. A spark of awareness glinted for a second.

The man beside her ex-fiancé jerked as though he were in the throes of an epileptic fit. Roman motioned for him to be cut loose. Once that was done, the man rolled across the ground, twitching and twisting for at least five minutes.

Gina swallowed, wondering if she could stand to watch the ritual further, but knew she must. She had made the decision that they would all go through with what needed to be done to save Quin. A movement drew her attention.

Vivian stood at her side.

Gina nodded toward the circle. "Who is he?"

"His name is Valery Breaux. In my religion, he would be called a *bokor*. One who practices evil."

Gina frowned. "What does that make Roman?"

A sad, helpless expression flitted across Vivian's face, but was quickly gone. She turned and smiled at Gina. "My brother's friend."

Gina nodded, wondering what price they would all pay for what they would do this night.

Valery Breaux rose.

Roman bowed his head to him. "Welcome, Great One. We ask for your help this night."

"What do you call me for this time?"

"To avenge the injustices done to our loved ones." Roman presented Quin, lying shivering in the heat of the fire, as if he were freezing.

Breaux narrowed his gaze on Quin. "That one I know. He gave me his woman."

Roman bowed. "He was forced to accept your presence and to relinquish his woman against his will to appease this man's jealousy and hatred." Roman pointed to Mark David.

Breaux stepped in front of Mark David Comeaux. "Weak."

"We offer him in sacrifice as revenge for our loved one."

The *orisha* glanced at Quin and nodded. Holding out his hand to Roman, he accepted a machete. Lifting the blade high into the night air, he prepared to swing.

Gina took a deep breath and forced her eyes to remain open and fixed on the savage scene in front of her. Her hand clutched Vivian's as the older woman tried to soothe her with words.

"It is life, child. We all are born; den we all must die."

But not like this! Gina's mind screamed in protest as the machete slashed down toward Mark David's throat.

The drums stopped. Everyone stood motionless and silent.

Gina looked around her, trying to understand what had happened. Mark David kneeled where he had been, with his head still intact. Shango-Elegba stood with the machete halted in mid-swing.

She squinted through the darkness and saw a figure crouched beneath Shango-Elegba, his arms outstretched and hands wrapped around the god's arm, preventing the final stroke that would end his enemy's life. "Quin!"

Haunted eyes turned to her. "We can't kill him." His voice was barely above a whisper, but Gina heard what he said.

Roman rushed forward. "We have called the *orisha* from you. We have to make an offering, a sacrifice."

Quin's eyes narrowed. "We are not stooping to this asshole's level." He shoved Mark David over with his foot. "Vivian and Gina will not go to prison for some man's twisted mind."

"You are right, brother." Vivian moved forward, touching Quin's arm.

Gina watched the exchange between brother and sister. Quin's smile for Vivian held warmth and love.

"I'm fine, now." Quin glanced at the still-possessed form of Valery Breau. "But we need to send the *orisha* away."

"Roman is correct. Shango-Elegba expects a sacrifice," Vivian said.

"Can the sacrifice be sex instead of blood?" Gina asked.

All eyes turned toward Gina, making her step back into the shadows. Before anyone answered, a voice spoke loud and clear into the night.

"Yes, sex would be acceptable." Shango-Elegba stared at Gina. An expression of triumph crossed his face. "But only if it is with her."

"No," Quin said.

"Yes," Gina said.

Their voices rose in unison. They both turned, glaring at each other.

"It's the only way, and you know it." Gina put her hands on her hips.

"You'd let him --" He jerked his head toward Breau. "-- fuck you?"

Gina sucked in a deep breath, refusing to let her anger at Quin's disgusting question overpower the decision she had made. She walked over to him. "No, but I would let Shango-Elegba fuck me if he were in your body."

Shango-Elegba's head turned toward her with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. Quin's face radiated surprise before a momentary flicker of desire flashed across his features. It disappeared quickly.

Before anyone could make a decision, Quin's body stiffened. His back arched and he fell to the ground, convulsing as Breaux had done. After several seconds, he lay completely still.

Breaux stumbled and gasped, as if he were breathing for the first time. Roman caught him, pushing him to the ground beside Mark David. He motioned for his men to tie the hitman. The men came forward without hesitation to do as Roman commanded.

