



# Timeless Spell

By

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Dear Reader

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

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

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

On to our two continuity series.

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

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

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

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



Gail Northman  
Editor Triskelion Publishing



## **PROLOGUE**

She moved with fluid grace, an actual flowing of her body across the broken concrete edging the parking lot. Falcon watched her, his eyes narrowed in concentration. He'd watched the woman before and he couldn't explain his continued obsession. She was a mortal and how many times had he preached to his young protégé that mortals and wizards did not mix? He knew he should turn away just as he knew he wouldn't, couldn't leave her alone.

His eyes transfixed on her seductive curves outlined beneath the long, white dress, which flowed around her slender legs, the coppery length of her hair that kissed the round firmness of her bottom. Her face, unlined and smooth, bore traces of worry, a hint at the troubles surrounding her. Falcon knew the woman existed in turmoil. He'd sensed the agitation enveloping her the first moment he'd seen her. Fear, anger and hopelessness warred within her. The emotions were strong waves, pouring over him and Falcon resisted the urge to go to her, to offer his comfort, his assistance. He knew she wouldn't appreciate either. She didn't know him. A simple oversight he could correct. If only he were a mortal.

Danni knew she wasn't alone. She'd sensed someone's presence the second she'd exited the school building. But the familiar panic didn't stir her. The presence didn't intend harm. A quick look over her shoulder revealed nothing but the drab gray building housing the school's gym. For all intents and purposes, she was alone. Why then, did she feel a comforting presence?

Awash in heat and curiosity, Danni inserted the key in the lock of her aging Honda and climbed behind the wheel. She started the reluctant engine and tapped the dash, willing the air conditioner to kick in, praying it would last until the next pay day. And then she'd pray for the next one after that. She imagined she was clinging to the last hope, thinking there really was light at the end of the tunnel. In all actuality, the light no longer burned.

The air conditioner gurgled and coughed before finally shooting out a burst of tepid air only minutely cooler than the air outside. Danni sighed and moved the gearshift into reverse. Any air was better than no air, she supposed.

The engine clicked and knocked as she guided the Prelude onto the entrance ramp to the interstate that would take her to her modest two-bedroom house on the outskirts of Mills River, North Carolina.

And all the while, she felt her visitor's presence.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

“Mrs. Condrey?” Josh Baker’s small hand went up for the fifth time since class had started fifteen minutes earlier. Danni knew she should ignore him and continue with the lesson, but the boy’s pleading expression always moved her. Lowering the third-grade reader, she placed the book face down on her desk and focused her attention on the freckled face.

“Yes, Josh?”

“My mommy says dragons don’t really exist. What does exist mean?”

Danni smiled a little. She wasn’t surprised Josh’s mother, a highly educated scientist, would doubt the existence of dragons, but a part of her wanted to disagree with the woman, to reassure her young pupils that outside the confining walls of the tiny schoolhouse existed a world where dreams were possible. The schoolteacher in her sought the easy way out. “Well, Josh, as I explained, the book we’re reading now is fiction. Remember when I told you that fiction meant the story comes from the writer’s imagination. She thought all this up.”

Josh’s lips pulled down into a pout. “But you said anything is possible if we believe.”

“My Daddy said that’s a load of hogwash.” Elizabeth Bertram announced importantly, peering at the class over the top of her tortoise-shell rims. “Only he didn’t say hogwash. Mommy told me I had to say hogwash if I repeated Daddy’s sentence.”

That Danni could believe. Henry Bertam was a pompous, self-serving....

“Mrs. Condrey, why is there a man looking at us through the door?” Another high-pitched voice dragged Danni’s attention away from her derogatory thoughts and sent her gaze winging toward the door.

Through the narrow window embedded in the paneled door, Danni caught a glimpse of straggly, white hair before the head disappeared. “Wait here, children.” She skirted her desk and darted toward the door, but, by the time she reached the hallway, the visitor was gone. Danni stood silently, listened for the metal clang of the exit doors but silence settled around her.

“Did you see him, Mrs. Condrey?”

“Who was he?”

“My mommy says if we see somebody we don’t know in our neighborhood, we should call the police.”

Danni tuned out the barrage of questions and observations and sank into the chair behind her desk. Her legs shaking, she crossed her ankles and picked up the reader. “Class, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure it was just a visitor who was looking for his child’s room. Now, let’s get back to our reading

lesson.” Feigning a calm she didn’t feel, she flashed a bright smile around the room. Knowing the children couldn’t see past the false serenity made her feel only marginally better. Instincts told her whoever had been outside the classroom wasn’t her visitor from yesterday. This presence had carried the hint of evil. Her jaws aching from the strain to continue the smile, Danni began to read.

At five in the evening, the temperature hovered around ninety-eight degrees, another hot and humid day in the Carolinas. Danni shouldered the strap of her purse, got a better grip on the grocery bag and crossed the nearly empty parking lot to her car. For a Friday night, the small town was amazingly quiet.

Danni shook off the uneasiness and stuffed the bag into the back seat. Her thin, linen blouse clung to her skin, soaked with perspiration. She climbed behind the wheel, hitched her peasant skirt up to her thighs, and stuck the key in the ignition.

The engine protested her attempts to start it and while she rested her head on the sticky steering wheel and did a mental count for calm, a shadow fell across the hood of her car.

Danni looked up, eyes narrowed against the waning rays of the sun. She recognized the hair immediately, the same uncombed white her schoolchildren had noticed earlier this morning. Senses on alert, she slid the key from the ignition, holding it between her fingers as a weapon. She took in the man’s appearance with some trepidation. Torn jeans, a frayed t-shirt with holes across the abdomen. The craggy face bore traces of dirt. She cursed her decision to disconnect her cell phone just a few days earlier, a last ditch effort to assist with the ever-growing mound of bills stacked on her kitchen counter.

“Good evening, Mrs. Condrey.” The voice held no cordiality.

Danni refused to shiver beneath the chill of the man’s eyes. “Who are you?”

The man bowed, a courtly gesture for such a ragged appearance. “Who I am is not important. What I am is extremely so. I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

She felt the gurgle of hysterical laughter bubbling up within her chest. Like a bad mystery movie, the man placed his fingers together and looked down at her from his imperious height. “I don’t know what you’re talking about and I would appreciate it if you would leave me alone. If I see you around me or the school one more time, I’ll call the police.” She tried to inject authority into her voice, but the man didn’t seem impressed. In fact, he actually smiled.

He placed one hand on the open door of her car, preventing her from closing it. “That’s not something you want to do. In fact, doing so would be detrimental to your health. Remember last week when your brakes refused to cooperate?” The white hair fell across his shoulders as the man clucked sympathetically. “It would be a shame to waste such a beautiful life when you could save yourself quite easily.” His head

lowered in tune with his voice. "I want what's mine."

Danni swallowed convulsively. "And I'm telling you I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your husband knew." His fingers brushed over her skin, just above her wrist. The iciness of his touch made her heart convulse. She noticed dirt underneath the lengthy fingernails. She'd always hated long fingernails on a man.

Another swallow. "My husband is dead. He's been dead for eight months."

"And I can still feel the heat of your grief."

The sarcasm stung. Not many people knew the depth of relief Danni felt upon learning of the death of her husband. But then, not many people knew the truth behind the farce of her marriage. Certainly not this man. She guessed he was bluffing. "Listen, Mr., whatever you name is. It's hot. I'm tired and I have ice cream in the bag in the back seat which is rapidly melting. I'd like to go home. So if you would kindly remove your arm from my door...." She let the request hang.

"As I said, it would be a waste." The man stepped back, allowed his arm to fall to his side.

Danni jerked the door shut and after several tries, managed to shove the key into the ignition. With luck on her side, the engine purred to life this time and she jammed the gearshift into drive and stomped on the accelerator.

Falcon knew the exact moment when the woman's life was in jeopardy. With centuries of wisdom came the illumination of which mortals could only dream. One minute he was standing in front of the mirror, adjusting the collar of the button down shirt he hadn't yet broken in and the next instant, he blocked the path of a speeding car, slowing its acceleration with sheer force of his will. He guided it back into its proper lane with a movement of his chin.

The black Buick drew to a stop seconds before it could collide with the front bumper of the battered Honda. Hand still held aloft, Falcon approached the driver's side of the import. "Are you all right?"

The woman blinked, hazel eyes clouded with confusion. "What just happened?"

"Drunk driver. Are you okay?"

She nodded, checked herself for any injury, nodded again. "Yes. I think I'm fine. Is that...you...are you okay? You were standing in its path." She tilted her head to one side, trying to clear the fog from her brain.

Falcon smiled and straightened. "I'm fine." He moved away from the window with slow, measured footsteps. One look at the driver's seat of the Buick told him he would get no information. No driver. He



wasn't surprised. Any wizard with half a brain and an ounce of power could guide a car with his mind. Apparently, this woman's wizard shadow had half a brain, but less power than he actually needed to complete his task.

Falcon returned to the woman's door, peered inside. She still shook, her hands clasped together in her lap. "Why don't you let me drive you home?"

She looked up, closed her hands around the steering wheel. "No, that's okay. I'll be all right." The heat of his eyes sliced across her. Strangely, his presence didn't alarm her. She supposed it should. The man cut an impressive figure. Broad shoulders obliterated the sunlight and the stern set of his jaw told her he was a man accustomed to control.

"I'd feel better if I knew you were safely home."

She gave him a suspicious look. "And how do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't know really, but your instincts are telling you to. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Is that a promise?"

"Do I need to make it one?"

She climbed over the gear shift, settled herself into the passenger's seat. With shaking hands, she clasped the seat belt. "Thank you."

He slid in behind the wheel, adjusted the seat to allow for the difference in their height. "You're welcome." From a distance, she'd been a lovely apparition coloring his dreams. Close like this, she stirred him. A mortal stirred him. Impossible. A figment of his imagination, that was all. It had been some time since he'd experienced the basic pleasures of the opposite sex. What he felt now was merely lust, a need any female wizard could quench.

"I'm Danni." Her voice glided over him, a gentle breeze on an early spring day.

"Falcon."

"That's an unusual name."

"I come from an unusual family." He didn't elaborate. He steered the Honda into the flow of traffic and moved over into the left lane. "Just relax. You'll be home in a few minutes."

Danni's hand clenched around the door handle. "How do you know where I live? I haven't given you my address."

Falcon corrected his oversight smoothly. "I saw you going in this direction and I assumed you were on your way home."

From the corner of his eye, he saw her shoulders relax. She had accepted the explanation. "Once you cross the railroad tracks, take a right. It's the third street on your left, second house on the right." A sigh escaped her and she closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the rest. "Was the driver okay?"

“He was fine. Not drunk after all. Probably fell asleep at the wheel.”

Danni turned her head slightly and Falcon felt her eyes on his profile. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“My accent gave me away, I presume?”

“You’re from England?”

The Honda bumped across the railroad tracks and Falcon switched on the turn signal. “Close enough.” He slid her a long, studying glance. “You’re still shaking. Are you cold?”

She shook her head. He couldn’t help but notice the long, burnished strands of her hair that fell across her shoulders or the agitation in the hazel depths of her eyes. Her alabaster skin bore no make-up, but her face was flawless. A remarkable beauty.

Intrigued, Falcon dove deeper for more information. “Will your husband be worried about you?”

Danni’s fingers closed over the gold wedding band circling her finger. “My husband is dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” Falcon didn’t miss the bitterness in her voice. He didn’t need a loudspeaker to know Danni wasn’t sorry her husband had passed on.

He slowed the Honda to a stop outside a simple one-story house with white shutters and a window box filled with blooming geraniums. He killed the engine and opened the driver’s door.

Danni climbed out of her seat before he could round the car. “Thank you for driving me home. I should be okay. I’m just a little shaken up. I...” She broke off, a small frown creasing the center of her forehead.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just realized you’re stranded now. I didn’t see your car back at the road. How are you going to get home?”

Falcon lifted a hand then lowered it quickly before he could touch her hair. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll get home just fine.”

“Are you sure?” She looked over his shoulder as if contemplating whether or not she should let him go.

Falcon stilled the urge to touch her and took a couple of steps back. “You should rest. Take care of yourself.” He inclined his head in a courtly gesture. “And watch out for runaway vehicles.”

Danni grinned in spite of the situation. “Thank you. I don’t know how you...”

Falcon held up one hand before she could think too much. “Goodbye, Danni.” He walked away before Danni could call him back, before he could decide that staying was more important than finding out who was trying to harm Danni Condrey.

Danni sailed through the next day but she couldn't take her mind off the attractive stranger who'd saved her life the day before. Hardcore handsome, the man had left a permanent image stamped on her brain.

More calm than she'd been in a long time, she didn't even mind when her students created a ruckus just before recess. The children considered themselves lucky they didn't end up with detention. But Danni was too focused on the man who'd introduced himself as Falcon to think about punishments.

Lost in a fantasy world, she strolled to her car as the heat of the afternoon beat down on her. Late August in North Carolina was a combination of steamy temperatures during the day and cool evening breezes. It was one of the reasons Danni had chosen to stay in Mills River, even after her husband's death.

She slid behind the wheel of her car and after several tries, managed to start the reluctant engine. With the windows rolled down and the long strands of her hair whipping in the wind, she hummed along with the radio, tapping her foot against the cracked mat beneath the pedals.

The eighteen-wheeler came out of nowhere, an ominous blend of metal and chrome as it bore down on her. Danni screeched and yanked the wheel, trying to avoid a head-on collision but the truck veered with her, increasing in speed. Danni slammed on her brakes and threw the car into reverse. Stomping the accelerator, she careened down the road backwards.

The wind roared in her ears, her heart pounded against her chest like the knock of an insistent visitor, and while the panic raced up her spine, she prayed, mumbling the words she'd learned as a child. She raced around a dangerous curve and tossed a look forward as the road gave way to a straightaway once more. Suddenly, she slammed on her brakes again and came to a dead halt. The truck was gone. There were no signs it had even been there.

Shaking like a criminal facing an uncompassionate judge, she guided the Honda over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. She didn't know how long she stayed with her head on the steering wheel until she heard a light tap on the driver's side of her car. Jumping, she looked up and saw the face of the man she'd been dreaming about all day. She shrank back against the upholstery. "Falcon?"

"We meet again." He opened the car door and helped her to her feet. Numbly, Danni allowed her to lead her around to the passenger side of the car.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she whispered.

"Helping you," he replied simply, fastening her seatbelt as if she were a small, helpless child.

Danni rested her head on the upholstery behind her and closed her eyes. "Were you following me?"

Falcon dispelled her fears. "I was behind the eighteen-wheeler."

Danni's eyes shot open. "He tried to kill me. Where did he go?"

"He drove past you. You didn't see him because you were too busy trying to drive backwards."

Falcon closed the car door and walked around to the driver's side. "All set?"

"Are you taking me home again?"

He smiled. "Seems that way." He started the engine and maneuvered the Honda back out onto the highway.

They made the trip to Danni's house in silence and once Falcon had stopped the Honda in the driveway, Danni slid around to face him. "Would you like to come inside? I mean, the least I can do is fix you a cup of tea." Her teeth worried her lower lip. "Do Englishmen still drink tea?"

Falcon laughed lightly, cupped her elbow in his hand as he helped her from the car. "Why don't you let me fix you that tea while you rest?"

She stumbled against him. His arm went around her waist, his hand curving naturally against the small of her hip. It felt right. He didn't want to let her go. Fifteen hundred years on his own and it had taken a petite copper-haired lady with sexy hazel eyes to send his libido into overdrive.

"I'm sorry. I'm not usually so unsteady on my feet." Danni's hand dug into her purse. "Now, if I could just find my key."

Falcon touched her hand. "It's right there, next to the tube of lipstick."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know that?"

"The sunlight glinted off the metal as you moved your hand. Are you always this suspicious?"

"I have good reason to be." She stuck the key in the lock and pushed against the door. It didn't open.

"Damn. Sometimes, it sticks." She braced her shoulder and gave it a shove. It still didn't budge.

"Allow me." Falcon pressed the palm of his hand flat against the wood and flexed his shoulder. The door popped open. Danni frowned, but remained silent as she stepped across the threshold.

"You know, this is the first time I've let a stranger into my house. I surprised myself with the offer."

"I'm not a stranger. You know my name." And he'd saved her life. Twice. She didn't need to know what had really happened to the truck or its driver. The police would find the upended vehicle later that day. Its driver had vanished the second he'd sensed Falcon's arrival.

Danni tossed her purse onto the sofa and tugged the wide band from her hair. "Usually, it requires more than just a first name to gain entrance into my home."

"Then allow me to rectify the situation. I'm Falcon Kendrick. Perfectly respectable. Perfectly harmless." At least to sexy ladies who spun his blood with a simple uplifting of her full lips.

Danni tilted her head to one side, continued to smile. "Somehow, I doubt that."

"Which part?"

“The perfectly harmless. But, you did save my life yesterday and if you intended to kill me, you wouldn’t have wasted your time.” She sailed into the kitchen and switched on the overhead light.

Falcon leaned one shoulder against the door frame and watched her bustle around the tiny kitchen. “Glad to see you’ve regained the proper use of your legs.”

“Have to rebound quickly in my world.”

“And what world is that?”

Instantly, her face shuttered. “Do you take cream with your tea?”

“What are you afraid of, Danni?”

The kettle slipped from her fingers and clanged against the almond colored stove. “What are you talking about?”

Falcon walked into the room, unable to stand her panic a second longer. He wanted to hold her, to comfort her, to reassure her that she would be all right, that he would make sure she was all right. “I sense your fear.”

Danni gave a nervous chuckle and righted the kettle. “That’s impossible.”

He stopped inches behind her, saw her hands jerk as she switched on the burner. “Nothing’s impossible.”

“So you’re telling me you’re psychic?”

“Something like that.”

Danni moved around him, tugged open the refrigerator door and removed a jug of milk. “I don’t believe in psychics.”

“Yes, you do.” He corrected her. “You just don’t want anyone to know you believe in them. But you’ve experienced the phenomenon yourself. You can sense when someone isn’t who they say they are. You’ve always been able to differentiate between the normal and the abnormal. Just like now. Your internal radars are creating havoc inside of you. That’s why you’re afraid of me. You don’t know who I am or what I am.”

“I think you’d better leave.” Her voice was a mere croak.

Falcon damned himself for adding to her fear. “I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

Danni nodded her head. “It’s okay. I just need to be alone for a while.”

He knew otherwise. He felt the terror gnawing at her, the panic at the thought of being alone again. He didn’t want to leave her, but he couldn’t stay. “Very well.” His hand dipped into the pocket of his shirt, removing a card. “Take this. It has my home number and my cell number on it. Call me if you need me.” When she didn’t immediately reach out for it, he took her hand, pressed the card into the center of her palm. “I mean it, Danni. Call me if you need anything.”

Danni had to tip her head back to see his face. Not that she needed to look at him again. She'd already committed those chiseled good looks to memory. With steel gray hair, a rugged jaw and silver eyes that flashed when he talked, Falcon Kendrick exuded sex appeal. He moved with a raw grace surprising for a man of his height. Or maybe it was his masculinity which made him appear as tall as she thought he was. He dwarfed the kitchen, surrounded her. Danni found herself staring up at him, trying to gauge more about the man from the picture he presented. He was in his late forties, maybe closer to fifty. She couldn't be sure. He seemed ageless, his skin worn from the years but his eyes were lit with an inner fire, which spoke of an exuberance for life.

She stepped back. Her hip connected with the counter. Grateful Falcon didn't move toward her, she busied her hands with retrieving mugs from the cabinet overhead. "Maybe," she swallowed, "Maybe you could stay for tea after all. If you promise not to talk about that psychic stuff." Her lips curved.

He dipped his head. "What would you like to talk about?"

"How about how you knew I was in danger yesterday and where you came from all of a sudden today?"

Falcon took the mugs from her and carried them to the rickety oval table next to the window. "I thought you didn't want to talk about that psychic stuff."

"Good point. Okay. Well, where was your car?"

"I was out walking yesterday and I told you I was behind the truck today."

"Really?" Her eyes narrowed. "Why don't I believe that?"

"Because you're inherently cynical."

"I have reason to be." The kettle whistled. Danni removed it from the burner and switched off the stove. "Mills River is a small town. I don't recall seeing you around here before."

"I don't live in Mills River."

"Near here, then?"

"I have a house here. I visit occasionally."

Danni scooped up a couple of tea bags and brought them to the table. "Then I guess it's my good fortune you're in town now."

"Actually, I think it's mine." He smiled at her. Danni's heart flip-flopped. How was a woman expected to concentrate on her tea when a perfect gentleman with Sean Connery looks looked at her like he could dance in her eyes forever?

She swallowed, reached for the kettle. Her hand connected with his, closed around the handle. Her eyes shot to his face and the warmth crept up her neck. "I-I'm sorry."

“There’s no need to be frightened of me, Danni.”

“I’m not frightened of you.” But I’m terrified of what one simple touch is doing to my insides. She prayed she hadn’t spoken aloud. It had been a long time since these types of feelings had swamped her. Long before her marriage. She wondered if the psychic side of him knew she’d been thinking about him all day. She prayed he couldn’t read that part of her mind.

Falcon smiled again and removed his hand. “You’ve lived here a long time.”

“Mills River is my home.”

“Did you and your husband live here?”

Danni winced. “I’d really rather not talk about my husband.”

He took a sip of his tea and returned the mug to the table. “Then let’s talk about Saturday.”

She burned her tongue on the scalding tea. “Saturday?”

Falcon’s lips turned up into a sexy smile. Danni’s nerves jangled. “Have dinner with me.”

The command shook her, should have riled her. Instead, she felt her insides soften. “I might be busy Saturday.”

He reached across the table, took her hand. “Busy running away from me?”

Danni grinned a little. “Maybe.”

“Didn’t I tell you I was perfectly harmless?”

“You also told me I was inherently cynical. Why should a cynic believe you?”

“Because I won’t hurt you.”

She fumbled with her mug. “That’s a broad statement to make to a total stranger.”

“We’re not strangers, Danni.” His voice deepened an octave.

She couldn’t have swallowed if she’d wanted. “Then what are we?”

Falcon squeezed her hand. “Come with me Saturday and find out.”

Every instinct in her body told her to show him to the door and run like hell. She didn’t need to be told this man was dangerous, not to her health, but definitely to her peace of mind. “I don’t think there’s any sense getting involved with someone who is only passing through.”

“My plans are open.”

She continued to argue. “We’ve just met.”

“We have to start somewhere.”

“Why?” Frustration stamped her voice. She tugged her hand free and pushed herself to her feet.

“Why do we have to start anywhere? We don’t owe each other anything.”

She hadn’t heard him move but now he stood behind her. His hands fell to her shoulders. She tried not to jump. “Because we both can feel.” His lips whispered next to her ear. “And I would fight it if I could,

but I am as weak as you in this instance.”

She closed her eyes. Her heart slowed to a dull thud. Her limbs became languorous beneath the ministrations of his fingers against the muscles in her neck. Her head dipped. “I’m not the type to rush into anything.”

Falcon kissed the back of her neck. She did jump then. “There’s no need to rush. We’ll take our time.”

Danni blamed it on temporary insanity or the heat of the moment, even the lingering nervousness of her near-death experience, but the need to taste him compelled her to turn. She felt his arms close around her, settling around her waist. He tipped her chin with one finger, lowered his head. She held her breath, anticipating, dreaming.

And then he kissed her. Slowly. Deeply. And she melted. Her body merged with his, connected until she didn’t know where she ended and he began. He lifted her, adjusted her to his height. She felt the tickle of his mustache against her lips, the ripple of power beneath her fingertips and tasted the tea on his tongue. Hard muscles pressed against soft curves and Danni moaned haltingly.

The exploration continued. His lips journeyed down the column of her throat, over the smooth expanse of honeyed skin. The burn began in the pit of her stomach, stretched outward to feed her limbs. Warmth spiraled from head to toe. His lips were firm, yet gentle, coaxing, teasing and taking, feeding the hungry ache in the center of Danni’s soul.

Danni heard another moan and wondered if it came from her again. She clung to him, her hands fisted in the collar of his shirt. Her back arched beneath the pull of his hands. He dragged her even closer until their heartbeats connected, slammed against one another.

Reality was a distant memory as Falcon’s arms closed around her, lifted her. Her hips connected with the hard edge of the counter. Her legs closed around him, holding him. His hands framed her face while his lips plundered, taking her over the edge of sanity, into a dark and dangerous world she wasn’t sure she wanted to explore. Falcon surprised them both by raising his head. He didn’t move away from her but his arms loosened and he dragged deep gulps of air into his starved lungs. His hands shook when he lowered her feet to the floor.

Danni’s own lungs craved oxygen, ached with the need. She tipped her forehead against his chest and just breathed. Slowly. Steadily. Until her world stopped spinning. She should make him leave. She needed him to leave. But she desperately wanted him to stay.

He brushed the hair back from her face, kissed her cheek, her eyelids before taking a step back from her. “Perhaps now would be a good time for me to leave.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” The words cracked in her throat. It had been a long time since she’d



been so close to a man and never one she'd only known less than two hours. She blamed her lack of discretion on raging hormones.

"I'll see you Saturday."

Danni wanted to ask him what was wrong with tomorrow night, but pride kept her silent. She followed him to the door and prayed he didn't notice the way her knees knocked. "Thank you again...for driving me home today and for saving my life."

He turned, touched her cheek again. "It's a life well worth saving, Danni." Silver eyes sparked.

The breath whooshed from her lungs. She knew of no men who could touch her with their eyes alone. "I might have a difficult time sleeping tonight." What on earth had made her say that? She hoped it didn't sound like an invitation.

Falcon smiled, bent and kissed her lips gently. "You'll sleep deeply and you'll dream of me."

Danni frowned a little. "That's kind of arrogant."

The smile broadened. "A simple stating of the facts." He backed out the door. "Good-night."

Danni kept one hand on the door to hold her aloft. "Good-night." She didn't believe for an instant she would see him again. Men like Falcon Kendrick were way out of her league and men like him didn't fall for women like her.

Falcon's eyes narrowed. He caught her hand, lifted it to his lips. "You will see me again. Saturday evening. Seven o'clock. Trust me."

She held her breath. "I'll believe you when I see you."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Do I need to stay to convince you?"

Her heart hammered against her chest. He had no idea how much she wanted to say yes. But there was no match for common sense. She couldn't answer the question, not without revealing more than she wanted to.

His eyes burned into hers. "I'm looking forward to Saturday night. Sleep well." One more kiss and he jogged down the walk before Danni could ask him how he would get home.

Falcon paced the polished marble floors of his mountaintop home, a testament to the wealth he'd accumulated over the years. If a bit ostentatious, he allowed himself the luxury. After all, he didn't invite visitors and the trappings were for his eyes alone. At least, that had been his plan before Danni.

He cursed low and long below his breath. Booted feet slapped against the floor as his eyes, darkened with a mixture of confusion and disbelief, swept the wall barricading the kitchen from the den. In an instant, the smoothly painted sheet rock fell away, giving way to a sheen of glass.

“What in the hell has gotten into me?”

“That is obvious.” The deep, masculine voice startled him.

Falcon lifted his gaze and fixed it on the mirrored wall. “I am surprised you find it so easy to speak disrespectfully to your elders. Have my lessons taught you nothing?”

A raw chuckle greeted the words. “It is difficult to admit your shortcomings, my friend. In this instance, those shortcomings encompass a rather beautiful school teacher. I believe she is a... what is that word again, oh, yes, a mortal.”

Falcon gritted his teeth. “Show yourself, Jaxon, for the rein on my temper grows shorter.”

Immediately, the leader of the Assembly of Wizards materialized. A handsome man with a mischievous smile and sparkling silver/gold eyes, he crossed his arms over his massive chest and smiled at his mentor. “You are looking well, Falcon.”

Falcon didn’t take the compliment easily. He shifted, turned his back on his former protégé and walked across the room. “What brings you to the States, Jaxon? Do you not have enough to keep you busy these days?”

“Have you forgotten you gave me the means to find you before you stepped down as leader?”

“It was to be used only in emergencies.”

“Funny, I do not remember you specifying that.”

Falcon’s brows furrowed. “And you just happened to be spying on me the exact moment I was with Danni.”

Jaxon grinned. “There is no need to worry, my friend. My wife did not allow me to spy for long.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked Tess.”

“Hmm,” Jaxon tapped his chin, “I do seem to recall once upon a time, Tess was a mortal woman. Not too long ago. And if I am not mistaken, it was you,” he pointed a finger at the center of Falcon’s chest, “who told me I was making a mistake.” He grinned broadly. “Interesting how things come full circle.”

Falcon felt the snap of his jaws. “Say what you have to say and be done with it. I do not find your wit amusing.”

Jaxon laughed and slapped his friend on the shoulder. “Relax. I only came to wish you well and to offer any wisdom I may impart. After all, mortal women are much different than the women of our realms.”

“I knew I gave up my place too soon,” Falcon muttered.

Jaxon opened his mouth to say more then closed it abruptly as he turned his gaze toward the wall. “Saved by the call. Tess needs me.”

“And I hope she bloody well keeps you there,” Falcon grumbled, storming back toward the mirror to hasten his friend’s exit.

Danni held the glass of wine in one hand and the remote in the other. She wasn't paying attention to either. Her focus centered on the silver-eyed stranger who'd invited her to dinner on Saturday. She couldn't get a feel for him. Ordinarily, her instincts were strong enough to point her in the right direction and since Doug's death at the beginning of the year, she'd stayed away from all men. They weren't worth the trouble, especially not since the late night phone calls and threatening notes had begun.

Her nerves, as taut as a violinist's bow, jangled as she waited for the nightly barrage of phone calls and doorbell rings. She'd tried to convince herself they were just neighborhood kids having a good time at her expense, but after the latest vision, she knew there was more behind the taunts.

Cursed with visions since she was a child, Danni had endured the fear of knowing the future before her family and friends and had faced their incredulous looks and suspicious natures when her visions came to fruition. Just as this latest one was, she was sure.

She'd seen the white-haired man again. And he was going to hurt her.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Danni had been down this road before. She didn't even know why she'd bothered reporting the dead rat on her front step to the police. They'd never believed her before now and she didn't know what had possessed her to think they would believe her today.

The stalker loomed ever closer, making it known he could end her life easily. She wouldn't see him coming, wouldn't hear him. And he would kill her. Danni swallowed the terror and faced the paunchy police chief. "Chief Harrigan, I told you I believe this is the same guy who flattened my tires, cut my brake line and cut a circle in my kitchen window. The guy is letting me know he can kill me at any time."

The chief rubbed his stomach and reached for the large café latte he ordered each morning at the local coffee shop. He took a slurp and swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Well, as I explained, Ms. Condrey, while I appreciate your predicament, I ain't got no proof. And without proof, well, we can't do nothing." He scratched his head and shrugged.

Danni ignored the man's lack of personal hygiene and forged on. "Can't or won't?"

"Makes no difference either way. Without evidence, no man would get convicted. Are you sure this ain't some neighborhood kids?"

"I told you I've seen the man."

"Ah, yes, the scraggly white haired, tall thin man who seems to be able to appear and disappear at will." The chief traded glances with the desk sergeant. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to need a little more to go on than what you've given me."

"Would my corpse be enough evidence for you?"

"You're blowing this way out of proportion."

"And you're taking this too lightly."

Chief Harrigan took her by the arm and guided her toward the glass doors, the same old song and dance routine Danni experienced since the first report. "You know, you've been a bit, well, uneasy, ever since Doug passed on. Why don't you go see Dr. Woodward and have him prescribe a little something for you? You probably ain't sleeping too well in that house all by yourself."

Danni wanted to scream, but she knew it would only serve to reinforce the chief's belief she'd slipped over the edge. "I might have known coming here would be futile. I'm sorry I wasted your time."

The chief missed the sarcasm. He patted her arm awkwardly. "Don't you worry about that. we're all a family here in Mills River. We take care of our own. You know my men and I would protect you just as we would any other member of our community. But I'm telling you that you ain't got nothing to be afraid of."

You're safe here. Now, you head on over to Doc Woodward's office and get something to help you get some rest, you hear?" Grinning from ear to ear, the portly chief ushered Danni out the door and into the waning sunlight.

Chief Harrigan seated himself in front of the antique mahogany desk and hitched up the cuff of his pants. "I'm telling you this woman ain't no wallflower. She's gonna figure it out pretty soon. We gotta make other arrangements."

"We make other arrangements when I say we make other arrangements." The voice held a hint of danger that made the lawman cringe. "Now has she given you any indication she is aware of your involvement?"

Adam's apple bobbing, Harrigan shook his head. "No. I don't think she knows."

"Then we are in the clear."

"I don't think she knows nothing, though. I mean, about what you're looking for. She'da told me by now. She's pretty spooked."

"You're not getting paid to think."

The chief found his courage. "I ain't getting paid at all."

Ghostly pale eyes stared at Harrigan from across the wide expanse of wood and sleek glass. "You will as soon as the job is done. That was our agreement."

The chief hunched his shoulders and clasped his hands together. "We didn't have no agreement. You just blew into town and threatened to kill me if I didn't help."

The man behind the desk inspected his fingernails. "Ah, yes, but I did offer to compensate you for that help. You should take into consideration I do not usually make such offers." He stood, rounded the desk. "Perhaps I need to explain to you once more that I am not a man you would want to cross."

Harrigan swallowed hard and clambered to his feet, shoving the chair out of his way in case he needed to make a hasty retreat. "I ain't crossing you. I'm just tellin' you you're wastin' your time. Danni Condrey ain't got nothing you want. She's got plenty of stuff most men in town want, but I'm sure we ain't talking about the same kind of stuff."

"I would agree. Just do your job, Mr. Harrigan and you and I will get along fine."

The chief stood his ground, even though his backbone waved like a flag in the breeze. "I ain't gonna kill her."

Pale eyes narrowed. A blue-veined hand reached out and clenched the air. Harrigan's eyes bulged as his windpipe bent beneath the pressure of a grasp he couldn't feel against his skin. He stumbled, bumped his

hip against the chair and staggered toward the door. Struggling for air, his hands clawed the door knob, but the handle refused to turn.

“Do you see, Mr. Harrigan? I could kill you at any time. Like it or not, you will do what you are told when you are told to do it. Is that so difficult for you to understand?” With a grunt of disgust, the man released his quarry and lowered his hand to his side.

Harrigan fell to his knees, his face purpled. Veins luminous in his neck, he sank down against the carpet and filled his lungs with life-saving oxygen. “What kinda monster are you?” He managed to gasp out.

“The kind that will kill you without blinking an eye. Do not make the mistake of thinking I am actually concerned for your safety or the welfare of this town. While I am trying to handle this diplomatically, I will not hesitate to erase this little dot on the map. And you would not want the innocent lives of your fellow townspeople on your hands, now, would you, Chief Harrigan?”

Harrigan shook his head, grasped his throat. “No, sir.”

“Good. Then, we have an understanding. I do hope this is the only time we need have this conversation. I find repetition tiresome.” The man’s small feet made indentations in the carpet as he crossed the floor. “You will kill Mrs. Condrey if that is what I choose. Remember that the next time you decide to grow a backbone.” He opened the door with a wave of his hand and glided out into the paneled hallway, his long, white hair flowing behind him.

He wanted to see her. Falcon didn’t see the use in pretending otherwise. He debated calling her. Her phone number had been easy enough to procure despite its unlisted status. Magic did have its moments. He climbed the stairs, a mortal’s way, but he’d grown somewhat accustomed to the primitive ways of the people.

His bedroom, situated at the top of the stairs, was large enough to house a small village, a tasteful display of modern art and fresh, new sculptures. He swept open the heavy draperies, which covered the French doors. Stepping out onto the balcony, he breathed in the fresh mountain air, an intoxicating blend of honeysuckle and hyssop.

From across the valley, he heard the whisper of the wind and the rush of traffic on the curvy roads leading up to the mountainous peaks. His senses alert, he listened, waiting for the sound of Danni’s voice, the soft, sultry tones that warmed his blood and called to him.

Need punched him, almost driving him to his knees. His hand clenched around the iron banister and his eyes sizzled with inner fire. He wanted her. Desired her. He would have her. It was just a matter of time. Her mortal status be damned.

Danni checked the locks on the windows and the back door before returning to the living room. She settled herself on the sofa, tugged a thick afghan over her legs and reached for the remote. The ringing telephone froze her hand in mid-air. Her heart raced against her chest while she tried to convince herself this time, someone would actually be on the other end of the line, unlike the five other times tonight when the phone had rung.

As the phone continued to ring, perspiration slid between her shoulder blades, pooled down at the waistband of her jeans. Hesitantly, she reached for the receiver and held it to her ear. The heavy breaths were enough to make her slam it back down into the cradle before sweeping the phone from the corner table with the back of her hand. Huddled on the sofa, she stared at the serviceable white phone while the busy signal droned.

She tried to chalk the calls up to childish pranks, had almost convinced herself the area teenagers were having some fun at her expense when the doorbell chimed. Danni's gaze flew to the grandfather clock. Just after eleven. Dragging the afghan with her, she plodded to the front door, stood on tiptoe to peek out the small, glass window. The dim glow of her porch light afforded precious little viewing. She squinted and tried to see her visitor, but darkness shrouded her vision. Making sure the chain was securely in place, Danni cracked open the door a notch, careful to keep her foot against the back of the wood.

"Hello?"

Only the whistling of the wind answered her. "Hello?" Nervously, she leaned forward for a better look, but her front porch was empty. An owl hooted and she jumped, slamming the door shut with her hip. A quick turn of the doorknob lock and she leaned against the flimsy wood, gulping in deep breaths of air.

"This is ridiculous. Not only am I panicked, I'm paranoid. This has got to stop." Talking to herself in a calm, rational tone of voice, Danni traipsed into the kitchen, seeking the cure-all cup of hot tea. One foot had crossed onto the tile when the doorbell rang again. She froze, her other foot hovering in the air. "Childish pranks," she muttered and forced herself to walk to the counter to retrieve the tea kettle from the drainer.

The bell chimed again, in rapid succession, like someone was jabbing their finger against the button. Danni's breath stalled in her throat. Her heart climbed up into her chest. She debated calling the police, but figured she'd be wasting her time. Chief Harrigan had dismissed her fears. She'd have to have blood dripping from an oozing wound before he'd believe her and even then, he'd probably insist on a doctor's assessment of the wound. A shutter banged against the window above the sink and Danni's hand wobbled over the burner. "This has got to stop. I've got to get control of this. Whoever is doing this isn't going to get

the best of me.” Self-talk used to work, but that had been long before Doug died. Now, facing the night alone, it didn’t seem to do much good. Fear took root in her soul.

She twisted the knob on the stove and turned the burner on. With short, jerky movements, she removed a mug from the cabinet and placed it on the counter. The doorbell rang again. Danni began to hum in an effort to drown out the chimes. She mentally ticked off the number of times it rang. Ten, eleven. Then silence. She breathed again and fought back a bout of nausea. She couldn’t let them win. She wouldn’t let them win. She was much too strong for that.

The cup of tea didn’t help. Fifteen minutes later, she huddled back on the sofa with the television set at an ungodly level to drown out any further noise. Her eyes were wide, her hands shaking. And she struggled to keep the tears at bay. She was a grown woman, a mature woman of forty years. She could handle a few neighborhood kids with nothing better to do on a Friday night than to terrorize the town widow. Maybe she should call the police. At the least, she could guilt them into sending over a squad car. Perhaps that would scare off her nightly visitors.

Her resolve set, she reached for the phone, righted it on the table beside her just as the window next to the TV shattered. With a cry of alarm, Danni leaped to her feet, ducked down behind the sofa and clutched the phone next to her. Terror short-circuited her brain. She didn’t know who to call, what to do. She crawled toward the front door, reached up for the purse she’d tossed onto the foyer table after school.

She found the card in the zippered compartment, right next to the supermarket saver card and the pack of gum she’d bought a few days before. Bracing her back against the door, she punched out the numbers.

Falcon stared at the phone for an instant, disbelief warring with confusion. Calls were unusual. Even more so after midnight. He held out his hand and the phone drifted into his outstretched palm. “Hello?”

“Falcon...” There was no mistaking the gasping voice on the other end of the line.

He dressed himself with a thought. “Danni, what is it?”

“I’m not sure. A brick, maybe. It broke my window. The phone’s been ringing all night. I’m alone. Then the doorbell and it won’t stop ringing. Someone’s outside and I--”

“Hold on. I’m coming.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t. I don’t know who’s out there.”

Falcon had already made it to her front door. He tapped against the wood. He could have materialized in her living room, but he didn’t want to scare her any more than his speedy arrival already would. “Danni, open your front door.” He still held his phone in his hand.

“Are you crazy? Someone’s out there. Weren’t you listening?”



“Just open the door for me. I’m right here.” He heard a thump, the snick of the lock.

“You’re right where?”

“On your porch.”

“That’s impossible.”

Falcon kept his voice soft, gentle, calming her. “Remember what I told you about that.”

The door cracked open. Danni peered out, her eyes wide. Widening even more when they landed on his face. “How could you...?”

Falcon held out his hand, touched her arm to reassure her he was indeed there. “Open the door and let me in. We’ll discuss my arrival later.”

Danni released the chain and tore open the door. “I shouldn’t have called you.”

He stepped across the threshold, took the phone from her and tossed it aside before pulling her into his arms. “Of course you should have.”

She pressed her head against his chest. “I didn’t know what else to do. The police don’t believe me.”

Falcon’s eyes hardened and he cast a glittering gaze at the moss-covered brick beside the wall. “You’ve been in trouble.”

“Yes. No. I mean, if I have, I don’t know what I’ve done. I can’t think of anything I’ve done.”

“Tell me what’s going on.”

Danni pulled away from him instantly, wrapping her arms around her body as if to shield herself from his questions, his scrutiny. “That’s not a good idea. I don’t want to get you involved.”

Falcon moved toward her, caught hold of her arm. “Danni, it’s after midnight. You’re scared. Someone has been terrifying you all night long.” His voice tightened as he spoke. “And you need someone to talk to. I’m here. Talk to me. Let me help you.” He saw the terror in her hazel-eyed gaze before she turned away from him.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.” She dipped her head, her voice pleading.

He dragged her into his arms once more, held her even tighter than before. “I’m not going to get hurt. And I won’t let you get hurt, either. Trust me.”

Danni tried to struggle out of his arms, but his strength was too great. “I’m sorry.”

Falcon stroked her hair. “Sorry? For what?”

“We shouldn’t see each other. I don’t know what this person is going to do.”

“You think someone is trying to kill you?”

“Either that or just scare the hell out of me.”

“Do you know why?”

Danni touched his arm and curled her fingers over the muscle. “No. At least I don’t think I do. It

started after Doug died. In fact, a few days after.”

“The attempts?” Falcon guided her toward the sofa, sat down with her. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder while the fury burned within him. He would find whoever was trying to hurt her. And for once, he would use his powers against a mortal. He didn’t try to fight the knowledge. Someone would die and it wouldn’t be Danni.

Danni tucked her legs beneath her, snuggled next to him. “No. The threats didn’t come until later. At first, it was just notes, phone calls. More harassing than scary. I called the phone company. They gave me an unlisted number, but somehow, the person who was calling me before got it. He started calling again. He would just breathe, low and harsh into the receiver. I hung up each time, but he kept calling back. Eventually, I started leaving my phone off the hook.” Her lips pulled down in a grimace. “I tried that tonight, too. Apparently, my visitor wasn’t deterred. But,” she tilted her head to one side, “it seems like they’re gone for now.”

“I’m not surprised. They probably saw me.”

“You must have driven like a demon to get here.”

Falcon caressed her hair, stroked his hand over the long, silky strands. “You could say that.” Thunder rumbled outside, at level with the combustible energy within him. Anger stirred him, clouded his eyes.

“You probably shouldn’t be here. If he comes back, both of us could end up getting hurt.”

“No one is going to get hurt.” *Except Danni’s visitor.*

“You sound very confident.” She lifted her head to see his face. “Unless you know something I don’t, that man or men or whoever they are seem pretty determined.”

*They haven’t seen determined.* Falcon smiled. “I can be a fairly determined man myself. Danni,” his voice caressed her, “I can protect you.”

She sent him a look filled with questions. “Are you a cop?”

He smiled. “No.”

“A gangster?”

The smile broadened. “No.”

Her brows knitted. “An assassin?”

Her words brought laughter. “Again, no.”

She got to her feet. “You don’t know what you’re up against. Hell, I don’t know what you’re up against. So far, they’ve just been toying with me. They could get serious. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt if they do.”

Falcon stood, took hold of her hand. “Your concern touches me.” He stroked his free hand down her arm. “You need to leave here.”

“But this is my home.”

“Your home has been vandalized. You need to call the police, make a report and stay somewhere safe tonight.”

He heard Danni’s teeth snap. “I’m not leaving my home. They’re not going to run me out of here.” Danni tossed the words out angrily.

Falcon bit back a curse. Apparently, he’d forgotten the stubbornness of mortal women. He was used to instant obedience. “It’s not running, Danni. It’s exercising precaution.”

She thumped his chest and took a step back. “Call it what you want. I’m not going anywhere.”

His anger escalated. “Why would you risk your life to prove your independence?”

“It’s not about my independence. If I run, they win.”

“I’ve already said...”

She held up one hand. Falcon stopped talking instantly, surprised by the unspoken command. “There’s no use talking about this. I’m not leaving.”

He shrugged out of his coat. She stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“If you won’t leave, you give me no choice but to stay with you.”

“I didn’t call you because I needed a bodyguard.”

“But I can protect you.”

“You don’t even know what you’re up against.”

“I can protect you regardless.” The absolute power in his voice sent a tingle down her spine.

Danni’s brows lowered. “You sound pretty sure of yourself for a guy who doesn’t even know how many men are involved in this.”

“Confidence can be a good quality, I’m told.”

“I think arrogance would be a better description.”

Falcon hooked his arm around her waist. “Why don’t you show me to my bed?”

“You don’t have a bed. I have a bed. You have a sofa.” She pointed toward the overstuffed couch. “I have another bedroom but it doesn’t come equipped with a bed. I use it for an office.” She paused, chewed on her lower lip. “Look, Falcon, why don’t you just go home? Like I said, I shouldn’t have called you. I’m fine. My visitor is gone and...”

“And what if he comes back when I leave?” Falcon growled the question.

Danni shivered. She’d thought of that and while the fear tightened her throat, the thought of spending a night alone with Falcon increased it tenfold. He wouldn’t hurt her, at least not physically, but the chance for emotional scarring was higher with a man like Falcon. She couldn’t trust him. She’d trusted Doug and all she’d earned was a miserable marriage. No, she wouldn’t take the chance again.

“I’ll be all right.”

His hand crept around to the back of her neck. Danni tingled from head to toe. She felt the warmth vibrating off his body and caught the scent of his skin, not cologne, but a masculine, woodsy fragrance that was all male. She leaned into him in spite of her mental restraint. “Why are you so afraid, Danni?”

“I’m not sure having you stay here is such a good idea.”

His eyes burned into hers. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.”

The promise didn’t help. She envisioned too many things she wanted him to do. Wild, erotic things. Things that would only get her into trouble. “I...um...I just don’t want to get something started.” She sighed a little, reached up and peeled his fingers away from the nape of her neck. “I already have these pranks to deal with and my life is busy if not normal. The last thing I need is to complicate things further. You would definitely be a complication.”

His silver eyes scanned her face, searching for more truth behind her words. “You’re frightened of me?” He asked the question as if it was a sheer impossibility. Danni figured he’d frightened other women by his physical presence alone.

“That can’t surprise you.”

“It does.”

She swept a look down at her hands, anywhere but his face. “It’s in a man’s nature to hurt a woman.” She brushed past him and walked into the kitchen.

Falcon followed her and leaned one shoulder against the doorframe. “You’re generalizing.”

“Yeah, well, it works for me.”

“Danni, look at me.” He moved forward swiftly and caught her chin to assist her with his command. “Look into my eyes. Believe me when I tell you I’m not like any man you’ve ever known. I don’t fit into any category.”

“That I can believe.”

“Then, is it really so difficult to trust me?”

“You have no idea.”

“Maybe not.” His hand dropped to his side. “But I’m staying tonight anyway.”

“I don’t suppose I’m going to be able to get rid of you.”

“Short of throwing me out, no.”

Danni tipped her head to one side, assessed the difference in their sizes. “You’re assuming I can’t.”

His lips twitched. “I’m confident you can’t.” He took hold of her arm and towed her back into the living room. “Now, stop running away and sit with me. We have a few more things to discuss before your visitor decides to return.”

“What makes you so sure he will?”

Falcon brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. “Because his job isn’t finished.”

Danni shuddered. “Thanks. I needed to hear that.”

Falcon settled himself on the sofa and tugged her down beside him. He sat too close, his hip bumping hers. Danni didn’t move away. She liked the warm feeling coursing through her veins, the sense of comfort, protection. Instinctively, as unrealistically as it sounded, she knew Falcon would protect her. The thought made her relax.

“Your heart is racing.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“It’s the night.” She didn’t find it difficult to admit her fear. “I used to love the nights.”

His hands soothed her by rubbing over her knees. “You will again. Why don’t you tell me about Doug?”

Danni sat up a little straighter. “I don’t want to talk about my marriage.”

“Not your marriage, your husband.”

“It’s a little hard to separate the two.” She tried for a mocking tone, failed miserably. She sat back against him, her arm nestled in the crook of his. “Why don’t we talk about your family?”

“My family is gone, at least my blood family.”

“That’s a strange way of putting it.” Danni frowned. “So what happened to your blood family?” She leaned her head far back enough to see the outline of his face. She noticed the clenched jaw. She reached up and touched the rough hair of his beard. “You’re looking very stern all of a sudden. Don’t want to talk about your family?”

“They’ve been gone for quite some time,” he hedged, brushing away her concern with a trace of his fingertips over her lips. “And you’re changing the subject.”

“Because I don’t want to talk about Doug any more than you want to talk about your family. I guess we’ve reached an impasse.”

Falcon’s arms swept underneath hers. He turned her, settled her against the wide expanse of his chest.

“Then we’ll need to find something else to do to amuse ourselves while we await your visitor.”

Danni stared into his heated silver eyes, felt her control slip several notches. Her mind screamed, telling her to run, but her hormones were talking louder, more insistently. And she found she preferred to listen to them. She stretched lazily, like a cat basking in the sun. She reached up for him, clasped her hands behind his neck and brought his head lower. “I’ve always been good at improvising.”

“I’ve always liked improving.” His lips hovered inches away from hers, his breath mingling with hers. They touched lightly, haltingly. Retreated.

Danni protested, clinching her fingers in his hair. She captured his lips, held, explored the corners of

his mouth with her tongue.

Falcon's breath hissed out of his lungs and he spun her, pressing her back against the cushions. And wood splintered, fragmented as a bullet pierced the paneling. He carried her to the floor, tucked her next to his body while the air around them snapped and popped with automatic gun fire.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

“Stay down.” Falcon issued the command in a voice that whipped like a bolt of lightning. He rolled to his feet, crouched next to the edge of the sofa and trained his gaze on what remained of the door.

“Falcon!” Danni called out to him, but he’d tuned her out. As his eyes burned, fueled by the heat of his anger, he stood and walked toward the night.

She screamed his name again, but he had disappeared, filtered out by the warped paneling.

The gunfire ceased and Danni scrambled to her feet, heart pounding. “Are you crazy?” She peered out into the night, keeping her body shielded by the edge of the wall.

Falcon stood on the porch, his gaze scanning the empty air. Like sparks from a downed power line, arcs of electricity scattered the darkness. The night sizzled with the remnants of a power Danni didn’t understand, couldn’t see. She moved close to Falcon, touched his arm. Her fingertips burned and she quickly pulled her hand back. “Falcon? What’s going on?”

He dragged his eyes away from the road and focused his attention on her upturned face. His features softened. “Your visitor decided to leave.”

“I meant what’s going on with the air. Can’t you see all that?” She pointed toward the blue flames licking the concrete at the edge of her yard.

He took her hand, held it against his chest. “Heat lightening, probably caught a bullet. Let’s go back inside. You’re shaking.”

Danni allowed him to lead her back inside, but she didn’t buy his explanation for a second. She might be a little unlearned when it came to otherworldly things, but she wasn’t stupid. More had gone on outside her home than just heat lightening and sparks. She’d missed something, something she was sure Falcon wasn’t about to share with her.

His palm touched the splintered wood. He could repair it easily enough, but he didn’t dare use his magic in front of Danni. Fear still clouded her eyes and he doubted seeing his powers would endear him to her. “This door will have to be replaced. You can’t stay here tonight.”

She nodded shakily. “I’ll rent a hotel room.” She crossed the living room, headed down the hallway.

Falcon caught up with her at her bedroom door. “There’s no need. I have plenty of room at my house.” He wanted her close. He needed to protect her.

Danni tossed him a look over her shoulder before continuing into her room. “That’s a new line. Haven’t heard that one before.”

Falcon slipped in beside her, wrapped an arm around her waist. “It wasn’t a line, Danni. Just a fact.

You shouldn't be alone tonight. Had I not been here, you might have been killed."

Danni acknowledged the truth of his words with a shaky smile. "I guess I did forget to thank you."

He gritted his teeth. "I wasn't asking for your gratitude. I won't let you spend the night alone."

She pressed her palms against his chest and felt his heart slam against her skin. Her fingers curled, nested in the thickness of his cotton pullover shirt. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound difficult. I'll throw a few things in a bag and grab a room at the Holiday Inn up the road. I'll be fine."

"I know you will...because I'm not leaving you."

She sighed, slapped her hands against her thighs. "Falcon, I appreciate your concern, really, I do, but these guys, whoever they are, just got serious. It's probably best if you bowed out now before they come after you, too."

"You don't need to protect me, Danni."

"Oddly enough, I find myself wanting to do just that." She shook her head. "Which is very strange considering I don't even know you." Her breath huffed out on a sigh. "Never mind. I don't even know what I'm saying much less what I want."

His eyes flashed. "Yes, you do. We both know what you want, Danni." His voice dipped an octave, slid over her like a rush of warm water. How could a man's voice be such a dangerous weapon?

She took a step backwards, held out both hands to ward him off. "I'll admit I'm attracted to you, but that's as far as it's going to go."

He lifted one eyebrow. "I disagree."

Danni clutched her throat. "What are you talking about?"

"Let's not waste time playing games." Falcon walked toward her, held out his hand. "Come with me." Danni didn't miss the intensity of his gaze or the sudden way his muscles tensed. He stepped back, caught hold of her hand and began guiding her toward the door.

"I haven't packed." Danni's protest was feeble even to her own ears.

"You can return later for your things."

"Falcon, what's going on?" The urgency in his voice made her quicken her own pace.

He didn't respond. How could he tell her the dark magic he'd met earlier was returning? He felt the swirl in the air, knew it was only a matter of time before the power behind the magic would arrive again. And he would be forced to face it, to defeat it. He couldn't match his powers against his new enemy with Danni present. She would learn soon enough what he really was. He wouldn't force the knowledge on her this evening.

He walked fast, his long legs eating up the steps to the red Explorer waiting at the curb."

"Wait a second." Danni swept a look around. "How did this get here? It wasn't here when we were



outside just a second ago.”

Falcon held open the passenger door. “Danni, get in.”

She hesitated only a fraction of a second, long enough to see the coldness of his eyes. The man who’d touched her so gently a moment ago had disappeared. She didn’t recognize this Falcon, but she recognized his desire to protect her. She slid into the seat, buckled the restraint belt. “I assume you’re taking me to your house.”

The Explorer whipped out onto the road as Falcon depressed the accelerator. Behind him, in the rearview mirror, he saw the vaporous explosion, the vivid blue and white sparks signaling the arrival of a foe he had yet to meet. Another wizard. One who had chosen to serve the powers of darkness, to turn against his own kind in an attempt to achieve unforeseen greatness. Power beyond measure. The greed would only lead to his early demise. Falcon would see to it. He adjusted the mirror and returned his gaze to the road.

Danni laughed a little in an attempt to lighten the mood. “You’re not talking. That can’t be a good sign.”

He reached a hand across the console and placed it on her thigh. “You’re safe.”

She covered his hand with hers. “I’m beginning to wonder about that.”

“Your visitor has returned with reinforcements.”

Danni whipped a look over her shoulder, but her house had long since faded into the distance. “How do you know?” She shook her head. “No, never mind. This is about that psychic stuff again, isn’t it?”

It was as good an explanation as any. “Yes.”

“So I guess you were serious about protecting me.” She folded her arms, looked out the window into the inky blackness. “You’re going to get tired of my thanking you.”

“There’s no need.”

“You don’t want my gratitude?”

“No.” His voice was clipped, harsh even.

“You want something in exchange for the gratitude?”

He cursed low, brutally. “You know better than that.”

His anger lashed her. She turned slightly, angling her body to see his better. “You would think, as a teacher, I would be better with words. That’s not what I meant.”

“Isn’t it?” The England accent thickened his voice.

Danni expelled a breath audibly. “I’m sorry. My low opinion of men tends to color my words sometimes.”

Falcon’s hands clenched around the steering wheel. “Your comparisons are unjustified.”

“You mean because you’re not like ordinary men?”

“You could put it that way, yes.”

“I’ve already figured that one out. You were right when you said I sense something different about you. Something I’ll figure out eventually.”

“You won’t have to figure it out. When you’re ready, I’ll tell you.”

“Oh, so you get to decide when I’m ready?”

His lips twitched at the bite in her voice. “We are talking about me, Danni. Shouldn’t I be the one to decide when it’s time to air my dirty laundry so to speak?”

“I doubt we’re talking about laundry.”

Falcon chuckled. “I believe the anger has switched sides.”

Danni turned her head toward the window once more. “I’m not angry. Just mystified.”

“Do you have to understand everything in your world?”

Her fingertip drew a circle on the condensation coating the window. “No, but it helps.”

“Then perhaps we will talk once we reach my house.”

“Why can’t we talk now?”

“Because we have guests.” With ice-solid precision, Falcon’s senses honed in on the vehicle following them. He didn’t need the mirror to know the driver wasn’t a mortal. The magic reached out to him, challenged him. He pressed the accelerator and muttered a quick, “Hang on.”

Danni didn’t need the instruction. Her hand had already found the handhold over the window. Her fingers clenched around the leather. She wanted to close her eyes, but a combination of fear and fascination kept her eyes glued to the road ahead. The Explorer had accelerated to an unfathomable speed. And Falcon looked completely relaxed, totally in control. She made a mental note, chalked up another question she would ask him later.

The headlights behind them illuminated the interior of the Explorer and Falcon cursed, his only outward sign of concern. The wizard was gaining on them, using his magic, forcing Falcon into a corner. His options were limited. Use his own power or risk Danni’s life. He didn’t hesitate. “Danni, I want you to close your eyes and keep them closed until I tell you to open them.”

“What?”

He reached over, gripped her hand to reassure her. “Just do it.” He knew the exact moment when she obeyed him. And he blinked, taking the Explorer into a white, swirling mist.

Danni didn’t open her eyes. In fact, she squeezed them tightly shut as the vehicle spun around in dizzying circles. She didn’t want to know what was going on. Just as she didn’t want to hear the explanation behind the strange phenomenon. The only explanation could be magic and she’d had her fill of that while Doug was alive.

A screeching of tires heralded the abrupt halt of their follower's vehicle and Falcon smiled. As he carefully lowered the Explorer's tires to the asphalt once more, the dark powers remained a safe distance away. He reached across and patted Danni's knee. "You can open your eyes now."

She clenched her fingers around his. "I'm not so sure I can. Do I even want to ask what just happened?"

"Probably not." His voice held laughter. Laughter which caused Danni to crack open one eye.

"You find this amusing?"

"Not this exactly." More patting accompanied his words. "You need to relax."

"I suppose I should ask how you just did that or what you just did, but right now, I'm too exhausted to think beyond a hot bath and bed. That's all I want right now."

The headlights illuminated the narrow road ahead, which took them from the main road. "And that's what you'll have in a few minutes."

Gravel crunched beneath the tires and Danni caught the scent of heavy honeysuckle even through the closed windows. The night air was alive with crickets and night birds. She depressed a button and the window slid down. A cool gust of wind bathed the interior and Danni breathed in the scents and sounds of the night. "I'm not surprised you live on top of a mountain."

"Why is that?"

"You seem like a loner."

He'd give her that much. "I do like my privacy."

The dashboard clock drew her attention. "Is it really after two? God, what a night."

"It'll all be over soon."

She shook her head, her long, copper-colored hair falling over one shoulder to rest against her breast. Falcon's gaze flicked to the silky strands. "It won't be over until whoever is doing this is caught."

"He will be. Very soon." He made the promise with steely resolve as he slowed the Explorer to a stop.

Danni leaned forward, catching a glimpse of the monstrous structure by the dim glow of the headlights. "It's like something off the Adams' Family. You might have mentioned you live in a mausoleum."

He chuckled, killed the engine. "I like my space as well as my privacy."

"Space is one thing, Falcon. This is incomprehensible vastness." She climbed out of the vehicle and settled her feet on the ground. An owl hooted, its wings rustling high overhead. High up in the sky, the moon glittered like the end beam of a giant flashlight. Trees whispered with the wind, swaying in time with the breeze.

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I’m not going to be here long enough to get used to it.” She felt compelled to remind him.

Falcon didn’t respond, choosing instead to afford her a measure of security her independence offered. He took her arm, walked with her up the three levels of stairs to the main entrance. He forced himself to use the normal, mortal means of entering. He inserted the key in the lock and twisted the door knob. It was a waste of time to him when he just wanted Danni safely inside the house, shrouded in the protection his powerful spells would offer. Here, he could safeguard her, make sure no one or nothing touched her.

“Why don’t you pick out a room first and then I’ll draw a bath for you?”

“You don’t have to baby me. I’m okay.” Danni injected a trace of firmness into her voice to reassure him.

He nodded and cupped her elbow to climb yet another flight of stairs. “There are several available bedrooms. It’s the space thing.” His lips twitched.

“Which one is yours?” Danni asked the question before she could stop herself.

He stopped, pivoted to face her at the top of the stairs. “The first door on the right.”

The heat of his silver gaze sliced through the thin layer of her clothing. She felt those eyes brushing over her skin. She swallowed the knot in her throat and slid past him, her breast caressing his arm unintentionally. She heard the swift intake of his breath and hastened her footsteps toward the row of rooms lining the hallway.

“I think the room at the end of the hall will be fine.”

“As far away from me as possible?” More laughter edged his voice.

Danni cast a defiant look over her shoulder. “That wasn’t what I was thinking. Just that if someone breaks in here, you’ll have plenty of time to stop them before they can get to me.”

“No one is going to break in here. You’re safe.”

Her walls were going back up, keeping her heart safe once more. “I’ll believe that when the morning comes.”

“The dawn is almost here.” He caressed her with his voice alone. Reassured her. Comforted her. The man was dangerous. If she didn’t know it before, she knew it now.

“I think I’ll take that bath now.” She ran her hands down her hips, folded her arms as she waited for him to show her the way to the bathroom. “I don’t have anything to wear.” Heat stained her cheeks as her words cast an intimate glow.

Falcon took a step toward her; she didn’t back away though instincts were pushing her to run. “I’ll find you something.”

His promise only added to the intimacy. Danni couldn’t take her eyes off the gleaming silver of his.

“Okay, well, about that bath....”

“Danni.” His voice caressed her. “You don’t have to be afraid of me. Touch me. Know that with all the strength I have, I would never use it against you. You are safe with me.”

“I believe you.” Her voice squeaked. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I do believe you. It’s just the trust issue.” She held up one hand. “But it’s my issue. Don’t worry about it.”

*It was like telling the moon not to rise.* He did worry about her. He worried about what would happen when she discovered the truth of his existence. He worried she would run and even his powers wouldn’t be enough to convince her to return. He worried he would lose her when he’d just found her. He quickly harnessed his thoughts and swept out a hand. “The bathroom is this way. I’ll start the bath. In your bedroom, you’ll find a robe and other necessities you might need.”

Danni started down the hallway, paused. “Other necessities? Do you always prepare for women visitors?” Jealously snagged her heart in a tight fist.

“Your eyes are turning green, Danni. I was referring to toiletries. Shampoo, razors, those sorts of items. I don’t think you’ll find any lingerie inside the armoire.” His hand rested against the door jamb, his eyebrow lifted wickedly. “Does that reassure you?”

She clamped her lips together and stalked down the hallway, angry with herself, angrier with him for taunting her. It was just one night. She could make it through one night with him. Alone. In two separate bedrooms. She would have to trust him. No matter what, she didn’t have a choice right now.

The darkness stretched its raven arms out for her. Its grasp suffocated and even in the throes of sleep, Danni struggled, fighting an unseen foe. Heart pounding, a sticky wetness coating her skin, she fought for each breath as her lungs battled against her.

A velvety soft voice reached out to her in the midst, a calm within the storm. “You’re okay, Danni. You’re safe. Come back to me.”

Danni wrestled with the shadowy impression, felt the wicked long talons close around her throat while another voice, an irritating scratch of nails against a chalkboard, coaxed her.

“You don’t belong in this world, Danielle. You need to be with me. Give yourself to me.”

The urge to relinquish control overwhelmed her and even though she recognized the pull of evil, she couldn’t open her eyes, couldn’t step back into her world. Safety dissipated and Doug’s face filled her vision, her mind.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” He smiled at her, but Danni didn’t recognize him as her husband. He was evil, trapped in a bleak existence he’d created.

“No. I won’t go with you.” Her voice cracked hysterically and she clawed for a hold on reality, anything to save her from the fathomless pit surrounding her.

“Danni, I’m here.” Warmth enveloped her, batted back the icy hands of the nightmarish vision entrapping her. “Wake up now. Listen to my voice. Concentrate on my voice.”

Falcon’s arms held her close. He stroked her hair, caressing her, soothing her while the fury raged at his soul. He damned the wizard capable of invading her dreams. He reached out to her again and again, willing her to come back to him, to regain her strength by holding onto his voice. He could release her from the nightmare, make it end with a simple spell, but the aftereffects could linger for days. He didn’t want to frighten her anymore than she already was. She needed to do this on her own, to trust in him enough to believe he would help her.

Danni’s eyelids fluttered once, twice, before her eyes opened fully. The glaze receded and she focused on his face. With an inarticulate cry, she sank against him, burying her face in his throat. “Something was here. It was with me.”

Muscles straining to hold onto his temper, Falcon resisted the urge to strike out at the enemy who had dared enter his home. He’d misjudged the wizard’s abilities, had thought he could protect Danni even from a distance. He’d been wrong. But only this time. The sorcerer wouldn’t get another chance. “Shh, you’re okay. I’m here. He’s not going to hurt you.”

Tears fell damply against his bare chest while Danni sobbed, clinging to him in desperation. “It was Doug.”

Falcon shook his head, attempting to reassure her. “It was just a nightmare. Doug wasn’t really there.”

“He felt so real.” She hiccupped, tried to pull herself together.

“I know.” His hands moved down her spine, slow, languid strokes that warmed her blood. “I shouldn’t have left you alone. Tonight was too traumatic. You shouldn’t have been in here alone.” Damnation crept into his voice. Guilt.

Danni lifted her head, fixed watery hazel eyes on his face. “It was my choice.”

“You don’t have to be alone now. I won’t leave you.” He kissed her face, her eyelids.

She clung tighter to him, needing his strength, his power. His ability to comfort her didn’t surprise her. She didn’t question her implicit trust in him...at least not tonight. He was her savior. “I don’t want you to leave, but I don’t want to stay here. Not in this room. Take me to your room.”

Falcon swallowed hard, knowing she was asking for nothing more than security. But the need swelling within him screamed out a warning. Sleep wouldn’t come to him tonight, not with Danni’s shapely body snuggled in his arms. But he would do this. He would hold her, protect her, ensure she slept well. Even

if it meant no rest for himself.

He stood, slipped his arms beneath her and cradled her against his chest. “You’re safe now.” He pressed another kiss against her parted lips and began to walk out of the room.

Danni dropped her head to his shoulder. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“So scared?” His voice rumbled beneath her ear.

“No, so protected. So cared for.”

Falcon wasn’t surprised. From what little information he’d been able to glean about her husband, the man wasn’t the type to instill confidence. And he hadn’t cared for Danni. Only for the money, she’d been able to provide him while their sham of a marriage continued. Good thing the man was already dead. Falcon didn’t enjoy killing mortals, but he would have made an exception for Doug Condrey.

He lifted her hand to his lips. “I’ll always take care of you, Danni.”

Danni swallowed visibly. “Always has a permanent ring to it.”

“And you don’t like that?”

“I’m not sure I should. We’ve just met.”

“Does that really matter? Should we waste time fighting the inevitable?”

Danni could drown in the silken heat of his gaze. The man was lethally charming and he used his sex appeal to his own advantage, steering innocent women at his whim. Fortunately for her, she wasn’t so innocent. “What may seem inevitable to you is impossible for me.”

“One day, you’re going to tell me about your husband and what he did to make you distrust men.”

“Who said it was my husband?”

His thumb caressed her palm. “I only have to look into your eyes to know the truth. His name alone causes the darkness to cloud your vision. You didn’t love him. Did he love you?”

Danni licked her lips and tried to focus on his question, the words, but the tender stroking sent spikes of liquid desire from vein to vein. Fire licked at her breast, warmed her. She pondered the magic of his touch, wondered what it would be like to make love with a man who could shatter her thoughts with one kiss.

Falcon called her back to the present. “Danni?”

She looked at him and the heat rushed to her cheeks. Did he know what she was thinking? It was hard to tell. Those eyes prompted her to believe he could see anything he wanted. Even the depth of her feelings for him. A damnable prospect. She tugged her hand free.

“We can’t fight what we feel.” Falcon’s voice was a compelling drug.

“In this instance, fighting would actually be a good thing.”

His lips brushed her neck and Danni’s spine turned to jelly. Her hands clenched into fists and she gulped in a steady breath. “Falcon, please.”

He kissed her again, touched her with his voice. "That's all I'm trying to do. Please you."

Danni reached for his hands and clasped them tightly against her abdomen. "Maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea."

Falcon didn't answer her. Instead, he lowered his lips to the nape of her neck, bathing the silken skin with warm, wet kisses. His hands spanned her waist and moved beneath the cotton nightshirt she wore. Reason fled and need took its place. "I want nothing more than to make love to you until neither one of us can move."

Danni shivered and clung to him, her eyes tightly closed. "We can't."

Falcon rubbed his cheek against hers. "Unfortunately, that was going to be my next statement. You need to sleep. It's been a long day." He tucked her against his side and pushed her head down to his chest.

Danni felt strangely bereft, but she didn't fight him. As the masculine scent of his skin and the warmth of his embrace enveloped her, she slipped into an easy slumber.

The night lay ahead, endlessly long. Even at four in the morning, Falcon counted down the minutes until dawn would break across the sky, allowing him to move Danni's warm, supple body out of his arms. His own body hardened with each innocent move of hers. In sleep, she turned to him, nestled her head on his shoulder, breathed against his neck and he swallowed groan after groan, praying for daylight.

And while he waited and prayed, he planned, plotted a way to ensure Danni's safety no matter what the cost. With the morning light, he would be prepared. He'd faced many enemies in his centuries of existence. But the stakes were different this time. He'd never loved before, never needed a woman like he needed Danni. The wizard wouldn't win; Falcon wouldn't allow him to succeed. The dark sorcerer would not defeat him. He had faith in his own abilities, belief in his powers. He was the oldest living wizard in the universe and with his age came abilities far extending the grasp of this enemy. Falcon would destroy him to save Danni.

She stirred, slid her hand along his rib cage and Falcon caught and held his breath, closed his eyes to breathe in the heady scent of her hair, her skin. His own body damned his self-control, forced him to touch her, to slide his hand over the graceful curve of her hip. His heart thrummed in his chest, pounded in his ears, drowned out the voice of reason.

Danni lifted her head, pressed a light kiss along his jaw. "You're not sleeping." Her voice reprimanded him huskily.

Falcon's hand clenched. "Neither are you."

"I was." She pushed herself up on her hands to see his face. "Something woke me." She searched the



room, searching out the shadows. “Did you hear something?”

He lay still for a brief moment, sent out a cloaked signal to his guards, alerted them to search the area and relay any information back to him. He hadn’t caught the presence of another wizard, but it was possible humans could have found their way to his home. He wouldn’t be as adept at sensing their presence. But his guards would find them. “I didn’t hear anything, but stay here. I’ll make sure everything’s all right.”

Danni scrambled to a sitting position, brushed her tangled hair over her shoulders. Falcon had already made it to his feet, was now looking down at her. Light flashed in his eyes as he took in her tousled appearance. Sexy, erotic fantasies flirted with his mind and he quickly looked away even as his control slipped another notch.

“Be careful.” The slight catch in her voice made him turn back around to reassure her.

“No one can get inside, Danni. If you heard something, it’s probably outside and my guards will take care of it.”

“Your guards?” Her attention caught, snagged on his words. “What guards? Why would you need bodyguards?”

Falcon made it to the door before he responded. “They aren’t that type of guards. I’ll tell you all about it later. Just try to rest.”

Danni launched herself off the bed, forgetting about the t-shirt she wore. Made to fit Falcon’s broad shoulders, it hung to her knees, creating another evocative image that Falcon didn’t need.

“Get back in the bed. I don’t want to have to worry about where you are.”

“You won’t. I’ll be right behind you.” She clutched at his arm, implored him with vivid, hazel eyes. “I don’t want to be alone, to lie here wondering what’s going on.”

He sighed, knowing he wouldn’t deny her. His body hummed as she pressed her soft breasts against his back. “All right. But stay close.” That was more for his benefit than hers. He liked the feel of her next to him. Wondered how much longer he’d be able to last before he made her his. He reached back, took hold of her hand and guided her out into the darkened hallway.

“The outer perimeter is secure,” a voice came to them from the corners of the stairwell and Danni stifled a squeak of alarm.

“Good. Thank you.” Falcon swept Danni close to him and proceeded down the stairs.

“Who was that? Or should I say what was that?”

“My guards are computerized, Danni. The voice you heard was a computer. It’s tied into a security system.”

“Funny, you don’t strike me as a computer geek.”

Falcon swallowed a laugh. “I don’t refer to myself in that manner, but I do have some knowledge

when it comes to computers.” Less than he would admit. It was best anyway to let her think the computer was doing the talking. The last thing she needed to see tonight was the person behind the voice. He doubted she’d understand the presence of a nine foot tall giant. Eventually, she would meet the being he’d befriended in his journeys once he’d left Mystique. But, for now, the computer explanation was the lesser of two evils.

Danni huddled next to him, stepped onto the lower floor and let out a shriek that startled even the birds of the night.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

Instantly, Falcon stepped forward, swept out a hand to shield her from any harm, but he saw nothing. Nothing, at least, that would have elicited such an unearthly scream. One look at Danni's face told him she'd seen something even his magical abilities didn't enable him to see. He turned slightly, searched the area closest to them.

"Danni, what is it? Tell me what you saw."

Her eyes were huge orbs in her pale face as she clutched at his arms. "It was Doug. I saw his face. There." She pointed toward the window next to the front door. "He was looking at me. He's alive."

"He's not alive."

"Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he wasn't really dead. I mean, it's possible he wasn't dead even when I saw him dying. We buried him, but that doesn't mean he's really dead. What about zombies and ghosts? Could he have turned into one of those?" She pushed her hair back, staggered toward the bannister. "What if he's come back for me?"

Falcon gripped her shoulders and gave her a slight shake. "Listen to me. Doug is not alive and he didn't come back as a ghost or a zombie. Your imagination is playing tricks on you." With a little help from an outside influence. He'd had just about enough of this nonsense.

Danni brushed off his hands, irritation stamping her face. "I didn't just imagine his face, Falcon. I saw him."

"I know you saw him. The mind is a powerful tool."

She held up one hand. "Don't. Don't stand there and tell me I've been under a lot of stress and therefore, I don't even know what I'm seeing." He reached out for her again, but she climbed up one step, holding him at bay. "I saw my husband's face at that window." She pointed again. "And I wasn't imagining it."

"I believe you." He lowered his voice to a caress, wanting to calm her.

"Don't patronize me. Never mind." She turned and began to ascend the stairs. It was the opening Falcon needed.

His eyes darkened to a stormy gray as the power welled up within him, obliterating every thought, every emotion. His hands opened and flames licked against the centers of his palms. His voice, a low, guttural sound, murmured the ancient words, which would secure Danni within his shelter of protection, a powerful spell to ensure her safety at all costs. Holding his hands higher, he blew on the flames and sent the spell cascading over her body as she traversed the stairs.

Danni stopped, turned. "Did you feel a draft?"

Falcon joined her on the fourth step. "Didn't feel a thing." He hooked his arm around her waist. "Now, let's go back to bed while we still have a few hours of night left."

Danni awoke to sunlight and the smell of fresh coffee tickling her nostrils. She saw Falcon watching her from the foot of the bed. Freshly showered and dressed with his hair slightly damp at the ends, he simply watched her with an unblinking gaze that should have unnerved her.

Self-consciously, she brushed at her hair, the wrinkles in the t-shirt. "What time is it?"

"Just after seven."

"I have to get home. I'll need to call a carpenter, the police and..."

"I've already taken care of that."

She blinked at him. "Of which one?"

"Both. The police are on their way here. They'll take your statement and send a crime unit to your house this morning, but the chances are slim they'll catch this guy based on what they find." He tugged the comforter into place over her feet and stood. "The carpenter will be there at nine to repair the door. After the unit retrieves the bullets from the walls, I'll arrange for a painter to..."

"Hold on a second!" Flustered, Danni scooted to the edge of the bed, unaware the action caused the t-shirt to slide up over her thighs. "You can't just make all these decisions without my input! I have to pay for that carpenter and that painter you're talking about. I need to know they're not going to charge me an arm, a leg and two teeth."

"The carpenter has already been paid. The painter will be also."

The breath escaped her lungs in an angry huff. "You mean by you?"

He inclined his head slightly. "That is exactly what I mean."

She got to her feet, snatched the hem of the t-shirt and raked it down over her thighs. "Well, forget it. You're not paying my bills, Falcon. That's not part of the deal."

"I wasn't aware we had a deal."

"We don't. You know what I mean. Protecting me from stalkers is one thing, paying my bills is another. This is a small town. The last thing I need is for someone to find out a stranger is paying my bills, keeping me, so to speak. I am a respected school teacher in this town. My reputation is all I have left."

Falcon tipped his head to one side and took in her anger, felt the brush of her fury. "The payment was made in your name." He dispelled her arguments with a simple sentence.

She clamped her hands on her hips. "That doesn't change the fact you paid it."

“But no one will know.”

“I will know. Isn’t that enough?”

“I don’t understand why you can’t accept my gift.”

“Is that what it is? A gift? Or payment for future services rendered?” Danni knew the exact moment she’d crossed the line. Falcon’s expression changed, darkened. Involuntarily, she took a step back, anxiety beating at her chest.

“I thought we’d had this discussion before.” The words escaped on a throaty growl.

Danni refused to back down. She pushed aside her uneasiness and stood her ground. “We did, but that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t agree with what you have done here.”

“It’s just money.”

“That’s something only someone with lots of money would ever say.” She tossed him a scathing look and whipped around. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll reimburse you.”

“No, you won’t.” His denial brought her back around to face him.

“You can’t tell me what to do, Falcon. This is my decision.”

In two strides, he stood in front of her, his large hands clasping her upper arms. “When are you going to stop fighting me?”

She tried to shake his hands away, but her efforts were useless against his superior strength. “When you understand I’m not going to be controlled.”

“I’m not trying to control you. I’m trying to protect you.”

“Why? Why are you trying so hard to protect someone you barely know?”

“I know you, Danni. I know everything about you. I feel you. Here.” He took her hand and placed it over his heart. “Just as you feel me. Our lives are intertwined. There’s no escaping that.”

Her anger deflated, replaced by a cold, mind-numbing fear. She sensed the truth behind his words. There was no other way to explain the connection between the two of them, the easy way she’d placed her life in his hands. But still, his words scared her, terrorized her. She didn’t want to be in the hands of another man. She didn’t want to be controlled. Every fibre of her being struggled against the knowledge that Falcon was her destiny. “I don’t believe in predestination.”

“You don’t have to believe it, but you know it. You feel it, too. Stop fighting it.” He crushed her to his chest, dragging her head down to nestle just over his heart. “I will protect you with my last breath.” He tipped her face to his. “I can feel your fear just as I can feel your acceptance of my words. You know I speak the truth. From the moment we met, our hearts joined, our lives bonded. Fate has decreed we are one.” He tucked a thick lock of hair behind her ear. “It’s just a matter of time before this need within us overtakes us. We will have no choice but to give in.”

Danni's temples began to throb. "I know there's more you're not telling me, Falcon. More about you. More about us."

"When you're ready, I'll tell you everything."

"I thought we had this conversation about your deciding when I'm ready."

His lips curved into a smile. "Perhaps we did. You should get ready now. The police will be here soon and then we should go to your house to get your things before this evening."

"What happens this evening?" Danni suddenly felt very weary.

"Have you forgotten it's Saturday night? I believe we had a date."

Her brow furrowed. "That was before all of this."

"A promise is a promise. You need a night of relaxation."

"I doubt a night with you is going to bring about relaxation."

"That all depends on how the night ends." His voice was pure sex.

Danni shivered and stepped out of his arms. "I'm going to go take a shower. I don't know if you have anything decent for me to wear, but..."

"I sent my maid for some clothing this morning."

She sent him an arch look. "And I suppose the stores opened up this early just for you."

He smiled at her once more. "I have friends."

"I would imagine you do." Her shoulders slumped, Danni headed toward the bathroom. "Sometimes, arguing with you is very tiresome."

"Then I would suggest you stop arguing."

"And follow orders?"

"They're not orders, Danni. I would never try to control you."

"Then you're saying I have a choice in this."

"Why don't you ask your heart?"

She walked away from him, needing the time and space to think, to attempt to put things in proper perspective.

Falcon didn't like the Chief of Police. He didn't like the condescending way he talked to Danni and he liked the patronizing pats on her shoulder even less. He didn't have to be a wizard to know the man was about as honest as a slimy used car salesman. He could read his eyes, the shiftiness. And he didn't doubt the man knew far more about Danni's stalker than he wanted to admit.

"Did you ever go see the doctor like I suggested?" Chief Harrigan addressed Danni in a tone of voice

usually reserved for recalcitrant children.

Falcon stiffened, placed his hand on Danni's shoulder as he stood behind her. "Danni doesn't need to see a doctor, Chief. I can assure you everything she said she saw, she saw."

"Uh-huh." Those shifty blue eyes switched to Falcon's face. "And you say you saw everything as well, Mr. Kendrick?"

"That is correct." He held the lawman's gaze until Harrigan looked away.

"Well, I have to say that each time Ms. Condrey has seen something or heard something, my men have investigated and found nothing. So you can understand my reluctance to break out a full scale investigation with so little information to go on."

"I knew this would be another waste of time. I don't even know why I bother with you." Danni got to her feet and walked to the front door of Falcon's home. "Never mind, Chief Harrigan. Just forget I called you. Send your men home to their families. I'll take care of this myself."

The chief's eyes sparked. "Now, don't you go doing something that's going to make me have to arrest you. Women like you don't belong in the system."

"And men like you shouldn't own a badge." She returned crisply. "Good day."

Harrigan didn't immediately walk to the door. Instead, he tried his persuasive tactics on Falcon. "You have to make her understand, Mr. Kendrick, that it ain't so easy to just use up a lot of my manpower to investigate a crime that didn't happen."

"The crime happened. The bullets are in the walls. One would think you would want to investigate a shooting. Unless you're trying to hide something." Falcon kept his voice level despite his rising temper. He could snap the chief's neck with a blink of one eye, but he restrained himself by directing his attention toward Danni. She still stood by the door, her hands thrust into the pockets of the new jeans, her face flushed. Once again, he could read her anger.

Chief Harrigan drew himself up to his full height, which was considerably less than the man he faced. He hitched up the waistband of his police issue trousers and clamped his hands on his hips, settling his fingers over the butt of his weapon. "Now, see here, Mr. Kendrick, I don't take kindly to strangers making unfounded accusations. You might find yourself in a jail cell before the night is through."

"I wouldn't be there for long," Falcon assured him.

"The system doesn't always protect the wealthy."

Falcon grinned, a mere baring of his teeth. "I don't need the system to protect me, Chief. I'm quite capable of protecting myself...and Danni."

Harrigan tugged at his pants again before mopping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

"Yeah, well, just make sure you stay outta my way while you're doing it. I'd hate like hell to throw your ass

into a cell.” His tone belied his words.

“Yes, you would.” The threat rang clear in Falcon’s voice and the chief took a step backwards, bumping into the uniformed officer behind him.

“Now, you may show yourselves out.” Falcon held out his hand toward Danni. He was a little surprised when she took it so willingly.

“I mean it, Kendrick, I don’t want to see you and Ms. Condrey here doing anything crazy like trying to investigate something on your own. She’s been a little spooked ever since Doug got fried by a downed power pole. She ain’t been right and I’m thinking that you would do yourself a world of good by staying away from her. She’s going to end up in the nuthouse.” Still trying to assert his authority, Harrigan sauntered toward the door. “And being seen with someone like her might just make your reputation take a downward spiral.”