Roman bent and whispered something into one of his men's ears as they tied Breaux's hands and feet. The man nodded.

Gina rushed to Quin's side, running her hand over his hair and face. His breathing was shallow, but steady. She looked for Roman. "What do we do?"

"We get to watch you two have sex." Roman grinned.

"Not if I can help it." Vivian elbowed him in the ribs, doubling him over with an *oof*.

Chapter Fifteen

Gina sat naked in the center of her bed. Candles flickered from their perches on the nightstands and the dresser, casting a warm glow around the room.

Her hand skimmed across the peach-colored sheets in an unconscious movement. When she realized she was doing it, she stopped with a grimace. The entire setup looked like a bridal suite. *So where's the frickin' groom?*

As if on cue, her bedroom door opened. Vivian walked in, followed by Quin, or rather Shango-Elegba. They stepped to the end of Gina's bed.

Gina looked from one to the other, noting the white clothing they wore. Her eyebrow rose. "Why does everyone get clothes, except me?"

"You are the sacrifice." Shango-Elegba looked offended she would even ask.

Gina rose onto her knees. "I could change my mind, buster, so don't push it."

His chin came up, and his eyes narrowed.

Vivian stepped forward. "He is right, Gina. You are his gift, so you have been presented to him without garments that would hide your beauty from his sight."

A blush rose and spread across her chest, neck, and cheeks. "Oh."

She could feel his gaze upon her, traveling from her hair and face across her breasts where it lingered, silently caressing her until her nipples stood erect and her breasts throbbed.

"You are very beautiful." His words were soft and sincere.

Gina lifted her gaze to his. Her blush grew hotter at the look of molten desire in his eyes. Her lips parted, but she couldn't speak. After a few seconds she lowered her gaze and mumbled, "Thank you."

Vivian moved to the side of the bed. "Let us begin."

Gina nodded, stretching her legs and arms across the bed and lying back onto the satin sheets. She stared up at the ceiling, trying not to be too aware of Shango-Elegba's presence. He might look like Quin, but she knew deep down they were not the same man. Shango-Elegba could rip her in two without a thought.

She wondered how much control Quin would be able to exert over the *orisha* tonight. He had been so weak and tired earlier at the ritual. She prayed he would be able to assist her if she needed him to intervene in this offering of sex.

Vivian slipped a strand of red and white beads over her head, smoothing Gina's hair over her shoulders and pillow. "What are those for?"

"Roman says de beads symbolize de god dat is being invoked. Shango-Elegba is a combination of two Santerian gods, one represented by de red and de other de white. So we will use both colors as representation of him. De offering, or sacrifice, is adorned with de colors of de god he or she is presented to."

Gina gripped Vivian's hand, staring up into the beautiful brown eyes, so like her brother's. "This will work, won't it?"

Vivian squeezed her hands, folded them over Gina's chest, and smiled. "Roman has instructed me on what to do. He will be right outside if I need him. Okay?"

Gina glanced down the bed at the Santerian god. He stood quietly, waiting with arms folded across his chest and legs spread as if he had all day. "Okay. Let's get this over with."

His eyebrow shot up at her last remark. "Am I a difficult task you wish to rush through?" He moved closer, dropping his arms to circle his hands around the bedpost. "Did I not please you the last time we were together?"

Vivian glanced from him to Gina, but remained quiet, moving around the bed, drawing pictures upon the floor with what looked like colored flour.

Gina tried to hold Shango-Elegba's intense gaze, but couldn't. She looked up at the ceiling fan. "I just want Quin back."

"You care for him?"

Gina bit her lip, not sure she wanted to discuss this with a Santerian god while Quin's sister was in the room.

The bed squeaked as Shango-Elegba climbed upon the bed.

Gina closed her eyes at the feel of his large body covering hers. His breath fanned her face, but she kept her eyes shut, hoping it all would end soon and her lover would hold her in his arms again, like he'd done after Shango-Elegba had fucked her the day before.

His fingers stroked through her hair, gently massaging her scalp.

Slowly, Gina relaxed into his touch with a sigh. "That feels good."

"Yes?"

She smiled and nodded, surprised at how carefully he handled her. "Yes."