“I appreciate your concern for my standing in this town, but I’ll take my chances. With Danni.” Falcon wrapped a possessive arm around her waist. The thin cotton shirt bunched beneath his palm as he struggled to hold onto his temper. “I believe you were just leaving.”

Harrigan hadn’t quite finished having his say. “You can brush me off all you want, but I’m warning you, if I see you snooping around my town, bothering the citizens and the like, I’m going to take serious action, action you won’t like.” He brought himself up to his full height, still falling several inches short of Falcon’s impressive stature. “Consider yourself warned.”

Falcon released Danni long enough to take a step forward, a long step that brought him within an inch of the lawman’s soft body. “I will do whatever it takes to protect Danni. If that means dealing with individuals your department doesn’t care to deal with then so be it. And I would suggest neither you nor your men get in my way. Consider that your warning.”

“Now, see here.” The chief patted the butt of his gun in a threatening manner and tilted his head so that his chins wobbled defiantly. “I am the law in this town and I will not be threatened by...” His voice broke off on a squeak as his body slid up the door jamb, his feet dangling several inches from the ground. “You have no idea what you’re being threatened by, Chief Harrigan, but I would suggest you learn a little more about me before you make promises you’re unable to keep.” Falcon guided him back down the slab of wood. “Now, as I said before, you may show yourselves out.”

The officer who had been providing back up brushed Harrigan aside. The man hurried on his way to the waiting squad car without looking back. The chief’s brows lowered in a measure of disgust. “Don’t think you can scare me with levitating and all that nonsense. I’ve been to the circus. Those freaks can create images in your mind that will make you believe you’re actually flying. I’m not impressed by them, either.”

Danni grabbed hold of Falcon’s arms, her nails digging into the fabric of his shirt. “Falcon, let him go. He’s never been one to listen.” Her soft voice impressed her desires upon him and Falcon felt himself



weakening, but one look at the chief's hardened gaze snapped him back into perspective.

"Perhaps I should walk the chief to his car." Falcon angled one hand toward the opened doorway. "After you."

Harrigan eyed his new foe suspiciously. "I never walk in front of my enemies."

Falcon grinned, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "As you wish." He walked ahead, unconcerned by the threat of the man who followed him.

The officer sat trembling behind the steering wheel, his hands clenched around the leather while his eyes stared straight ahead.

"You may have scared Henry there, but I ain't so easily bullied." Chief Harrigan droned on in his self-important tone of voice. A rush of wind swirled around his ears and he tried to brush away the roar. Increasing in intensity, the sound overtook him, spun him around, pressed him back against the hood of the car. He opened his mouth to scream, but the sound stalled in his throat. His eyes rounded as he stared into a gaping vortex of swirling onyx and vicious blue. His heart raced. His legs jellied. And into the violent center, he focused on a single blue flame, growing higher and higher, flowing forward, licking at the edges of the whirlpool.

"Your presence here is not welcome. You are a trespasser to my home. Danni Condrey does not need your protection or your assistance. I will protect her and I will destroy anyone who comes between me and her. You will leave and never return here. Do you understand, Chief Harrigan?" Falcon kept his voice low, preventing Danni from overhearing the hypnotic words.

As the eddy swirled and retracted before his eyes, the chief could only nod an affirmative response.

Falcon touched his shoulder and the vortex closed, leaving the lawman shaking his head and wondering what in the hell had just happened. "As I said, Danni and I will handle the matter ourselves, Chief."

Harrigan bobbed his head and slid into the passenger's side of the marked police vehicle. "Right. Right. Well, long as you understand, you're on your own."

"We like it that way." Falcon grinned in perfect satisfaction and watched until the taillights of the cruiser disappeared around the corner.

"What did you do to him?" Danni greeted Falcon at the door, arms folded, eyes slightly accusing.

He ushered her back inside and kicked the door shut. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I've never seen him look so scared and I know Chief Harrigan. To my knowledge, nothing scares the man."

"Perhaps he saw something he can't explain."

“That was a qualified explanation if I’ve ever heard one.”

Falcon grinned at her, deviousness in the curve of his sexy lips. “I qualify all my answers. It keeps me safe.” He took her arm, guided her toward the kitchen. “I’ve had my cook prepare breakfast. After we eat, we can go to your house and- -”

“Falcon.”

He stopped walking, gave her his full attention. Danni felt a surge of pleasure. He looked at her like he was actually interested in what she was about to say. She liked the feeling. “What is it?” His hand cupped her cheek. She liked that feeling even more.

“Umm,” she thought about brushing his hand aside so she could concentrate then decided she liked the warmth of his palm against her skin. “I think we need to have a talk.”

“We can talk tonight.”

“It’s about tonight.”

He lifted one eyebrow. “You don’t want to go?”

“I don’t think I should go out. I mean, not with you. No, that didn’t come out right. I meant...” She stopped herself, took a deep breath and tried again. “What I meant to say was I don’t believe going out is such a good idea since someone is obviously trying to kill me.”

The eyebrow rose even higher. “And you doubt my ability to protect you?”

Danni hadn’t counted on wounding his ego. “You can’t see a stray bullet, Falcon.”

The grin made her slightly uneasy. “I don’t have to see it. You will be protected.”

“Let me guess. You’re bringing bullet proof vests along.”

He cupped her elbow once more and resumed walking toward the kitchen. “Has anyone ever told you that you worry too much?”

“We’re talking about my life. Don’t you think it’s natural for me to worry?” The fragrance of fresh-baked bread made her mouth water, though Danni wasn’t one to eat breakfast ordinarily. Her stomach rumbled as she crossed the gleaming porcelain tiles at her feet.

As testament to Falcon’s wealth, the kitchen bore the latest in modern appliances, cherrywood counter tops covered in rich marble, walls adorned with portraits painted by the hands of world-renowned artisans. Copper pots hung from hooks centered above the wooden butcher’s table serving as an island. And everywhere Danni looked, she saw the touch of perfection, like the room had been plucked straight from the pages of Modern Kitchens and situated in the center of Falcon’s house.

She allowed Falcon to seat her at one of the padded stools lining the butcher’s table. He strolled toward the counter. Lifting a silver carafe, he angled it toward her. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please. You’re not answering my question.”

“It would be natural for you to be worried, yes, but now, you don’t have to worry any longer. You were alone before. You’re not alone now.” He returned to the table, carrying both the carafe and a miniature pitcher of cream.

She held out a mug while he filled it. She added enough cream to whiten the dark liquid before taking a test sip. “I wish I had an ounce of your self-confidence.”

He filled his own mug, placed it back on the table top before returning to the counter. “It’s not wrong to be confident in one’s abilities, Danni.”

She blew into the cream-colored coffee. “I didn’t say it was wrong. I just said I wish I had some of it.” Her lips curled around the rim of the mug and need punched Falcon in the stomach. He looked away quickly, concentrated on carrying a tray filled with delicate pastries to the table. Straddling the stool next to hers, he bumped his knee against her thigh.

“Self-confidence can be learned.”

“Are you offering to teach me?” She licked a trace of coffee off her lips and Falcon’s eyes flashed. He leaned in, captured a strand of silky copper hair in his fingertips. Danni held her breath.

“Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?”

Her breath escaped with a whoosh of air. “Has anyone ever told you how dangerous you are?”

He smiled. “Yes, I believe they have.”

“That shouldn’t surprise me. You are dangerous.”

“Not to you.” He twirled the strand around his fingers.

Danni pushed the stool away from the counter and stood. “We should really get going.”

“You haven’t eaten.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He didn’t move. “Danni, you need to eat.”

“I rarely eat breakfast. I want to go, Falcon. I want to see my home.”

He debated arguing with her, decided against it. He pushed himself to his feet, took a long sip of his coffee and thumped the mug back against the polished wood atop the butcher’s table. “As you wish, then.”

She eyed him, taking a few backward steps toward the door. “You make me nervous when you talk like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re humoring me.”

He took her hand and tugged her out of the kitchen. “Did I mention you worry too much?”

“Yes, I believe you did.”

“We’ll have to work on that.”

Danni and Falcon surveyed what was left of her front door, the carpet riddled with bullet shells. Gaping holes in the walls housed the deadly bullets intended for her and Falcon saw Danni shiver. "I can't believe we survived this," she whispered. She wrapped her arms around her waist and stepped across the broken metal plate lining the doorframe.

Falcon came in right behind her, careful to keep her within his sight. "All of this will be repaired shortly." Glass crunched beneath his loafers as he approached her. His hands on her shoulders, he steered her away from the aftermath. "Have you seen enough?"

Hazel eyes clouded with confusion. Danni didn't understand the consuming desire to leave now that she'd just arrived. This was her home, where she belonged and yet, she didn't want to stay. She pressed her palms against her temples and shook her head. "No, I can't. Not yet."

"Danni," Falcon's voice was a whisper in her ear, in her head. "You can't stay here. You know that. These men know where you live. They'll come again."

She knew he was telling the truth, speaking logically. And she found herself walking down the hallway, away from the reminder of last night's attempt on her life. "I have to pack."

"We'll do it together." Falcon's gaze swept the bedroom the second they entered, assessing the area for any signs of danger. Thick with the lingering scent of an enemy's magic, the air fogged. His shoulders tensed even though he knew they were alone. The wizard wouldn't have remained behind, wouldn't have come back this soon. He would have realized by now that Danni wasn't alone even if he hadn't ascertained the identity of her companion.

Falcon's lips curled into a sneer as Danni tore open a battered suitcase and began tossing clothes into the center. The wizard was weak, a young novice who had given into the thirst for glory. Probably just past the two hundred mark, the wizard had yet to attain the full power of his magic. Falcon knew it would be an easy matter to destroy him. But first, he would have to make sure Danni was safe. His spell would do most of the task. His shoulders relaxed. He didn't doubt his ability to protect her. He doubted her desire to remain with him long enough for him to find the wizard.

The air shimmered, wavered and Falcon's gaze shot toward the ceiling. The summons seized him and he frowned. Damnation. He couldn't leave Danni, but he couldn't ignore the summons of the Assembly.

He'd only been gone a matter of months. The summons surprised him. Jaxon knew where he was, even at this precise moment. He could only surmise the edict came because the Assembly sensed danger to one of their own.

Falcon reached out, touched Danni's arm. She jumped. "I'm sorry. I just remembered I have to make

a phone call.”

Danni gave him a strange look. “The telephone’s in the kitchen.”

He shook his head. “It’s an international call. I’ll use my cell. I left it in the car. Do you want me to wait with you until you’re done?” Summons be damned. He didn’t want to leave her alone even for a minute.

“Falcon, make your call. No one is here. I’m fine.”

He wasn’t so sure about that, but he jerked his head in an abrupt nod anyway. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“I’m sure I won’t.” Danni held a blouse against her chest and pointed toward the door. “You can leave at any time. I promise to scream if anything happens.”

“That’s not funny.” Her words pierced a section of his heart long protected against such feelings. He couldn’t think of anything happening to her, wouldn’t think of it. It simply wouldn’t happen. He wouldn’t allow it.

She wondered at the bite in his voice, tilted her head to one side. “Are you all right?”

He deliberately softened his face. “I’m fine. I just want to get you out of here.”

“Well, I’m packing as fast as I can. I should be done by the time you’re finished with your phone call. And then you can drop me off at a hotel...” she broke off, sensing the sudden turn in the conversation. She looked up. Falcon’s jaw had clenched. “I take it I said something you didn’t agree with.”

The call beat at him, forcing him to end the conversation quicker than he would have liked. “We will finish this later. I’ll be right back.”

“I’m sure you will.”

He tossed one last look over his shoulder before stepping out of the room. He took two steps down the hallway before a vertical beam of light sliced the air. He continued walking until the golden glow enveloped him, carried him across the span of distance, to a city known as Mystique, the city the wizards called home.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

“The wizard you seek is called Montclair. He is from a guild of wizards who make their home light years away from here in Splendor, a city of about ten wizards, give or take one or two.” Jaxon didn’t waste time with preamble as he launched into the explanation for the summons. “My mother knows them well. They are far less powerful than we are, but they are a tight-knit group.”

Falcon swept a look in the direction of Jaxon’s mother, Charlemaine. The only female wizard in the Assembly prior to Jaxon’s wife’s arrival, she was a direct descendant of the wizards of Splendor. Known as the Honorables, they had battled many covens and somehow, despite their lack of power, had managed to stay together. “You know him then, Charlemaine?” Falcon asked.

She stood, tall and graceful, a slender silhouette as she moved across the gilded floor of the Assembly Room. “Not directly, no. It is my understanding he is a cousin’s son, but I have never met him. I have only heard of him.”

Falcon tugged a chair out with his foot and sat. He pressed his fingertips together and rested his chin atop the steeple. “You do not want me to kill him.” As the former leader of the Assembly, he could still read the emotions of those wizards he once ruled.

Charlemaine sighed and came to stand behind her husband, Jaxon’s father. “I do not know that killing him is necessary. There may still be a chance to redeem him.”

“But, of course, should that chance fail, then your only remaining option will be to eliminate him.” Jaxon’s voice rang with authority and as Falcon directed his silver-eyed gaze at the man he’d tutored, trained, pride welled up inside. Jaxon had indeed become the leader Falcon had always known he could be. In the few short months, Jaxon had accepted the mantle of authority, had become the true master of this guild of wizards Falcon held close to his heart.

Charlemaine closed her eyes. “I pray that will not become necessary.”

Falcon stood and walked around the table to position himself in front of Jaxon’s mother. “As do I.”

“Perhaps we could help.” Tess, Jaxon’s wife, intervened, her voice a soothing balm to the tension coating the air.

Jaxon held up one hand to silence any further suggestion. “No. We will not interfere unless Falcon requires our assistance.”

“He won’t ask for it,” Tess pointed out with an underlying current of irritation. Falcon smiled. It was good to see some things had not changed. Married just over a year, Tess still struggled with her husband’s desire to dominate all things, including her. But their love was strong. Falcon had no doubt of its survival.

“He will not have to. Should I become aware of his need, I will direct the Assembly to assist him.”

Jaxon slanted a glance at Falcon. “You are aware of what I am referring to?”

Falcon strolled toward the young wizard and clamped a firm hand on his shoulder. “Your assistance will not be required, Jaxon. I have no worry of this Montclair overpowering me. His magic is still unlearned, still new to him. Perhaps Charlemaine is right in assuming there is still hope for the young wizard. If he can be saved, I will direct him toward the proper path.”

“Where will you send him?” Charlemaine wanted to know. “The Honorables will not take him back, not once he has turned against their own. Once banished, his only option is survival on his own or acceptance by another guild.”

“Then we will take him.” Jaxon announced calmly.

Falcon nodded, as if it was an everyday occurrence for the Assembly to accept a banished wizard. In reality, guilds simply did not accept wizards who broke the laws. The Assembly’s laws weren’t clear on the subject, either. But Falcon knew by the time he’d bested Montclair, Jaxon would know what was allowed and what was not. Just as he knew Jaxon would never turn his back on a wizard who could be saved. He exchanged glances with the leader, a glance that held more information than the brief conversation they’d shared.

“I should return to Danni.” Falcon held out his hand, clasped Jaxon’s. “It was good to see you again, my friend.” His sweeping glance included the remainder of the wizards seated around the oval table. “It was good to see all of you again.”

Jaxon’s hand fisted, opened to push against the air. “May the Fates be with you.” The portal reopened with a surge of power. The light separated as Falcon crossed over, stepped back into Danni’s hallway.

Danni collided with the solid wall of Falcon’s chest and screamed.

“Hey, it’s okay.” His hands curved around her shoulders, gentle, comforting.

Hazel eyes clouded with confusion as Danni blinked up at him. “You weren’t here. I was looking for you.” She peeked around him. “Where did you come from?”

Falcon held out the cell phone. “I was at the car making the call I told you about.”

“I looked outside. I didn’t see you. I didn’t see you in the hallway, either.” She pressed her palms against her temples. “I’m starting to get a headache. My mind’s fuzzy.”

Falcon’s hands brushed hers aside and he placed soothing fingers against her skin. Heat bathed her temple, eased the pain. “These last few days have been too much for you. Come on. I’m taking you home.”

“That’s funny considering my home is here.”

He captured her waist with his arm and guided her toward the door. “Are you all packed?”

“My suitcase is on the porch. The carpenter called. He’ll be here in an hour or so. Maybe I should wait for him.”

“He knows what to do.”

“I have to pay him.”

“We’ve already discussed that.”

Danni felt her surrender even before she acquiesced. “You’re right. We did. You paid him, right?”

Falcon opened the door of the Explorer and helped her into the front seat. “That’s right.” He kept his voice soft, lulling her into complacency. “Now, just close your eyes and rest. We’ll be home in a few minutes.”

Danni rested her head back against the seat. She had the desire to argue, to protest Falcon’s dictatorial attitude, but the need to sleep was stronger. Folding her hands in her lap, she closed her eyes, telling herself it would only be for a second. Then, she and Falcon would need to have a talk. She needed to straighten a few things out between them if they were going to have any type of relationship.

Falcon’s fingers lightly grazed her cheek while his voice touched her like the brush of a butterfly’s wing. “Danni, wake up. We’re home.” Wrapped up in a peaceful dream, Danni rejected the call, burrowing herself even deeper inside the cocoon of sleep, the warmth of his embrace.

She heard his chuckle, felt his arms curve beneath her legs and then he cradled her against his chest. She cracked open one eye to survey her surroundings before she laid her head back against his shoulder. “You took me back to your house.”

“Of course. Where was I supposed to take you?”

“To a hotel.”

Falcon shifted her, opened the door and carried her across the hardwood floors. “You want to feel safe, don’t you, Danni?”

Her head rose once more and she gave him a baleful look. “What kind of a question is that?” She slid closer against his chest as Falcon ascended the stairs.

“Would you feel safe alone in a hotel room?” He knew he was playing a trump card, but he couldn’t let her out of his sight. Not yet.

Danni frowned. “So how long do you think I’ll have to stay here?”

“You can stay as long as you want.”

“And suppose my stalker finds me here?”

“He won’t.”



“How can you be so sure?” She was irritated. Did the man never feel fear?

“My house is well protected. Even if he were to locate you, he could not get to you.”

“More computer technology?”

“You could say that.” He kicked open the bedroom door and carried her to the bed. Easing her gently down onto the mattress, he hitched one hip on the edge beside her. He brushed the hair back from her face and bent down to tease her lips with a soft kiss. “As long as you’re with me, you have no need to be afraid.”

Danni laughed softly. “I’m not so sure of that.” She caught hold of his fingers, brought them to her lips and kissed them individually. “You do things to me, Falcon, things I’ve never felt before.”

Fire swept into his gaze. “Don’t be frightened of what you feel, Danni. It is natural.”

“My husband never made me feel this way.” Suddenly ashamed, she sat up, drew her knees to her chest. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not fair.”

“To Doug?”

“He doesn’t deserve my disloyalty.”

“And you’re telling me he deserves your loyalty? What did he do that was so deserving? Did he love you unconditionally? Did he place your needs before his own?” Danni watched with some surprise as Falcon’s entire demeanor shifted. Anger darkened the depths of his silver gaze. Tension clutched his muscles and his face tightened. “Tell me what he did, Danni. Tell me how much he wanted to share his life with you, how he made you feel like you were the only woman on earth for him.”

She pulled away from him, backed out of his reach. “Stop it. You don’t know anything about Doug or my marriage.”

Falcon didn’t move toward her. “I know enough to know you didn’t love him, at least not the way a wife is supposed to love her husband.”

“You don’t know. How could you know?”

“Because you don’t mourn him. Your body cries out for mine. And the guilt is weighing heavily on your shoulders. You don’t want to admit your feelings for me.”

“I don’t know you! How can I admit feelings for you when I don’t even know you?” Desperation speared her voice.

Falcon shot across the bed, took hold of her arm and dragged her into his embrace. He placed his palm over her breast, pressed against the rapid beat of her heart. “How can you deny them? Your eyes, the beat of your heart, even the panic in your voice betrays you. You’re scared because Doug didn’t touch you this way.” His hand became a gentle caress over her breast. “And his touch didn’t stir you the way mine does.”

Danni curved her hand around his wrist, determined to break the contact, but his thumb glided across

her nipple, brushed it to a demanding peak. She bit hard on her lower lip to quell the moan in her throat. "Falcon, don't. Please."

He stilled. "Why do you insist on punishing us both when the need is so strong? You want me as much as I want you, Danni. You want to feel me inside you, feel my possession." The rich, husky tone of his accent poured over her, made her insides weak. And for a moment, a brief moment, Danni felt her capitulation. She did want him. She ached with a hunger she didn't understand. She only knew that when Falcon was with her, her senses overloaded. She could smell his distinct scent, feel the warmth of his palm brushing over her sensitized skin and she craved him. The knowledge alone was enough to make her push him away.

"Don't." The words came out on a moan. "Please. I can't do this." She felt his hands loosen on her arms, slide down to grasp her hands.

Falcon rested his forehead against hers. "Never be afraid of me."

She touched his cheek; the day's growth of stubble tickled her palm. "I'm not afraid of you, just of what you do to me."

His breath escaped on a shudder. "When you talk like that, it makes me want to touch you."

She pushed lightly against his shoulders. "Which is precisely why we need some space from one another." She scooted to the edge of the bed, swung her legs over the side of the mattress. "I don't think my staying here is such a good idea." She didn't need to look over her shoulder to know she'd touched a nerve.

"You think a hotel would be a better place knowing how easily your attacker sabotaged your home?"

Danni stood, crossed the floor to pull back on one of the heavy drapes that hung to the midnight blue carpet. "I think we need about a hundred miles between us." She stared out into the bright sunlight, imagining she saw the wink of the stars in the sky. She needed a star to wish upon now more than ever even if she didn't believe it would come true. "Do you ever wish on a star?"

Falcon moved to her side soundlessly. She liked the way he walked. Gracefully. Powerfully. Muscles rippled as he gathered her in his arms. "I have no need for wishes."

Danni's palms curved open over his pecs. "Everyone has need of wishes, Falcon. It's what keeps us going. Our hopes. Our dreams. Our wishes."

He brushed a kiss over the tip of her nose. "What if I told you I could make your dreams come true?"

She tipped her head back. Copper hair swung low against her thighs. "I'd say we're about to start playing word games. You don't even know what my dreams are."

He cupped her chin, met her gaze. "You dream of happiness. A solid relationship with a man you can trust. Love beyond reason. You want, more than anything, to know you are the only one in that man's life. You want children. And a house filled with laughter. Am I close?"

Too close. Danni pulled away, wrapped her arms around her waist. “It’s too late for any of those things now. I’ve long ago given up on the hope of living happily ever after. I don’t believe in the fairy tales anymore.”

“And you wouldn’t believe me if I told you they existed?”

“Sometimes, I’m not sure if I believe you exist. I don’t really think I want to know.” She laughed softly, backed up to press her hand against the smooth, polished top of the dresser. “You’re right. I used to dream of those things you mentioned. But then I grew up.” The smile turned bitter. “Finding out your life is a sham will do that to you.”

A muscle clenched in Falcon’s jaw. “Doug did this to you.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No. I did this to me. I made myself a victim.”

He resisted the urge to go to her. “You can’t control other people’s actions.”

“I could control mine. I could have stopped myself from marrying him.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I convinced myself I loved him. That he loved me.”

“And he betrayed you.” The simple statement resounded in the silence.

Danni hung her head slightly, battling back the tears welling up in her eyes. “Dammit. I said I wasn’t going to talk about this.”

“Talking can be cathartic.”

“So can sleeping. That’s what I need to do right now.”

“You can’t sleep away your problems. Besides,” Falcon grabbed her hand, startling her, “we have other plans.”

“A date doesn’t usually begin until the evening hours.”

“This isn’t part of the date.” He steered her toward the door.

“What is it then?”

He edged out into the hallway, his hand still firmly holding hers. “It’s an adventure.” He winked and picked up the pace toward the stairs.

Danni laughed. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed so unabashedly. So freely. But she was laughing now as the wind swept through her hair and stung her eyes. The rush of it played across her face and kissed her cheeks. But beyond that, she felt Falcon’s unerring gaze. Watching her. Enjoying her freedom.

The Mustang convertible ate up the miles toward Asheville and Falcon knew he’d chosen the right

activity to take Danni's mind off what she would eventually have to face. The steady thrum of a steel guitar masked the throaty purr of the engine as the speakers vibrated with the radio's offerings. Danni's foot tapped in time with the tune and her hazel eyes glittered with happiness.

Unable to resist, Falcon stretched a hand across the console and cupped her knee. He smiled when she simply covered it and squeezed. He gave one lock of her hair a gentle tug which earned him another smile.

She was breathtaking. She'd taken the time to pull her long, copper hair back in a frothy holder. The ponytail only added to the angelic beauty of her face. Her stonewashed jeans clung to her petite frame, accentuating the curve of her hips and the white peasant blouse drifted off her shoulders, giving Falcon a view of silky skin. A view he appreciated.

His eyes dropped to the swell of her breasts for a brief moment before the road demanded his attention once more. He steered the Mustang back into the proper lane and concentrated on the long line of asphalt stretching ahead.

"Thank you!" Danni shouted above the wind and the music.

Falcon's teeth flashed in a grin. "You're more than welcome."

"I'm feeling guilty that I'm the only one enjoying this terrific view."

Hardly. The grin broadened. "I'm doing okay." More than. From the corner of his eye, he saw her shift on the seat. The enticing curve of her bottom lifted and he swallowed a curse. His body raged and he wondered how much longer it would be before they would feed the hunger.

Danni swept a lock of hair out of her eyes and tipped her face to the sun. "This is why I love living in North Carolina. The fresh mountain air. It's so clean. So pure."

Falcon could give a damn about the mountain air. Right now, he was waging a battle with the increasing demands of his body. "We'll be in Asheville in a few minutes. Did you want to stop?" His throat felt like sandpaper and if his jeans got any tighter, Danni was sure to notice.

"Can we keep driving?"

"I don't have anywhere to be."

Danni threw him a smile that melted his insides. He cursed inwardly once more. Another few minutes and he would pull the car over to the side of the road and take her for an entirely different type of ride.

"Falcon?" The silkiness of her voice made him jump.

His hands slid damply over the steering wheel. "Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

His knuckles whitened. "I'm fine. Why?"

She reached across the seat and touched his thigh. "You look tense."

He gritted his teeth. "Danni, don't."

She withdrew her hand and fisted her fingers. "There is something wrong."

"You can't be that naive." The words were harsh, much too harsh for Danni to understand the pain behind them.

She continued to look at him. He felt the burning heat of her gaze on his profile, the question in her eyes. "Well, perhaps you could explain it to me just in case I am that naive."

He heard the censure in her voice and quickly retracted his words. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to growl."

The wind whipped a long strand of copper hair over her eyes and Danni brushed it away with impatient fingers. "So are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

"That's a conversation for another time."

Danni lowered her hands to her lap. "I'm sorry I've gotten you involved in all of this."

Falcon pressed a button and the top of the convertible slid into place. With a turn of the knob, the vents burst forth with cooling air. He enclosed them in the quiet confines of the car, securing the windows with a push of the master switch. "You didn't get me involved, Danni. I'm right where I need to be."

"Need to be?"

"And want to be," he amended.

"I imagine you would say that even if it ends up getting you killed."

"It's not going to get me killed. You, either."

"Maybe it would be best if you stayed away from me for a while. At least until all of this blows over."

Danni used her best schoolteacher to pupil tone of voice.

Falcon's chuckle held no humor. "It's a little too late for that."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

He knew he should reassure her, comfort her, but his gut twisted, clenched as vivid images slashed through his mind. Horrifying images he couldn't control. He slammed on the brakes and whipped the convertible to the side of the road, killing the engine. He willed the visions away and lowered his head to the steering wheel.

Danni unclashed her seatbelt and slid over to his side, her hands touching him, moving over his shoulders, his back, offering comfort and more pleasure than Falcon could stand. "Falcon? What is it?"

His head shot up. He caught her wrists in his hands and stared into her confused, hazel eyes. "I can't lose you, Danni."

Her face softened and she leaned in, brushing her lips gently against his. "How can you lose me when you said you would protect me?"

“I will protect you, but you have to stop fighting me. I can’t keep you safe if you don’t trust me.”

“Would I spend the night alone with a man I didn’t trust?”

Falcon’s shoulders relaxed. “Thank you.”

Danni’s head dropped to his chest. “I should be the one thanking you. After all, you’re going to save my life.”

And he would. Even if it meant destroying Montclair.

Danni hummed through most of the first hour of class on Monday morning. She’d spent a glorious weekend with Falcon, enjoying the sights and sounds of the city. They’d played tourists in Asheville, traveled to Hendersonville before doubling back to enjoy a leisurely picnic in Pisgah Forest. And Falcon had been the perfect gentleman. And if she’d been a little disappointed with the hasty way he’d ended both Saturday and Sunday evenings, she contented herself with the knowledge he was apparently in no hurry to go anywhere.

Heidi McManus, a thin, golden-haired girl with braces and freckles, stood by her desk, dancing from foot to foot and waving her arms. “Mrs. Condrey?”

Danni blinked her concentration back into focus. “Yes, Heidi?”

“I need to go to the restroom.”

“Okay, but hurry back. It’s your turn to read next.” Now, what had they been reading anyway?

“Mrs. Condrey, why is your face so red?” Danni cursed Elizabeth Bertram’s powers of observation. They forced her to think quickly.

“I would imagine it’s because of the heat, Elizabeth. Now, why don’t you take Heidi’s turn at reading?”

“I just read.”

Josh, ever the overachiever, pounced to attention. “I’ll read it, Mrs. Condrey.”

Danni waved a hand distractedly. “By all means, Josh. I believe we ended at the start of Chapter Three.” As the room fell silent, she settled herself back behind her desk and allowed her mind to drift once more.

Josh interrupted her thoughts. “Uh, Mrs. Condrey?”

She hoped no one noticed the irritation lining her face. “Yes?”

“We, um, we ended with Chapter Five.”

Danni looked down at the third grade reader and frowned. She was sure they’d ended at the beginning of Chapter Three. Had she really lost that much time? Her focus was way off. She needed to concentrate on

her students, a task made more difficult by vivid images of silver eyes and a sexy smile that had haunted her dreams last night. “It would seem you are right again, Josh. So begin reading at Chapter Five.”

As the childish voice rang out, Danni forced herself to follow along word for word, but the image remained, so detailed, she could almost touch his cheek, feel the rasp of the whiskers beneath her palm. She crossed her legs and tried to quell the heat pooling between her thighs. She had to get her mind off of Falcon and back on her students. Easier said than done.

Last night played through her mind like an old movie reel. He’d kissed her at the bedroom door, just a gentle brushing of his lips against hers. For a moment, a brief one, she’d been sure he was going to take the kiss further. But then he’d backed away, allowed her hand to drop back to her side. And while she’d stood in the hallway, reeling from his scent, his touch, he’d walked away from her and into his own bedroom. And she’d lain awake for most of the night, wondering what had just happened.

She was sure Falcon wanted her as much as she wanted him. Just as she was sure it was only a matter of time before they made love. The need grew stronger with each passing day and while she didn’t understand it, she knew she wouldn’t question it, either. She would only admit to herself she was counting the days, the hours until the passion would dictate their actions. She craved his touch, wanted to feel him inside her.

“Mrs. Condrey?” Danni looked up to find Josh standing in front of her desk, a quizzical expression on his pale face. “Are you okay?”

Danni scooted her chair away from her desk and shoved herself to her feet. She quickly snatched the reader off of her desk and pressed it against her chest, hoping she could calm her racing heart before she hyperventilated. “Of course, Josh, I’m fine.”

“Well, I’ve finished reading and you didn’t say who was next.”

“I should be next because it was my turn.” Heidi announced a little petulantly. Danni wondered why she hadn’t seen the small girl return to the classroom. True, thoughts of Falcon clouded her mind, but she couldn’t imagine not hearing the door to her own classroom open and close?

“You were in the bathroom.” Elizabeth noted with a slight touch of disdain.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.” Elizabeth continued to bait her target. “If you didn’t drink so much water, you wouldn’t need to go to the bathroom.”

Heidi took umbrage. “My mommy says water is good for you.”

“Your mommy is a...”

“Children!” Danni rounded her desk and slapped the reader against her palm. “What have I told you about arguing with one another? Now, apologize.” With the silence came Danni’s increased exasperation.

“Elizabeth, tell Heidi you’re sorry now.”

Elizabeth’s lower lip jutted out in a perfected pout. “But I’m not sorry and my mother tells me I shouldn’t lie.”

“Your mother also tells you to wear those stupid knee socks,” Heidi inserted with catty perfection worthy of a high-school sophomore.

Danni positioned herself in front of Heidi and trained her disapproving gaze on the little girl’s face. “Heidi, that is enough. Tell Elizabeth you’re sorry.”

“But she hasn’t apologized to me.”

“Then you’ll both have detention at recess. I won’t tolerate fighting in my classroom.” She watched twin pouts cover the girls’ faces. They were more alike than they cared to admit.

Josh drew her attention back to the front of the room. “Mrs. Condrey?”

“Yes, Josh?” Slightly distracted, Danni switched gears.

“Who is Falcon?”

Danni’s mouth fell open and she forgot all about Heidi and Elizabeth. “Wh-why do you ask?”

“Because his name is written all over that piece of paper on your desk.” Josh pointed to emphasize the direction of the paper.

Danni’s gaze flew toward the sheet of paper, impossible to see from her vantage point. “Josh, please take your seat and stop reading papers on my desk.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Josh did as instructed, but once settled back in the pine chair, he swung his legs and sent her a gamine grin. “Susie Myers once wrote my name all over her notebook because she liked me.” His grin faded at the memory. “But I didn’t like her, though. Is that why you wrote Mr. Falcon’s name all over your paper, Mrs. Condrey?”

The class tittered and shifted in their seats.

Sixteen sets of eyes stared at Danni as she slumped back down behind her desk and prayed for the recess bell. “Please keep your attention on your lessons, Josh, and not on my personal life.” She pressed her palm against her forehead in an effort to ward off the oncoming headache.

“Yes, ma’am.” Though the boy was perfectly agreeable, Danni didn’t have to be a brain surgeon to know the wheels were turning in the boy’s head. She had no doubt her love life would be a topic of great interest on the playground that afternoon. Ordinarily, that wouldn’t have bothered her. But since meeting Falcon, ordinary didn’t seem so interesting any more.

She was still leaning over her desk when the vision slammed into her, tearing into her skull. She clasped her temples and tried to ride out the vivid images playing through her mind. The pain was so real it made her catch her breath, but it was a scene in the vision. She was on her knees, praying for release, from



what she wasn't sure and blue lights and swirling fog surrounded her. And then just as suddenly as it had arrived, the vision disappeared and Danni was left shaken and weak.

She slowly got to her feet and made her way to the window on wobbly knees. There was an undercurrent of tension in the air. Something or someone was coming. Danni only wished she knew why they were coming for her.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

As the heat of the day blanketed her, Danni quickened her pace to her car. Usually the last teacher to leave the building for the day, she had stayed even later than normal, taking extra time to grade the spelling tests she'd given her students just after lunch. And now, the sun was beginning to sink low in the sky, but the fading light did little to cool the punch of the late spring air.

The door to the Honda groaned in protest as she tugged it open and tossed her bag and purse into the passenger seat. She had one leg inside the toasted confines when she heard her name. She lifted her head and shot a look over her left shoulder.

The same white-haired man she'd seen in the parking lot before stood several feet away from her, his hands on his hips in a belligerent stance. "Well, it seems we meet again, Mrs. Condrey."

Danni quickly sat on the cracked upholstery and stuffed the key in the ignition. "I told you the last time we spoke I would call the police if I saw you here again. Maybe you can explain to them why you continue to harass me." Her words contained far more bravery than she felt.

The man chuckled, a sinister, evil sound that crawled down Danni's spine. "You won't call the police. You already know they have no intention of helping you. You won't waste your time."

"Which is exactly what I'm doing now." She pumped the accelerator a few times and turned the key. The engine coughed and sputtered but, thankfully, began to idle. "Now, if you will excuse me...." Before the words left her mouth, the man slapped his palm against the hood of the car, startling Danni. How had he gotten there so fast and why hadn't she seen him move?

The Honda gave one last cough and stuttered to silence. Danni blinked into the cold, pale eyes of the white-haired miscreant. But perhaps, miscreant wasn't the best word to describe him now. He'd changed. Gone were the tattered clothes he'd worn before. In their place was a three-piece suit with a silk tie knotted at his throat. He'd tied his hair away from his face and his hands were clean, his nails neat.

He spoke again and Danni lost her focus. "You might have done better heeding my warning, Mrs. Condrey." He ran one finger down the windshield and the glass cracked, long ribbons slicing to the opposite end.

Danni's breath caught in her throat and held. She'd known this man was dangerous even before now. Something dark lurked in his eyes, malevolent. She shivered in spite of the heat and drew her arms around her waist. "What do you want?"

"Ah, yes, the games again. I do like a good challenge every now and then." He walked around the opened driver's door and leaned into the steamy interior. "However, now is not one of those times. You will

give me what I'm looking for and I will kill you quickly and painlessly. Trust me when I tell you that you do not want to take the second option."

Danni felt the blood draining from her face, but she refused to give into the fear. Instead, she shoved with all her might against the lanky stranger and managed to unbalance him. Then, she dove from the car and took off at a run, her sandals slapping against the concrete.

"Stop!" The harsh word rang out and Danni froze in place, her legs heavy pieces of lead rooted to the ground.

Horried, she looked at her feet. She struggled to force her legs to obey her commands even as the stranger approached her once more. She knew she wouldn't be able to escape him this time.

"I cannot imagine why a well-educated woman such as yourself would choose option number two, but that is not my concern. You will die, Mrs. Condrey, and it will not be pleasant." As he spoke, storm clouds rolled in the skies, obscuring the last remaining rays of the sun. The winds increased in tempo, brushing a cooling breeze over Danni's damp skin.

She made a last ditch effort to reason with a man whose level of sanity had taken a nosedive. "Could you at least tell me what it is that you want? Maybe if I knew what you were looking for, I could tell you where it is."

He merely smiled and shook his snowy head. "The time for conversation is past. I grow weary of your riddles." With lightning quick speed, his hand arced. He dragged a bolt of energy from the sky and flung it toward Danni.

As she opened her mouth to scream, the streak of blue flame bounced harmlessly off an invisible wall before dissipating into thin air. Danni swayed on her feet, staring in horrified fascination at the stranger's look of complete stupefaction. Before her surprise could give way to a full-fledged faint, she gasped. A dark shroud settled around her, stealing her oxygen. Her hands clawed at her throat, but the power behind the darkness was stronger. She fell to her knees, struggling to draw in a breath, no matter how small, any breath to sustain her lungs.

Her mind's eye captured the image of a red mist and a flash of light but her vision grayed, clouded. Her lungs craved oxygen and Danni knew her life was slipping away. Her face pressed against the concrete, but she didn't even feel the bite of the gravel against her tender skin. The grayness enveloped her and she closed her eyes.

"Danni." The harsh voice called her back to reality and in an instant, Danni could breathe. She dragged in deep, restorative gusts of air. She didn't sit up. Her limbs lay uselessly against the pavement, her body shaking.

She recognized the gentle touch of Falcon's fingers against her face, but she couldn't acknowledge his

presence. Her chest ached, her head throbbed and the panic settled within her breast like a raging animal.

Falcon knelt down beside her, stroking her hair and murmuring to her in a soothing, peaceful tone of voice. "You're safe now."

She wanted to ask what had happened, but she wasn't so sure she wanted to know. Hadn't her marriage to Doug proven some things were better left unlearned? It had been her quest for information that had sent Doug on the downward spiral, which ultimately led to his death. And she'd vowed to keep her nose where it belonged. Falcon scooped her up into his arms, cradled her against his chest like a priceless treasure he couldn't risk breaking. His long strides carried him back toward the Explorer. Danni rested her head weakly on his shoulder, her hands curled into fists against the warm fabric of his shirt. He smelled nice. Woodsy. Masculine. She swallowed an hysterical bubble of laughter that just seconds after her brush with death, she would be thinking about Falcon's scent. Her world was racing crazily and she was beginning to doubt her own sanity.

Falcon cursed himself with every step. Why hadn't he noticed the mark of the wizard's spell on Danni? How could he not have known his protective spell was dangerous? He should have foreseen Montclair's plan, should have realized the wily wizard would have expected him to protect Danni.

Damnation. Falcon settled Danni in the passenger seat and secured her seatbelt as if tucking in a small child. He kissed her cheek, brushed his hand over her hair once more and moved to the driver's side. He'd only wanted to protect her, to ensure that she would be safe without him by her side twenty-four hours of the day. And his protection spell had almost killed her.

"I don't understand." Danni's voice was raspy.

Falcon reached over and took her hand, held it tightly against his chest. "I know. We'll talk when we get home."

She tugged her fingers away. With each passing minute her strength was returning and along with it, the horror of the moments. "I want to know what happened." Her hazel eyes lingered on his face. "Do you know?"

His jaw clenched and Danni got her answer.

"Well, if you know, then tell me. Tell me what's going on. I can assure you that in spite of how it looks, I'm not going to fall apart." At least, she hoped she wouldn't fall apart.

"I told you we will talk when we get home."

Danni sat up straighter. Her hand caught hold of his arm and she gave it an insistent tug. "I don't want to wait. I want to know."

"Danni, I..."

"Dammit, what is going on?"

Falcon whipped the sports utility vehicle over to the emergency lane and switched off the engine. His hand draped over the steering wheel, he angled his body slightly to face her. “Who have you had contact with these last few weeks?”

She blinked once, trying to grab hold of the conversation. “Excuse me?”

“Who has touched you?” The words came out a low growl.

“That’s none of your business.”

Falcon’s temper snapped. He pushed open the door, stormed around to Danni’s side of the vehicle and dragged her out into the open air. Pressing her back against the steel fender, he met her bewildered gaze. “It is my business. Whoever touched you has...” he broke off. Hell, what was he supposed to tell her? That she’d been hexed? Cursed? She wouldn’t understand the wizard’s precautionary measures anymore than she would understand his attempt to protect her. To her, it would be a magic she didn’t understand. And he would be the circus sideshow.

“Has what?” Danni pushed against his chest, needing the space to breathe, to think. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“I’m not trying to tell you anything. I’m trying to find out who you’ve had contact with.”

“You’re not the only one who gets to ask the questions and furthermore,” she managed to disentangle herself from his arms, “I don’t answer to you.”

Falcon’s hand shot out, fingers curling around her wrist. “This could be important.”

“So is what happened to me back at the school and there’s no doubt in my mind you could shed some light on the subject. Which is why I don’t understand your hesitation. Don’t you want me to know what’s happening?” She whirled, broke the connection and walked around him.

“Knowing and understanding are two separate issues.”

Temper flashed in her eyes. “I’m not ignorant, Falcon.”

Silver eyes followed her every move. “This isn’t about intellect.”

“You’ll have to forgive my ignorance,” she shot back, “because you’ve become pretty adept at keeping me in the dark. You keep telling me you’ll protect me. You show up at just the precise moment I’m about to meet my Maker and amazingly, you always manage to save the day. You can understand my concern. For all I know, you could be the one stalking me.” She stopped, clapped a hand over her mouth.

Falcon watched the fear flicker in her eyes and he steeled himself for the onslaught of her panic. He remained silent as the emotions skated over her face, doubt, confusion, and terror. Still, he didn’t move, didn’t speak.

“Falcon, why did you come to me that first day in the parking lot?”

The question was unexpected. And spoken so calmly, Falcon wondered if he’d imagined the

apprehension he'd seen in those hazel eyes. "Because your life was in danger."

"But how did you know that?"

"We've already gone over this." He reached out of her, taking her shoulders in his hands, but Danni brushed him away, moved out of his reach. She crossed her arms over her breasts in a defensive gesture and Falcon swept out a hand, giving her permission to resume her line of questioning.

"Do you know who is stalking me?"

He didn't want to lie to her. She needed to trust him. "How can I when I've never seen the man?"

"Answering a question with a question. That's always been a good hedge. My students do it all the time."

"I'm not a third-grader, Danni. I'm merely a man trying to protect you." He took another step toward her, but her upheld hand warned him off.

"Don't touch me. Just stay back right now. I don't believe you."

Falcon didn't wince even though the words cut straight through to his heart. Her trust in him had slipped. "I've never lied to you."

"No, but you've sidestepped around the truth so much I'm not sure what to believe. I can't be with you right now. I need some space. Some time to think things through. I want to go to a hotel."

His temper spiked. "No."

Her arms dropped. "No?"

"Precisely."

"I'm going to a hotel with or without your help. I'll call a cab if I need to."

Falcon reached her in one easy stride. He clamped one hand around her arm and towed her toward the Explorer. "You're not going to a hotel, Danni."

She struggled against his hold. "Let go of me. I'm not going back to your house. I swear if I have to I...."

He moved so fast, her hair lifted with the rush of wind. He pressed her back against the door, his arms locked around her waist. "Listen to me. You are in danger. I'm the only one who can save you now. I'm sorry if that frightens you, but I won't let anything happen to you. If that means keeping you within my sight twenty-four hours of the day, I will. Look at me, Danni. Look into my eyes. You know what I'm telling you is the truth. This isn't the type of danger the police could handle. You're going to have to trust me on that one."

Perspiration coated her skin, but Danni knew it wasn't from the heat. It was a sickly cold type of moisture, panic's sign. "How do I know I should trust you at all?"

He cupped her face. “You know I wouldn’t hurt you.”

“But you’re going to keep me against my will.”

“If that’s what it takes to save your life, then, yes, that’s what I’ll do.”

“And I’m supposed to trust that what you’re doing is in my best interest?”

“Yes.” The clipped word did little to reassure her.

She shoved hard against his chest and ducked under one of his muscular arms to gain her freedom.

“No. That’s not how it’s going to work. You’re going to answer some questions or I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Falcon knew he could take her against her will just as he knew to do so would jeopardize any trust she might have in him now. Unaccustomed to having to explain himself, he was a little rusty. He tried for a softer tone. “Danni, you know you’re in danger.”

“That’s not news. How did you know?”

“I have a sixth sense about these types of things.” And centuries of experience.

“And you also have a sixth sense about who’s after me.”

“I haven’t seen him.”

Danni lifted her thick hair away from her neck to allow the cooling breeze to ghost over her exposed skin. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. “You’ve told me that already. But you think you know. I just want the truth, Falcon.” Her hair dropped. Her hands moved to the top button of her silk blouse. She lifted the material away from her skin where it clung to her. As the silence drew taut, she tipped her head up. “Falcon?”

One minute he was standing opposite her, the next, he was in front of her. One hand dipped inside the vee-neck of her blouse and curled around the silver, stone pendant swinging from the antique necklace. “Where did you get this?”

Danni stared up at him and for a brief moment, she felt fear. A new side to the man had emerged. A dark and dangerous side. His jaw clenched and his face settled into taut lines. When the icy, silver orbs landed on her face, Danni actually shivered.

“Answer me, Danni. Where did you get this?” His voice rasped like the slide of a rusty saw.

“I...I’m not sure,” she lied, apprehension stamping out reason.

Falcon gave the chain a yank, breaking it from her neck. “Don’t lie to me.”

She gasped, leaned away from him. “What are you doing?”

He gripped her upper arm and dragged her back to the Explorer. “Do you have any idea what this is?”

She dug in her heels, but Falcon’s strength was greater. He propelled her along as if she were no more than a child’s pull toy. “Falcon, stop it!” With desperation, she clawed his fingers from her arm and

stumbled away from him. She bit her lower lip because any minute she was going to cry and mature women did not cry simply because their boyfriend began dragging his knuckles along the pavement. "I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me what is going on."

Her anxiety floated across to him in waves and Falcon forced himself to relax, to attempt to ease her fears. "Danni, I'm sorry." He stuffed the amulet in the front pocket of his jeans and held out one hand, coaxing. "Come here."

Danni stood her ground. "I'm not sure I want to be near you right now. What was that all about?"

He walked to her. "This stone is a very priceless artifact. People have been killed for it."

Her eyes widened and she darted a glance to the front pocket of his jeans. "What's it for?"

"It's not for anything. It's one of a kind. It cannot be duplicated. For that reason alone, it would bring an extraordinary price on the black market." He pushed back the guilt for the lie. He didn't think she could handle the truth right now.

"How do you know so much about it?"

"Because it belongs in my family."

Danni's shoulders sank. "Is that what brought you to me? Did you know this is what that man is looking for?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't know why you were being targeted."

"But you do now."

Falcon took her in his arms, ignoring the slight resistance. He soothed her, stroked her spine, her hair. "I think this would be a good reason." He kissed her forehead and pulled back to see her face. "I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"There's no if about it."

He tipped her face and kissed her lips softly. "When I think about the possibility of your getting hurt, reason deserts me."

"Apparently." Danni touched his chest with her open palm. "Are you okay?"

"I should be asking that of you."

"The white-haired man is the one who touched me. That first day we met. He grabbed my arm at my car. Is that what you needed to know?"

Falcon wrapped his arms tighter around her and allowed himself the luxury of just holding her. "Yes, that's what I needed to know."

"Is everything okay?"

"No, but it's going to be."

"Should I be worried?"



“No. Not anymore. I will take care of this.”

The promise should have made her feel better, but instead, the fears only intensified. How could Falcon go up against the white-haired man and win? She didn't know what the man was capable of, but she knew it was far more power than she'd seen in a long time. And she'd seen a lot in her forty years. She sensed Falcon's strength and knew he would be a formidable opponent, but the stranger appeared to have knowledge of the black arts. And she didn't know of anyone who had survived a confrontation with that type of magic.

Her only solution would be to stop Falcon from going after the man. Now, it was her turn to protect.

Falcon hadn't wasted any time in ascending to the top of the highest mountain once he'd left Danni safely sleeping at his house. Adorned in the indigo robes of his people, he held his arms wide, summoning the younger wizard with the mystical abilities afforded him by his centuries of existence. “Montclair.”

The air contorted and Falcon heard the muffled curse as the invocation dragged the wizard into his presence.

Montclair, a wizard of only two hundred years, had chosen to allow his appearance to age and with the long, flowing, white beard and hair sweeping down his back, he seemed the epitome of the wizened sorcerer. Only Falcon knew the knowledge wasn't sufficient to sustain him in battle.

Montclair simmered with affront even as his feet touched the earth several feet away from where Falcon stood. “Why have you summoned me here?”

“You have made your presence known to someone close to me.”

The young wizard's lips curled into a sneer. “Ah. The shapely Mrs. Condrey. You are with her, then?”

Falcon ignored the sneer and focused on the task at hand. “You will leave her alone.”

Montclair folded his arms, titled his head and for a brief moment, Falcon remembered a younger version of Jaxon when he'd challenged the Assembly for his right to use his magic for his own greedy purposes. Falcon had helped him see the light and he could only pray he could do the same with this young wizard. “Who are you that you speak to me with such authority?”

“I am Falcon of the Assembly and I come to you with a direct order from the master wizard. Leave Danni Condrey alone.”

Only the slight shifting of Montclair's stance gave any indication of his unease. “The Assembly would protect your woman? I find that hard to believe. And I happen to know Falcon is an old man. I saw him once many years ago. You are not Falcon.”

"I will not argue my identity with you. Even a wizard of only fifty years can change his appearance at will." Falcon's voice snapped. "Do not make the mistake of misjudging me, Montclair. For should you choose to challenge me, you will lose."

"Your confidence is impressive."

"So is my power," Falcon's words shot out on a snarl.

The young wizard's arms dropped to his sides and he took a step back. "Your woman has something I need."

Falcon's hand dipped in his pocket and brought the amulet into the waning sunlight. "Is this what you require?"

Montclair's brown eyes fastened on the stone and deep within their depths, Falcon saw the greed. He'd seen it in many other wizards. Some he'd been able to help. Others had allowed their desire for domination of the human populace to rule out reason and self-control. He wasn't so sure he'd be able to help this wizard. His will was strong. His desire palpable.

"That amulet belongs to me." The rumble of Montclair's words shook the ground at their feet.

"If you want it, you come after me to get it. Danni has no part in this not any longer. Am I clear?"

"Your woman has seen too much. She could be a liability to me."

Falcon leaped forward with a snarl, ensnaring the young wizard in a relentless grip around his throat. "I could kill you at this moment, so do not test me or my resolve. If you come near Danni again, I will not hold the Assembly's request to spare your life in good stead."

The wizard choked against the steely fingers curved around his neck. "You cannot kill another wizard. It is not permitted."

Falcon dragged him closer and leaned in toward his ear. When he spoke, his voice was a blend of rage and lethal warning. "You should read the rule book again, young Montclair. You have turned your back on your guild. For that, you could easily be destroyed, especially if you challenge another wizard." As quickly as he'd captured him, Falcon released the wizard and returned to the opposite side of the mountain. "But I would kill you for touching Danni."

"I am not the only one who wishes Mrs. Condrey's demise." Although fear flickered in Montclair's eyes, his voice still rang with power.

"And I shall deal with those accordingly. For now, I am concerned with your next step. Should you choose to make it toward Danni, you will find your life greatly shortened."

Montclair's smile was cold and unmerciful. "I do not have to be near Mrs. Condrey to kill her."

Falcon's eyes narrowed and twin streaks of light burnt the ground at Montclair's feet. "You are easily disposed of as well. Heed my words, Montclair. Do not make me kill you." Falcon didn't waste any more

time. With the warning simmering in the air, he returned to his home.

Falcon pushed open the bedroom door without knocking and strode inside. He came to a stop in the middle of the room as Danni turned slowly, her blouse pressed against her lacy scrap of bra. The tops of her shoulders were bare save for the thin, black straps. The silky piece of material Danni held against her offered little covering. Falcon saw everything, from the shape of her breasts to the peaks of her nipples pouting against the lace. Though his eyes burned, Falcon forced himself to focus on the reason for his intrusion. “Beginning tomorrow, I’m going to the school with you.”

Danni’s eyes widened. “Don’t you ever knock?”

“That’s not important. I’m going to work with you.”

She continued to hold her blouse and stare at him. From across the room, his eyes touched her, caressed her. She didn’t think it was possible for a man to do that. “And do what?”

“Watch you.”

She turned her back to him and shoved her arms into the blouse. “I don’t need you to watch me and anyway, the principal wouldn’t allow it.” Her hands were shaking so much she couldn’t fasten the tiny pearl buttons.

Falcon squelched her concern. “I’ll talk to him.”

Danni whirled back around, holding the silk lapels together. “No, you won’t. You don’t need to come with me to work. I’m safe there.”

“You were in the parking lot of the school when you were attacked,” Falcon reminded her.

“So you can meet me after school. I’m safe inside.” She finally managed to secure one button then another. “Where did you go anyway?”

“That’s not important.”

Danni gritted her teeth. Her anger allowed her to focus enough to finish clothing herself. “Let me be the judge of that. Did you go talk to someone?”

Falcon walked toward her. His fingers were gentle as he adjusted the collar of her blouse. He allowed his hands to linger just over her collarbone. “Danni, the danger isn’t over.” He looked into her upturned face.

Danni ignored the warning in his voice. “Did you give him the amulet?”

“Who?”

“The man you went to see.”

Falcon’s breath escaped on a heavy sigh. “I didn’t say I’d gone to see a man.”

Danni brushed his hands aside. “Didn’t you?” She grabbed the brush from the night stand and pulled it brutally through her hair.

Falcon’s hand clamped on her wrist and stilled her ministrations. She blinked up at him. He took the brush from her hand and began gliding it through the silky strands falling over her shoulders. “I did go talk to someone, but I don’t think he’s going to be of use.”

“You thought he might know who is after me?”

“Yes.”

Danni turned around to face him. “That’s it?”

He arched one eyebrow. “What more did you want?”

She walked away from him, stilled herself to keep from stomping toward the door. “I’m tired of this, Falcon. You know something. I should know it because I’m the one whose life is in danger. I swear to God if you don’t give me more information, I’m going to walk out that door right now.”

Falcon folded his arms across his chest and watched her.

Danni waited till the count of ten before turning the doorknob in her hand. She tugged the door, but it wouldn’t move. She tugged harder to no avail. She rested her head against the wood. “What have you done to the door?”

Falcon’s hands caught hold of her arms. Danni jumped. “I can’t let you leave.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“I do that a lot.” His voice held regret.

She wiggled her shoulders to free herself from his embrace. “But you still won’t let me leave.”

Falcon stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I can’t.”

Danni pressed her hands against the solid wood paneling and shoved away from the door, away from him. “Then leave.”

He leaned one shoulder against the wall. “Why?”

She crossed the floor to the bed and sat down on the edge. “That should be obvious. I don’t want you here.” She looked up and saw the spark in his eyes. Her hands fisted in the comforter at her sides. “You can’t control my life, Falcon.”

“I’m not trying to control your life, Danni. I’m trying to keep you alive.” He whipped around and pulled open the door. “Stay inside the house. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Another informant?” Danni’s voice carried a bite.

Falcon paused with one foot in the hallway, the other still inside the bedroom. “Just stay inside.”

Danni flopped back against the mattress and covered her eyes with her arm. She heard the front door slam and then silence. As the tears began to fall, she climbed slowly to her feet. She knew what she had to

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do and she'd need to do it while Falcon was gone.

When Falcon returned home less than an hour later, Danni was gone.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

Falcon held onto his temper with more restraint than he thought he possessed as he descended the stairs of his home. Circling one hand in the air, he opened a mystical bubble and saw Danni. She'd made it home safely, but he didn't breathe any easier. He sensed the darkness lurking around her. Muttering curses below his breath, he closed his eyes and pictured Danni's home.

When his eyes opened, he stood on her front porch. He didn't knock. He flung the door aside with a wave of his hand and walked inside. Danni whipped around to stare at him in stunned disbelief.

She scooted around behind the island counter which separated the kitchen from the living room. "What are you doing here?"

Falcon swept the door shut and walked toward her. "Do I really need to spell it out for you? I came for you."

"I'm staying here."

"This isn't safe."

Danni lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I've decided safety isn't my number one priority anymore."

His eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't run from this guy any longer, Falcon. I'm going to face him."

Disbelief battled with pure, hot fury as Falcon watched her assume a defensive posture. "You have no idea what you're up against."

"Because you won't tell me."

"There are some things you're better off not knowing."

"I'm not a child, Falcon."

"Then stop acting like one," he returned in a simmering tone.

Danni's jaw locked. "I'd like you to leave now."

"I'll leave when you leave."

Though her knees shook, Danni stood her ground. "I'm not going anywhere."

He could make her leave. Falcon warred with the decision, knowing it would only intensify the fear she felt now. He couldn't let her stay here. The wizard was close. He hadn't heeded Falcon's warning and Falcon knew it was only a matter of time before he would face Montclair again. And this time, one of them wouldn't walk away. But before that could happen, Danni had to be safe. With or without her consent. "Danni, don't make me take you." His voice was as soft as the brush of a butterfly's wing, but there was no mistaking the steel underneath.

Danni gripped the counter. “Why? Why would you take me? You barely know me. Why are you so insistent that I go with you and stay at your home? Why do you even care?”

Falcon moved across the floor with more speed than grace. He gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Danni covered his hands with her own. “And I don’t want to be held prisoner inside your home.”

“You’re not a prisoner,” he snapped.

She tossed her head back defiantly. “I can’t tell a difference.”

The shattering of glass brought both of them spinning around, Falcon automatically shielding Danni’s body with his. He shoved her down to the floor. “Stay here.” Leaping over the counter in one agile movement, Falcon sprang toward the door. The air around him blurred as he moved with the speed of his ancestors.

The first man didn’t know what hit him but as he lay sprawled on the ground blinking and bleeding, he saw his partner shoot into the sky only to land a few feet away from him.

“Gary, my God, Gary, are you all right?”

“You should be more worried about yourself than Gary.” The quiet voice startled the man and he looked up, his mouth going dry. “Who the hell are you?”

Falcon didn’t speak. He lifted a hand and dragged the man to his feet. “What is your name?”

“Syd. My name is Syd.” The words came out on a squeak.

“Syd, I have some bad news for you.”

Syd’s eyes widened. “Wh-what news?”

A cruel smile played about Falcon’s mouth. “You are going to die today.”

“No, no, no. I’m not the one you want.” Syd squirmed in Falcon’s grip. “I only came to do a job. I was just supposed to shoot at the place, you know, scare the broad inside, nothing more. I wasn’t supposed to hurt her. I was told not to hurt her and I wouldn’t have. I don’t hurt women. Please don’t kill me.” He ended his speech on a sob.

Falcon continued to hold him, his penetrating silver eyes scanning the man’s face as he searched for the truth. “Who sent you?”

“I don’t know his name. We don’t talk to him. We go through someone else. We get a phone call, telling us the job. When it’s done, we call him. That’s it. Gary can tell you. Gary, dammit, wake up.” Syd dangled helplessly from the tips of Falcon’s fingers. “Please, Mister, don’t kill me. I’ll help you. I’ll do anything I can.”

Falcon dropped him. As Gary landed with a thump on the hard concrete, Falcon loomed over him. “You will call this man who hired you and tell him your job is done. And then you and your friend will leave

this town, this state. If I see you here again, I will kill you.”

Syd’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah, okay, but the man owes me money. I need the money to...” he broke off on a squeak when Falcon lifted him once more and brought him to eye level.

“You will leave today, Syd, or you will never leave.”

Syd didn’t need the implication spelled out for him. He nodded jerkily as beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. “I wasn’t going to hurt her, Mister.”

Falcon’s teeth flashed in a knowing grin. “I would not have allowed it.” Instantly, he released his prey once more and turned back toward the door. He’d seen the curtain covering the kitchen window move. He knew Danni had been watching. That knowledge was what had saved Syd and Gary’s lives. He would have killed them without remorse, but Danni wouldn’t have understood.

Danni met him at the door while Syd gathered Gary up and managed to limp back to the rusted Jeep parked two driveways down. “Who were those guys?” Danni asked, her gaze drifting past Falcon’s shoulder to follow the retreating men.

Falcon edged her farther back into the house and closed the door. “Nobody. Are you ready to go?”

Danni’s breath escaped on a disgusted sigh. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate staying in the dark.”

“It’s the safest place for you.”

“I’ll decide where I’m safe.”

He lifted his eyebrows and waited for the explosion to escalate.

Danni began a slow circle of the living room. “You can’t treat me like a child, Falcon. Before you came along, I managed to live my life without someone guiding me. And once you’re gone, I’ll do it again. Maybe this is my fault. I’ve leaned on you too much. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have involved you. You could get seriously hurt.”

Falcon still didn’t speak, sensing the tirade wasn’t over.

She picked up an embroidered throw pillow and hugged it close to her chest. “You act like this is a cloak and dagger game, like you can’t possibly lose.” She tossed the pillow aside. “And you expect me to sit on the sidelines and risk your life. I won’t do it. I can’t do it.”

As she wound down, Falcon approached her and guided her to a place on the sofa. “Sit down.” He knelt down in front of her. “You care about me.”

Danni’s gaze flicked to his face. “That’s all you got from what I just said?”

He gave her a wicked smile. “That’s all I wanted to get.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “I won’t let you get hurt and I won’t let you keep me in the dark. That’s not going to work. If I agree to go home with you and,” she thumped his chest, “that’s a big if, then



you and I have to come to an agreement. You have to tell me everything.”

Falcon stood. “That’s not possible.”

Danni leaped to her feet to stand beside him. “It’s my life.”

“But I’m better equipped to handle these types of situations.”

“Says who?”

He folded his arms. “I took care of the ones outside your door just then.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what you did because I was instructed to stay inside.”

“It’s nice to see you’re starting to follow orders.”

“You’re a conceited, arrogant ass,” Danni tossed over her shoulder as she left the living room.

Falcon smiled. “She’s falling in love with me.”

Harrigan squeezed himself into the narrow space between the main building of the police station and Harry’s Antiques. He dialed the phone number as quickly as his shaking fingers would allow. “Come on. Answer the phone.” He smacked the brick wall and winced. “Answer the damn phone.”

“Why are you calling me?” The dark voice didn’t issue a welcome.

“It’s Syd and Gary. They bailed,” Harrigan’s voice cracked.

“Then find someone else.” Slight irritation colored the voice now as if this wasn’t important enough to disturb his day.

The chief blew out a loud breath and dragged his hands through his hair. He was sweating profusely. Even the cool wind blowing off the mountain didn’t help. “You don’t get it. They were shaking like a noodle in a windstorm. They got the crap scared out of ‘em. They wouldn’t tell me what they’d saw only that they wasn’t going to go back to Condrey’s house. They was leaving town. What does that tell you?” Harrigan ended the question on a high-pitched octave.

“That I have managed to find the most incompetent person in this small town to assist me. Find someone else to take care of this.”

“Why don’t you take care of it yourself? I don’t know what happened over there at Danni Condrey’s house, but I can tell you that I don’t want to be a part of it. I ain’t risking my neck for you anymore, not unless I see some money.”

There was a long silence, long enough to make Harrigan’s skin start to crawl. His fingers slipped on the cell phone and he juggled it against his neck as his heart pounded.

“I have something I must take care of. You and I shall continue this conversation later.” The line went dead.

Harrigan stared at the phone for a brief second before throwing it against the brick wall with a loud, long curse.

“Chief?” A junior officer stuck his head around side of the building. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Go back to work,” Harrigan snapped.

The officer continued to watch him. “You need some help getting out of there?”

Harrigan glared at him. “Just follow orders, Officer.” He mopped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and watched the uniformed officer walk away. He’d no doubt he’d be the topic of conversation in the locker room this evening. Dammit.

As Danni wrapped up her class for the day, she realized she missed Falcon. She hadn’t seen him all day although she knew he was close by. He wouldn’t have dropped her off at work and left her. He’d said he’d be nearby and she trusted him to keep his word. But she hadn’t seen him. Her heart leaped as she tucked the papers she needed to grade into her briefcase. Only a few more minutes.

The school secretary knocked on the door of Danni’s classroom and stuck her head inside. “Mrs. Condrey, there’s a gentleman here to see you. He says it’s important.”

“Okay, kids. Make sure you have tonight’s assignment written down before you leave for the day. I’ll see you all tomorrow.” Danni followed the secretary out into the hallway. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“No. Just that it was important.”

Danni cast a worried look over her shoulder. “What does he look like?”

The secretary frowned. “The man?”

“Yes, the man.”

“Average height. Black hair. Plain looking if you ask me.”

Danni relaxed a little. “Okay. Is he in your office?”

“I told him he could wait in the principal’s office since he’s gone for the day. Do you want me to wait?”

Danni reassured the woman with a touch to her shoulder. “No, it’s probably just a parent of one of my students. You go on home.” She grasped the door handle of the principal’s office and waved to the secretary before walking in. “Hello. I’m Mrs. Condrey. May I help you?”

The man turned from the window and smiled. Long and lean, he wore a charcoal-gray business suit with a snowy, white shirt and leather shoes buffed to a glossy shine. With his hair parted on one side and combed to severe perfection, the man presented a professional appearance even down to the wire-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“Hello, Mrs. Condrey. It’s a pleasure to see you again.” The smoothly cultured voice sounded

patently polited.

Danni searched her memory. "I'm sorry. We've met?"

The man approached her, walking with a practiced ease. "Perhaps you don't remember. I'm Luke Montclair." He extended his hand and tilted his head to one side in a gesture of friendliness that didn't put Danni at ease.

Danni allowed her fingertips the briefest of touch against his hand. "I'm afraid I don't remember you." She inched closer to the door, away from him.

His teeth flashed in a grin that was all polish and gleaming white teeth. "My appearance has changed somewhat since last we met."

Danni's warning system began to chime. Where in the hell was Falcon? He said he'd be nearby. What had happened to his psychic abilities? "I see. Well, maybe you could refresh my memory. Where did we meet, Mr. Montclair?"

"I'd prefer to speak some place more private."

"I think we have enough privacy here." Danni saw a flash of irritation in the man's iridescent eyes as she spoke. Her hands clenched around the back of the wing-backed chair in front of her. "Please say what you came to say."

Calmly, Luke Montclair made his way to her side. "I don't like to discuss my personal business in such an open forum." He closed his hand around her upper arm. "Privacy is a must for me."

Danni tried to shake his hand off. "Let go of me."

"In due time. For now, you and I have a little business to transact."

A gust of wind blew the papers from the principal's desk, scattering them onto the Oriental rug. Mr. Montclair turned, his expression one of intense suspicion. His arm tightened on Danni's arm and he thrust her in front of him. "Falcon," he called into the air, "come out and show yourself."

"Falcon?" Danni couldn't see anything.

The shutters flew open and banged against the wall. Danni jumped. Mr. Montclair only laughed. "How exciting," he drawled.

Sparks cascaded from the ceiling, swirling around in a vortex of power and energy and in the center, Falcon appeared while Danni watched in horrified fascination.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Falcon?"

Falcon stepped out of the spinning lights. Clad in a long robe of dark indigo, he didn't resemble the man Danni had come to know. His very presence bespoke of power and authority. Sparks continued to sizzle in the background, snapping and popping against the carpet and walls.

Falcon stretched out his hand. "Release her, Montclair."

Montclair's fingers dug into Danni's arm. "We've had this discussion before. She has something I need."

"I warned you." Falcon's voice was a low vibration.

Montclair smirked. "I don't heed warnings from has-beens."

The room began to shake. Pictures fell from the walls. Glass shattered and chairs slid from one end of the office to the other. Danni felt Falcon's rage although he was the picture of serenity. He barely blinked. Didn't move. But her captor was intimidated. She felt it in the pressure of his hand on her arm, saw it in his eyes, that brief flash of fear before he turned away from her.

Danni trained her gaze back on Falcon, wondering who he was. "Falcon, I..."

Falcon held up one hand to silence her. For once, Danni obeyed instantly.

The paneling buckled and Montclair shifted Danni from one hand to the other. "If you destroy the room, you risk destroying the woman you love."

"I can protect Danni." Falcon's voice was barely a whisper of sound, but the words were strong enough to reassure Danni. "You should worry more for your own safety, Montclair."

"We should take this outside," Montclair suggested. "Just you and me. That is how it should be."

"That is the way it should have been. You changed the rules," Falcon said. His calm demeanor unnerved the man at Danni's side. She felt the dampness of his palm against her skin. She tensed, waiting for her chance to break away from the man's hold.

"Danni," Falcon's voice called to her.

She looked up and met the intensity of his gaze. Silver eyes bored into hers. She swallowed hard, but didn't speak.

"Keep still," Falcon instructed her. "You're safe."

She wondered why she didn't feel safe.

Montclair gave a little laugh. "And that is your Achilles heel, Falcon. This woman will be your downfall." He dragged Danni closer to his side and blinked rapidly. He looked down at his body before directing his gaze back toward Falcon's face. "What is going on?" He tried to move forward, but his body didn't respond.

Falcon smiled coldly. "You were trying to leave. I could not allow that." He held out one hand. "Danni, come to me."

As Montclair's hand fell away from her arm, Danni followed the command. Her knees shook when she finally reached Falcon's side. He gripped her around the waist to steady her. "Stay still," he said.

Montclair shifted, but trapped inside the prison of Falcon's making, he couldn't move beyond three inches. "You will kill me while I am paralyzed?"

Danni's breath caught in her throat and she gripped Falcon's arm. "What's he talking about? You're not going to kill him, are you?"

Falcon swept open the door with a flick of his wrist. "Danni, leave us."

She shook her head. "No. I'm not going anywhere without you."

Falcon turned toward her then, only slightly. "I need you to leave. Please." He softened his voice to lessen the command behind the words.

Danni continued to hold onto him. "I don't want to leave without you."

"Don't make me send you out."

Danni knew he didn't want to yield, but she couldn't back down, not when his life could be in jeopardy. "Falcon, please."

He cupped her face. "You might not understand what will happen."

"I'm willing to take my chances."

"With me?" He questioned softly.

She blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Are you willing to take a chance that something you see here might change things between us?"

Danni swallowed hard. "I'm not so easily frightened."

Falcon leaned his forehead against hers. "I don't want to frighten you."

Danni cast a look over his shoulder to where Montclair was still standing. "Find out why he wants to kill me."

"If the two of you do not need me here any longer, I shall take my leave," Montclair inserted in a bland tone of voice, which belied his nervousness.

Falcon brushed his knuckles down Danni's cheek before he turned around. "Actually, you were never needed here." He lifted his arms and the wind rushed in through the open windows, a sweeping maelstrom.

Montclair tried to hold his position, but the force was too powerful. He scooted toward the opening, cursing and grinding his teeth. "This is not over, Falcon."

Falcon watched the wizard with cold eyes. "You can explain that to the tribunal. They will decide your fate."

"As long as I am alive, your woman is not safe." Montclair's words were enough to catch Falcon's attention. With a curl of his hand, Falcon quieted the windstorm.

Montclair's feet thumped against the floor and his shoulders slumped. "Now this is more like it." He spun around, his eyes glittering like polished diamonds. "We are on equal footing now, Falcon."

Falcon steered Danni around behind him, pushing her toward the door. "Arrogance will not save you, Montclair."

The younger wizard fisted his hands and pulled a lightening bolt from the center of the air. "See how much of my words are arrogance." He flicked his hand and shot the bolt like an arrow.

"Falcon," Danni screamed his name.

Falcon captured the streak with his fingertips and studied it. "A sign of a simple-minded wizard." Danni sucked in a sharp breath behind him, but Falcon focused on his opponent. "You learned this trick in the first year of your studies, am I right?"

Montclair's lips thinned. "I am weary of sparring with you. I want your woman to watch you die."

Falcon held the wizard's gaze while his mind spun with a spell.

Montclair stumbled backwards. He searched the air around him, looking for the source of the blow. Another punch caught him low in the abdomen and he doubled over. His eyes wild, he straightened, only to encounter an uppercut to the chin, which felled him. He staggered and clutched the desk behind him to right himself.

Falcon folded his arms and smiled. "Perhaps you would like to rethink your plan of attack."

Sweating, Montclair tugged at the collar of his shirt. "It seems I underestimated you."

Falcon nodded his assent. "It would seem."

Montclair took one step toward the window, pausing to look over his shoulder. "You will let me go. You do not want your woman to see you kill me."

Falcon levitated and glided across the room to reach where Montclair stood. Returning to the ground, he shuttered the windows with a sweep of his finger and leaned one shoulder against the wooden slats. "You think to read my mind, Montclair, but your skills are sadly lacking in that area."

Montclair aimed a look at the chandelier overhead. As it began to sway and creak, Falcon pushed Danni to safety with a backward movement of his hand. The younger wizard's jaw tightened.

"You will not win this battle," Falcon informed him.

"I would not be so sure," Montclair returned with a measured look in his eyes. "For a wizard, there is always tomorrow."

Falcon's hand caught the wizard in the center of his chest. Montclair gave a yelp of pain and doubled over. The heat from Falcon's palm had seared away both clothing and flesh, leaving behind a raw, angry wound. "Leave me now," Falcon instructed.

Montclair looked up, surprise stamped across his features. He edged toward the door, keeping one eye on Falcon.

Falcon stood still. "My patience grows weak, Montclair. Return to your guild. Do not come near Danni again. I will not be as compassionate as I am at this moment."

Montclair slid out into the hallway, tugging the door shut behind him.

Danni slumped against the wall, her face ashen. Falcon came to her side, taking her face in his hands.

“Danni, are you all right?”

She shook her head. Every nerve in her body jumped. She couldn’t swallow or think. She could barely breathe.

Falcon gathered her in his arms and centering his thoughts on his home, he stepped over the threshold within seconds. He carried her up the stairs. Her head dropped to his shoulder and she concentrated on breathing while Falcon walked. Her mind swirled, pushing out reason and sanity. She’d witnessed things impossible. Things she wasn’t supposed to see. How could she rationalize the magic?

Falcon shoved open the bedroom door with his shoulder and placed Danni carefully on the bed. He sat down beside her, taking both of her hands in his. “Danni, say something.”

Her hazel eyes clouded with confusion. Brushing the hair back from her face, she stared up into Falcon’s face. “What happened?” She squeezed his hands. “Tell me the truth.”

Falcon looked down at their joined hands, taking a minute to filter his thoughts. “There’s no easy way to explain what just happened.”

“I didn’t ask for easy.”

He nodded. “No, you didn’t, but you won’t understand what I’m about to tell you.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“It will be difficult,” Falcon continued to hedge.”

“Falcon.” Danni’s voice held a note of exasperation.

He looked at her then, met her gaze squarely and held it as he said his next words. “I’m a wizard.”

Danni swallowed, blinked and licked her lips. “A wizard.”

“Yes.”

She dropped her head back against the pillow and closed her eyes. “I see. That’s how you’ve been able to get to my house so quickly.”

“Yes.”

“And how you knew when I was in trouble.”

“Yes.” Falcon saw no need to elaborate on his responses. He gave her the time she needed to digest the information.

Danni pulled her hands away from his. “Do you realize how crazy this sound?”

“I did warn you it would be difficult.”

She cracked open one eye. “That’s all you have to say?” She laughed abruptly. “My God. You’re sitting there telling me you’re a wizard and I’m lying here believing it. So which one of us is nuts?”

Falcon leaned down and brushed a kiss over her forehead. “Neither one. I’ve told you the truth.”

She sighed and inhaled the scent of his skin. "And I've already said I believe you."

He slid one hand along her cheek. "Do you really?"

She opened both eyes. "I don't have a choice. I just saw things that really aren't possible. I mean, you burned a man with your palm. I saw it. That man was getting pummeled and you weren't even touching him. I'd say those things qualify as something only a wizard could do."

Falcon observed her with a long, steady look. "You're not frightened?"

She pushed herself to a sitting position. "Don't mistake my calmness for no fear. Of course I'm frightened. Any woman in her right mind would be." She touched his chest, an exploratory caress with her fingertips.

Falcon looked at her. "What are you doing?"

She poked his arm with her index finger. He caught hold of her hand.

"Danni, what are you doing?"

"I'm making sure this isn't a dream."

"Then shouldn't I be pinching you?" he teased.

Danni's eyes narrowed. "Try it."

He grinned. "You seem to be okay."

Danni smacked him. "Okay? Are you kidding me? I'm being stalked by a wizard."

Falcon frowned. "I'm not stalking you."

She dragged her hands over her face and peeked at him through splayed fingers. "Not you, the other guy. Mr. Montclair. He's a wizard, too, right?"

Falcon sighed. "Yes, he is."

"Obviously not as strong as you are."

"Powerful," Falcon corrected.

Danni swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. "Whatever."

"Where are you going?"

Nervous energy propelled Danni to the door. "I'm not sure. I need to walk, to think, to breathe. Is that allowed?"

Falcon joined her at the door. "You're not a prisoner." He reached out to touch her, just a simple brush of his fingers along her arm to reassure himself she was really standing before him safe and in one piece.

"Of course not. It wouldn't matter if I left anyway. You could track me. Wizards can find anyone they want to find, can't they?"

Falcon leaned in for a closer look. "We're not gods, Danni. We have abilities and powers from



centuries of existence, but we do have our limitations.”

Danni folded her arms, needing something to do with her hands. Her feet shifted as she continued to watch him. “Name one.”

He arched one eyebrow. “A limitation?”

“Yes.”

Falcon cupped her face and dragged his thumb along her lower lip. “I can’t make a woman fall in love with me.”

Danni’s spine melted. It was difficult to resist the power behind the words. “You already have.”

He closed his eyes and drew her close, resting his chin atop her head. His heart beat in time with hers. “Did I force you?”

She clung to him as his arms wrapped around her waist. “Technically. You didn’t give me a lot of choices.”

Falcon bit down on the inside of his cheek. “Women are notorious for not being able to make up their minds.”

Danni tipped her head back and glared at him. “Not a good response.”

He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. She shivered. “Walk with me,” he whispered. He slid his hand down her arm and took hold of her hand.

Danni looked down at their joined hands. “Where are we going?”

“There are some things I’d like to show you, things I couldn’t show you before now.”

“Before you told me you were a wizard.”

Falcon guided her out into the hallway. “That’s right.”

Danni held tightly to his hand while they descended the stairs. “We’re not going to do anything weird, are we?”

“How would you define weird?”

Danni stopped a few steps from the bottom, forcing Falcon to turn around and look up at her. “I don’t know. Things like facing a dragon or swallowing fire.”

Falcon smothered his laughter. “No dragons and no fire. Feel better?”

“I will once you tell me what we’re going to do.”

“We’re going for a walk.”

Danni eyed him suspiciously. “Where?”

Falcon started walking again. “Come and see.”

Curiosity made her legs move. “Don’t make me regret this, Falcon.”

He stopped at the door. “Do you regret anything so far?”

Danni fell into the spell he'd woven. She reached up and touched his face. "This is crazy, you know. I'm being stalked, my life is being threatened and you're a wizard. So tell me why I'm even more worried about your safety now that I know the truth."

Falcon winked at her. "Because you love me."

Danni looked into his eyes and smiled. "You really are an arrogant ass, Falcon."

"In the future, we'll need to work on your vocabulary."

Even as the banter worked its way into her heart, Danni sensed the danger looming ahead. It was a constant reminder they were never really safe. Someone was always looking, watching. And waiting. For what, Danni wasn't sure.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

The waning sunlight glistened off the still water of the lake behind Falcon's house. Butterflies floated on the breeze, searching for a peaceful place to land for the evening. As the crickets took up their nightly serenade, Falcon slipped his arm around Danni's waist and walked with her to the edge of the lake.

They stood on the bank waiting for night to fall. Neither one of them spoke as dusk gave way to a million glittering stars in the sky. Each one winked like a perfect diamond against an inky backdrop.

Falcon held out his hand. "Walk with me now."

Danni slipped her palm into his. "Is this where I get to see the surprise?"

He smiled at her and tightened his hand around hers. With his free hand, he swept a wide arc in the sky and created a glowing bridge extending from one end of the lake to the other. Still smiling, he took one step forward, guiding Danni to follow.

Swallowing audibly, Danni tapped the luminescent arch with one foot before taking a hesitant step forward. Surprised at the solid feel, she took another step, climbing all the way to the top with Falcon at her side.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked down from atop the peak of the arc, her heart pounding fiercely inside her breast. "Falcon, it's beautiful." In truth, beauty paled to the sights below. The bridge cast an incandescent aura over the water, illuminating the cerulean depths. Frogs, startled by the brightness of the light, jumped to safety afforded by the darkness of the grasses while fish welcomed the glow and jumped in quests for food.

"Look up," Falcon whispered.

Danni tipped her head back and the stars seemed close enough to touch. In awe, she stretched her hand upward and swore she felt the warmth of the moon bathe her palm. Like a child on Christmas morning, she wasn't sure what to do next, what to touch, to see.

Falcon chuckled at her rapt expression and tipped a finger toward the sky just over her head. As a star slid into his palm, Danni gasped aloud. Falcon turned, holding his hand open for Danni's inspection.

"This is incredible." Danni kept her voice low, for fear she might disturb the night.

"This is only the beginning," Falcon corrected. "I can show you your world in a way you've never seen it before. I can take away the horrors of these last few weeks and give you a passion for life again."

Danni squeezed his arm. "You're underestimating yourself again."

Falcon returned the star to the sky and looked down into her upturned face. "I want to make you happy."

She walked into his embrace. “Falcon, you already have.” She stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. His arms banded around her and drew her closer. He deepened the kiss, spinning her into a world of magic and desire.

The night exploded, bathed in the warmth of their bodies pressing against one another, the spiral of their feelings swelling toward the sky.

“Danni,” Falcon whispered against her lips.

She slid her hands alongside his jaw. “I know.” She knew what he was asking and she couldn’t deny him any more than she could deny herself. Tomorrow might bring a new set of problems, but tonight belonged to them. Tonight, she would fall into his arms and watch the sun, rise over the horizon. And she would love him even more.

He held her closer and in an instant, they were inside his bedroom, floating toward the bed. Danni dragged her eyes from his face long enough to acknowledge her surroundings.

“Mmm, that was quick.”

“I’ve never been a procrastinator,” he murmured, fisting his hands in her hair.

She laughed appreciatively. “Is this the part where you tell me you’ll love me forever?”

Falcon lifted his head and met her hesitant gaze. “Those are just words, Danni.”

She nodded her head. “Words I’ve heard before.”

He placed one finger against her lips. “Let me show you.”

She closed her eyes against the intensity of his gaze. “I suppose now is the time where I’m supposed to run.”

Falcon ran his hands along her spine, settling them at the swell of her hips. “Don’t be frightened. Look at me.”

Danni blinked her eyes once, twice, focusing on his face.

“I’m going to make love to you.” He said the words as a promise, not a warning.

She licked her lips. “I should tell you it’s been a while since...”

He hushed her by brushing his lips against hers. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters except this.” He kissed her again, a light teasing. “And this.” One hand slid up her rib cage. “I want to see you.”

Danni captured the hand that had found the edge of her blouse. “Dim the lights,” she whispered on a plea.