"What about this?" His lips feathered across her eyebrows and eyelids to the tip of her nose, then her mouth.

Gina bit her lip on a giggle. "Yes."

"I love when you do that."

She froze. "What?"

“You know. The way you bite your lip whenever you’re anxious or scared.”

Gina’s eyes opened to stare up into Shango-Elegba’s face. How did he know that she bit her lip? He hadn’t seen her any other time, except last night. A thought occurred to her, but she pushed it aside, knowing that it was impossible. She had seen the god take possession of Quin with her own eyes. But still ...

“You really *love* that?”

He smiled. “Oh, yeah. Almost as much as when you scream when my cock pushes into your --”

Gina placed her hand over his mouth, stopping his words. She glanced quickly around the room, but couldn’t see Vivian.

Behind her hand, his smile widened. He kissed her fingers, flicking his tongue between them. “She’s gone, Gina.”

Gina stilled again. Her eyes narrowed. “You said my name.”

His eyebrow twitched. “Yes. I do know the name of my sacrifice.”

She shoved him hard, rolling from beneath him. “No, you said my name, like ‘Gina,’ not ‘Gee-nah.’” She shook her fist at him. “Quin Tertulliano, you sonofabitch.”

“Hey, now, leave my mom outta this.” A flush spread over his cheekbones as his temper flared at her remark.

“Oooo, I’m going to kill you!” Gina lunged across the bed, hitting him in the chest with her fists. “You’ve been faking all along. How could you?”

Her shouting filled the bedroom, followed by a sob. “I thought you were going to die.” Her fist connected in another weak blow against his chest.

“Ah, Gina, I’m sorry.” He pulled her into his arms and lap, rocking her gently back and forth. “It wasn’t all fake. Shango-Elegba was here last night with you and in me earlier this evening.”

She sniffed. “I don’t understand. What happened?”

Quin sighed. "The god left Breaux and entered me again. When Breaux fell, Roman had him tied."

Gina nodded. "I saw that."

"Well, something happened. He was back inside me, but ... it was like a light -- on and off. He was just gone."

Gina pulled back and stared at Quin. "You think he's back in Valery Breaux?"

Quin's features hardened. "I don't know and I don't care, as long as Shango-Elegba isn't in me."

"Yes." Gina laid her head against his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Why all this, if Shango-Elegba is gone?"

"Well, if you'll shut up with the questions and hurry up and complete that 'difficult task' of fucking me, we'll be married."

"What?" For the second time that night, Gina pushed him away from her. She glanced around the room, noticing not only the candles this time, but the flowers that she'd missed seeing earlier in her stress over being some god's sacrifice.

"I know you had your heart set on a big church wedding, but Vivian is a licensed priestess. She's drawn all the *veves* and presented the bride to the groom. And right now she's outside chanting up our union. All we have to do is --" He rubbed his hands together. "- connect in a very personal way."

Gina bit her lips, but this time from happiness, not fright. She cleared her throat from the tears that threatened. "The church thing was Isabel's idea. To tell you the truth, I don't really have a church or religion, so to speak, at present."

Quin tunneled his fingers beneath her hair and pulled her to him, nipping her lips with his. Resting his forehead against hers, he said, "Neither do I, but if you don't mind, we can make Viv happy tonight, and then we can make your family happy another day."

"What about making us happy?"

"I've got just what you need to ensure that, babe." His mouth covered hers in a searing kiss as he pushed her into the mattress with the weight of his body between her legs.

Gina moaned at the taste and feel of him, spreading her legs to accept him into her body. "Um, um, wait." She pulled her mouth free. "What happened to Mark David?"

Quin rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "If you don't mind, I'm trying to make love to you, and you're thinking about another man in our wedding bed!"

Gina opened her mouth to protest, but stopped and smiled. "Well, you'll just have to make me think about something else."

Quin grinned. "Yeah? Like how?"

Her legs wrapped around him, pulling him in so close his cock slipped between the folds of her labia. They both groaned and closed their eyes. Quin kissed her long and slow. "Like how?"

Her fingers feathered through his hair. "You could always fuck me senseless."

They stared at each other for a second, both hesitating over the step they were about to take. Quin spoke first.