“Danni, don’t you know how beautiful you are?” He brushed her hand aside and began to raise the silky material.

Her eyelids fluttered in time with the butterflies in her stomach. “It’s been a long time... I mean, I haven’t done anything since...” she let out a breathy sigh. “I’m not sure I can do this.”

Falcon nuzzled her neck with his lips. "I know you can. Just follow my lead."

"Your lead's going to get us into trouble."

He chuckled and backed her toward the bed like a synchronized waltz. The warmth of his hands caressed her smooth skin before his nimble fingers released the catch on her bra. Her pulse began to hum.

He pulled her even closer, stretching her petite frame against his long length. "I want to feel all of you, touch you," he paused to catch her gaze, "taste you." Delicious shivers danced down Danni's spine.

She ran her hands up the wall of his chest, her fingers cresting over hard, unyielding muscle. Sinewy strength and chiseled male perfection made her sigh with anticipation.

His hands began a slow, unnerving descent down her body, over the small of her back, her hips. Danni tried not to squirm beneath his touch, but the second his fingers found the catch on her slacks, she inhaled sharply. Falcon stopped and looked at her, allowing her time to adjust to his next move.

Danni's throat went dry. "I'm just..." she blushed like a schoolgirl.

He leaned in closer, his breath bathing her cheeks. "Trust me."

"I do." *More than you know.*

Falcon released the button and lowered the zipper while Danni held her breath. His palm warmed her bikini line, his fingers resting lightly over the soft mound of flesh between her legs. Danni quivered and grasped his forearms, deciding whether to hold on or push him away. But then his fingers moved and she couldn't think any more. He'd made the decision for her. The dampness of her panties moistened his fingertips. With a grunt of irritation, he quickly removed the final barriers between his touch and the satiny softness of her skin.

Danni saw the air spinning around her, a kaleidoscope of colors. The stirring brushed the hair away from her cheeks. The magic of Falcon's touch far eclipsed the magic of his ancestors. She closed her eyes again and held on while his fingers moved inside the silky folds of her womanhood.

Falcon rained soft, teasing kisses along her shoulder, down her arm before returning his lips to hers. His tongue swept inside her mouth, learning her moist secrets and Danni moaned against him, pushing her body against his questing fingers. The spasms racked her, bringing her back off the mattress. She tore her lips from his and cried his name in a breathy whisper.

He continued to stroke the sensitized flesh while Danni quivered and moaned. "It's okay. That's it. Just let go, baby."

As his fingers continued to torment her, Danni's body fragmented again, sending her hurtling over the edge into a mind-numbing vortex of pleasure. She gasped his name in a litany and dug her fingernails into his shoulders.

Falcon shifted himself between her legs and Danni wondered when he'd undressed, but then it didn't

matter. His hardness brushed her thigh and she looked up into the depths of those silver eyes, eyes that caressed her. She held his gaze as the moist tip of his manhood brushed her heated entrance. Then held her breath when he slid inside her, inch by tantalizing inch. Rockets exploded inside her mind while the pure sweetness overwhelmed her. Tears pierced her eyelids as Falcon's body began a slow, delicious assault on her senses.

"I've wanted to be inside you like this for a long time," he whispered against her skin.

Danni's hips lifted to accept the full length of him. She heard the swift intake of his breath and she smiled. "And I've wanted to feel you like this." He shifted and her breath caught in her throat. He tipped his hips forward and Danni let out a soft sigh of pure delight.

She slid her hands over the taut muscles of his spine, down lower still to knead the firmness of his buttocks. Her grip provided to be the catalyst Falcon needed to increase the pace. His hands fisted on either side of her head, he pumped into her while she arched beneath him. Closer and closer they came to the precipice, which beckoned with the promise of untold ecstasy. Then, with their eyes locked and the sheen of perspiration coating their skin, they fell, hurtling into the vortex.

Falcon rolled instantly, taking Danni's damp body with him. He tucked her close to his side and kissed the top of her head. His heart was full and he couldn't find the words he wanted to tell her how he felt. He continued to touch her, his hands moving along the slickness of her skin. When she shivered, he dragged the comforter over their naked bodies and tucked it tightly around her. "Better?"

"Mmm," Danni murmured drowsily. She couldn't remember feeling this safe, this cherished before. She pressed her ear over Falcon's chest and the beat of his heart reassured her, made her believe that perhaps she really could have a normal life. She wanted to tell him what he'd done for her, but the words wouldn't come. She settled for a quick kiss against the hair dampening his chest.

His arms tightened. "Are you okay?"

Her head moved, creating a delicious friction. "I'm better than okay."

Falcon chuckled. "I suppose I should thank you for the unspoken compliment."

Danni's laughter joined his. "I suppose you should."

His fingers tap-danced up her spine. "You know what I was thinking?"

"I'm not sure I should ask considering the activity we just concluded."

He nipped her lightly on the side of the neck. "We should go away together." The minute he spoke the words he wished he could retract them. He knew the instant Danni's suspicious alarm went off. She stiffened in his arms and tipped her head back to see his face.

"Why?"

Falcon brushed the hair back from her face and kissed her upturned lips. "Because I want you all to

myself.”

Danni’s eyes narrowed. “All to yourself or out of Mills River?”

“Both.”

She sighed and pulled away from him, dragging the comforter up over her breasts. “I can’t run away from this, Falcon.”

He sat up beside her. “I’m not asking you to run away, just clear out for a while.”

“And what about my students?”

“That’s what substitutes are for.”

“Would you run away from your life because a maniac was stalking you?”

“This isn’t about me,” Falcon said grumpily.

Danni swept the comforter aside and got to her feet. “No, it isn’t. It’s about me and I’m not running away.” She held up one hand while she searched about the room for a robe. Spying a long, blue one hanging on the back of the bathroom door, she snatched it off the hook. “And I don’t care what you call it, it’s still running away.” Shoving her arms into the silky material, she belted the robe around her waist and turned away from Falcon’s studious gaze. His scent clung to her. It didn’t help her to think.

Falcon remained sitting in the bed, watching her scurry around the room, trying to rationalize in her mind what they’d just done. “Danni, we made love. We didn’t commit an unpardonable sin.”

Danni stopped all movement. She didn’t look at him. “We were talking about my leaving, not about making love.”

“I was talking about your leaving, but your actions were talking about a different subject. Look at me.”

“No.”

“Danni, look at me.” His voice hardened.

Danni gritted her teeth and shot a quick look over her shoulder before dropping her gaze back down to the floor. She shuffled her feet and stuck her hands in the pockets of the voluminous robe. “What?”

“Come here.” Falcon knew he wouldn’t hold her attention unless he held her. He rose from the bed and walked toward her.

She tensed her shoulders, hearing his approach. “Falcon, please.”

“What’s happened?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He spun her in his arms and settled his hands on her shoulders. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m just cold,” she hedged.

“When I mentioned leaving town, it was almost as if you panicked. Why? Are you afraid to leave

Mills River or just frightened at the thought of leaving with me?”

Danni thrust her head back, defiance glittering in her hazel eyes. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

Falcon inclined his head slightly. “You mean we shouldn’t have made love?”

“Stop calling it that,” she snapped, trying to twist her shoulders out of his grasp. “Our feelings, these feelings we have for one another aren’t based on reality, Falcon. We’ve come together in a dangerous situation and once the danger is over, the novelty will pass. You’ll move on to someone else, possibly another wizard,” she curled her lips at the word, “and I’ll still be stuck here in this small town with the memories.”

As her insecurities washed over him, Falcon drew her close and pressed her head against his chest. “Danni, haven’t you figured out by now I’m not going anywhere without you?”

She rested her forehead against the area of skin over his heart. “And what happens when I don’t need your bodyguard services any longer?”

His shoulders shook with laughter. “I believe I have a few more services you might require in the future.”

Danni smiled in spite of herself. “I’m still not leaving town.”

Falcon kissed her forehead. “You’ll leave if I tell you to leave.”

She shot a look up at his face. “Just because we had sex doesn’t give you control over my life.”

Falcon’s eyes twinkled. “We didn’t have sex; we made love. And you won’t leave because I’m controlling you. You’ll leave because I wish it and you want to please me.”

Danni gave a harrumph of disgust. “Arrogant ass.”

He lifted her and she locked her legs around his hips. “Stubborn woman.”

Her teeth grazed his jaw line. “Just remember I’m not the only one who wants to please. As I recall, you were putting forth a decent effort to please me.”

He pulled back with a lifted eyebrow. “Only decent?”

Danni’s teeth worried the inside of her cheek. “Well, I was going to say marginal, but I was giving you the benefit of the doubt.” She gave a squeal of surprise when Falcon picked her up in his arms and tossed her onto the mattress. She bounced once and landed with the edge of the robe bunched around her waist. Before she could tug the material into proper place, Falcon’s body was covering hers.

“I want to wake up next to you in the morning,” he whispered.

She smiled up at him. “I believe I told you I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yes, you did.”

The lights of the office offered little illumination of the figure seated behind the polished oak desk.



But Harrigan didn't need to see the man. He knew all too well the face of his tormentor.

"I have decided," the voice came at the chief, making him jump, "that the time for games is over. I must have the amulet. I will have it." He leaned close enough to enable Harrigan to see his pale eyes. "You will get it for me."

"Me?" The chief's voice squeaked out. "We've been doing everything you've said. I have my best men on this and the woman ain't budging. I'm telling you that Kendrick fella has got her wrapped around his little finger. Not to mention something ain't quite right with him. Have you seen his eyes?"

White hair flowed over broad shoulders as the man slapped the desk with his palm. "Focus, Mr. Harrigan. Focus. You cannot fail me now. I will not allow it."

Harrigan's Adam's apple bobbed nervously. "What is it you're wanting me to do now?"

The figure stood. Arrogant and self-assured, he was everything Chief Harrigan wasn't. With a cruelly handsome face and eyes as pale as a winter ice cap, he exuded power and charm. Harrigan hated him for those traits alone, but mostly he hated the man's smugness and the easy way he controlled those he considered beneath him. And Harrigan's dictator left no doubt he considered Harrigan well beneath him. The chief wanted to kill him, but he didn't have the guts. He was man enough to admit that. But something deep inside of him, he wasn't sure what, told him he'd be better off going up against this man than Falcon Kendrick.

"Are you listening to me, Mr. Harrigan?"

The chief's head snapped up and he flicked a subtle glance toward the door, his only link to freedom. "Yeah, I'm listening. I just don't know that I can do much more than I've already done."

Eyes narrowed, the tormentor walked around the desk. He calculated his movements to instill fear in his quarry and they worked. By the time the white-haired figure settled one hip on the corner of the hard oak, Harrigan was sweating profusely.

"You are not doubting your ability to carry out my orders, are you?" He wove an implied threat into the words.

Harrigan prayed he wouldn't wet himself. He crossed his legs, tugged at the collar of his shirt and slid farther down in the chair. "No, that ain't what I'm saying at all. I'm just saying that I'm an ordinary man. My guys are ordinary cops. They can't do much more than what they've done. They ain't got no special training. Maybe you should have called in Special Forces or something. I'm assuming you have ties to all kinds of dirty people. Why would you want to use a small town bunch of cops like us?"

"Because small town cops are easily disposed of. They are, how shall we say it, oh, yes, dispensable."

Harrigan leaped to his feet so quickly he stumbled back against the chair. His hands flailed in the air for a second before he caught hold of the edge of the desk and righted himself. "I don't find your sense of

humor amusing.” More bluster than bravery, the chief hitched up his pants and stormed toward the door. “When you decide you want to talk man to man, you give me a call. Till then, I ain’t hanging around here so you can browbeat me.” As he reached for the door handle, Harrigan found himself face to face with the white-haired man. “Wh-what the hell? How did you do that?”

“I do not believe we have been properly introduced, Mr. Harrigan. Pardon my manners. My name is Luke Montclair and I am much more than a man. I am a wizard.” He held up one hand to demonstrate the truth behind his words. As flames licked from his fingertips, he smiled.

Harrigan’s prayer went unanswered and his pants grew damp.

The crash of thunder brought Falcon wide-awake. He stirred against the sheets and glanced to his left where Danni lay sleeping soundly. She hadn’t moved much since he’d kissed her goodnight at just after three in the morning. Exhausted, she breathed deeply and evenly. Falcon traced the bridge of her nose with one fingertip and rolled to his back.

As he stared up at the ceiling, the lightening illuminated the room, throwing the shadows into bold relief. While his body relaxed, his mind whirled. Montclair was nearby. He wouldn’t stray too far without the amulet. He needed the stone to continue his powers. Banished from his own guild, the young wizard had been stripped of the powers he’d received at birth. It hadn’t taken Falcon long to figure out the wizard was draining power from an unseen energy source, but soon, the source would run dry. He would reduce Montclair to a mortal man. He could only hope to get his hands on the amulet.

Falcon sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He watched the trees bend against the windowpanes and the rain beading against the glass. And he calculated his options. Destroying the amulet was out of the question. But finding Montclair’s energy source was a possibility.

“You should have woke me.” Danni’s soft voice reached out to him like a caress.

Falcon shifted on the mattress to smile down at her. “You need your sleep.”

Danni stretched luxuriously. “I’m not the only one who’s exhausted.”

“Wizards can function with little or no sleep.”

Danni ran her hand down his side. “Function adequately or function normally? You’re as tired as I am.”

Falcon lay down beside her. He met her eyes, but didn’t speak. They lay there together, eyes locked, neither one speaking. When Falcon finally spoke, the serenity shattered.

“Where did you get the amulet, Danni?”

She withdrew her hand and tucked it underneath her arm. “I don’t want to talk about that right now.”

“I need to know.”

“Why?”

Falcon considered hedging, but opted for the truth. “So I can get it back to its rightful owner.”

Danni’s nose wrinkled. “I thought you said it belonged in your family.”

“It does, but not necessarily in my family’s home. I grew up hearing stories about this amulet. I never knew where it had gone or who had it only that it was a powerful stone whose secrets could unlock the mysteries of time.”

Danni rolled to her back. “How do you know the amulet was stolen? Maybe it was given away.”

Falcon watched the emotions chasing across her face. Fear, worry, and even a trace of anger. He remained silent while Danni chose which feeling to embrace.

She turned to face him once more, propping her head in her hand. “My life wasn’t supposed to be like this. Once Doug died, I thought it would be better.”

Falcon lifted an eyebrow. “Your life would be better once your husband died?”

Danni gnawed on the inside of her cheek. “That didn’t come out right.” She sighed and looked at a point just over his shoulder. “Doug and I didn’t have a typical marriage.”

“I’d already gathered that.”

She shivered. “We weren’t happy. I don’t think we ever were.”

Falcon ran a hand down her arm. “Why did you marry him?”

“The usual reason. I was pregnant.” At Falcon’s startled look, she continued. “I lost the baby at the beginning of my second trimester. Doug and I were already married and he was well on his way to becoming an alcoholic.” She stopped talking and looked at Falcon. “Don’t look so surprised. I’d convinced myself Doug was marrying me because he loved me. And I loved him. At least that’s what I told myself.”

“But you didn’t.”

Danni shook her head. “No, I didn’t.”

“You didn’t think you could support a baby on your own?”

Tears glistened in Danni’s eyes. “Doug told me he wanted to marry me. He wanted to provide for me and our child.”

Falcon brushed his knuckles over her cheeks. “But you don’t believe that now.”

How could she believe it when she lived a marriage made in hell? Doug hadn’t been physically abusive. He just hadn’t cared. After she’d lost the baby, he lost interest in their marriage, preferring the attention of common street whores to that of his own wife. Danni couldn’t prevent the bitterness lacing her smile. “Doug could sell air conditioners to Eskimos. He was charming and very convincing. I don’t know if I was so desperate that I fell for it or I just wanted to believe him. I was over thirty and terrified of ending

up alone. I was an easy target.”

Falcon sat up and pulled her into his arms. He closed the embrace and rested his chin on top of her head. “You think Doug married you for a reason other than the baby?”

Danni traced a circle on the back of his hand. “I never really analyzed it. It just didn’t take me long to figure out he didn’t love me.”

“He was an idiot.”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“It matters to me,” Falcon whispered in the wake of her statement.

Danni pressed her head back against his chest and felt the warmth of his embrace surround her. She’d opened her heart to this enigmatic man and while her mind was screaming for her to tread carefully, her soul had already connected to his. “Could we talk about something else?”

Falcon pressed his hands flat against her stomach. “We could talk about the amulet.” His voice held amusement.

“I didn’t change the subject on purpose.”

He nuzzled her neck. “I know you didn’t. There’s no need to get defensive.” He grasped her chin in gentle fingers and tipped her head back to see his face. “I do want to hear about the amulet, though.”

“Of course. The all important amulet.” She slid out of his arms and got to her feet. Shrugging into the robe she’d discarded earlier, she walked to the window, her arms wrapped around her waist. “It seems like it’s been night forever.”

Falcon didn’t immediately follow her. He sat on the bed watching her, his eyes moving with her body. “Why does talking about the amulet bother you?”

Danni pressed her cheek against the coolness of the windowpane. “It doesn’t bother me. I just don’t know why it’s so important how I got it.”

“Did you steal it?” His voice hardened.

Danni whipped around, her eyes shooting daggers at him. “Steal it? No, I didn’t steal it. I don’t steal. The amulet was given to me.”

His eyes crinkled with laughter. “At last. A kernel of information. Who gave it to you?”

Danni turned back to the window. The moon winked high in the sky, bathing the grass below with a warm, yellow glow. She watched a racoon scurry across the cobblestones lining the flower garden. She heard Falcon moving behind her. He’d gotten out of the bed and any minute now, she’d feel his hands reaching out for her, wanting to reassure her. He’d take her in his arms and try to convince her that everything was going to be all right. But he didn’t know. He couldn’t know. Her life was in danger because of her own knowledge and the last thing she wanted was to hand that information over to someone else, to

risk their life.

“Danni?” Falcon’s soft voice called her back to him.

“You should never have come to Mills River, Falcon,” she whispered in desperation.

“Yes, I should have. Otherwise, we never would have met.”

“That might have been for the best.”

Falcon slipped into the space in front of her, leaning one broad shoulder against the lower half of the window. He didn’t touch her. He just looked at her with that unblinking, silver-eyed gaze which unnerved her. “Do you want to tell me why?”

She didn’t want to answer him. She didn’t want to talk about the past or those horrifying images which replayed over and over in her mind no matter how hard she tried to erase them. She looked away from Falcon’s gaze and focused on the darkness outside the window. “Maybe I’m not the best person for you.”

“My soul tells me otherwise.”

The response caught her off-guard. She held her breath for a split second before replying. “There’s no such thing as soul mates.”

Falcon lifted one eyebrow. “Then tell me you can live without me now.”

Danni shook her head ruefully. “Same old arrogance, I see.”

He cupped her face. “And the same old denial from you. Danni, why won’t you tell me the source of your pain?”

She covered his hands with hers. “Because there’s nothing you can do to make it go away.”

“I’d like to try.”

“I’ve already tried.”

“But I haven’t,” he reminded her.

Danni lowered her eyes. “Falcon, I can’t love you. My life is too complicated. Doug made sure of that before he died.”

Falcon drew her close into his embrace. “Tell me how.”

She snuggled into the warmth of his chest bathing her cheek. “He died too young.”

“How did he die, Danni?”

Danni shook her head and tried to pull out of his arms, but Falcon held tightly to her. “No. I don’t want to talk about this,” she whispered.

Falcon’s hand cupped the back of her head. “I know you don’t, but it’s time. The wound isn’t going to heal if you keep it covered. How did Doug die?”

Tears welled in her eyes and no matter how much Danni fought them back, they only came faster, racing down her cheeks in a steady rhythm. “Falcon, please.”

“Danni.”

She pulled in a stuttering breath and fisted her hands against his chest. “Why won’t you listen to me?”

“Because I need to know the truth.”

“Okay, fine. You need to know the truth, I’ll tell you the truth.” Danni escaped from his embrace. “I killed him. Doug died because I killed him. Is that enough truth for you?”

**CHAPTER NINE**

As Danni collapsed in Falcon's arms, he carried her to the bed and sat with her cradled in his lap. He rocked her as she cried, stroked her hair while she sought solace in the comfort of his arms. He didn't ask any further questions as the sobs wracked her slender frame. He simply held her and allowed her the time to sort through the tangle of her emotions.

Several long minutes passed while Danni cried, her hands holding tightly to Falcon's arms, her lifeline in the turbulent storm.

Falcon whispered words of reassurance in his native tongue. It didn't matter Danni didn't understand what he was saying. The tone of his voice was his tool. He didn't believe for one second Danni had killed Doug. The story hadn't unraveled yet, at least not the complete one. The guilt Danni carried around had convinced her she was at fault for her husband's death. Helped, no doubt, by the memories of her unhappy marriage.

Danni's voice broke the silence. "Doug was involved in the black arts, black magic." She spoke in halting tones as if unsure whether she should reveal anything further.

Falcon didn't move a muscle, his stillness encouraging her to continue.

Danni sat up straighter and pushed back the damp strands of her hair. "He got in over his head. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen to me. I knew he didn't know what he was doing. The magic intoxicated him, made him feel powerful. The witches gave him just enough of a taste to make him want more. They controlled him. He was their puppet."

Falcon's shoulders tensed. "Do you know who the witches were?"

She shook her head. "No. It doesn't matter. They left when Doug died. He'd served his purpose."

"How?"

"He got the amulet for them."

Things were starting to make sense. Falcon shifted Danni on his lap so he could see her face. "But he didn't give it to them."

"He never had the chance. He died the same day he got it."

"When did he give it to you?" Falcon asked.

Danni drew in a shaky breath. "Right before he died."

Falcon tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and tweaked her lobe lightly. "You said you killed him. Tell me what happened."

Her beautiful hazel eyes filled with tears once more. "The lightning strike was meant for me. Doug

gave me the amulet and told me to get out of town, to run as far away from Mills River as I could. He told me it wasn't safe to trust anyone, but I didn't believe him. I thought he was so far gone into the magic that he was paranoid." She slipped off Falcon's lap and began to roam around the bedroom. Occasionally, she would touch a piece of furniture, but as Falcon watched the faraway look in her eyes, he knew she wasn't really with him any more. She'd gone back to another time, eight months into the past.

Danni's steps fell lightly over the carpet. She stopped at the foot of the bed, one hand curling around the wooden post. "I'd never seen a wizard before, but that night . . ." She shivered. "Doug had taken me to the old quarry. He figured it would be safe to talk there. He always thought the house was bugged. He thought we were being followed all the time. I didn't want to believe him." She resumed pacing. "We were fighting. I told Doug I wouldn't leave town and I threw the amulet at him. That's when the wizard showed up. He wanted Doug to give him the amulet, but Doug refused. The next thing I knew, Doug was pressing the amulet back into my palm and the wizard had turned to me. I didn't know what was going on. Everything happened so fast." Danni had made it back to the window.

Falcon stood but didn't walk toward her. She needed the time to finish her story and he needed to hear the rest of it. Hopefully, it would erase some of the guilt Danni felt and give him the information he needed to get Montclair out of her life once and for all.

Danni gripped the edge of the windowsill while the tears raced down her cheeks in rapid succession. "I never meant for Doug to die in my place, but he wouldn't move. The wizard was going to kill me for the amulet because I wouldn't give it to him. He thought I was ignoring him, but I couldn't give him the amulet. I was frozen. I couldn't move." Her breath hitched in her throat while the memories replayed in her mind. "The wizard threw some kind of electrical spark toward me. I couldn't really see it." She wrapped her arms around her waist. "I was so terrified. I thought my heart had stopped. Doug saw the bolt coming and he pushed me out of the way. It hit him in the center of the chest and then I heard sirens. And Doug was dying and I couldn't stop it." The sobs came in earnest now, shaking her body once more.

Falcon came to her then, wrapping his arms around her, securing her against his chest. "You didn't kill him, Danni. Doug was protecting you."

Her hands dug into his arms. "Why? Why would he do that? Doug was the most selfish man I'd ever known. Why would he risk his own life to save mine?"

Falcon held her tighter. "Maybe it was because deep down inside, in his own way, he loved you, after all."

Danni's hazel eyes clouded. "No. There has to be another reason."

He cupped her face. "Why? Is it so difficult to believe your husband might have loved you?"

She shook her head. "He died because of me. If I could have moved, Doug would have still been



“He made a choice, Danni. You can’t take responsibility for the choices other people make.”

Danni’s fingers inched up to his neck and touched his hair. She sifted the strands over her palms and closed her eyes. “I held him in my arms as he lay dying and there was nothing I could do. The ambulance got there five minutes too late. I told the paramedics he’d been struck by lightening. The coroner ruled it an accidental death and it was the truth. Doug hadn’t been the intended victim. Had he not stood in front of me, I would have been dead.” She placed her head on Falcon’s shoulder. “I never thought he’d sacrifice himself like that. Not for me.”

Falcon’s eyes darkened while he reassured Danni with the stroke of his hands. “Did Doug tell you why the amulet was so important?”

“He tried, but I wouldn’t listen. I didn’t believe him.”

“But you’ll believe me,” he intoned softly.

“Are you going to tell me about the amulet?”

“Yes. I think you should know.”

Danni stepped out of his arms and brushed the tears from her cheeks. “I already know it had something to do with the magic.”

Falcon watched her walk away from him. Her shoulders were stiff, her spine ramrod straight. Her defense mechanisms were firmly back in place. He didn’t even try to bypass them. She needed to regain her strength, in her own way, in her own time. “The amulet is about more than magic, Danni. It’s about power and ultimate control.”

Danni turned to face him. “Don’t wizards already have that?”

One corner of his lips tilted upwards in a crooked smile. “Witches don’t. Which is why they wanted Doug to get the amulet for him.” He strolled toward her. “Do you know how he got it?”

She looked away from him. “No. I never asked.”

Falcon saw the wall go up and knew she was lying to him. The knowledge bothered him. He thought they’d crossed a barrier, but Danni still hadn’t learned to trust him. “Danni, I need the truth.”

Danni walked toward the door. “And I need some air.”

Falcon held the door in place with a simple glance. He watched her tug the handle futilely before she spun back around to look at him.

“Stop holding the door,” she instructed.

He tipped his head to one side. “Do you have any idea how much danger you’re in?” He swept a hand toward the bed. “Sit down.”

Danni remained standing by the door. “I don’t want to sit.”

“Danni, please.” Even the plea sounded like a command and when Falcon held out his hand toward the bed once more, Danni responded to the summons.

“Will you stop controlling me?” Anger colored her voice.

“I’m not controlling. I’m guiding.”

Her eyes shot daggers at him. “Semantics.”

He inclined his head, allowing her to argue the point. “Montclair wants the amulet because his powers are weakening. The amulet will give him what he needs and more. He’ll be a powerful enemy with the amulet.”

“Too powerful for you to defeat?”

Falcon’s lips twitched. “No, but innocent people could get hurt if he should get his hands on the stone. Which is why I need to take it back to where it belongs.” He squatted down in front of her. “Unless you tell me where Doug got it, then I’ll have to take it to my home. Someone could be missing it, Danni. Another wizard, one deserving of the power, may be in need of it.”

Danni narrowed her eyes and stared into his serious face. “Don’t try to snow me, Falcon. Wizards don’t need the amulet for power.”

Falcon bit back a sigh of irritation. “They do if they’ve been banished.”

“So why would you want to return the stone to a banished wizard?”

He stood and opened the bedroom door with a flick of his finger. “Go for you walk.”

“You’re angry with me.” Surprise laced Danni’s voice. “Because I won’t tell you where Doug got the amulet?”

Falcon waved away the question. “I could easily find out where your husband got the amulet.”

Danni stood and walked to his side. She touched him with a gentle brush of her fingertips over her arm. “Then why are you angry?”

Falcon held her hand, looked down at her fingers. He kissed each knuckle one by one before lowering her hand back to her side. “Why don’t you think about that on your walk?”

Danni’s shoulders drooped. “You think I don’t trust you.”

He didn’t respond.

She stormed away from him, pausing at the door. “Did it ever occur to you that I don’t want to tell you because it could be dangerous for you?”

Falcon gritted his teeth. “When are you going to start listening to me?”

Her eyes widened. “What are you talking about? I’ve been listening to you for the past thirty minutes.”

He gripped her arm. “I don’t mean just now. How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not in

any danger. Montclair cannot harm me.”

“How can you be so sure?” Danni was shouting at him now, her eyes blazing with fear and worry.

Falcon released her to drag his hands through his hair. Then, his fingers pinched the air and dragged a dagger into his palm. “Take it.”

Danni recoiled from the request. “What? I don’t want it.”

“Take it, Danni.” His voice hardened.

Reluctantly, she accepted the lethal weapon. “Now what?”

Falcon flung his arms wide from his sides and stepped back. “Use it.”

The blade thumped against the carpet as Danni’s fingers released it. “You’re crazy. I’m not going to stab you. I could hurt you.”

Frustration lined his face as Falcon reached for her again. His hands gripped her shoulders and he dragged her into his arms. “This is what I meant when I said you weren’t listening to me.”

She struggled to gain freedom from his embrace but Falcon held tightly to her slender form. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Danni smacked her open palm against his chest. “Now, let go of me.”

“Danni.” His voice was a whisper in her ear. “Wizards of my Assembly are immortal.”

Immediately, Danni stopped struggling. She peeked up at him. “Immortal?”

“Yes.”

“As in, you can’t be killed?”

“It’s a difficult feat, but it can be accomplished. Only few know how.”

Danni’s teeth worried her lower lip. “Does this Montclair know how?”

Falcon shook his head slowly, giving her time to accept the truth behind his words. “No.”

Her shoulders relaxed, her fists bunched against his chest. “That’s why you weren’t worried about him hurting you.”

His hands tangled in the wealth of auburn hair. “You’re in far greater danger than I am. Montclair doesn’t have the means or the ability to harm me. Ordinarily, he couldn’t harm someone under my protection, either.”

Danni frowned. “Ordinarily?”

Falcon sighed and led her back to the bed. He sat and pulled her down beside him. He sandwiched one of her hands between both of his. “When Montclair tried to kill you in the school parking lot, you thought you couldn’t breathe because of his power. You thought he’d hurt you.” He winced with the memory. “But it was me.”

Danni stared at him. “You hurt me?”

He looked at her, meeting her accusing gaze. He didn’t mince words with his response. “Yes.”

She slipped her hand out of his. “Why?”

Falcon got to his feet. His shoulders hunched. “Because I was trying to protect you.”

“But you hurt me instead?” Danni’s voice carried her confusion to Falcon.

“I didn’t know Montclair had touched you and when I protected you with the spell, I...”

Danni leaped to her feet. “You used a spell on me?”

Falcon had anticipated her anger. He tried to deflect it. “It was a protection spell.”

“You almost killed me,” she accused.

Falcon jammed his hands on his hips and met her glare for glare. “I can assure you it wasn’t on purpose. I had no way of knowing you’d been touched by another wizard.”

“Maybe if you’d been up front with me about who or what you are, I would’ve told you Montclair had touched me and you wouldn’t have had to sneak behind my back to enchant me.”

Falcon lifted one eyebrow and stared at her long enough to make her look away. “Would you have told me, Danni? Because so far, forthrightness hasn’t been your strong suit.”

“I was right all along. You really are an ass.”

Falcon didn’t shift his stance. “I’m the ass who saved your life.”

Danni tilted her head to one side, reminding Falcon of a queen surveying her subjects. “And who asked you to become my bodyguard, Falcon, because I don’t remember assigning you the position.”

“Someone needs to look after you,” he replied calmly.

“I don’t need a keeper.”

The eyebrow lifted once more. “Is that why you’re in so much trouble?” Falcon knew his words stung. He saw the impact immediately. Danni withdrew from him, her eyes and demeanor changing. He wouldn’t be able to reach her now. He’d have to give her time to sort through what he’d said and hopefully, discern the truth behind his words.

Danni swept past him on her way to the door. “I’m going for that walk now. I need some time to think.”

“Don’t leave the house.” The cold words stopped her in her tracks.

“I need some fresh air.”

“It’s not safe.”

Danni expelled a loud breath. “Did it ever occur to you that I’m not so worried about safety anymore?”

“Do not leave the house, Danni.” His voice sharpened, making the command clear.

“You need to back off.”

Falcon stood his ground. “It’s too late for that.”

“Because I slept with you?”

His temper spiked. “Because you’re mine.”

Danni recoiled as if he’d struck her. “I don’t belong to any one.”

He smiled then, more of a smirk. “No? Then try to leave me.”

“You think this is helping me?”

Falcon’s patience thinned. “If you’d open your eyes, you’d see I am helping you. Stop focusing on my authority and focus on my feelings for you.”

Danni’s hand curled around the brass doorknob. “You have no authority over me and you won’t dictate my life.”

“If it comforts you to believe that, then, by all means, do so.”

She gave him one last, killing look and slammed the door behind her.

After insuring Danni’s safety, Falcon ascended into the air, dissipating to reappear at the gold-encrusted doors of the fortress housing the Assembly. With a push of his finger, he opened the door and stepped onto the marbled tile. As the walls closed around him, he gained the sense of home, of family. He belonged here, maybe not in the permanent sense, but this would always be his home. While leaving had been his choice, he was thankful he’d left the option of returning open.

“Welcome back,” Jaxon greeted with a tongue-in-cheek grin.

Falcon scowled at him even while his eyes surveyed the classically handsome features of the Assembly’s newest leader. “You find this dangerous situation humorous?” He was relieved to see Jaxon looking so well. He’d assumed the mantle of authority at a much younger age than Falcon had. And Falcon had wondered how well Jaxon would be able to adjust.

“I find your frustration humorous,” the leader corrected. “You are dealing with a mortal woman, my friend. Now you will better understand my problems.”

“Nice. He refers to the love of his life as a problem,” Tess called out as she sailed across the floor to greet Falcon with a kiss on his cheek.

Pretty and petite, Jaxon’s wife was a study in contrast to her husband. Outspoken and stubborn, she balanced out Jaxon’s unstable temper and dictatorial ways. Falcon had known from the start the two would make a good match even as he’d fought the relationship. His way of thinking was simple. Wizards and mortals did not mix. But Jaxon and Tess seemed to be the exception.

Falcon looked down into Tess’ flushed face. “Your happiness radiates from you, Tess. I am glad to see marriage agreeing with you.”

Jaxon took his wife's hand and pulled her to his side. "Falcon is encountering some," he paused delicately, "difficulties dealing with this mortal woman he fancies." Jaxon winked. "Perhaps you could give him some pointers."

Tess' eyes narrowed. "Are you asking me to teach him how to respect her? Or perhaps I could show him how to treat her like an individual and not a piece of property?"

Some of the tension slipped from Falcon's shoulders as he enjoyed the banter between the Assembly's leader and Tess. "It would appear you have your own difficulties, Jaxon."

Jaxon glowered at his former mentor. "My wife does not always see things my way. It is a degree of dissension we are working to correct."

Tess tapped her husband's cheek. "If you think I'm going to genuflect and kiss your feet, my love, you married the wrong woman."

Jaxon gave her a mock growl and squeezed her closer against his side. "Women." He flashed a grin at the Assembly's oldest wizard and swept out a hand toward the conference room. "The others will want to see you."

Falcon shook his head. "I cannot stay. I came to speak with you about Montclair."

Tess slipped out of her husband's embrace. "I'll take that as my cue to leave." She gripped Falcon's hand briefly. "Don't stay away so long. We miss you."

Falcon smiled at her and watched her glide away. "She has adapted quite well to her home here."

Jaxon's eyes followed his wife's retreating figure. "Because she has such an understanding husband." He grinned and turned to walk down the long expanse of hallway. "We can talk in the Serenity Chamber."

Falcon stopped him with a wave of his hand. "No. What I have to say is brief. Montclair cannot be saved."

Falcon watched Jaxon consider his words carefully before he spoke. "I thought you might say that. Is it because of his attempts to harm Danni?"

"He will not stop until he has the amulet."

The leader's eyes iced over. "Then you must stop him, whatever the cost. He cannot gain access to the amulet."

Falcon met Jaxon's gaze squarely. "I am well aware of that. Stopping him will mean ending his life. Charlemaine will..."

Jaxon's hand sliced the air. "My mother will accept your decision. You have no other choice. In the wrong hands, the amulet can be deadly. Montclair will not stop at ruling Earth. He will challenge the younger wizards and absorb their powers. The amulet will enable him to gain more control than he has ever had. He will not be easily vanquished then."

Irritation slipped into Falcon's voice. "I do not require a tutorial, Jaxon. My concern is for your mother and the loss her family will feel. I do not wish to cause them pain."

"If it cannot be helped, they will have to deal with the pain. We all lose people we love. We learn to cope."

Falcon surveyed his young protégé with a practiced eye. Had gaining control of the Assembly at such a young age made him hard before his time? Had he stepped down too soon? He touched Jaxon's shoulder. "Are you...?"

Jaxon's face softened. "I am well, my friend. The decisions are difficult sometimes, but Tess keeps me grounded." He placed his hand on Falcon's shoulder as well. "But I miss your advice." Falcon dropped his own hand. "I have enough time to see your son before I leave."

Jaxon's smile blossomed. "He is growing strong just like his father." Beaming like any proud parent, the leader led the way to his chambers.

Officer Brick slammed the driver's door of the police cruiser and sauntered toward the main entrance of the police station. "I can't believe old lady Heller can't keep her damned cat out of the tree. It'll take three dry cleanings to get rid of all this cat crap. My wife's gonna kill me." He threw a scowl over his shoulder. "How many times do we have to tell the crazy old woman to lock the stupid animal inside?"

Chief Harrigan rubbed his growling stomach. "Next time, I'm gonna tell her we can't help her. She's taking us away from real police work because she's too hardheaded to listen. Hey, I could use a bite to eat. How about picking us up a pizza?"

Brick pushed against the glass door with the heel of his hand. "In case you haven't heard, Chief, they deliver pizza nowadays." The uniformed officer grinned and sauntered into the station.

Harrigan opened his mouth to make a smart retort when a white-haired man blocked his vision. The man came to an abrupt halt directly in front of the chief. Harrigan swallowed hard while his legs wobbled. "Mr. Montclair. I'm surprised to see you here."

Brick positioned himself in between the man and the chief. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Your chief and I have some business to conduct."

"He doesn't look like he's too happy to see you," Brick deduced. "Why don't you call and schedule an appointment."

Harrigan lifted a hand. "Brick, it's okay. I'll take care of this."

The uniformed officer hitched up his pants and thrust out his chest in a belligerent stance. "I got your back, Chief. You just tell me what you need."

Montclair turned and fixed the young officer with a glittering gaze. "What he needs is for you to

leave.” Compelling and lethal, the voice guided Brick across the tiled floors and away from Harrigan’s side. Satisfied, the wizard focused his attention on the chief. “Now, about that talk.”

Harrigan pointed toward his office. “We can talk in there.” His steps leaden, he led the way. “You really shouldn’t come here, you know. If anyone recognizes you....”

Laughter rumbled behind the chief. “No one will recognize me, Harrigan. No one knows me.”

“I know you.” Harrigan wished he didn’t.

Montclair bumped the door open with a backward sweep of his hand. “Only because I choose for you to know me.” He strolled around behind the desk and took Harrigan’s normal position. “It would appear we have a situation which needs your attention.”

The chief swallowed hard and tried not to look at the wizard’s hands, but it was a difficult task. Since Luke Montclair had introduced himself, Harrigan had been sweating bullets. He knew he was way in over his head and there was no one to help him. He’d even considered going to Falcon Kendrick and explaining the situation. Harrigan had gotten the distinct impression, from his one meeting with the wealthy man, that Kendrick wasn’t a man to be back down from any adversary. Of course, he’d never met a wizard. And no one would believe that Harrigan had, either.

Harrigan pulled up a chair opposite the desk and slumped down into the faux leather. Hitching up one leg of his pants, he crossed his ankle over his knee and assumed a relaxed posture. “What kind of problem, Luke?”

Montclair’s eyes flashed, but he didn’t comment on the chief’s casual address. “My time is growing short. I no longer have any to waste. I need the amulet and Falcon Kendrick has it.”

This day couldn’t get any worse in Harrigan’s opinion. He’d rather face Montclair’s wrath than Kendrick’s. He wouldn’t tell Montclair that, though. “How in the hell did he get it?”

“That is of no importance. What is important is that you retrieve it.”

Nausea swelled inside Harrigan’s stomach as his hunger pangs dissipated. “I can’t go near Kendrick’s house.”

Montclair toyed with the telephone cord, wrapping it around his lean fingers. “No? Why is that?”

Harrigan tugged at his sloppily knotted tie. “I don’t know why, but I can’t. I’ve been to his house once before and when I left, I knew I couldn’t go back.” He held up one hand. “I can’t explain it, so you’re wasting your breath to ask me any more about it.”

Montclair smiled, a crueler twisting of his lips. “No explanation is necessary. I will remedy that situation. Your mission is to retrieve the amulet from Mr. Kendrick’s possession.” He stood, muscles rippling beneath the black, silk shirt he wore. “You have until midnight tomorrow night.” Every movement a study in grace, he walked to the door. “After that, I fear I shall have no other choice but to make other



arrangements.” The wizard pinned the chief of police with a pointed look. “You will not like the new arrangements, Mr. Harrigan.”

Harrigan forced himself to his feet even though his knees wobbled precariously. “Mr. Montclair, I’ll do what I can, but you ain’t never met this Kendrick fellow, have you? He’s a tough character. Might even be as tough as you.” The chief realized one second too late he’d said the wrong thing.

The wizard’s eyes took on an unearthly glow as he spun around to face the chief. “Mr. Kendrick will be an unfortunate casualty of war. You do not need to concern yourself with him. I have plans for him.”

The chief held onto the chair behind him for support. “I hope it’s a damned good plan then cause this fellow ain’t no sissy.”

Montclair studied his prey long enough to make Harrigan squirm. “You think he can best my powers, Mr. Harrigan?”

Harrigan’s hand automatically went to his throat. The wizard didn’t need to remind him of his abilities. Maybe he was mistaking Kendrick’s persona for power, but he wouldn’t want to be in the same room when these two men met. “I-I don’t know. I mean, I don’t think he’s a wizard.”

Montclair laughed. “This town has an abundance of fools, does it not?” The wizard flicked a glance up and down the chief’s portly frame. “Midnight tomorrow night, Mr. Harrigan. If you do your job correctly, you will not need to see me again. Fail me and you will not like our next meeting.”

Sweat slid down the chief’s spine, soaking the back of his police issue shirt. “I’ll do my best.”

Montclair’s face hardened. “You will do my best or it will not be good enough.”

Harrigan bobbed his head, eager for the wizard to be on his way. Of course, of course.” Fear blanketed his expression. “But Mr. Montclair, what about the remedy you talked about? You know I can’t go near the house.”