"I love you, Gina." He kissed her forehead, smiling tenderly and wrapping his hands around her wrists. With slow movements, he pulled her arms above her head and rotated his hips against her. His cock pumped into her body in a gentle rhythm.

A lone tear rolled down the side of Gina's face. "I love you, too," she whispered.

His strokes picked up speed, and soon they were both panting and straining for release. Their orgasms hit together. Both threw back their heads and screamed their release into the night.

* * * * *

Vivian smiled and looked across at Roman. "They are united."

He nodded his head and gave her a smile that quickly disappeared.

She touched his arm, trailing her hand across his shoulders, but he moved away from her to stand by the front window overlooking the beach.

"You did what had to be done, Roman."

"Yes, but does that make me any better than a *bokor*?"

Vivian clutched his arm, pulling him around to face her. The look of self-disgust on his face shocked her. "You are not an evil man. Vengeance and justice were called for, but you did not allow dem to be killed."

"An eye for an eye, eh?" Roman snorted, grabbed his keys, and headed for the door. "Somehow I never pictured that in my mind when I decided to become an *olorisha*."

Her anger rose at his words. "But you have no trouble fuckin' de girls dat come around."

"There's a little bit of difference between fucking a woman for pleasure and fucking a woman as a sacrifice." He turned.

"You don't know -- de woman might have enjoyed it."

Roman gave her a look that would have withered a lesser woman. "I presented the *orisha* with a sexual sacrifice, which was Gina. I don't think he was in the mood to play footsies with just anyone."

Vivian hung her head, feeling the blush rise into her cheeks. "No, but he played with me."

"Because I wanted you."

"Is it so hard to believe that I wanted you, also?"

Roman stepped closer and lifted her chin with a gentle hand. Their eyes met, and she saw a hard cynicism she'd never before noticed in the young man's gaze. He leaned forward, letting his lips brush hers in the briefest of kisses.

"Did you? Or did you fuck me, as Shango-Elegba, to save your brother?"

She pulled away with a gasp. "How can you say dat?"

"You've fought the attraction between us since I arrived in New Orleans last year. I find it hard to believe you suddenly found me irresistible."

He moved away toward the door. "Before he left Breaux and entered me, Shango-Elegba convinced Mark David to call the police and drop the charges against Quin. They won't be bothering any of you."

"Why would dey listen to Comeaux?"

Roman shrugged. "Everyone knows Mark David Comeaux and his family have the police in their pockets. Hell, half the Bay St. Louis force are somehow related to them."

"What of Breaux and Comeaux?"

"I think Shango-Elegba sufficiently threatened them enough that they won't be bothering anyone in this family again." His lips thinned in a look of distaste as he continued toward the door.

"Where are you going?" She held her breath, knowing what he would say.

"I have to go away for a while, Vivian. I need to find out who I am." He hesitated at the doorway. A muscle ticked along his jaw. "I'll see you."

The door closed before she could respond. Not wanting to see his car disappear into the night, she walked into the kitchen and picked up a spoon. Quin and his bride would be hungry soon.

She lifted the lid and stirred the contents of the large stew pot. A car rumbled to life outside. Vivian held her breath, hoping ...

The car crunched down the sea-shelled driveway. The sound of the engine faded into the night.

Her breath released on a ragged sigh.



Glossary

- Aborisha -- (Santerian) the individual worshiper of Santeria
- Aleyo -- (Santerian) outsiders
- Aye -- (Santerian) the visible world where humans live
- Bokor -- (Voudon) priest who performs evil sorcery; sorcerer
- Deux anges -- (French/Voudon) “two angels” in reference to “ti bon ange” and “gros bon ange”
- Eskot -- (Voudon) “team” of Voudon rituals, steeped in local tradition. They assist the ritual,
- to make sure all goes as planned
- Gros bon ange -- (Voudon) one part of a person's soul; “big guardian angel”
- Houngan -- (Voudon) priest
- Loa -- (Voudon) pantheon of spirits/gods that resemble Christian saints
- Mambo -- (Voudon) priestess
- Met tet -- (Voudon) “master of the head”; a person's patron saint
- Obatala -- (Voudon) god who created the earth and all life forms
- Olorisha -- (Santerian) priest trained in the oral tradition for years followed by a period of solitude. Uses dance, songs, and healing methods
- Orun -- (Santerian) invisible world where the gods live
- Orisha -- (Santerian) lesser “gods” of Santeria, associated with Christian saints; Exp. Eshu-Elegba, Shango