The wizard paused, a bored look on his face. “I said I would take care of it. You will not have difficulty approaching the woman.”

Harrigan swallowed and tugged at the collar of his shirt constricting his airway. “That’s good. Thank you. I mean, I wouldn’t want to get into any unnecessary trouble with Mr. Kendrick. You know what I mean?” Harrigan found he was talking to air. The wizard had departed. The second he realized he was alone, the chief slumped against the door, his shoulders quaking. He had to find a way out, but his options were extremely limited. As were the hours of his life if he didn’t get the amulet.

Danni didn’t know how long she ran across the fallen leaves, but as the night swallowed her, she knew she’d gone too far. Having disobeyed Falcon’s edict not to leave the confines of the house, she now found

herself in an unfamiliar section of woods, surrounded by night sounds and the animals of darkness. She hugged her arms around her waist and began to backtrack in the direction which she'd come. She wanted to make it back to the house before Falcon returned but she had to make sure she'd only been imagining things. Falcon wouldn't understand what had brought her out into the darkness despite his command for her to remain inside.

The visions were coming more rapidly now and Danni couldn't differentiate between what was real and what was fiction inside her head. She'd seen a small child, a little girl, with Falcon's silver eyes and a wealth of auburn hair piled high atop her head with a bright, blue bow. Dressed in a print dress and Mary Jane's, she was the perfect image of the daughter Danni desperately craved. And while Danni smiled at the clear picture in her mind, the child screamed, snapping Danni into action. Suddenly, the daydream took on nightmarish proportions. The child was real and she was in trouble.

A branch snapped and Danni stopped, holding her breath. Leaves crunched and Danni pressed against the trunk of a large oak for shelter. The distinct sound of footsteps made her heart race. Too heavy for a child's, the steps sent icy fingers of fear tiptoeing down her spine while she waited. She searched the ground for any available weapon. Settling on a fallen branch, she picked it up, judged the weight against her palm and hoisted it against her shoulder like a baseball bat.

As her stalker drew closer, Danni caught the static of the two-way radio and she sagged against the tree with relief seconds before she heard the familiar voice. Whipping out from behind her safe spot, she dropped the makeshift club and planted her hands on her hips.

"Chief Harrigan, what are you doing out here so late at night? You took ten years off my life."

## **CHAPTER TEN**

“I must return. I...” Falcon stopped talking in mid-sentence, his eyes narrowing.

Tossing his head back, he directed his gaze toward the vaulted ceiling. “Danni is in danger.”

Jaxon didn’t question his announcement. “Do you require assistance?”

Falcon’s body began to shimmer in the air. “You will know if I do.”

The dew dampened leaves muffled his footsteps as Falcon landed on the ground at the back of his house. His senses attuned to every sound of the night air, he walked with the confident air of a predator seeking his prey. He caught the scent of fear in his nostrils, but it wasn’t Danni’s fear. His hand circled the air and the path before him opened into a bubble of vision, allowing Falcon to see what lay ahead. His jaw clenched.

Chief Harrigan stood with one shoulder propped against the trunk of a tree, chatting amiably with Danni. She appeared to be in no immediate danger, but Falcon read the chief’s facial expression, his posture.

With his fingertips, Falcon narrowed the spectrum of the bubble and zeroed in on the chief’s face. A fine sheen of sweat covered Harrigan’s skin though the temperature had dipped to a cool fifty degrees. Falcon slowed his pace and picked up the sounds of the conversation. Remaining in the night shadows, he listened and waited while his temper simmered below the boiling point.

Danni watched the chief strike a casual pose. Instincts told her to back away but paranoia had become a constant companion. The chief was relatively harmless if a bit on the incompetent side. “You haven’t said what you’re doing out here, Chief.”

Harrigan slid one hand down over his rotund stomach and rocked back on his heels. “It was a nice night for a stroll.”

Danni folded her arms. “You’re on private property. Surely there are better places in town to take a nightly stroll.”

Harrigan’s chest swelled. “I’m the law. I can go wherever in the hell I please.” His tone was indignant.

“I see. Well, have a good night then.”

“Mrs. Condrey, wait,” the chief called after her. He took a couple of steps toward her as Danni aimed a look over her shoulder.

“Yes?”

Harrigan rubbed a forefinger over his top lip and blinked the sweat from his eyes. “I’m surprised Kendrick would allow you out here at night by yourself. He seems to be the possessive sort.”

Danni didn’t take the bait. “Did you need something else, Chief?”

He gave a grunt which mirrored his irritation. “It ain’t safe out here.”

“Is that a warning?”

“Damn right it is. With all the trouble you’ve had, it seems like you’d be a little more careful.”

Danni didn’t try to shake off the uneasiness. It was her warning signal, a sign to back away before it was too late. “Then I thank you for your concern. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Falcon is waiting for me.” She had the pleasure of knowing her words alone had frightened the chief of police.

Harrigan placed his hand on the butt of his weapon and swaggered a bit as he approached her. “If you’re in some kind of trouble, I mean, if Kendrick is making you stay here, I can help you.”

Danni laughed without mirth. “After all this time, now you’re willing to help me? I came to you when my life was threatened and you told me to go to the doctor that I was hallucinating. What makes you think I’d listen to one shred of your advice now?”

“Because you value your life.”

She folded her arms. “Are you threatening me? I don’t believe the police commissioner would condone such behavior.” She took another step towards the house.

Chief Harrigan hurried to her side. He leaned in close enough to whisper. He reeked of cheap cologne and stale coffee. Danni wrinkled her nose against the stench. “You’re not safe here, Mrs. Condrey. Let me take you into police custody. I can help you.” He reached out for her arm, but Danni brushed him away with a swipe of her hand.

“I don’t need your help,” she said in a polite tone of voice. “Again, you’ll have to excuse me.” She turned to leave, hoping she’d make it this time.

“I know Kendrick isn’t home.”

Danni stopped. The icy feeling of dread had returned. “You’ve been paying that much attention to Mr. Kendrick’s schedule?”

Harrigan’s lips curled. “Oh, that wasn’t me. I have a friend who’s taken a particular interest in your boyfriend’s activities. In fact, he’s the one who told me when it was safe to come see you.” He hitched up his pants and assumed a braggart’s stance. “Not that I was worried about Kendrick seeing me here with you. Ain’t nothing he can do to me. I’m the law and if he laid one finger on me, I’d lock his ass up.”

Danni gave the lawman a pitying look even though his words escalated the tension. “Do you really think you could?”

Harrigan’s hand snaked out and he caught hold of Danni’s arm above the elbow. “You’re playing with something you don’t know nothing about. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

As the thick, meaty fingers dug into her flesh, Danni tried to twist her arm out of the punishing grip. “Let go of me.”

Harrigan’s teeth flashed whitely in the darkness. “You gonna scream if I don’t? You gonna call for your boyfriend?”

“She doesn’t have to. I’m already here.” Falcon moved from the shadows and while Danni breathed a sigh of relief, Harrigan immediately released her arm.

The chief took a stumbling step backwards. “You wasn’t supposed to be here.”

Falcon walked to Danni’s side. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, her voice useless.

Falcon whipped his gaze back to the chief’s face. “You made a mistake coming here tonight, Harrigan.”

The chief backed up until his spine bumped against tree bark. “I was doing what I was told, that’s all. The two of you, you got no idea what’s going on here. This is deep, deeper than anything you could ever imagine.” He raked his hands through his thin hair. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Falcon positioned his body in front of Danni to shield her from Harrigan’s view. “Try me.”

Harrigan blew out an agitated breath. When he lowered his hand, it shook. “No, I’m telling you. You ain’t gonna believe it. I mean, this is Ripley’s kind of crap.”

Danni pressed her hand against the small of Falcon’s back. “We should go.” Her voice was barely a whisper of sound.

A night owl flew over with a rustle of wings and Harrigan jumped, cursed and slumped back against the tree. “She’s right. The two of you should go. I can’t be here, either. I shouldn’t be here.” He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his arm. “The guy who told me to come here, he’s gonna know I didn’t finish the job he sent me to do.”

Falcon’s eyes narrowed to slits. The fires of his temper made the irises glow with a ferocious gleam. Tension streaked through his muscles and he retained control only by the sheer force of his will. He knew who the man was, but he asked anyway. “Who sent you?”

Harrigan danced from foot to foot, casting fearful glances over his shoulder. “The guy’s name is Luke Montclair.”

Danni gasped behind Falcon. He shushed her with a gentle touch of his hand against her arm. "But that ain't all," the chief continued. "He's a...he's a...oh, hell, you ain't never gonna believe me anyway. What's the point?"

Falcon moved away from Danni and closed in on Harrigan's air space. He narrowed the distance with the stealthy walk of a hungry panther. "What is he, Harrigan?" If Montclair had revealed his true identity to a mortal, the wizard would end Harrigan's life once he'd served his purpose.

Harrigan licked his lips and darted a glance toward Danni who remained well hidden in the shadows. Then, lowering his voice to a raspy whisper, he replied, "He's a wizard."

Falcon straightened and inclined his head slightly. "A wizard."

Harrigan threw up his hands in despair. "See? I told you that you wouldn't believe me. I told you, but you had to know. Yes, you heard me. The guy's a wizard. He told me so himself and he's done some pretty weird stuff, too. Stuff that would make a man wet himself."

Falcon held out one hand. A fireball glowed in the center of his palm. "You mean stuff like this?"

"Oh, God," Harrigan whimpered. "I should have known."

Falcon grasped the end of the chief's tie and wrapped it around his hand, dragging Harrigan closer until they were nose to nose. "You go back to Montclair and tell him to fight his own battles. If you come near Danni again, your boss will be the least of your concerns. Got it?"

The chief's head bobbed up and down like a kewpie doll's. "He's going to kill me anyway."

Falcon released him. "Then I'd suggest you get out of town."

"But he can find me. I've heard that wizards can track people. Montclair will find me no matter where I go."

Falcon backtracked to Danni's side. "You give him far too much credit. Take my advice, Harrigan, if you want to live to see the sunrise." He wrapped an arm around Danni's waist and began guiding her through the darkness.

"You all but told him you're a wizard," Danni admonished.

Falcon shrugged. "It doesn't make a lot of difference considering Montclair's going to kill him."

Danni stopped walking. She turned to stare up at Falcon in wide-eyed surprise. "And you're going to let him?"

"Are you asking me to protect Harrigan?"

"I'm asking you if you're going to let another wizard kill a mortal?"

Falcon's face shuttered. "There are portions of my life you don't understand."

"Because you won't explain them to me."

He took her arm again and resumed walking. "We can discuss this inside."

Danni lapsed into silence on the remainder of the walk back to Falcon's house.

"You shouldn't have gone outside," Falcon began the instant he clicked the door shut behind them.

"I had something to do," Danni hedged.

"More important than obeying me?"

Her spine stiffened. "You're not my father, Falcon. I come and go as I please."

He folded his arms across his chest and Danni saw the play of emotions crossing his face. He was angry, angrier than he'd ever been at her and rightfully so. She knew he was only trying to keep her from harm, but how could she explain what had taken her out into the night? She wasn't sure she could.

"Falcon, try to understand, please. I didn't go outside deliberately to disobey you. I needed some air."

"You could open a window," he suggested in a tight voice.

Danni waved a hand. "That's not the kind of air I needed."

Falcon launched himself toward her so quickly Danni didn't have time to throw up a defense. In the next instant, she was in his arms and he was holding her tightly against his chest. "Promise me you won't ever do anything that foolish again, Danni. If I were a mortal man, you'd have taken years off my life."

Danni relaxed in his arms, relieved he wasn't going to push the issue any further. "I'll try not to, but Falcon, sometimes, you hold on too tight."

He buried his face in her hair. "I don't have a choice."

As Falcon's breath bathed her cheek, Danni closed her eyes. The little girl was still there, calling to her, needing her. Danni couldn't shake the image away and she wondered who the child was and why she looked so much like Falcon.

Danni shuffled her workbooks into a neat stack and straightened her pencil sharpener and staple. With not much left to do, she stood taller, dragged her hands down over her linen-covered hips and flicked a glance toward the clock over the chalkboard. Three fifty-five. She doubted Falcon would give her much more time before he came looking for her.

She sank down into the wooden chair behind her desk and dropped her head into her hands. It had taken most of her energy this morning to convince Falcon she needed to go to work. Even then, he'd given her a ten-minute lecture on what to do should she see Montclair again. Danni's shoulders shook with hysterical laughter. She couldn't remember when her life had been normal, but she was sure that at one point, it was. Before Falcon.

He'd moved into her life as if he'd belonged from the start and while Danni didn't want to remove

him, he was making it difficult to breathe. And she couldn't imagine being married to a wizard. Not that Falcon had suggested marriage, but the thought of accepting the magic, his powers and abilities, overwhelmed her. She'd never been a shrinking violet before Doug died and yet, here she was now allowing a man to run her life, to dictate her comings and goings.

Danni dropped her hands from her face and looked toward the window. The sun beat against the panes but the winter temperatures had arrived. In another few weeks, it would be Christmas. She couldn't think about the Yuletide or what she'd be doing tomorrow. For now, her focus was to survive. And figure out what she was going to do with Falcon.

Falcon paced, the speed increasing in intensity until his feet left the ground and he whirled around the room in a dizzying blur. While he circled, he muttered Gaelic curses. Sparks winged from his feet and cascaded to the floor and the more he moved, the angrier he became.

Jaxon stepped through the portal and observed his mentor. "How long have you been at this?"

Falcon came to a stop, his spine settling against the corner of the wall. Still airborne, he leveled a glittering gaze at Jaxon. "Does it matter?"

"I told Mother."

Falcon's feet hit the ground. "And?"

"As I said, she accepts your decision."

Falcon's breath escaped his lungs in a loud whoosh of air. "I wish there was another way."

Jaxon only nodded in response.

"He will not stop until he kills her," Falcon commented in a stone-cold voice.

Jaxon came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You will stop him first."

Falcon's internal alarm clock told him it was past time for Danni to be home from work. "Danni continues to try my patience."

Jaxon smothered a grin. "Mortal women are much different than female wizards, Falcon."

Falcon's brows lowered in a scowl. "This is not news to me. I need to go find her."

"You have not tracked her?"

Falcon's shoulders stiffened. "Only when necessary. She is not in danger at present."

Jaxon didn't try to hide the smile this time. "You two have grown quite close."

"What is your point or do you even have one?"

Jaxon shrugged. "You cannot track a mortal woman you have not been intimate with."

Falcon brushed past his former protégé and left the room. He heard Jaxon's footsteps behind him and



knew the leader wouldn't stop until he'd gleaned the information he'd come for. "Ask what information you seek, Jaxon. My time grows short." The words jumped as he hastened down the hallway.

"Will you bring Danni to the Assembly?"

Falcon stopped at the edge of the living room and whipped around. His brows were set in a foreboding glower. "Why?"

"Tess has asked."

"Tell Tess it is not her concern," Falcon responded.

Jaxon grinned. "My wife is not so easily swayed."

"You allow her too much control."

Jaxon didn't take offense. "And you are still learning the ways of these mortal women. They will not take orders, Falcon. Perhaps you need to learn this the hard way." He flicked a glance toward the miniature grandfather clock above the fireplace. "I believe your lady is late."

Falcon disappeared then, carrying the image of Jaxon's gloating smile with him.

Danni took a minute to stand outside the front door to her home and look. It seemed like forever since she'd been back and with jangling nerves, she stuck the key in the lock and twisted the door knob.

Everything looked the same from the potted plants hanging over the kitchen divider to the TV Guide opened on the scarred coffee table. The scent of new wood clung to the air and as Danni walked from room to room, acclimating herself to her surroundings once more, she felt the tension of the last few days slip from her shoulders.

She wandered into her bedroom, taking her time. She touched the pieces of furniture, pieces of her past. She smoothed a wrinkle in the bedspread and opened her closet door to check on her clothes. The shoes were neatly aligned on the floor as if she'd just straightened them. Nothing had been touched or moved. Even her earrings were still on the nightstand where she'd left them the last night she'd spent here.

The rocking chair her grandmother had left her sat still with the crocheted afghan draped across its back. The white pine armoire, a present for her sixteenth birthday, occupied one corner of the room and the old-fashioned braided rug Danni had rescued from the auction sale after her grandparents' death, lay in front of the bed. It still reminded her of that little house on Wood Street in Knoxville, Tennessee. The house that had been more home to her than her own.

Danni sat down on the edge of the mattress and folded her hands in her lap. She needed this connection, this link to her other life. Falcon wouldn't understand. He would come for her again and although she needed him to, she wanted to be able to take care of herself again. But most importantly, she

wanted to keep him safe. He didn't know about the visions, didn't see the things she'd seen. The child continued to call to her and Danni the feelings of helplessness grew with each passing hour.

Danni lifted her head to search the room once more, seeking that familiar sense of comfort she'd always felt when she lay aside her worries of the day and allowed the peace of the room to steal over her. She didn't find the respite she was looking for. She only saw Falcon's face, the hard set of his jaw, and she felt his anger. She didn't regret sleeping with him, but that most intimate act had changed things, had united them in a much more elemental way than just the lovemaking itself. They were a part of one another now and Danni could only wonder if the magic played a part in the bond. And how she could protect him not only from what they'd shared but from her if it came down to that.

Falcon kept his distance from Danni, waiting patiently in the doorway to her bedroom. He watched her struggle with her thoughts, her conscience. By the slump of her shoulders, he knew the stresses of the past few days were taking a toll. He wanted to comfort her, but she wouldn't allow it. He felt her slipping from his grasp and wondered how much longer he'd be able to hold her.

Jaxon's words of warning rang in his ears while his eyes traced Danni's every movement. Her slim hands lifted the heaviness of her hair away from her neck for a brief second before dropping it down over her shoulders. He moved his gaze down the slender column of her spine and lingered on the curve of her hips. His body hardened in response to the sight of hers and he cursed that part of him which made him vulnerable. He needed control now more than ever. For Danni. For what they could have together.

Danni stood and walked across the room. She kept her back to the door. Her hips swayed with each move, her long, copper hair brushing against her waist. Her nimble fingers picked up a trinket from the top of the dresser and held it against her palm. She murmured something indiscernible and replaced the piece of jewelry.

Falcon heard the swift intake of her breath. He raised his head in time to see the confusion in Danni's eyes.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked in a low, hesitant tone of voice.

Falcon shrugged and crossed the carpeted floor. "Long enough. You didn't come home."

Danni swept a hand out to encompass the room. "Actually, I did."

He gave her a hard look. "We're not going through this again, Danni."

Danni's eyes flashed and for a second, Falcon thought she'd argue with him. Instead, she lowered her head almost demurely. "You're right. We have more important things to think about than where I stay. Just let me get a few more of my clothes." She sidestepped around him to make her way to the closet.

Her acquiescence didn't put Falcon at ease. In fact, he was more on guard than ever. Ordinarily, he read people easily enough, especially mortals. But Danni managed to confound him. When he expected her to give in, she fought and when he braced himself for the impact of her anger, she consented. "I know you want to stay here," he began quietly.

Danni shot him a look over her shoulder, one of surprise. "You're wrong."

He lifted one eyebrow and waited for her to elaborate.

"I called a realtor this afternoon at lunch."

Falcon took the load of clothes from her arms and carried them to the bed. "Why?"

Danni retrieved the garment bag from the back of the closet and walked toward Falcon. "Because after all that's happened, I can't live here anymore."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, allowing his fingertips to linger against the curve of her cheek. "Giving up your house is a big decision."

"You don't think I should sell?"

"You should do what your heart tells you to do."

Danni dropped her gaze. "My head is telling me to sell. My heart isn't talking so much anymore."

Falcon's chuckle brought her eyes back up to his face. "It's talking, Danni. You aren't listening."

She dropped the garment bag to the bed and began stuffing the clothes into the zippered opening. "I have a pair of black boots and a pair of tennis shoes on the floor inside the closet. Could you get them for me?"

Falcon accepted the subject change and answered her request. "Do you want to stay in Mills River?"

Danni shivered. "I'm not sure."

Falcon returned to her side. "What are you sure of?" Unable to resist the urge, he slid his palm down the length of her arm.

"If you'd asked me that a few weeks ago, I would have said my job, my ability to take care of myself and my belief in the goodness of people. Now," her shoulders lifted in a careless shrug, "I'd have to say nothing. I'm not sure of anything anymore."

Falcon reached out for her. "Danni, stop running away."

She held up one hand. "We should go. There's no telling if Montclair is watching us."

"He's not here."

"How can you be so sure?"

Falcon held out his hand. "Because I know when you're in danger. You're safe now."

Danni took his hand. "For now."

"Always."

A glittering mist swept over the landscape, falling in moist droplets. Beneath the shelter of the trees, Montclair shielded himself from sight as darkness crept in to steal away the light of the day. He waited the beat of a heart, listening to the familiar sounds of night. His favorite time of the day.

His steps were stealthy, his movements unobserved as he crossed the street and walked toward the simple brick house at the corner of East and Woodlawn Streets. Through the opened kitchen window, he saw a dark-haired woman wearing a flour-dusted apron and a floral dress. Voices filtered out into the night. Children laughed along with a sitcom on the television and a dog barked in the distance.

Montclair settled against the window to wait for the right time. His eyes burned into the homey interior of the house, searching for his prey. His muscles tensed with impatience, he levitated enough to get a better look inside. At that exact moment, the woman turned, saw Montclair hovering near the window and opened her mouth to scream. Montclair silenced her by lifting his hand. She stood frozen in silence, her eyes wide in her pale face while Montclair slid over the window sill and into the kitchen.

“You will remain here until I give you permission to move,” he whispered in passing.

The glow of the television screen flickered down the darkened hallway as Montclair glided toward the back bedroom. He knew exactly where he was going. He knew everything about the house and its occupants and he moved with cold precision. He could have completed his task with a spell from a distance or even a gruesome car accident, but he wanted to see his victim’s eyes.

He pushed open the bedroom door and heard humming coming from the master bathroom. His footsteps silent, he crossed the bedroom floor. With a twist of his fingertip, he dispersed with the lock and flicked open the door to the bathroom. The shower spray drowned out his approach. Montclair thumped the vinyl curtain.

“Hey, honey, could you hand me another bar of soap? This one’s a sliver. Honey?” Chief Harrigan poked his head out from beneath the spray and blinked the shampoo out of his eyes. Immediately, he recoiled. He reached behind him to shut off the water while he cursed loudly.

Montclair whipped open the curtain and thrust a towel into the tub. “Get dressed.”

Harrigan stumbled and snatched the towel. As the water gurgled down the drain, his eyes widened. “Why?”

“We have somewhere to go.”

“Where? My wife and kids are here. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Then get dressed.”

Still Harrigan hesitated. “Now’s not such a good time. It’s family night and- -“

Montclair's hand whipped out and caught Harrigan around the neck. "Unless you wish for your entire family to watch you die, get dressed now."

The wizard watched with a dispassionate gaze as the chief of police began to cry.

Danni slid one hand along the banister as she climbed the circular staircase leading up to the row of bedrooms lining the hallway. Her steps were slow and measured, reluctant even. "He's not going to wait much longer." She didn't need to raise her voice to be heard. She knew Falcon was close behind her. She sensed him.

Falcon draped an arm around her shoulder. "There's no need to worry."

Danni ducked under his arm and spun to face him. "Montclair is not only coming after me, Falcon."

Falcon inclined his head in a manner which irritated Danni even more. "I'm aware of Montclair's desires, Danni. I believe I assured you of my ability to handle him."

She propped her hands on her hips. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Falcon's brows lowered. "What?"

"Why haven't you handled him before now?"

"I did not want to kill him," he snarled the words.

"But now?"

"But now he's given me no choice."

"So how much longer will you wait?"

Falcon leaned against the polished teak railing. "When the time is right, I'll know."

Danni made a frustrated sound. She couldn't explain to him why her fears had intensified. "Could you be any more elusive?"

He lifted one eyebrow.

"You know what? Never mind. I'm tired of playing these mind games with you. You do whatever in the hell you want to do. It's what you planned on all along. I'm going to bed." She ascended the stairs and stopped to toss one more word over her shoulder. "Alone."

"Danni," Falcon called after her.

She stopped on the top step. "What?"

"It's time you met someone."

Danni gave him a suspicious look. "Who?"

"Casey."

"Who's Casey?"

“The man in charge of the security of my home.”

Danni took a hesitant step forward. “I thought computers did that and why would a wizard need a bodyguard anyway?”

Falcon’s lips twitched. “He’s not a bodyguard and I’m can’t be home constantly.”

Danni moved forward one more step. “And I’m meeting him now because...?”

He climbed up enough steps to meet her. “Because when I meet Montclair next, I need to know you’ll be safe. Casey will make sure of that.” He took her hand and continued up the stairs. “Before you meet him, Casey is different.”

“You mean different like a wizard?”

Falcon grinned. “Different like a giant.”

Danni laughed humorously. “Right. A giant. Bring him on. Nothing surprises me anymore.”

As heavy footsteps fell on the hallway behind them, Falcon hooked his arm around Danni’s waist and guided her toward the wall. “Casey, I’d like you to meet Danielle Condrey.”

Danni tipped her head back as far as her neck would allow. Falcon hadn’t been lying about the giant. Ducking his head to keep from brushing the ceiling, Casey dwarfed the hallway. With broad shoulders and arms the size of tree trunks, he was by far the biggest man Danni had ever seen. He knelt down to greet her, extending a hand that was roughly the size of a small country.

“I’m happy to meet you, Ms. Condrey.” The giant spoke in a guttural growl laced with a heavy foreign accent.

“My pleasure, Casey.” Danni didn’t know what else to say.

Falcon placed his hand on Casey’s shoulder. “I need you to watch over her.”

Danni swallowed a burst of irritation. “I’m not really looking for a bodyguard, Casey, but we can be friends.”

Falcon and Casey exchanged glances, which Danni accurately interpreted. She didn’t waste her breath any further.

Falcon moved back against the wall. “Danni, I have to go.”

Her head whipped around. “You’re going after Montclair tonight?”

He touched her arm. “No, I’m going to save a life tonight.”

Her eyes clouded. “Whose?”

Falcon gave her a gentle kiss. “Harrigan’s.”

Harrigan alternated between praying and cursing with each footstep he made. The wizard walked

behind him, prodding him with shoves and instructions. Sweat poured down the chief's face, ending in a sticky puddle around the collar of his shirt. He'd kissed his wife good-bye less than an hour ago, had hugged his kids and assured them he'd be back soon. But he'd been lying. They'd know the truth soon enough. He just hoped there was someone out there who could catch this bastard before Montclair killed again.

"You know," Harrigan wheedled, "you really don't need to kill me. Me and my family can leave Mills River. I ain't got no particular ties here. Hell, I just kinda stumbled upon the place myself a few years back. I wouldn't mind leaving at all."

"Keep walking," Montclair instructed coldly.

Harrigan lifted his foot to take the next step and encountered a complete nothingness. Empty air surrounded him. He gave a blood-curdling scream and closed his eyes as the rush of wind roared in his ears. He began to repeat the rosary, forgot most of it and began to cry once more.

"Open your eyes," the harsh voice commanded.

Harrigan cracked open one eye and came face to face with Falcon Kendrick. "What the hell is going on here?"

Falcon surveyed him with a disdainful look. "I just saved your life. Get your family and get out of Mills River tonight. I can't promise I'll be around to protect you next time."

Harrigan almost fell to his knees with gratitude. "Thank you. Thank you. I don't know what I did to deserve this, but I can't thank you enough."

Falcon's body began to fade. "I didn't do it for you. I did it for Montclair."

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

Falcon returned before Danni had time to miss him. As he strode across the sculpted carpet wearing the indigo robe of his family, Danni focused on the long length of his body, the hard strength of his muscles. A specimen of pure masculinity, Falcon walked with the confidence of a male in complete authority, completely at ease in whatever he wore. Never doubting his abilities, he exuded self-assurance and charm. He'd hooked Danni long before he'd ever kissed her.

Now, watching him move closer to her, Danni swept her gaze over the beauty of his face. His mesmerizing eyes held hers and when he reached her, he stretched out his hand and lifted her to her feet. Danni held her breath, resting her free hand against the width of his chest.

"Is Harrigan okay?" she asked quietly.

Falcon brushed her hair with his palm. "He will be if he leaves tonight."

"But he's alive now?"

"He was when I left him."

Danni slid her arm across his biceps, marveling at the leashed strength beneath the silk of his robe. "Did you see Montclair?"

Falcon dropped his arms to circle her waist. "No. I didn't go to confront him. My mission was to save Harrigan."

Danni tipped her face back. She caught the flame of desire in his eyes and licked her lips. How long had it been since she'd felt him this close to her, since he'd touched her like this? It was difficult to concentrate on the topic when she could smell the scent of his cologne and feel the warmth of his arms banded around her. "Why?"

Falcon's eyes traveled to her lips. "Why what?"

"Why did you save Harrigan? You don't like him."

His arms tightened around her. "True, but I had no choice."

Danni saw the shadows dance across his features. "Tell me."

Falcon sighed and slid his arms from around her waist to capture her hands. He held her, their arms extended. "Montclair has chosen the dark side of his power but he hasn't killed a mortal yet. He can still be saved now. Once he takes the life of a mortal, the chances of his salvation are slim."

Danni looked down at their joined hands then back up at his face. Questions burned within her. "Have you ever killed a mortal?"

His eyes shuttered and he released her hands. "Does it matter?"



“To me it does.”

He turned his back to her. “Would it change how you feel about me?”

Danni treaded very carefully. “If you killed someone, I know it was because you had no choice. You’re not evil, Falcon. I know you couldn’t kill someone in cold blood.” Falcon walked to the fireplace and rested one arm against the mantle. “Once. I’ve killed someone once. I was Montclair’s age. And you’re right. He didn’t give me a choice.” He slid a glance her way. “I had to protect a child, the son of a wizard.” His eyes darkened. “A lot of people are frightened of what they don’t understand.”

Danni crossed the floor to stand behind him. “A lot of people are frightened by what they do understand, too. It’s human nature.” She ran her hand over his back. “You don’t like it that you had to kill the man.”

Falcon whipped around, his jaw clenched. “I never like to kill, Danni, but I would do it again.” He cupped her face, startling her with the intensity of his gaze. “I would take the life of anyone who tried to harm you.”

“But you’re trying to save Montclair. That shows your compassion.”

He rested his forehead against hers. “Montclair is from a dying guild. The Honorables have very few wizards remaining. They cannot afford to lose him.”

“Do you really think he can be rehabilitated?”

Falcon lifted his head to smile at her. “It’ll take some work, but I can’t give up on him. I have to believe it’s worth the trouble to save him.”

Danni brushed her thumb across his lower lip and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. “Thank you.”

He blinked down at her. “For what?”

“For allowing me to see this side of you.” She grinned impishly. “It’s not every day you let your guard down around me.”

He frowned. “You keep a man on his toes.”

She slid into his embrace. “You’re not just a man, Falcon. But if I can keep you on your toes, I guess that is a compliment.” She winked, kissed him on the cheek and stepped away from him.

“Danni,” Falcon called to her before she could walk away.

Danni heard the hesitation in his voice and didn’t want to turn around. They’d crossed a small bridge in that few minutes of conversation. She didn’t want to hear anything that would change the mood. “Falcon, don’t.”

He continued anyway. “We need to talk.”

Danni turned back around, holding both hands up in front of her. “We just talked. I’m safe. You’re safe. You saved Harrigan’s life. I think that’s enough for one night.”

“I want to take you to my home.”

Danni’s knees began to shake. “I’m already here.”

Falcon shook his head slowly and Danni caught the glint of determination in his eyes. “Not this one. I have,” he paused, “another home. You’ve never seen it.”

“So why do I need to see it now?”

“You might need to go there for a while.”

Danni shook her head emphatically. “No, I don’t. I have Casey now. He’ll protect me even though he isn’t much of a talker. Not that we’d have much to talk about anyway. I mean, what could I possibly have in common with a nine foot tall giant from Austria?” She dragged her hands through her hair. Her fingers tangled on the silky strands and she yanked them through and bunched the thick tresses up into a makeshift bun. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not talking about this tonight.”

“Danni.” Falcon whispered her name again.

She knew he wasn’t going to let the subject go, but desperation spurred her to defend her position. “Falcon, I can’t do this right now. I can accept you as a wizard, but if you expect me to accept an entire family a wizards and a place I’m sure doesn’t exist here on Earth, well, that’s just too much. I can’t do it right now. I need more time.” She couldn’t leave without knowing who the little girl was and why the child continually called to her. Danni saw her in her dreams at night and felt her with every waking moment.

Falcon’s eyes continued to burn into hers. “Why? Why do you need more time? Haven’t you had long enough to accept who I am?”

“I’ve accepted you,” she returned shortly.

“You’ve accepted what you want to accept,” he shot back.

Danni closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and her forefinger. Her temples began to throb. “I know you’re a wizard. I can deal with that.”

Falcon grabbed her hand and yanked it away from her face. As her eyes popped open, he loomed close within her line of vision. “You don’t get to pick and choose what you deal with, Danni. I’m a wizard with a family and a home. I have other people I care about and,” he relinquished hold on her wrist, “a calling.”

Danni backed away from him. “A calling? What are you talking about?”

“It’s not important. Will you come with me?”

She blanched. “Now?” One hand went to her throat. She felt the pulse jump beneath her palm as the tensions crowded her. “I-I can’t. Please don’t ask me again. Not yet.”

“I want you to see everything.”

“But does it have to be tonight?”

Falcon crossed his arms. "Is it so inconceivable that I would want to show you my world?"

"Just as inconceivable as it is to you that I'm not ready."

His stance shifted and Danni's eyes mirrored the frustration in his. "Fine. You let me know when you are ready." He spoke so softly Danni had to strain to hear him.

Tears burned the back of her throat as Danni left him standing in the middle of the living room.

Falcon leaned his forearms on the hardwood railing circling the deck behind his house. Midnight had come and gone and sleep eluded him. The winter air bit his skin but he didn't retreat from the cold. Anger still burned within him, anger tempered by frustration. He couldn't make Danni understand the importance of leaving Mills River. And he didn't want her to see the end result of his battle with Montclair. Should the younger wizard choose not to relinquish his powers willingly and go back where he belonged, Falcon would have no choice but to destroy him. He didn't want Danni to see it.

The Olde Towne lanterns hanging from iron poles provided enough light for Falcon to watch a snake slither through the grasses. The wind rustled the trees, casting dancing shadows over the mountain ridges. His breath fogged in the air as Old Man Winter jeweled the ground with his icy fingers of frost. In another hour or so the temperature would drop to the teens, yet still Falcon didn't move from his post.

"Falcon?" Danni's soft voice made his shoulders stiffen. He didn't turn around.

"You should go back to bed."

Her teeth chattered as she came to stand beside him. "I can't sleep without you."

The admission surprised him. He turned his head slightly to see her face, bathed in the sliver of light coming from the French doors behind her. "I'm not tired."

She settled into place next to him, her shoulder bumping his. "You're angry with me."

"Not now, Danni."

"Falcon, look at me." When he didn't move, she increased the urgency in her voice. "Please."

He shifted, one hand dangling over the railing. He slid his eyes from her face to the delicate slope of her breasts outlined beneath the gauzy material of her nightgown. His body responded instantly. The cold wind had stiffened the peaks of her nipples and mesmerized him. He took a step closer to her. "You need to go back to bed." His voice thickened with desire.

Danni tossed her head back, giving him a better view of her full curves. "Not without you."

Falcon's hand gripped the back of her neck and he dragged her closer. "This solves nothing."

She hooked her arms around his neck. "Make love to me." She nibbled the edge of his jaw.

His sex surged to life, straining against the fabric of his trousers. His hand fisted in her hair and he

tugged the silky strands, forcing her head back. He didn't speak again. He took what she offered, dipping his head to fasten his lips to hers in a savage kiss.

Heat spiraled through him and the coldness of the air disappeared. Catching his hands beneath her bottom, Falcon lifted Danni, wrapping her legs around his waist. The softness of her womanhood brushed against him and he groaned low in his throat. Her hands sifted through his hair and held on while he caressed her. He left no part of her body untouched. He needed to feel her, taste her. The honeysuckle-scented shampoo wafted over him as he breathed in the fragrance of her hair. Her skin beckoned his tongue and he drew a long, lazy stroke over the pulse point in her neck. Danni shivered and arched her back.

Falcon spun around, pressing her spine against the railing. One hand dove between her legs and found the warm wetness, an invitation for his fingers to explore. His thumb captured the sensitive part of her flesh and Danni gasped in stunned delight. Every part of her body cried out for his touch. He felt her response beating against him and his body ached with the desire to dive into the heat of hers.

He massaged her to release, catching her cries of ecstasy with his lips. He nibbled her throat, her shoulder while she shuddered with the aftermath. His body screamed for a release of his own and with a muttered oath, he yanked the thin scrap of her panties down her legs and released the catch on his slacks. One-handed, he freed himself while he held the back of her neck. "Danni, look at me. I need to see your face when I take you."

Hazel eyes clouded with somnolent passion fastened on his face. Falcon heard the slight intake of her breath as the tip of his manhood brushed the dampness between her thighs. Danni's hands dropped to his shoulders and flexed against the roped muscles. "Take me," she whispered.

Falcon's fingers dug into her hips as he surged into her, stretching the tightness of her body to accept the fullness of his desire. He set a frantic pace, driving into her over and over again while Danni moaned and bucked against him. When the climax hit, Falcon shattered, surrendering to the wash of emotion with a harsh groan. Danni's own release peaked seconds later and this time, her cries echoed across the mountains while Falcon held her, his chest pressed against her breasts.

Danni relaxed against him, her face buried in the curve of his neck. Falcon slowly retreated from her body and lowered her nightgown over her thighs. After righting his own clothing, he picked Danni up in his arms and carried her through the opened doorway and into the living room.

He placed her gently on the couch while she shivered. "I'll stoke the fire," he said.

"Falcon, wait." Danni's hand caught hold of his arm before he could move away.

He looked down at her but didn't speak.

"Just hold me," she whispered.

Falcon's muscles tensed, but he dropped down beside her anyway, drawing her into his arms. He

pressed her head against his shoulder and held tight. “You’re safe, Danni.”

Her hands curled against his chest. “I know. I can feel your protection.”

Falcon’s heart galloped within his chest. Did she know what he felt for her? Could she feel his love each time he kissed her, when they made love? He smoothed the hair away from her forehead and brushed his lips over her skin. He wanted to tell her, but the words wouldn’t come. He didn’t know if they’d ever come.

Danni lay with her head on Falcon’s shoulder for a long time, just breathing in the scent of him and reveling in the comforting strength of his arms and the reassuring beat of his heart beneath her ear. She loved him. She didn’t know how or when it had happened but she’d fallen in love with a wizard. She moved her head slightly, rubbing her cheek against the rough mat of hair covering his chest. He’d left his shirt open when he’d carried her inside the house. She liked the skin-to-skin feeling.

“Danni,” a voice whispered, the sound meant for her ears only.

She sat up, her palm against Falcon’s arm as she levered herself for a better look around her.

“What’s wrong?” Falcon asked.

“I heard someone call my name.”

Falcon’s head turned to search the room with her. “No one’s here.”

“I heard my name, Falcon.”

He positioned her back against the cushion and stood. “I’ll have a look around. Stay put.” He walked across the room and into the kitchen, taking his time to check the locks on the doors and the windows.

Danni didn’t even think about getting up. Her heart pounded while the blood roared in her ears. She’d heard her name clearly. And she’d know that voice anywhere.

“Danni?” The voice was back.

She closed her eyes immediately. “Go away.” Her voice was an uneven hiss.

A chuckle reached her ears. “I’m not going to go away, Danni, so you might as well open your eyes and talk to me.”

Danni’s heart tripped beat after beat as she opened her eyes. “Doug, you can’t be here. You’re dead.” She stared at the visage of her dead husband anyway. He looked so real, so alive. It wasn’t possible. Her mind was playing tricks on her. “I’m imagining you.” Or it was another vision. Her temples began to throb.

Doug squatted down in front of her and took one of her hands. His skin was warm to the touch and Danni’s mouth fell open. “Listen to me. I don’t have a lot of time,” Doug said urgently.

Danni snatched her hand away and held it against her chest. “You don’t have any time.” A bubble of hysterical laughter welled up with her chest. “Am I the only one of us who understands that you’re dead? You died eight months ago.” She pushed against his shoulders. His body was solid and Danni recoiled back

against the cushions, drawing her knees to one side.

Doug placed his hands on either side of her. "If you'll listen to me, I'll explain why I'm here."

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind if I listened in as well," Falcon said from the doorway to the kitchen.

Doug cursed and got to his feet. "You weren't supposed to see me."

Falcon crossed the room and positioned himself in front of Danni, his posture protective. "It would appear you're not very good at protecting your identity then." He glanced down at Danni. "Are you okay?"

Danni pointed to Doug. "I told you I saw him before."

Falcon nodded. "So you did." He directed his attention back to the dead husband. "What are you doing here?"

Doug massaged the back of his neck. "I came to warn Danni. She's in danger."

Danni let out a disgusted sound. "This isn't news, Doug. You always were tardy on the uptake." She got to her feet. "No thanks to you, I've been in danger for the past eight months. What in the hell were you thinking to give me that damned amulet?"

Falcon restrained her with a hand to her arm. "Let's let him tell us what he means, Danni. Maybe he knows something we don't."

Doug didn't thank Falcon for the intervention. "You always were stubborn, Danni."

"Let's don't go there again. We spent most of our marriage arguing about my faults. Did you ever consider that some of our problems were because of you?" Danni returned in a heated voice.

Doug threw his hands up in the air. "What I've considered is that I've summoned up enough energy to drag my ass out of the realms of the other world to help you and all I'm getting is grief."

Danni folded her arms and lifted one eyebrow. "Is it extremely hot in that other world?"

Doug's teeth snapped together.

Falcon intervened once more. "Let's get back to the topic at hand. What kind of danger is Danni in?"

Doug shot a glittering gaze toward Falcon. "Montclair wants the amulet."

Danni nudged Falcon with her elbow. "See? Told you he wasn't very quick to catch on."

"If you'll let me finish," Doug bit out. "Montclair needs the amulet and he'll stop at nothing to get it. I've been watching him, Danni. Without the amulet, his powers are dwindling, but he's summoning additional help."

"Magical help?" Falcon asked.

Doug shook his head. "No. He's not that strong right now. He's enlisting the aid of the entire police force. Danni's in some serious trouble right now."

Danni stepped forward, her shoulder bumping against Falcon. "And you expect me to believe that you

came here to warn me out of the kindness of your heart? Doug, you've never had a conscientious bone in your body."

Doug held up both of his hands. "Did you ever consider maybe I'm trying to atone?"

"Working your way to heaven?" Danni snapped.

Falcon reined them both in with a quick sweep of his hand, which silenced the ghost and startled Danni. "That's enough. Thank you for the information, Doug. We appreciate it."

"Danni." Doug's voice became more insistent. "You have something else the wizard needs. More than just the amulet. He needs you and what you see."

Danni's eyes widened and her heart began to pound a steady rhythm against her chest. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Doug smiled as his body began to evaporate. "Take care of her, wizard."

"That was always my plan."

Once Doug disappeared and they were alone again, Danni whirled around toward the French doors. "I need some air."

"Danni, maybe he really was trying to help."

She began to walk. "And maybe elves really wear green shoes."

Falcon sighed and came after her. "You should give him the benefit of the doubt."

Danni stepped out into the crisp night air. The temperature had taken a severe drop in the few minutes since they'd gone inside. The iciness bit through the sheer fabric of her nightgown. "That's what I did the entire time I was married to him. I spent too many years of my life giving him the benefit of the doubt. I don't trust him."

Falcon took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "You don't have to trust him. Trust me. I'll find out if what he told us was the truth and we can go from there."

"If he really came back to warn me, why didn't he do it that night I saw him at the window? Why did he wait so long?"

"I can't answer that." Falcon kissed her forehead. "Now stop worrying. I'll find out what we need to know and Doug is gone."

"But will he be back?"

Falcon changed the subject. "Do you know what Doug was talking about back there? He said Montclair needs what you see. Any ideas?"

Danni curled her cold hands around the wooden railing and shrugged. "Doug always spoke in riddles."

Falcon cupped his hand around the nape of her neck. "You're hiding something from me."

Danni tried to shake out of his grasp but he held fast. "I'm going to bed."

"Danni, I'll find out one way or another."

"I'm sure you will." Danni hurried back into the house and tugged the French door closed behind her.

Montclair strolled across the floor of the rented hotel room, his face set in a smirk. "Excellent. Excellent. I could not have done the job better myself. I am most impressed with your acting abilities."

"Thank you." The voice spoke out of the shadows.

"You shall be rewarded greatly for your assistance," the wizard intoned.

"You've already given me much more than I could ever have hoped to gain."

Montclair acknowledged the truth behind the statement with a knowing smile. "Perhaps you do not understand the importance of my obtaining this artifact."

"It's more than just an artifact, Montclair. Don't play me for a fool." A chuckle accompanied the words of warning.

Montclair didn't take umbrage. "Nevertheless, you have proven your loyalty to me. Will you be able to find the chief?"

"It won't be easy. If I know him like I think I do, he's already halfway to Quebec by now."

Montclair sifted his fingers through a bowl filled with colored rocks. "But you will find him?"

"Yeah, I'll find him."

"And you will kill him?"

The voice hardened. "Absolutely."

Montclair smiled once more. "Excellent. You will not regret your allegiance to me."

"Danni, wake up. You have to come with me now. Wake up before it's too late." The deep voice yanked Danni from a sound sleep.

She sat straight up in the bed as Falcon turned from the window. "Falcon? Did you hear that?"

He came to her side instantly. "More voices?" He took her hands and sat beside her.

"Doug was telling me to wake up. He wanted me to come with him."

Falcon's eyes iced. "He's not going anywhere you want to go."

Danni stared at him. "What do you mean?"

Falcon rose and retraced his steps to the window. "He's trying to trap you."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "How do you know?"

He turned back around and circled his hand in the air, opening a window to another place and time. "I tracked him when he left here."



Danni scrambled from the bed to get a better look at the window. “That’s Doug. He’s with....” she stopped and held her breath. “Montclair.”

“The wizard has summoned your husband from beyond.”

Danni clutched her throat. “Can wizards do that?”

“Nothing is outside of our abilities. Most of us know it’s an unwise choice to consort with the dead.”

Danni stumbled backwards, turning away from the image of the man she’d buried over eight months ago and the wizard who wanted her life. “I don’t want to see anymore.”

Falcon clenched his hand into a fist and the sights disappeared.

“What will you do?” Her voice was a whisper of dread.

He didn’t mince words. “Your husband will have to be sent back.”

Danni sat on the edge of the bed. “How?”

“I’ll break the spell that summoned him here and he’ll return.”

Danni put two and two together. “Montclair is trying to distract you.”

Falcon’s eyes approved of her understanding. “He wants to get close to you. He thinks me foolish enough to leave you alone.”

“How will you break the spell?”

Falcon’s eyes told her he didn’t have the answer to that question yet. He held out one hand and drew her to his side with the power of his eyes alone. As Danni moved into his arms and his closed around her waist, fear licked its way up her spine.

“Is Montclair winning, Falcon?”

He brushed her hair with his cheek. “To win, he would have to kill me, Danni. It won’t happen.”

“Has a wizard ever been killed before?”

“Many times.”

“I meant one you were close to, one in your family.”

Falcon rubbed her back. “A very close friend of mine died a few months ago. He sacrificed his life to save the wife of our leader.”

Danni’s hands clenched against his chest. “You lead a tragic life.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Danni. I’ve been alive for many centuries and undoubtedly, I’ll be alive long beyond the course of young Montclair’s life.”

Danni scrunched her eyes shut. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Falcon didn’t apologize. “I’ll do what must be done.”

She sighed. “I’m sure you will. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.” She moved back enough to see his face. “What happens if you can’t break the spell Montclair used to summon Doug?”

Falcon smiled, a gentle pulling of his lips. "There's never been a spell I couldn't break, Danni."

"Then you've broken the spell Montclair used on me?"

He cupped her chin in his fingers. "Of course."

Her teeth worried her lower lip. "Did you put another spell on me?"

"You asked me not to."

"But did you?"

Falcon blinked at her. "No."

Danni touched his arm. "You understand why I had to ask, don't you?"

Falcon guided her toward the bed. "That's not important. It's time you thought once more about what I suggested earlier."

Danni fell back onto the bed. "This is about going to your home beyond the wild blue yonder, isn't it?"

Falcon moved her legs aside to sit down beside her. "You'd be safe there."

"I'm safe with you."

"Montclair is wise to attempt to distract me. He wants to get close to you."

"But I don't even have the amulet any more."

Falcon's lips tightened. "This isn't just about the amulet, Danni. It's about the true test of power. Montclair wants to win at all costs to be sure, but beyond that, he wants to overpower me. He thinks that will make him far stronger than the magic of the amulet."

Danni sat up and drew her legs up to her chin. "By overpower, do you mean...?"

"Kill me," Falcon responded simply.

Danni shuddered at the thought. The image of Falcon's blood-spattered, lifeless body beat at her brain. "Why would that make him stronger?" Her voice was a mere croak.

"He could absorb my powers."

She wrapped her arms around her knees. "I probably shouldn't have asked."

Falcon leaned forward and ran his knuckles down her cheek. "Probably not."

"What happened to sheltering me from the truth?"

He lifted one eyebrow in a mocking gesture. "You'd prefer I do that?"

She let out her breath on a long, drawn-out exhalation. "I suppose not. So tell me how we're going to send Doug back to his casket and Montclair back to...where are we sending him anyway?"

Falcon shook his head and stood. "We're not sending anyone anywhere. If any sending is to be done, I'll do it. Starting with sending you to Mystique."

Danni's mouth fell open. "What exactly is Mystique?"

“Mystique is a city. My home is home.”

She scratched her head. “And where is it again?”

Falcon pointed toward the ceiling. “Up there.”

“A vague description.” She flattened her legs and rolled to a standing position. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

Falcon flicked a glance at her face before crossing the floor to resume his earlier position at the window. “You’ll go.”

Danni’s temper flared and she stalked across the floor to stand in front of him. “Dammit, Falcon, I’d thought we’d reached an understanding. You weren’t going to keep dictating to me.”

He smiled, a little too smugly for Danni’s taste. “Saving your life is more important than protecting your feminist values.”

“Feminist...” Danni broke off with a splutter. “Why you self-centered, cavalier son-of-a- -“

”Danni, get down,” Falcon shouted.

Danni didn’t have time to move before Falcon tackled her. They landed with a thump against the wine-colored carpeting. Sandwiched between the floor and Falcon’s body, Danni struggled to breathe and to take inventory of the possibility of any broken bones.

Falcon laid full length on top of her, his elbows on either side of her face. “Wh-what happened?” she whispered.

He placed his hand over her mouth as a thin, red ray of light fell across the floor at their feet. He didn’t take his eyes off the movement. “Keep quiet and still.”

Danni’s eyes widened. She peeled his fingers away and followed the streak of red as it began to move in a sweeping rhythm. “What is that?” She mouthed the words more than actually speaking them.

Falcon’s disapproving gaze fell on her face. “It’s a spotter. We have visitors. Armed visitors.”

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

“So maybe Doug wasn’t lying after all.” Tinged with hysteria, Danni’s voice reached out to Falcon in the quiet as the sweep of the radar continued.

Falcon kissed her gently. “Danni, no matter what happens in the next few minutes, I want you to stay here. Don’t get up and don’t move no matter what you see.” He saw the fear darken her eyes before he could finish speaking.

“What are you going to do?”

He smiled to reassure her. “I’m going to welcome our guests properly.”

“Falcon, they’ll kill you,” Danni almost shouted. She clutched at his arm.

Falcon covered her hand with his. “Where’s that trust you said you had in me?”

“I do trust you, but they’ve got guns.”

He levered himself off of her and pushed himself to his feet. “Promise me you’ll stay here.”

Danni scrunched her hands into fists. “Promise me you won’t get killed.”

He winked at her. “I promise. Remember, no matter what you see, don’t get up.”

She nodded. “I remember.”

“I mean it, Danni.”

Danni bit her lower lip and waved her hand to reassure him. “You can believe me this time. I’m staying right here. I’m not match for men with guns.”

With one last stern look down at her, Falcon focused on the situation at hand. Without leaving the bedroom, his eyes searched through the darkness of the night for the men surrounding his house. There were six altogether and all wearing the uniforms of the local police department. He wasn’t surprised.

He shielded his body from detection by technological means and moved swiftly toward the window. It opened with a sweep of his hand and Falcon cast one last look over his shoulder. “Trust me, Danni. I’ll take care of you.”

Danni’s eyes were huge in her pale face but she nodded anyway. “Don’t die.”

Falcon grinned. “One day, we’re going to have a talk about the meaning of immortality.” Then, the humor drained from his body and he directed his eyes back toward the inky blackness.

Danni rolled to her side and watched the transformation take over. With no effort, Falcon clothed himself in the now familiar indigo robe. His face lost the easy warmth she’d grown accustomed to and became hard, unyielding. And when he spoke, his voice rang with authority and fury.

“I seek the visitors to my home, here without welcome or invite. Follow the commands of my voice and face the one you seek tonight.”

As Danni held her breath, Falcon moved away from the window and centered himself in the middle of the room. One by one, the police officers, their badges shiny and faces pale, floated in through the window. Their eyes were wide with a mixture of disbelief and shock and as Falcon’s feet left the floor, they gasped collectively.

Towering over them, Falcon circled the air slowly, methodically. Danni saw the wizard taking stock of the invaders, assessing them. She knew it would take little of his energy to kill the men standing before him. Each day taught her Falcon was capable of anything. The thought didn’t reassure her.

“Who sent you?” The deep timbre of Falcon’s voice startled Danni and she whipped her eyes back to his face.

None of them seemed eager to speak or volunteer any information. They traded glances and folded their arms across their chests defiantly.

Falcon’s eye narrowed. “I am going to start with each of you, one at a time. If you refuse to answer my questions, I will have no more use for you. Do I make myself clear?”

Danni prayed she’d heard wrong. Falcon wouldn’t really kill these men. Would he?

Falcon settled his feet on the ground and approached the group. He pinned his gaze on the tallest of the six men. “I ask again. Who sent you?”

The man gave a vulgar response. Falcon’s smile held no humor. “Perhaps you did not understand the meaning behind my words. I shall simplify it for you. Refuse to answer my questions and I shall have no other recourse but to kill you.”

Danni started to sit up but Falcon shot her a glance that kept her in her place. Her eyes pleaded with him to spare the lives of the men though she knew she wasn’t getting through. Falcon had gone to a place she couldn’t reach.

“You can’t kill us. We’re the law,” came the squeaky-voiced response of the smallest of the group.

Falcon strolled toward the voice. The officer shrank back. “I do not obey the dictates of your laws. You are in my home. I make the rules here. I am judge, jury, and,” his gaze swept the faces of the police officers, “in your cases, executioner.”

One man began to murmur the Lord’s Prayer while the others shifted nervously and nudged one another. Anxiety-ridden faces turned toward Danni.

The tallest officer finally offered information. “We weren’t going to hurt your lady, Mister. In fact, we were told specifically not to hurt the lady.”

Falcon pressed his fingers together in front of him. “What were your orders specifically?”

“To hell with this.” One officer shouldered his way to the front of the group. “I’ll tell you whatever you need to know, Mr. Kendrick.”

An overweight officer whose stomach strained the buttons of his uniform shirt reached out one beefy hand. “Ian, shut your trap. You want to get us all killed?”

Ian managed to avoid getting caught and he stopped inches away from Falcon. He thrust back his shoulders and tipped his face to see Falcon better. “I was being serious. If you let the rest of these guys go, I’ll tell you what you want.”

Falcon rested a hand on the man’s shoulder and Danni saw the officer wince. “You will tell me what I want to know and I will consider your request,” Falcon responded quietly.

“We weren’t sent to kill Mrs. Condrey, only to bring her back with us,” Ian replied in a voice that shook with fear. He lowered his head. “The only person we were supposed to kill is you.”

Falcon’s hand dropped to his side. “I see. Did you and your colleagues have any idea who you were coming to kill?”

Ian licked his lips rapidly. “No. We didn’t get much information, only instructions.”

“In the future, you should obtain more than just the basics before you attempt to end someone’s life... especially someone who can easily extinguish your life with a touch.” Falcon pressed his hand back against Ian’s shoulder and the officer shrieked with pain. Dropping to his knees, Ian sobbed and cried out for mercy while Falcon watched with a dispassionate gaze.

Another officer took a stumbling step backwards. “Sweet Mother of God.”

Falcon held up his other hand to prevent any further movement. “She will not help you now, officer. In fact, I know of no one who can help you now.”

Danni couldn’t lay silent any longer. Climbing to her knees, she called Falcon’s name in a tortured plea.

He didn’t look at her. “Danni, remain silent.”

“You’re killing him.”

“I never intended to allow him to live or any of them for that matter.” The response sent a shiver down Danni’s spine and brought moans of distress from the other men.

“You can’t do this.” Danni levered herself to her feet and walked slowly toward him. “It isn’t right, no matter what they’ve done. This is murder.”

Falcon looked at her then and his eyes chilled her to the bone. “This is justice.”

“Falcon, I’m begging you----“

“Enough.” Falcon’s hand sliced the air. “You will sleep now and leave me to take care of this matter.”

The words had a drugging effect and Danni felt herself floating in the air, her body weightless. From a distance, she heard Ian's monotonous wailing but she couldn't open her eyes, couldn't speak to reassure him. As she fell against the mattress, her breaths became even and a shroud of darkness fell over her, inviting her to succumb to the pull of sleep.

Falcon sat on the edge of the bed. With gentle fingers, he brushed the tangled, coppery strands away from Danni's face. He didn't expect her to understand his decisions and now, he wasn't sure he could expect her to accept them. He listened to the rhythmic sounds of her breaths and closed his eyes. His actions would change little between the two of them. Danni would never fully be a part of his world and he couldn't live in hers much longer.

He stayed by her side for several more minutes watching her sleep before he got to his feet. "Sleep well," he whispered. He left the room then, closing the door behind himself.

His footsteps rang hollow on the stairs as he descended. He didn't need to look behind him to know the giant had followed him. He'd sensed the hulking presence. "You think I should have allowed her to influence my decision."

Casey's big feet took up a large portion of each stair. "Are you asking for my opinion?"

Falcon sighed. He'd never needed anyone's opinion before now. He'd made decisions all of his life, quick, life or death decisions and he'd stood by them. Now, things had changed. Danni had changed him. "Danni will never understand the ways of my people."

Casey reached the bottom of the stairs and rested one hand on the banister while he surveyed his friend. "You can't expect a mortal to understand them. Even I don't understand you completely."

Falcon tossed him a look. "Forgive me for saying so, but that doesn't concern me nearly as much."

The giant inclined his head in complete comprehension. "You're in a difficult situation. Does she know of your call?"

Falcon wasn't surprised that the giant had such knowledge. Somehow, Casey always seemed to know what was going on around him. "I've mentioned it, but I didn't elaborate."

"Perhaps it's time you did."

Falcon rubbed his chin. "Maybe. I'm going for a walk. I won't be gone long." He shot a quick look up the stairs and Casey placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Go. She'll be fine."

Falcon nodded without speaking and walked away.

Danni stretched and pulled out of sleep's hold. She yawned and scooted herself to a sitting position. She rubbed her face and pushed the hair out of her eyes. And then she froze. Seated across from the bed in a wing-back chair was Doug. He was dressed casually in khaki pants and a white polo shirt and looked very much alive. One knee crossed over the other and he watched her with a solemn expression.

Danni tossed a glance toward the bedroom door. "So you weren't a vision after all."

"You still have those damn things?"

Danni gave him a hard look. "What are you doing here?"

"Keeping you company," Doug responded. "And don't worry. Your, what is he anyway? Your boyfriend? It doesn't matter. He's not here. He left about an hour ago."

She tugged the comforter up to her chin. "Why are you really here, Doug?"

He slid forward to the edge of the chair and dropped his hands down between his splayed knees. "Someone had to try to talk some sense into you. I figured it might as well be me." His pants rasped against the upholstery. "I know this Falcon guy makes you feel safe, but Danni, have you seriously considered the danger you're placing him in by not giving Montclair what he wants?"

Danni hugged her knees. "I suppose you've met Montclair? I know you said before that you'd been watching him. I know you well enough to know you aren't the sit on the sidelines type of guy."

"You're right. I've done much more than just meet him. I've talked with him. He's not a guy you want to fool around with. I've seen what he's capable of." Doug shivered for effect. "Pretty powerful stuff."

"Did he send you here?"

Doug looked affronted. "No. How could you ask me that? I'm trying to protect you." Danni's jaw locked and she spoke through clenched teeth. "You're trying to trap me."

He scratched his nose and tilted his face to give her what was supposed to pass for a reassuring look. "No, I'm not. I know your new guy might think that, but it's not true. I'm only looking out for your best interests." He picked a piece of lint off his pants and sat back in the chair. "I suppose Kendrick told you that he saw me with Montclair."

Danni surveyed the man she'd known as her husband with a practiced eye. She'd known Doug long enough to know when he was tiptoeing around the edge of the truth and right now, he could be dancing The Nutcracker. "He did." She saw no reason to deny what Doug obviously knew to be true.

Doug nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "And you assumed that meeting was detrimental to you." Urgently, he leaned forward, his expression intense. "How could you ever doubt how much I care for you, Danni? I would never do anything to hurt you."

Danni grabbed the robe at the foot of the bed and managed to slip her arms into the sleeves without



loosening her grip on the comforter. Then, swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she stood and belted the robe. “What has he promised you, Doug? To bring you back? Immortality? Wealth?” She strolled toward the dresser, the picture of calm. She might be out of her realm dealing with wizards, but her ghostly husband she could handle. “I mean, the guy is a wizard.” She picked up a wire-haired brush and began gliding it through her hair. “I imagine he would promise you the world for that amulet.”

Doug glided across the floor to stand behind her. Danni saw his reflection in the mirror. He’d always been a handsome man. With the Nordic features of his Scandinavian parents, he’d turned many heads while they’d been married, but those women didn’t know the real Doug Condrey. It hadn’t taken Danni long to see the self-centered little boy hidden beneath the charm and easy grace.

As Doug placed his hands on Danni’s shoulders, she tensed. “Relax, Danni. I’m not going to hurt you.” He met her gaze in the mirror. “I can remember a time when you used to crave my touch.”

Danni dropped her eyes. “That was a long time ago, almost a lifetime. You should go.”

He lowered his lips to her neck. “But you still haven’t learned why I’m here.”

She tried to avoid the coolness of his kiss against her skin. His touch didn’t stir the fires within her like a simple look from Falcon could. “I don’t care anymore.”

Doug chuckled and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “Sure you do. You’re inherently inquisitive, Danni. You want the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. You can’t help it.” He continued to move his lips over her skin. “Now, if you’re nice to me, I just might give you the answers you’re looking for.”

Danni tried to move out of his grasp, but he held her fast. “Let go of me, Doug.”

He slipped his hands around her waist and pulled her roughly against him. “Can you feel what you do to me?”

She laughed almost hysterically. “I shouldn’t be doing anything to you. You’re dead. Am I the only one in this room who realizes that?”

“Look in the mirror, Sweetness,” he whispered against her hair.

Danni was almost afraid to lift her eyes, but the compulsion to know the truth won out. Her gaze lifted and connected with glowing red eyes. She gasped and attempted to turn around, but Doug held her fast. “What has he done to you?” She demanded.

Doug placed a finger against her lips. “Shh. He hasn’t done anything to me, baby. He’s done everything for me. I guess you could say I owe him my life.” He laughed at his own attempt at humor. “Find the amulet, Danni, and you can walk away from this.”

She struggled in his embrace. “I don’t believe for one minute Montclair will let me live if he gets his hands on the amulet.”

He pinched her waist lightly. "I'll protect you."

Danni closed her eyes to shut out the glow of his eyes. "He won't keep you around once you've done what he wants you to do. Your resurrection is short-lived, Doug."

Doug tugged a strand of her hair playfully and stepped away from her. "Don't count on it." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his khakis and rocked back on his heels. "There is one more small matter we need to discuss."

Danni gripped the edge of the dresser. "Just go away."

"Have you forgotten I'm your husband?" His voice was whisper soft.

Danni looked up to meet his eyes once more. "You were my husband. I have a copy of your death certificate signed by the coroner. You and I are no longer married."

He held his hands away from his sides. "It's a miracle. Your husband is back from the dead. And he's here to stay. You might want to think about sharing the good news with your boyfriend because in a few days, I'm coming back...for you." He gave her a wink before strolling toward the door. "Honey, I'm home." He twisted the doorknob, grinned over his shoulder and stepped out into the hallway.

Danni sank to her knees and clenched her hands into fists. Her mind spun with the possibilities. Could Montclair have brought Doug back or was he just some kind of illusion designed to unnerve her? She leaned her head against the polished wood and closed her eyes while her nerves jangled.

Her heart beat rapidly against her breast as she pushed herself to her feet minutes later. Icy dread danced down her spine while she gathered her things for the shower. She moved in a mindless stupor, not wanting to think or feel anything. Wooden legs carried her into the master bathroom while tears began to leak down her cheeks.

Falcon felt the pain in the center of his chest, the sharp, burning knowledge of Danni's fear. He closed his eyes and pictured her, seeking information. He saw her on the floor of the master bathroom. Curled next to the claw-footed tub, she had her face buried in a thick, terry towel and her shoulders shook with her sobs.

Falcon wasted no time in getting to her. He knelt beside her and took her into his arms, pressing her head against his shoulder. "Danni, sweetheart, what's wrong?"

Danni turned in his embrace and clung to him, the dampness of her tears bathing his shirt. "D-doug was here."

Falcon kissed her forehead. "Honey, he's not alive. He can't hurt you."

She pushed back from him, her movements shaky. "If that's the case, why is he able to touch me?"

Falcon's temper began to escalate. "He touched you?"

Danni scooted away from him and hugged her knees. “You weren’t here.” Her voice was accusing.

Falcon accepted her anger even while he wanted to shake the full knowledge of Doug’s visit out of her. “No, I wasn’t. But I’m here now.”

“Doug isn’t here now,” she pointed out in an acidic tone of voice. “He said we’re still married. He’s coming back for me.”

Falcon stood and pulled her to her feet. He wrapped his arms around her waist and held on tight. “He won’t be able to take you away from me, Danni.”

“I never thought he’d be able to come back from the grave, either.”

“He had a little help with that.”

“Montclair, I assume?” Danni managed a shaky laugh. “Is there anything that man won’t do to get that damned amulet?”

Falcon felt the resistance slide from her body as she melted into him. He rested his chin atop her fiery hair and closed his eyes, willing his blood pressure to return to normal. It would seem that he had more than just Montclair to track down. Even a wizard might have a bit of difficulty finding a ghost. “Montclair won’t stop until someone stops him. And before you say anything, that time is drawing closer. He’s preparing to make his move.”

“He’s been preparing for over eight months now.”

Falcon rubbed his cheek against her hair. “He needed Doug’s assistance and he couldn’t raise Doug until the autumnal equinox.”

Danni peered up at him. “Is this more information you’ve been keeping from me?”

He captured her arm and began to lead her from the bathroom. “More information I’ve just learned myself. Most wizards aren’t too wise about raising the dead. I had to do some research.”

“Must have been tough.”

“Extremely difficult.” He smiled, relieved to see the color returning to her cheeks. “Now, tell me what Doug had to say other than that nonsense about his being your husband.”

Danni sat on the edge of the bed and swung her legs. “He thinks Montclair is going to allow him to stay alive after all of this is over.”

Falcon joined her on the mattress. “Then he’s a fool. Montclair will dispose of him once he no longer has any use for him.”

“He can’t kill him.”

Falcon’s eyes crinkled with his laughter. “He can send him back to the afterlife.”

Danni’s nose wrinkled. “You have no idea how eerie that sounds.” She rested her head on his shoulder and Falcon took a deep breath. He knew it was only a matter of time before Danni’s fear would

subside completely and the events of the previous evening would come screaming back.

“Would you like something to drink? I could have Casey bring in some tea.”

Danni shook her head and pushed her hair back over her shoulders. “No, I’m fine. Thank you.” She brushed her hands down over the edge of the short nightie that barely covered the tops of her thighs. “Falcon, I need to know something.”

He didn’t need to ask what. “Do you really want to know, Danni?”

“It’s not so much want as need. What happened to the policemen?” When Falcon remained silent, she lowered her eyes to her hands, which she’d clasped in her lap. “You killed them, didn’t you?”

“They killed themselves,” he responded in a harsh tone of voice. “They would have killed you.”

“They said they weren’t here to kill me.”

“You think Montclair wouldn’t have killed you once you’d given him what he wanted?”

“I don’t have the amulet. I couldn’t have helped him.”

Falcon stood and walked to the window. “Danni, you can’t be that naive. You would have told him where the amulet is and that’s all he needs to know.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and directed his gaze out the window. “Doug seems to think Montclair wants more from you than just the amulet anyway.”

“Doug never has been a very smart man.”

Falcon pinned her with a look and searched her face. She hid something from him even now. He didn’t like knowing she didn’t trust him enough to share it with him. But he didn’t push her. “I know this is difficult for you to understand.”

“Very,” Danni replied in a subdued tone of voice.

“As you said before, if I kill, it’s for a good reason, not because I’m evil.”

“That doesn’t give you a license to take the lives of Montclair’s puppets. He was using them, Falcon.”

“And he would have killed them as well.”

“So you made it easier for them?”

Falcon turned to face her, his jaw clenched. “I gave them a choice.”

Danni looked horrified. “You let them choose how to die? How noble of you.” She pushed herself to her feet and stalked to the bathroom.

“Where are you going?”

“To take a shower. I would appreciate it if you were gone when I got out.”

“Danni, this isn’t a black and white world any longer.”

She paused with one hand on the doorknob. The look she gave him was rife with sadness. “It hasn’t been a black and white world in a long time, Falcon. Ever since I met you, I’ve seen the gray. The only

problem is, I'm not so sure I want to anymore."

Falcon let out an angry curse just as the bathroom door closed with a decisive click.

Doug strolled across the well-manicured lawn, his loafers leaving damp impressions in the grass. So intent on his destination, he didn't realize someone followed him. He reached the French double doors at the back entrance to the palatial mansion Montclair called home and whistling, he rapped once and pushed open one of the doors, a bright smile on his face. His jaunty steps carried him across the parquet flooring. "Monty, you here?" The door clicked shut behind him. The lock turned into place. Doug only spared it a cursory glance before he continued on his way. "Hey, where in the hell are you? I think I have some very good news for you. Something you'll like to hear. I had her shaking in her boots, man. I mean, by the time this is all over, she'll be too scared to do anything but fall into my arms. I gotta say, I owe it all to you, Monty and----" "A violent gust of wind staggered Doug, forcing him back against the wall. His head bumped against an ancient Rembrandt painting and he cursed. "What the hell is going on?"

Montclair, dressed all in black, his pale eyes glowing, approached from behind a curtained wall. He approached slowly, dangerously, his hands curled at his sides. "What are you waiting for?" His voice came out as a thunderous growl.

Doug rubbed the aching spot on his head and stepped away from the wall. "What are you talking about? I'm not waiting for anything. What's in your craw?"

Montclair leaped across the floor until he stood face to face with the former ghost. He slapped a hand on either side of Doug's head and leaned in close. "I brought you back to perform a task. You do not seem capable of fulfilling your duty to me."

Doug blinked rapidly. "You brought me back to get the amulet. I'll get your damned amulet, but I know my wife better than you do. I can't rush in there like a herd of buffalo. I have to ease into it. I'm telling you, I've got her eating out of the palm of my hand."

Montclair curled his hand around Doug's throat. "Liar. I saw you. Your wife might have been frightened of you but she would not have told you where the amulet is."

Doug smirked. "You're not giving me enough credit, Monty, old boy. Trust me." He smacked his hands on the wizard's shoulders and ducked out from under his prison. "Now, why don't you relax and go walk on a moonbeam or something? I'll have the amulet for you before the week is out."

Montclair's eyes glistened and anticipation was a savory taste in his mouth. "I certainly hope so, Mr. Condrey. My patience is wearing thin."

Doug snorted. "If you ask me, you didn't have much of it to start with."

“Even less for those who fail me.”

Doug didn't break a sweat. He lifted his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. “Look, I've already told you you're wasting your intimidation tactics on me. I'll do the job you want me to do because I want to live again, but it's no skin off my nose if I go back. Hell ain't what you read about in those old story books, you know. In fact, I was hanging out with these really hot honeys from...”

“Silence!” Montclair whipped out the word with a flash of his eyes. “I grow weary of your procrastination. Get the job done, Mr. Condrey. Do not disappoint me or hell will take on an entirely new meaning for you.”

Doug snickered and rocked back on his heels. “Don't you ever get tired of talking like that? I mean,” he swept a hand around the room, “you're living like Dracula here. That's gotta be tiresome. Personally, if I were you, I'd be on the prowl for some ladies. You know, something to take the edge off.” He tipped his head to one side and raked a glance up and down Montclair's lean frame. “How long has it been since you've scratched the itch, old buddy? I think I still have a few contacts here. I could hook you up with some really fine...”

Montclair ached to squeeze the life from the man's useless body, but priorities kept him restrained. He would allow Doug Condrey his moments of fun. They would be fleeting. “Do not forget your task.”

“Oh, I did have one more question before you haul ass.” Doug surveyed his fingernails with utmost interest.

Montclair gritted his teeth. “And what question would that be?”

Doug lifted his head and grinned, a cheesy grin that crawled under Montclair's skin. “Does Falcon know you've changed your mind about killing his woman?”

Montclair's jaw snapped. “You speak out of turn.”

Doug continued to grin unrepentantly. “Always.” He shrugged again. “Just wondering if the old guy knew you were going to take his woman for your own.”

Montclair's temper sizzled and the restraint on his fury grew flimsy. With very little trouble, he could send the ghost back to the shadowy realms of hell and before the week was through, his intent was to do just that. “You are treading on dangerous ground, Mr. Condrey. You should choose your next words more carefully. It is foolish to tempt a wizard, especially one who holds your fate in his hands.”

Doug chuckled. “But that's the funny part. You don't really hold my fate any longer. You know, I had to cover my bases, protect my ass and I believe the knowledge I have might be some useful information to impart. That's just in case you decide my services are no longer needed. My trump card, so to speak.” His grin faded. “You make one move against me and I've arranged it so that Falcon will know everything, enough to destroy you. And without the amulet, I don't imagine that would be too difficult of a task.” His

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hands slipped into the pockets of his slacks. “Wouldn’t that be a bitch?”

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

“Mrs. Condrey,” a little girl from the back row wailed, “Josh said a bad word.”

“I did not.” Josh defended himself heatedly. “My daddy says poop and he says it’s not a bad word.”

“Your daddy is an idiot. My daddy says so,” the same little girl responded.

Josh leaped up so fast his chair bumped against the floor. “You take that back.”

Danni rounded her desk and caught Josh’s wiry body before he could launch himself at the pigtailed little girl. “Josh, we don’t hit one another.”

“She called my daddy an idiot,” Josh pointed out.

Danni turned him around toward her desk. “I know and that’s why Rebecca is going to apologize.”

The freckled face girl poked out her lower lip and crossed her arms. “I don’t want to apologize.”

Danni bit back an angry retort and mentally counted to ten before replying. “I didn’t ask you what you wanted. You need to apologize to Josh.”

More pouting accompanied the statement and Rebecca looked down at the floor, scuffing the toe of her sneakers against the tile. “If I apologize, I’d just be lying and my mommy says it’s not good to lie.”

Danni pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and her forefinger and hunkered down in front of the mutinous child. “Do you think your mother would like to come see me after school tomorrow?”

Rebecca’s eyes rounded with worry. “My mommy works.”

“She’d have to miss work to come talk to me about your behavior,” Danni said in a resolute tone of voice.

Josh bobbed his head enthusiastically. “Yeah. That’s right.” He pointed his finger at the center of Rebecca’s chest. “And you’re gonna have detention.”

“Mrs. Condrey,” Elizabeth called in an important tone of voice.

Danni held up one hand. “Just a minute, Elizabeth.” She could only handle one problem at a time. “Rebecca, you have until the count of three to apologize, or you’ll stand in the corner during recess.”

“Mrs. Condrey,” Elizabeth’s voice became more strident.

“I said wait a minute,” Danni snapped. Immediately, she corrected herself. “Elizabeth, I’m sorry, but I need to focus on Josh and Rebecca right now and...”

“But, there’s smoke,” Elizabeth announced with a pout.

Danni straightened and whipped around to follow the little girl’s pointed finger. A dark cloud of smoke bubbled up past the rectangle window in the door of her classroom. At once, the children began to scramble from the desks in an attempt to get a better look. “Everyone take your seats, please.” Swallowing



hard, Danni touched the doorknob and immediately withdrew her palm. The brass seared her skin. Fire!

Danni turned and in a very calm tone of voice directed the kids to line up next to the window beside her desk. “Okay, class, remember the fire drill we had last week?” Pigtailed heads bobbed in unison with towheads. “Well, we’re going to see what we’ve learned.” As she talked, she cranked open the window and pushed it open. “Josh, I want you to lead the boys and Elizabeth, you can lead the girls. I want each of you to help the person behind you climb out the window. Once you’re on the ground, stay together. Remember where our meeting place is?” More nodding was the only response. For once, Danni’s class was uncommonly quiet. She was grateful for the instant obedience accompanying the silence.

Josh tugged on the sleeve of Danni’s cotton shirt. “Mrs. Condrey, Anna’s not moving.”

Danni took a look over her shoulder. Anna, the smallest girl in Danni’s class, huddled against the back wall, her eyes round with terror. “All of you keep moving. I’ll take care of Anna.”

Rebecca wrapped her arms around Danni’s leg. “Anna is my friend, Mrs. Condrey. Can I stay?”

“No. I need you to go outside just like I told you. You’ll be safe out there and I’ll make sure Anna gets out safely.”

Rebecca’s lower lip wobbled. “Please, Mrs. Condrey.”

Anna whimpered and slumped to the ground, her fist pressed against her mouth while another little girl struck up a loud wail in fear. Pandemonium resulted as several little girls joined in the crying chorus while the boys tried to appear calm.

Josh caught hold of Rebecca’s arm. “Come on, Rebecca. You heard what Mrs. Condrey said. She’ll get Anna out.”

A loud roar accompanied an even louder explosion as the door blew in from the force of the flames. Cries became screams as the children scrambled helter-skelter for the window.

Danni didn’t have time to supervise them. Her attention centered on Anna who was dangerously close to the flames licking at the doorway. She bent down low and approached the little girl slowly. “Anna, honey, I want you to come to me.” She waggled her fingers in open invitation, but she knew she was waging a battle she couldn’t win. Anna’s mother died in a fire, which had destroyed Anna’s home and left Anna with more inward scars than outward. Anna wouldn’t move. Danni would have to cross the line of fire to reach her.

She cast a look over her shoulder and felt a momentary pang of relief to see that the children had obeyed her. She was alone in the room with Anna. She squared her shoulders and took one step toward the little girl.

“Someone help me,” the high-pitched whine made Danni spin around. She searched the smokiness behind her and could barely make out a small body hovering next to the chalkboard.

“Who’s there?” Danni whispered.

“Help me. Please help me.” The little girl held out her hand and Danni took one step forward.

“Danni, don’t move.” Authority and power rippled out from the voice and Danni froze as Falcon descended from the ceiling to land inches away from Anna. Danni tipped her head back but didn’t see an opening in the plaster.

“Anna’s terrified of the fire,” Danni shouted over the roar of the flames. “Please get her out. There’s someone else in the room. I don’t know who she is, but I have to get to her.”

Falcon scooped the girl into his arms and turned toward Danni. “Get out of here, Danni. There’s no one else in here but you and Anna.”

“But I heard her,” Danni argued. “I saw her.” She turned around, but the thickness of the smoke obscured her vision and she couldn’t see the little girl any more. “Falcon, she was right here.” She pointed at the corner.

“Danni.” He sharpened his voice. “There’s no one there. Now, get out of here. I’ve got Anna. She’s safe.” When Danni didn’t move, Falcon raised his voice. “I said move!” He stood for a second longer to make sure Danni made it to the window safely then he began to ascend into the air.

“Mrs. Condrey, look out!” The warning came a second too late. Danni made it halfway out of the window when the ball of fire ignited the side of the building. With a scream, she fell back inside, covering her mouth with the collar of her shirt. The smoke stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly to combat the tears. The thickness of the air clogged her lungs and they cried out for oxygen. The blackness reached for her, dragging her under.

Falcon placed Anna on the ground next to a thin boy with a wan face. Instructing the boy to watch over her, he spun around and raced back toward the building.

A fireman barred his path. “Sir, you can’t go in there.”

Falcon didn’t waste time with explanations. Instead, he nodded shortly and pictured the center of Danni’s classroom. He disappeared before the fireman’s eyes. Dropping to his knees, he lifted Danni into his arms. She coughed and turned her face toward his chest. “You need to breathe.” He lowered his head and fastened his lips to hers, driving the oxygen from his body into hers. After several long seconds, he broke the connection and stood, cradling her against his chest.

“How did you do that?” Danni croaked.

Falcon waved one hand and parted the wall of fire. “The same way I did that.” He walked into the charred remains of the hallway and through the double metal doors leading outside.

Danni’s head fell to his shoulder. “I heard her, Falcon. There was someone else.” She coughed and

covered her mouth with her hand.

Falcon pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I checked. The room was empty."

Cheers erupted when his feet made contact with the concrete. Danni's students rushed to greet him, each one talking above the other in an effort to be heard.

"Mrs. Condrey, we were so scared!"

"That fire came out of nowhere."

"I saw it coming and I yelled, but I don't think you heard me."

"Are you okay? Your face looks kind of yucky," Josh inserted with a tilt of his head.

Danni favored the children with a wan smile. "Children, I'm fine. I want you all to go back to the tree and wait until your parents get here. I'm sure the principal has already begun making the calls."

As the students dispersed, one remained behind. Anna, her small face wearing the same horrified expression the fire had caused, tugged on the sleeve of Falcon's shirt. "Mister?"

Falcon shifted Danni in his arms and looked down at the young girl. "Yes, Anna?"

The blonde head dipped as the girl looked down at the ground. "I wanted to say... you didn't have to..." She lifted her head once more and fixed watery blue eyes on her savior. "Thank you."

Falcon gave her a smile and a wink. "You're very welcome." He watched as the child ran back to join her classmates. "She'll have the memory of this day with her for a long time."

Danni touched his cheek with the back of her hand. "But thanks to you, she'll be alive to remember it."

Falcon's eyes darkened as he searched her face. With the exception of a few smudges of soot and a lack of color, Danni looked okay. He couldn't explain why the knowledge didn't reassure him. He saw the weariness in her hazel eyes and he held her closer against his chest as he walked toward the tree where the children were gathered. "You'll want to wait with them." He didn't pose the sentence as a question. He knew Danni well enough to know that she wouldn't leave until the very last student left safely. He released her slowly, sliding her down his body to help her stand.

Danni wobbled and clutched at his shirt. "Thank you."

Josh tapped Falcon on the back with a pointy index finger. Falcon turned. "I'm Josh." The boy stuck out his hand.

Falcon looked at Danni before taking the hand. "I'm Falcon."

Josh's eyes widened. "You're Falcon?"

Falcon heard Danni's cough behind him. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder before directing his attention back to the boy's upturned face. "Yes, I am."

Giggles scattered throughout the group and Danni quieted them with a soft command. She came to

stand beside Josh and rested her hand on his shoulder. “Josh, why don’t you go wait with your friends? Your mother will be here any minute now.”

Josh grinned and shifted from one foot to the other. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans and sucked in his cheeks. “Mrs. Condrey likes you, doesn’t she?”

Falcon angled his body to see Danni’s face. “I’d like to think so.”

“Josh, that’s enough,” Danni warned.

“She wrote your name all over a piece of paper and when I asked her about you, she got all moony-eyed and...”

“I said,” Danni steered him away, “that’s enough.”

“Okay, sheesh,” Josh grumbled. “I was just trying to talk to him.”

“You were just trying to embarrass me,” Danni corrected. “We’ll talk about this later.”

An hour later, the last child had been handed over to his anxious mother and Danni sank against the tree trunk, anxiety giving way to exhaustion. “Thank God they’re all safe. I don’t know if I thanked you for saving Anna.”

Falcon waved away her gratitude. “I’m taking you home. You need a hot bath and a very long nap.” He wrapped his arm around her waist and began to walk toward the road.

“Where’s your car?” Danni yawned.

“I took a short cut,” Falcon explained. He tossed a look over his shoulder and then, taking her arm, centered his thoughts on home.

Danni muffled a scream against his shoulder. “Do you have any idea how frightening that method of travel is?”

Falcon scooped her up into his arms and proceeded up the stairs. “It can take some getting used to.”

“Like a century.”