Oru -- (Santerian) rhythm changes associated with specific orisha; the being is then invoked

Santero -- (Santerian) priest

Ti bon ange -- (Voudon) "little guardian angel"; one part of a person's soul that leaves the body during sleep and when a person is possessed

Veve -- (Voudon) an impermanent pattern of flour or cornmeal on the floor which is unique to the loa for whom the ritual is to be conducted; once the ritual is completed, the veve is wiped/swept away

Resources

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/voodoo.htm>, Vodun (and related religions)

<http://www.mamiwata.com/interview2.html>, West African Vodoun, An Ancestral Religion Resurrected in America

<http://sparta.rice.edu/~maryc/Santeria>, Santeria

Sheri Gilmore

When Sheri Gilmore isn't creating romantic sexual fantasies for her readers, she's a registered nurse, wife, and a mother of three. Her most favorite cities are New Orleans, San Francisco, and New York City, but she's always wanted to visit San Antonio, Santa Fe, and Las Vegas. Visit Sheri on the Web at www.sherisecrets.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Maslow's Needs

by Sheri Gilmore

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Maslow's Needs

Shit! Nolan hadn't attacked her. Drayden looked at her bandaged hands, then back at the cuts and scratches on her face. He frowned. If his brother hadn't done this to her, who had?

She watched him with a narrowed gaze, and he knew he'd given too much away. When she eased away from him to stand, he registered the loss of her warmth. His lips tightened. He couldn't afford to get involved in a sexual relationship with a woman right now, especially this one. He shifted his hips to release some of the tension in the crotch of his jeans, but the second she turned away from him he caught a glimpse of her ass.

She still wore the black jeans she'd been wearing at the club. In the dim light he hadn't been able to make a good appraisal, but had known she looked good. He'd seen the way the other men had watched her, like a pack of wolves. He snorted. Some of them were! His club serviced not only the vampire community, but otherkin also. All goth peoples were welcome, as long as everyone followed the rules -- the main one being, *Don't munch on the cowans without an invitation.*

Her hips swayed, and his mouth went dry. The denim fit her skin like a glove. She had one of those pear-shaped asses a guy just wanted to --

She turned; he glanced up. Her hands went to her hips.

Drayden smiled, knowing he couldn't deny he'd been staring at her ... assets. He shrugged. "What can I say? I'm human."

"Are you?"

Tension filled the space between them. Their eyes clashed.

He could see desire and wariness in hers. "I'm as human as you."

"You're not ... vampire?" Her head cocked in an angle of challenge.

“Yes.” He nodded and stood, slowly. He could see her muscles tense in preparation for defense. He wanted to ease her suspicions. He would give her as much information as he could. “But I’m human, and I’m also witch.”

Her eyebrow shot up. “Like Konstantinos?”

His jaw clenched at the mention of the man who had been her escort that night. He’d seen the other witch in action before with other women -- goth women, who knew the score. Drayden felt a rush of resentment that she would compare him with the writer-musician. “I am *not* like Konstantinos.”

Her eyebrows drew down. “Then you’re a different kind of witch?” She looked at him, and he saw the confusion in her eyes. “I-I didn’t realize there were different kinds --”

Her confusion had allowed him to move closer. One more step and he stood directly in front of her. His fingers found her chin, but he made sure he didn’t touch the cut he had cleaned. He lifted her face to his.

Her pupils dilated with surprise.

“There are different kinds of *everything* in this world, just like there are in yours. What I meant was that I don’t sleep around with a different woman every night.”

She pulled away from his touch. Her lips compressed into a thin line. “You said that earlier, and I told you it wasn’t your concern.”

“He’s gone and left you here alone.”

“So?”

He smiled and stepped in closer. “So, you must not be the *flavor* he wants at the moment.”

She tried to shove past him, but he exerted his strength and didn’t move. He caught her upper arms and pushed her back against the wall. Her strength amazed him. Even with her wounds, he had to tighten his muscles and dig his boots into the carpet to prevent her from breaking his hold.

After a few seconds, she relaxed and his weight fell into her. The gush of her scent as their bodies met assailed his nostrils. Once again his cock hardened. This time he didn't stop her from knowing he was aroused. The way they stood, he knew she could feel the outline of him against her abdomen. He pressed closer.

She jerked back, but couldn't go anywhere. Her head hit the wall.

"How long have you two been together?"

"A week."

"Has he fucked you?" The flame of jealousy he'd experienced earlier at the thought of them together returned.

Her entire body stiffened. He watched her skin flame from the neck of her shirt to the top of her forehead. He heard her words, angry and tense, scrape through clenched teeth.

"That's ... none ... of your ... damned ... business."

He smiled at the sound of her southern drawl, especially on the word *damned*. The accent might be slow, but the effect on his libido had him craving to hear her say a few more naughty words for him ... in bed. "Oh, but it is."

"Yeah?" She shoved him. "How do you figure?"

He caught her wrists below the bandages and forced her arms above her head. The sweater she wore rode up to reveal the smooth texture of her skin.

With a groan, he caught both wrists in one hand. His free hand moved to caress her beneath her rib cage. Her breath hissed in his ear. Her hips bucked, but he pressed closer, holding her in place. "I don't steal other men's women."

She stilled at that and raised her head. Their gazes met, once again, and locked. He circled his fingers, letting his fingernails brush the sensitive nerves lying just below the surface, one by one across the flat line of her belly. A surge of power engulfed him at the sight of her throat convulsing on a swallow.

“Are you one of his women?” His hand had lined up directly over her navel. He curled the tips of his fingers and his nails scraped her skin, harder, tugging lightly on a navel ring. He paused in surprise and delight. The detective had a wild streak. His fingers twitched. A tremor passed through her body.

“He has so many, what difference would it make if I am?”

He dipped his head to nibble the sensitive area behind her ear. He nipped her earlobe. With the tip of his tongue, he circled the rim of her ear, then let his breath fan the dampened area with a whisper. “I don't like to share.”

She bucked her hips again, and he had to tighten his grip on her wrists. The flat of his palm pressed into her abdomen with the ends of his fingers submerged below the waistband of her low-cut jeans. He could feel the coarse hair of her pussy against his fingertips.

“Are you, Jessi?” He flicked his tongue along her jaw.

She groaned. “N-No!”

“Good.” He dipped his head and took her mouth with his at the same time he slid his hand deeper into the crotch of her jeans to cup her mound. Warm, wet heat spread beneath his fingers, but he didn't try to enter her. Without the proper precautions, his nails could hurt her. For now, he'd let her move against the pressure of his hand to bring her release.

His tongue slid against and around hers. He sucked her bottom lip, bit her top one. And the entire time, she gave as good as she got. Her little moans and whimpers shimmered down his spine, making him want to sink his cock into her, deep and hard. The hum in his ears intensified, but he ignored the sound he knew indicated a psychic link. He'd felt the connection with her before. She had a highly developed system that she seemed unaware of.

Just a little more, then I'll stop before it gets too far out of hand.

Jessi curled her bandaged fingers around his hand, wanting to yank the loose layers of his poet's shirt and pull him closer. She opened her mouth to take more of his teasing mouth, feeling the cold swirl of his tongue-ring. She shuddered.

God, to feel that on my clit! She squirmed her hips against his hand, needing him to put his fingers deep inside her pussy. The pressure of his finger on her clit hardened, but he refused to go further.

She broke the suction of their kiss, and had to evade his lips that searched and demanded her return. She shook her head. "P-Put your finger in."

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What people are saying about

Maslow's Needs

Maslow's Needs is excellent with a gritty and dangerous feeling to thrill lovers of dark vampire heroes. It's a heady blend of sexual heat and horror...[W]ell crafted and exciting in every way! I highly recommend it!

-- Patrice, *The Romance Studio*

I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys reading about the supernatural and likes their romance tinged with a dark atmosphere. *Maslow's Needs* is a terrific book that I will never forget.

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

Elements in this book from the bondage scene, to the background of witchcraft and an intimate look at Goths, were purely fascinating...A definite read for anyone willing to expose him or herself to a darker taste of love and pain!

-- Rachelle, *Enchanted in Romance*