Falcon didn’t smile. He pushed open the bathroom door with his hip and carried her into the gleaming brass and marble interior. He stood her gently on the floor and yanked a towel off the rack behind the door. “Get undressed.” He practically barked the command. Leaning over to start the water, he kept the fear at bay by completing the mundane tasks. But Danni’s touch on his back caught him off-guard. He shut off the water abruptly and braced his hands against the tiled wall in front of him. “I wasn’t tracking you at first.” His voice shook with the memory.

Danni squeezed in between him and the wall. “What are you talking about? You found me.”

Falcon kept his head down. “But I almost didn’t. I wasn’t paying close enough attention. I knew the

exact moment you were in danger, but I should have known sooner that something was wrong. I should have seen the fire. Had I been tracking you properly, I would have.”

Danni took hold of his arm. “You were giving me privacy. You know how important that is to me.”

Falcon’s shoulders stiffened. “To hell with privacy, Danni. You could have died.”

“But I didn’t.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that it could have happened.” His voice rose an octave. “We saw today that Montclair means business.” His hands clenched into fists at his sides. “The little girl you saw wasn’t real, but Montclair wanted you to think she was real. She kept you there. That was Montclair’s plan and I almost let you die because of that plan.”

Danni kept hers low and soothing. “You wouldn’t have allowed anything to happen to me, Falcon. Since the day we’ve met, you’ve been my protector. I trust you.”

Falcon spun around, his hands dropping to his sides. “Maybe you shouldn’t.” He left her then, walking out of the bathroom and down the hallway with long, angry strides.

Montclair’s hands closed around Doug’s neck. “Fool! You could have killed her.”

“I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew the big guy would save the day. She’s deep inside him. He’s not about to let her go.”

The wizard’s hands fell away. “Your instructions were not to risk her life.”

Doug stepped back and leaned one shoulder against the door of the wizard’s lavishly decorated office. “Yeah, I know, but I’m a fly by the seat of my pants type of guy.” He lifted the free shoulder in a shrug. “Can’t blame me for wanting to exact a little revenge on the woman who loused up my life. Hell, she’s even making my afterlife miserable. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here right now. So much for resting in peace.”

Montclair’s eyes burned and rage snarled within him. He wanted to rid himself of the ghost. Soon. Very soon. “Do not attempt to harm her again.”

Doug lifted his hands to show their steadiness. “I’m shaking in my boots over here.”

The fury screamed for release. “One day, Mr. Condrey, you will regret tempting me.”

Doug laughed out loud. “Maybe, but not before I make you regret bringing me back.” He winked and twisted the door knob. “Oh, and next time, don’t summon me like a bad, little, school boy. I’m not your servant. I know what my job is here and I’ll do it, but you’re not going to intimidate me into bowing down. I’ll see you in hell first.”

As the door closed behind Doug, Montclair’s gaze singed a hole in the polished teak.

He'd found his prey easily. Harrigan left a trail an amateur deer hunter could follow. As Doug sat inside the cab of the dilapidated old pickup truck he'd 'borrowed' from a farm just outside of Mills River, he munched on potato chips and watched the former chief of police wrestle with his kids. Harrigan and his family had pulled up stakes quickly, leaving most of their possessions behind. Now, they were traveling cross-country in a used recreational vehicle, heading for Canada, Doug was sure.

It was a shame he'd have to kill the bastard, but, Doug figured his stakes were too high to back out now. He knew he could only keep the wizard at bay for so long before Montclair would decide to take him out in spite of the threats. And Doug had no intentions of returning to the hell dimension he'd been rescued from. He had bigger plans. Plans that included his wife and a helluva lot more money.

The cigarette lighter popped out and Doug lit a unfiltered cigarette and placed it between his lips while Harrigan and his kids rolled around on the browned grass. The missus was standing in the doorway to the RV, her face pale and drawn. Harrigan stood when she called his name and lumbered toward the door. Doug's lips curled. "Better say your goodbyes now, Harrigan, old boy. Cause tonight's your swan song."

Danni didn't have to look very far to find Falcon. He seemed to migrate to the balcony when he needed time to think, to put his thoughts into perspective. She walked up beside him and rested her arms on the railing. She'd taken the time to change into jeans and a thick, turtleneck sweater to ward off the chill of the evening air, but even with the heavy wool covering her arms, she felt the heat of Falcon's body against hers. She nudged him with her shoulder and waited for him to acknowledge her presence.

Falcon lifted his face to the starlit sky and remained quiet for a long, tense moment before he finally spoke. "I'm getting careless, Danni."

Her brows knit together. "Careless is never a word that could be used to describe you, Falcon. You know how I feel about being tracked. I don't blame you for not seeing the fire ahead of time." She placed her hand on his arm. "Besides, you got there in plenty of time to save Anna and me. That's all that matters."

He covered her hand with his and continued to look up at the sky. "Montclair is waiting and I can't figure out why."

"He wants Doug to do his dirty work," Danni suggested.

Falcon shook his head and dropped his eyes to her face. "No, I don't think so. Doug is just a pawn in Montclair's little game. He brought your ex-husband back from the grave to distract you, but not necessarily to take you."

“Montclair should have thought twice about bringing Doug back. Doug’s not exactly known for his loyalty. He’ll turn on the wizard in a second if it means Doug could have the upper hand, rule the world, so to speak. Doug has always craved that kind of power.”

“Doug doesn’t know what he seeks,” Falcon bit out. “He’s a fool of the worst kind if he thinks magic is something easily acquired and just as easily controlled. It will kill him without the proper knowledge.”

Danni lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “Doug’s already been killed. I’m sure he’s not thinking about his demise again.”

Falcon drew her hand underneath his arm to clasp it against his chest. “Danni, I know we’ve talked about this before, but....”

Danni touched two fingers to his lips. “We’re back to the subject of my leaving, aren’t we?”

He turned and captured her arms with his hands. “Can you not see why I want to get you out of this town?”

Danni shivered at the intensity of his gaze. As her world unraveled around her, he was her only port in the storm. She had to believe that whatever he was doing, he was doing to save her, to keep her safe. The thought of leaving the world she knew so well and moving to another plane of existence unnerved her. More than that, it scared the hell out of her. But if she was going to continue to trust Falcon, she had to believe that he would never do anything to harm her. “Could you give me one more night? I’ll go wherever you want me to go tomorrow. Tonight, I need to come to terms with what’s going to happen.”

Relieved melted the worry from Falcon’s face. “Tonight is all yours.” He cupped her face in his hands. “Thank you.”

She shook her head. “I should be thanking you. You’re only trying to protect me.”

He kissed her gently, without the intimacy Danni had grown accustomed to. She sensed there was more behind her request, information he wasn’t giving her.

“Is there something you’re keeping from me?” She asked softly.

Falcon lowered his hands and stuck them in the pockets of the black jeans he wore. With the white cable knit sweater stretched tautly over his muscles and the wind ruffling the salt and pepper strands of his hair, he took Danni’s breath away. It was difficult to focus on the suspicions her mind created.

“Will you stay?” His voice was low and deep.

Danni’s breath caught in her throat. “Stay? As in stay with you or stay in Mystique?”

He turned his back to her. “Both.”

Danni’s blood ran as cold as liquid nitrogen through her veins. “You can’t ask me that now.”

“Will there be a better time to ask you?”

“Falcon, the past couple of months have been a combination of fear and adrenaline. I’m trying to stay

alive and you're trying to keep me that way. We can't look at the future until we know a future even exists for me."

Falcon spun around to face her once more. "Your future is with me."

Danni's teeth snapped. Her temples pounded with the rush of blood. "You can't just point to someone and say they're going to be yours. Life doesn't work that way. I have to have choices."

He folded his arms. "You're saying you wouldn't choose to stay with me?"

Danni stared at him. Despite the darkness, she saw the flash of light in his eyes. She wondered if it was anger or desperation. She wasn't sure she could deal with either. "I'm saying I haven't thought about tomorrow much less the future. I want to take things one day at a time."

Falcon moved closer to her, close enough for her to feel the warmth of his breath bathing her face and see the silver of his gaze. His eyes mesmerized her, but it was the look in them that would haunt her through the night. She knew then that Falcon had made a commitment to her and even though he hadn't said the words aloud, she knew he loved her. In spite of the turmoil of the past couple of months, his protective feelings had developed into a stronger, lasting emotion.

Danni looked away from him, dropping her eyes to the ground. Her knees banged together and she took a hesitant step toward the French door. "I'm going to go inside now. It's getting cold out here."

Falcon's hand shot out and caught hold of her wrist before she could escape. "I have another question."

Danni swallowed hard and trained her gaze on his fingers circling her wrist. "I'm not...Falcon, please don't."

"Please don't what, Danni? Don't love you? Don't want to be with you? What is it that you don't want me to do?"

When she lifted her head, her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "This isn't just about love."

His thumb stroked the silkiness of her skin. "Then tell me what it is about."

Danni tried to tug her hand away but gave up when Falcon's grip only tightened. "It's about the difference in our worlds. You want me to accept everything about you, to voluntarily give up my life here, to be willing to follow you anywhere. But at what cost? Should I be willing to lose my own identity to love you, Falcon? And where are your sacrifices? What are you willing to give up to love me?"

His eyes snapped. "Why should either one of us have to give up anything?"

Danni was successful in freeing her arm then and she clamped both hands on her hips. "You don't get it, do you? You're a wizard with a home only God knows where and while I'm willing to go there while you deal with Montclair and his flunkies, I'm not so willing to forget about my life here. I have a career I love, students I adore and a relatively normal life. Or at least I will once this is all over."



“But do you have love, Danni?” His voice slid over her like expensive silk.

Danni closed her eyes. “That’s not fair.”

Falcon snatched hold of her and dragged her into his arms. One hand fisted in her hair, forcing her head back. “Fair? You’re looking for equality? You can’t be so naive to think that life plays a fair hand with everyone. Fair would be you marrying a man you actually loved, one who cherished you and loved you in return. Fair would be your never having your life threatened.” His body grew still. “And fair for me would be falling in love with another wizard instead of a mortal woman who can’t accept what I am.” He released her then and took a step back. “Don’t talk to me about fairness, Danni. It doesn’t exist.”

Danni didn’t immediately turn away. Instead, she held her position and her breath. “Falcon.” Her voice was shaky, uncertain.

He didn’t respond. Frozen in place, he met her gaze.

She tried again. “Falcon, please.”

He gave her a look, which allowed her to continue.

“There is one question you never asked.”

Falcon lifted one eyebrow.

“So in case you’re wondering, I do love you.”

Falcon’s shoulders stiffened. “And that makes everything better, right? Go inside, Danni, and pretend you love an ordinary man. That’s what works best for you.” Without giving her time to rebut his statement, he turned away and leaped over the side of the balcony, disappearing into the darkness.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

Doug brushed his hands down the legs of his slacks and grimaced. He hated doing Montclair's dirty work, but he considered it business. And killing Harrigan had been just that. Business. He could still hear the man's pleas for mercy ringing in his ears. He hoped that when it was his time to go again, he'd go like a man.

He turned up the radio in the truck and rolled down the window. Not that he had any intention of going anytime soon. He had too many plans. Plans even the wizard couldn't know anything about. By this time next week, things would change. Doug would be sitting on top and with any luck, Montclair would be history.

Doug patted the .357 Magnum lying on the seat beside him. His ticket to a better life. He'd have to be sneaky to make it past the wizard's inward antenna but sneaky was Doug Condrey's middle name. He could kill without batting an eye; he'd done it many times before. Danni didn't know the real Doug. She'd married a mirage. She'd only seen the side of him he'd wanted her to see.

He chuckled and lit up a cigarette, taking a long, deep pull into his lungs. The whine of a steel guitar filtered out into the crisp night air and Doug pressed on the accelerator. Only two hundred more miles until he reached Mills River again. If he timed his arrival right, he'd be leaving Kendrick's home with Danni at his side before the break of dawn. With the amulet in his possession, he'd have some bargaining power with Montclair.

The old truck rattled down the interstate and Doug's fingers tapped out a rhythm on the window's edge. "By tomorrow night, Danni, you'll remember what it's like to be married to a real man."

"Aren't you going to talk to me now?" Danni asked after spending a long ten minutes in the same room with Falcon and his silence.

Silver eyes flicked upwards, fixed on Danni's face. "Something's wrong."

Danni sat down on the sofa and folded her hands in her lap. "Are we going to go back over what we talked about outside?"

He walked away from the mantle and shook his head. "That's not what I'm talking about."

Fear formed a knot in the pit of her stomach. "What are you talking about then?"

Falcon looked up at the ceiling and Danni watched his face change. He was wearing the expressionless mask again. It enabled him to hide his thoughts and feelings from her.

Danni leaped to her feet and came to stand in front of him. "Falcon, talk to me. What's going on?"

He lowered his head and when he spoke, a shiver ran down Danni's spine. "Harrigan's dead."

She bit down on her lower lip. "How can you be so sure?"

He didn't take the time to explain. "I know. Stay here. I must go."

Danni caught his arm. "Go? Where? What are you going to do?"

Falcon removed her hand. "His family doesn't know, Danni. I must recover Harrigan's body."

Irrationality pushed compassion out of the way. "Since when did you become his champion?"

Falcon walked toward the front door. "It's a little too late to be his champion now."

Danni dogged his footsteps. "Did Montclair kill him?"

Falcon stopped and searched the air for an answer. "No."

"And you're sure of that just as you're sure Harrigan is dead?"

Falcon inclined his head. "Yes."

Danni snatched her jacket off the table by the door. "Then I'm coming with you."

Falcon rested one palm against the sturdy door. "No, you're not."

"You shouldn't go out there alone. It could be a trap. I mean, wouldn't Montclair know that you would go searching for Harrigan? Don't you think he's smart enough to figure out that you wouldn't take me with you? Do you really want to leave me here alone?" Danni played her trump card. She wouldn't expect Falcon to understand her true explanation. She didn't understand it herself. How could she tell him she'd seen a little girl in trouble and expect him to believe her? She wasn't sure she believed it herself. Doug could be playing mind games with her.

Falcon's eyes darkened. "You're not alone. Casey is here."

"Is a giant any match for a wizard?"

"Montclair's powers are rapidly fading. I believe Casey can protect you."

"Are you sure enough to take that chance?"

Falcon grasped her shoulders and pulled her away from the door. "Danni, I have to do this. I'm asking you to understand."

Danni dropped her head to his chest. "Montclair could be out there waiting for you."

He kissed her forehead. He meant to reassure her, but dread wrapped itself around Danni's spine and careened toward her stomach. "He's not out there," Falcon responded.

"Because you can't sense him? What if he can hide himself? What if he's got a trick up his sleeve, something you don't know anything about?" Frustration colored her voice. "You're the one who told me I can sense when things aren't right. Well, this isn't right. Montclair has something planned." She tipped her head back and even as she finished speaking, she knew that Falcon wouldn't listen to her. He would leave anyway. He considered it his duty. "You don't owe Harrigan or his family anything."

Falcon caressed her cheek with his palm. "This isn't about what I owe, Danni. It's about decency. Under ordinary circumstances, Harrigan would never have harmed you. He was trapped by his fear of Montclair's threats."

"Okay, so what happens if Montclair sabotages you the minute you're alone?"

Falcon's lips turned up in a parody of a smile. "He would not be so foolish. With his powers so low, he would be writing his own death certificate."

"I thought you didn't want to kill him." Danni was desperate to keep him with her for as long as possible.

Falcon's hand dropped to his side. "I'm finding that what I want to do is overshadowed by what I need to do. Stay inside. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Danni reached out for him and hugged him fiercely. "Please be safe."

He kissed the top of her head before pulling away from her. "Don't leave the house, Danni. I'm serious. If you go outside, Casey will tell me."

Danni lifted one eyebrow. "And then what? You'll ground me?"

Falcon's teeth flashed in a grin. "You don't want to know."

The moment the door closed behind him, a cold chill raced down Danni's spine. "*Mommy?*" The childish voice beckoned to her and Danni grasped hold of her temples. This wasn't happening. It wasn't real. She couldn't have children. She didn't have children. It was a dream.

*"Mommy, please help me. Daddy's going to get hurt."*

The words spurred Danni into action. There was only one man who could be Daddy. The child's silver eyes matched Falcon's and Danni knew she'd seen a vision of their daughter. She didn't know if the child was real or just a part of her imagination, but her heart told her to follow her instincts. And instinct was telling her to follow Falcon.

Danni stuck her arms into her coat and ran to the window. She might not be able to follow him, but she'd lay odds his own people could. She didn't know how, but somehow, she'd find his link to his family. They would be able to help him and regardless of Falcon's insistence that she remain behind, she knew he needed help. He wouldn't be able to take Montclair down alone, and there was no doubt in her mind that by now, Montclair would have summoned help. From where, she wasn't sure, but Montclair was one wizard who didn't like to work alone.

Danni turned away from the window and checked over her shoulder for any sign of the giant. Her confidence lagging, she tugged open the front door and stepped out into the foggy night air just as the first shot rang out.

Stifling a scream, Danni dove back into the house and slammed the door shut behind her. After

securing the lock, she raced back to the window.

Falcon knew he wasn't alone. He'd purposefully left his house on foot. He wanted to lead his stalker away from Danni, out into the open. His steps sure and even, he walked across the damp grass, taking the trail deeper into the woods. He heard the crunch of leaves, gravel behind him, and smiled as his visitor took the bait.

Anger coursed through his system, fire licking through his veins. Tonight, he would add one more body to the growing pile of men he'd had to kill to protect Danni. The knowledge didn't make him proud, but killing was a necessary evil sometimes.

He increased his pace and heard the huffing breaths of the stalker closing in behind him. Falcon smiled grimly, whipped around behind a tree and waited. He cleared the fog with a blow of his breath, startling the man who'd been following him.

"We meet again," Falcon noted quietly.

Doug took a stumbling step back before righting himself. He lifted the Magnum for protection. "I figured you'd know I was back here. That's why I brought this." He waved the gun for intimidation.

Falcon didn't even look at the weapon. "And what did you expect to do with that?"

Doug tugged his coat closer with his free hand. "Oh, I know I can't kill you but I don't have to kill you to slow you down."

"And you believe a bullet will do that?"

Doug took a step forward. "There's only one way to find out. Close range might give me better odds."

Falcon's breath left his lungs in a long, slow snarl. "By all means, come closer." His voice was a drugging combination of fury and magnetism.

Doug pointed the muzzle of the Magnum toward the center of Falcon's chest. "I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to intimidate me and it's not going to work. I've got the upper hand here."

"Then take your shot." The instruction caught Doug off guard and he blinked and swallowed.

"You're not getting me to fall into your trap, wizard."

Falcon continued to watch him. He noticed the fidgety movements, the shifting of Doug's feet and the perspiration coating his upper lip. Danni's ex-husband would make a mistake, a stupid mistake, but it would be all the opening Falcon needed. "I am going to send you back to where you belong. It does not matter to me if I must take a bullet to ensure Danni's safety. You cannot kill me, Condrey." His eyes flashed with the light of battle. "But I can kill you."

Doug squared his shoulders and faced his enemy. As Falcon watched, the energy provided by Montclair's waning strength flowed into Doug's body. His eyes glowed red and sparks nipped the ground at his feet. "I'm afraid you underestimate my abilities. Montclair has provided me with some additional strength."

"Montclair is a child," Falcon pointed out calmly. "His powers are no match for mine."

Falcon saw Doug reassessing the situation. The man's eyes flitted to the left then back to the right before settling on Falcon's face once more. "Did you know that Montclair has no intentions of killing Danni?" Doug asked.

Falcon didn't give away the fury scrambling for release within him. He remained still, waiting for the ghost to make his move. "I assumed as much."

Disappointment climbed over Doug's face. "How could you have known?"

Falcon smiled. "If Montclair had truly wanted Danni dead, he would not have stopped trying."

"Maybe he's waiting for the right moment."

Falcon changed the direction of the conversation. "Tell me why he wants her alive."

Doug swallowed visibly. His sweating intensified. Falcon took no pleasure in the man's agitation. He knew Doug was waiting for the moment when Falcon would relax his stance and allow him to make his move. Falcon wouldn't give him the pleasure. Doug raised the gun higher and threw back his shoulders. "I could shoot you right now."

Falcon lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "You could try."

Doug swiped his brow with the back of his hand. The Magnum wobbled a little. "You're just trying to scare me."

Falcon trained his eyes on the hand holding the weapon and Doug gasped with pain and cradled his hand next to his chest. "I would not waste my time trying to scare you, Condrey. I have better things to do this evening."

Doug massaged the raw, angry wound on the back of his hand. "I don't know how you did that, but don't do it again or I will shoot."

"So you have said," Falcon replied. "You were going to tell me why Montclair wants Danni alive."

Doug smirked. "You mean you haven't figured that one out by yourself?" He assumed a cocky stance. "Montclair has taken a liking to my wife. He thinks she's a hottie. Not that he's said so in so many words, but I see it in his eyes whenever he talks about her. He can't wait to get her all to himself."

"That is never going to happen."

Doug whistled and shrugged. "I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you. You might be underestimating the old guy."

Falcon didn't blink. "Perhaps." He gave Doug the opening the ghost required, allowed him to believe Falcon had lowered his guard.

His hand amazingly steady once more, Doug aimed the Magnum and pulled the trigger.

Danni ran over the grass, fear giving her more speed than she'd ever had before. The gunshot had come from the direction of the woods and though she was traveling blindly, she followed her instincts. And while she ran, she prayed. She prayed for Falcon's safety and for the unknown assailant who had pulled the trigger.

Rounding a copse of trees, she skidded to a stop and stared at the scene ahead. Doug leaned weakly against the trunk of an ancient oak, one arm hanging limply at his side. Falcon stood a few feet away, his arms folded. Relief poured through her and she sank down to her knees. Her breath hitched in her throat as Falcon began to speak.

"Did you really believe you could kill me?" He opened his hand and Danni heard Doug's inarticulate cry of surprise.

Falcon held the bullet up to the light of the moon. "While your gun is a powerful weapon against mortals, it is useless against a wizard. You should have done your homework."

Doug regained his confidence and stepped away from the tree. "Yeah, well, I didn't have a lot of time to study where I was." He took a step forward. "I may not be able to kill you with a gun, but I have other means to accomplish the job."

Falcon raised both of his hands. The bullet fell to the ground. "I urge you to make your next move your best. I will not waste any more time with you, Condrey."

Doug's hand dipped into the pocket of his leather jacket and he withdrew a small packet. "I have something that might make this situation a little more interesting."

"I am holding my breath with anticipation."

Doug held up a smooth, round stone. "Recognize this? In case you can't see it too clearly from where you're standing. It's an onyx. I've heard this little baby can make things more even between the two of us. Sort of like kryptonite to Superman."

Falcon didn't move his position and from where Danni sat, the information didn't appear to have affected him in the least.

"The way I heard it, all I have to do is touch you with this stone and your powers begin to fade." Doug winced mockingly. "Maybe then these bullets will be able to do their job." He lifted his arm, the onyx nestled in the center of his palm. "Are you ready for me to make my next move, wizard?" As he prepared to

toss the stone, Danni leaped to her feet.

“Doug, no!” She ran out into the clearing, startling both the man and the wizard.

Doug whirled around, his gun level.

“Danni, stay back,” Falcon instructed harshly, taking one step toward her.

“Falcon isn’t part of this, Doug,” Danni continued.

“Like hell he isn’t,” Doug replied. “Now, you heard your lover. Stay back.”

Danni slowed her pace to a walk. “I’m not going to let you hurt him.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Doug snarled. “Come any closer and I’ll take you out first.”

Falcon centered his thoughts on Danni, trying to push her back beyond the clearing and out of harm’s way, but the onyx blocked his pathway. Even from a distance, the stone’s powers hindered him. His physical powers remained just as strong, but he couldn’t protect Danni from a distance. “Condrey, your fight is with me.” He dragged the ghost’s attention back to where it belonged.

Doug whipped back around just as Danni cried out once more. With an evil gleam in his eyes, Doug took the opening Danni’s scream provided and he pulled the trigger, catching Falcon off-guard. The bullet tore through the wizard’s chest and felled him. Danni screamed and launched herself at Doug.

Doug tried to tear her hands away from his eyes, but Danni held fast. He couldn’t shake her. Cursing and staggering, Doug swung her against a tree, but even the slam of the bark against her spine didn’t make her release her hold. Her nails dug into his retinas and blood began to ooze down his face. In desperation, he brought the gun up between their closely attached bodies and squeezed the trigger.

The report of the bullet echoed loudly through the woods and as Danni fell limp against Doug, he dropped her to the ground, stumbling toward the center of the clearing. His eyes were on fire and he whimpered like a man facing a vampire for the first time.

“Good God, you’ve blinded me,” he hollered.

Danni lay on the ground, her hand clutching her abdomen. Blood seeped between her fingers and her breaths were shallow. She heard Doug’s moaning and wailing but she couldn’t move. She could only wait to die.

Doug fell to his knees and pressed the heels of his hands against his eye sockets, trying to ease the pain. “Montclair, where in the hell are you? Now’s when I need you.”

“What you need is death,” came the low, vibrating voice of Doug’s executioner.

For the first time in his life, Doug felt real fear. It was so real, it turned his muscles to mush. He thought he’d killed the wizard. He didn’t understand how Falcon Kendrick could still be alive. The bullet had hit him in the center of his chest. “I killed you,” Doug whispered.



Falcon curled his fingers around the man's throat. "You tried to kill me. You failed."

"Hold on," Doug wailed. "Maybe we could work something out. I know more about Montclair. Things that could help you." His legs flailed in the air as Falcon lifted him until they were eye level.

"You have nothing I want," Falcon said in a guttural voice.

Doug shot a glance toward where Danni lay bleeding. "Maybe not right now, but in a few minutes, Danni will be somewhere you can't touch her anymore. I guess I'm taking more than just my knowledge of Montclair with me."

Falcon's eyes turned cold. "I would not bet on that if I were you." With no more than a flexing of his hand, he crushed the man's windpipe and dropped him to the bed of grass beneath them.

Danni knew it was only a matter of time now. She felt her life's blood running down her side to pool on the ground beneath her. Her breaths were becoming more and more shallow, each one harder to sustain than the last. Her vision grayed and her hands flexed with one last burst of strength. Her death didn't matter anyway. With Falcon gone, she didn't care if she lived or died. Doug had gotten his wish. He'd separated them. She wondered where wizards went when they died.

"Danni." Falcon's anxious voice called her out of the pain-induced trance.

She turned her head on the ground with effort and blinked rapidly as Falcon's face came into view. "You can't be here. You're dead. Doug killed you."

"That's what he thought, too." Falcon stooped and gathered her into his arms. Danni gasped out loud. "It won't hurt for much longer," he assured her.

Danni kept one hand covering her abdomen. "Where are you taking me?" She heard birds' singing, which didn't make a bit of sense considering it was night and birds didn't sing at night. Or did they? She was hallucinating. How else could Falcon be carrying her when she'd seen Doug kill him? She rested her head on his chest. He certainly felt solid enough.

"Where I should have taken you a long time ago." Falcon's cryptic reply should have annoyed her, but Danni didn't have the strength to expression her irritation.

"I'm dying," she mumbled.

Falcon's breath hissed out on a long exhale. "No, you're not."

Danni sank against him, her head lolling limply. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I won't let you die."

"Oh. Okay then." Danni closed her eyes and welcomed the blackness beckoning her.

The air swirled angrily, a thick mixture of gray fog and black smoke as Falcon swept inside the

opened doors of the Assembly's home. His heels clicked against the floors as he strode down the expansive hallway. He kept his mind on his mission and purposeful steps carried him across the marble floors. He heard the whispers of the wizards and elves behind him, but he didn't slow down until he reached the Serenity Chamber.

A room made of pure gold, it welcomed the former leader and his woman with warmth and healing energy. Falcon juggled Danni against his hip and swept his hand over the empty floor. A plush velvet chaise lounge slid toward him. He stopped it with a flick of his finger and placed Danni down onto its softness.

Danni's eyelids fluttered once and she moaned. Falcon shushed her with a gentle finger against her lips.

"The others told me you were here," came a resonating voice behind him.

Falcon didn't look over his shoulder. "Danni has been hurt."

Jaxon advanced closer and surveyed the damage himself. "I can help."

Falcon lifted one hand. "Leave us. I will take care of her."

Jaxon placed a hand on his mentor's shoulder. "You should not be alone at this time. You may need my abilities. The damage is extensive."

Falcon's eyes frosted as he tipped his head back to view the younger man. "I do not need you to tell me that." He brushed his knuckles down Danni's cheek. "She's dying."

Jaxon nodded almost imperceptibly. "You can still save her."

Falcon pulled in a deep breath. "Perhaps she would not want me to." He rocked back on his heels. "She has never wanted me to use my magic to protect her."

Jaxon squeezed his shoulder. "I think, in this instance, she would make an exception."

Falcon's jaw clenched. "It does not matter. I cannot let her go." He held his hands over her body and closed his eyes. Whispered words of ancient healing filled the room and bounced off the metallic walls.

Danni began to move on the lounge, her cries of pain threatening to drown out the soothing words of comfort and supplication. Sweat slid down Falcon's face and his arms began to shake from the effort. But he didn't take his eyes off Danni's face. He focused every ounce of his strength into healing her. And he breathed a slight sigh of relief when Jaxon fell to his knees beside him. Together, the two powerful wizards healed Danni, their powers united.

As the last remaining drop of blood disappeared from Danni's blouse and the wound sealed completely, Jaxon pushed himself to his feet. "I'll leave the two of you alone."

"Jaxon, I..." Falcon began.

"There's no need," Jaxon quickly interrupted. "You would have done the same had it been Tess lying there."

Falcon inclined his head in acceptance of the truth. He stayed by Danni's side a little longer, allowing her to feel the strength of his presence. He knew she'd sleep for a while and it was good that she did. While the combined magic repaired the damage to her body, her mind would require excessive restoration. She'd seen Doug shoot him and beyond that, she'd felt the pain of being shot herself. Falcon wished he could kill the ghost all over again. Instead, he felt a helplessness that was new to him.

He got to his feet and prowled the Serenity Chamber, anticipating his next confrontation with Montclair. And how exactly he would kill him.

Montclair flew into a mortal rage, his face turning purple as he shouted at the heavens. "You will pay for this, Falcon! I will rid the universe of you myself!"

Tess came to stand beside her husband as they watched the young wizard's burst of fury. "Do you think he can?" Her voice carried her anxiety to her husband's ears.

Jaxon wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to him. "There isn't a being alive who can end Falcon's existence. He's lived longer than any of us and because of his intelligence, he'll undoubtedly outlive most of us."

"I appreciate your faith, Jaxon." Falcon spoke from behind him.

Jaxon didn't turn around. He smiled into this wife's upturned face. "I think his stubbornness will also have a lot to do with his longevity."

Falcon joined them at the window Jaxon had opened to enable them to see through the swirl of clouds obscuring Earth. His eyes darkened as he watched Montclair whip across the mountains, his long, white hair unfettered. "He will be the next to die." Falcon's words held no remorse.

Tess clutched at Jaxon's sleeve. "Perhaps there is another way."

Jaxon silenced her with a look and a slight shake of his head. "You know we stand behind you. It is your decision, my friend."

Falcon directed his gaze at Jaxon's face. "Montclair made the decision long ago. It is simply my duty to carry out his wishes."

"Do you think there's no hope of saving him?" Tess leaned around Jaxon to see Falcon's face more clearly.

Falcon favored her with an understanding smile. "Sweet Tess, I know you have a desire to save everyone, but sometimes, it simply is not possible. There are times when the evil within a person can only be eradicated when that person is stopped permanently."

Tess winced. "I'm not so sure your girlfriend is going to see it that way."

Falcon's brows lowered. "Danni will understand. We have talked about this."

Tess pursed her lips and clamped her hands on her hips. "And has she always seen things your way?"

Falcon and Jaxon exchanged weary glances. "Honey, maybe you should check on Roan," Jaxon suggested.

Tess poked him in the ribs. "Our son is fine and don't try to get rid of me."

"Master Falcon. Master Falcon." A high-pitched voice accompanied the small, squat body of the elf as he danced into the living chambers of the Assembly's leader.

The trio turned as one to answer the summons. "What is it, Narvil?" Jaxon posed the question.

"Miss Danni is awake. She is asking for you."

Falcon faded from view without requiring any further information.

Danni sat up and pushed the hair from her face. She blinked as she took in her surroundings. The circular room was made entirely of what appeared to be gold. Even the floors glistened with the metallic substance. She swept a look toward the door as it opened.

Falcon stepped inside the room and bumped the door shut. "Danni, how do you feel?"

"Amazingly well," she replied in a solemn tone of voice. "I guess I have you to thank for that."

Falcon approached her and sat on the end of the chaise at her feet. He touched her leg. "Did you really think I could do anything besides save you?"

Tess covered his hand. "I wasn't complaining." She looked down at her clothes. Sometime during her unconscious state, she'd been changed. She now wore a soft cotton t-shirt coupled with drawstring pajama pants. The clothes were comfortable and fit her body well.

She lifted her gaze. "I saw Doug shoot you."

Falcon nodded slowly. "He did."

"I thought he'd killed you."

"I know."

Danni shivered a little and slid down the bed to climb onto his lap. "Please hold me."

Falcon's arms closed around her and he rocked her against his chest, whispering words of comfort and love.

Too shocked to cry, Danni held onto him, afraid that if she let him go, she would never see him again. She'd come so close. She'd thought Doug had killed him, had been so sure that she was once again alone in the world. She didn't know who to thank for the wizard's salvation. "Did the others help?"

Falcon stroked her spine. "Their assistance wasn't required."

Danni pulled back enough to see his face. “You got the bullet out of your own body?”

His lips twisted into a slight smile. “I didn’t need to take it out. The bullet disintegrated.”

Danni plopped her head back down against his chest. “That’s some kind of magic.”

“It’s part of being immortal.”

“I guess that’s another strike against us,” Danni whispered.

Falcon reassured her with a kiss. “Mortals can become immortals.”

Danni scooted farther back on his lap and held onto him by grasping handfuls of his shirt. The soft cotton bunched against her palms. She breathed in his woodsy scent and relaxed even more, allowing herself to believe that, for now, even if just for the moment, they were okay. “I’m probably going to regret asking this next question, but,” she lifted her shoulders in a shrug, “I think the information is pertinent considering we both almost died. No, that’s not right. I almost died. But you saved me.” She paused and drew in a deep breath. “Would you care to tell me how a mortal like me can become an immortal like you?”

“It’s simple actually. Once you have conceived my child, you will become immortal.”

Danni’s face fell and she climbed off his lap.

“Danni, what’s wrong?”

She slid her hands down the legs of the worn cotton. “That leaves me out then.”

Falcon stood up in front of her. “What are you talking about?”

Danni tipped her head back. Tears pricked the backs of her eyes. It was one more reason why she and Falcon didn’t belong together. “Falcon, I can’t have children.”

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

Danni thought the knowledge couldn't hurt anymore, but saying the words aloud to Falcon proved her wrong. She had been so busy with her job and her kids at school that she had pushed her desire to have children to the back of her mind. Now, it came screaming to the fore as she pictured herself carrying Falcon's child. She placed a hand over her abdomen and turned away from the look in his eyes. She didn't want his pity, his compassion.

"Danni, look at me," Falcon instructed in that sexy, do-as-I-say type of voice.

Danni didn't obey. "I don't want to talk about this."

He ignored the statement. "What makes you think you can't have children?"

"Two doctors and a bevy of specialists. It was official last year. I don't even know what happened. One day my ovaries were working just fine and the next, they weren't." She held up one hand to silence whatever he might be intending to say. "Please, don't say anything else. I've had people tell me that doctors don't know everything, that miracles still happen and all the other flowery cliches imaginable. I'm not interested in hearing that I could still get pregnant. I'm forty years old. I've faced facts. So it looks like I'll be growing old alone. Which was my plan all along." Danni shivered and walked across the floor, her bare feet tapping against the smooth marble.

Falcon approached her, his hands extended. "Come with me."

She tossed a suspicious look over her shoulder. "Where are you taking me?"

"I want you to see my world."

"And what about what we were just talking about?"

Falcon shook his head. "It isn't important."

Danni blinked back tears. "It always has been to me. I wanted children. It was difficult when I learned I would never have them."

Falcon sighed a little and took her hands. "Danni, if I can disintegrate a bullet within my body, what makes you think I can't heal whatever's wrong with you?"

Her fingers curled around his and she caught her breath in hopeful anticipation. "Are you telling me I can have a child?"

He curled one hand around her cheek. "You can have my child." He winked. "The magic will only work with me."

Danni looked up at him. "Are you lying to me?"

Falcon lifted one eyebrow and began to lead her toward the door of the Serenity Chamber. "I thought

we'd gotten past the trust issues."

"That was when I thought you'd told me everything there was to tell about your life as a wizard."

"Danni, it would take centuries to tell you everything about me." His hand fell into place at her spine.

Danni walked with him out into the gilded hallways, coming to a stop so abruptly that their arms stretched out. Falcon gave her a curious look, but didn't ask any questions. "You brought me to Mystique, didn't you?"

"Yes," he replied in a guarded tone of voice. "This is where you healed me?"

"It's the best place to heal you. It was good that I brought you here. I found my magic alone was not enough. The damage was more severe than I'd anticipated."

Danni resumed walking, forcing Falcon to fall into step beside her. "So who helped you?"

"Jaxon."

"Remind me to thank him."

"I've already taken care of that."

Danni rolled her eyes. "There are some things I need to do for myself." Her curiosity piqued, she lifted her gaze to search the vaulted ceilings overhead. The triangular glass gave a view of the inky blackness outside. No stars were visible. No moon. Their footsteps echoed on the perfectly formed floors as if they were the only two people alone in this world.

Danni ran her hands along the walls of smooth, polished jade. "This place is beautiful." She saw Falcon's shoulders relax beside her and smiled. "You were worried that I wouldn't like it here."

"Wizards don't worry, my love."

"Of course not. They can adjust any situation to their liking."

Falcon stopped walking and tugged her closer to his side. "Not any situation." His fingers tightened around hers and Danni sensed the tour of his world was about to become a demand that she remain in Mystique. "Danni, you're safe here. Safer than you've ever been. The school won't be rebuilt for a while, so you don't need to return to work."

"And you want me to stay here until you can deal with Montclair."

Falcon nodded. "Exactly."

"How long is it going to take you to deal with him?"

"He'll be in hiding now."

"How long, Falcon?" Danni sharpened her voice to draw his attention.

"Could be days, maybe weeks."

Danni bit her lower lip and drew it inside her mouth. Her eyes clouded with worry and she slipped her

hand out of his grasp. "I don't belong here, Falcon. The others might resent my presence."

Falcon reached out for her but she backed away from him. He didn't come after her. "The others will accept my decision."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I was once the leader of the Assembly. Though I have stepped down, my word still carries the voice of authority. No one will question me."

"I question you all the time."

Falcon's lips pulled into a grimace. "Something we'll have to work on in the future."

"When are you leaving to go after Montclair?"

"Tomorrow night."

Danni hooked her hand through the crook of his arm and resumed walking once more. "Then I have until then to make my decision. And this time, we won't have a crazed gunman to take the decision out of my hands."

"Doug can't hurt you anymore."

"That's what I thought when I buried him."

Falcon shoved his hand against a wall and it moved, creaking open to allow them access. "This time will be different."

Danni tossed a look over her shoulder as the wall secured them inside a hollow room. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'll make sure of it." He squeezed the hand nestled in the crook of his arm. "We do have one small matter to discuss."

Danni winced. "Let me guess. You're about to lecture me on why I shouldn't have come after you."

"I wouldn't have phrased it as a lecture, but since you put it that way, it will have to do. Why did you come after me?"

"I thought you were in danger."

Falcon gave a short bark of laughter. "I appreciate your concern, but how many times do I have to tell you that I can take care of myself?"

"I heard a gunshot." Danni's voice was defensive.

Falcon stopped long enough to kiss her forehead. "Danni, I'm a wizard. What did you think a bullet would do to me?"

Danni lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I didn't stop to think. I heard the shot and I ran."

"Next time. Stay put. I need you to trust me but beyond that, I need to know you're safe."

Danni mumbled a promise but deep down inside she knew she'd do the same thing all over again. The



little girl seemed to know something neither Danni nor Falcon did. And Danni would follow the child when she called especially if it meant protecting Falcon. He wouldn't understand but then, Danni didn't need him to understand. She just needed to save him.

As Danni lay curled in his arms, her head resting on Falcon's chest, he knew what he would have to do. She would hate him for it, but Falcon saw no other way out. He had to make sure she was safe and the only way to protect her now was to leave her with the other wizards. They would guard her with their own lives and no one could enter the fortress without permission.

Falcon stroked the damp strands of coppery hair away from Danni's cheek and kissed her satiny skin. Her scent clung to him and he wanted to keep holding her, but Montclair wouldn't wait much longer. If Falcon didn't go to the wizard, Montclair would target the innocent people on Earth. Falcon read the wizard too well. Montclair was desperate and a desperate wizard was a dangerous wizard.

His kissed Danni gently on the lips and pulled back from her. She stirred and reached out for him. "Where are you going?" She whispered.

Falcon allowed himself the luxury of sinking back into her embrace. "I'm not going anywhere right now."

Danni made an appreciative sound and nestled closer to his body. "I could get used to this." Falcon's hand found the gentle swell of her hip. "As well you should."

"Are we going to be like this for a long time then?"

He held her tighter. "Forever, Danni."

"Falcon?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you." The words made Falcon catch his breath and hold it for a heartbeat before he rolled Danni to her back and looked down into her flushed face. He'd heard them before, but this time, it was different. He'd believed her the first time she'd said the words, but now, they carried a promise, a hope he hadn't heard before.

"Say it again," he commanded.

Danni blinked up at him, her hazel eyes luminescent in the darkness. "I love you."

Falcon closed his eyes briefly, opened them and smiled. "I've been waiting forever to hear you say those words."

Danni smiled. "I've said them before. You just didn't believe me then. And we haven't known each other forever."

He cupped her face with his palms and kissed her lips once, twice, before rising above her once more. “But we will, Danni. We’re just getting started.” He ran his thumb over her lower lip. “I’ve loved you for a long time, longer, I think, than I’ve even known you.” He rested his forehead against hers. “The Fates brought us together for a reason and no one will ever come between us.”

Danni clasped her arms around his neck and dragged him lower to her. “Make love to me again, Falcon. This time, we’ll know it’s love.”

The next morning, Danni woke alone and without climbing out of the king-sized bed she’d shared with Falcon the night before, she knew he wasn’t anywhere nearby. He’d left her. His intention was to keep her safe, but as she raced into the shower and threw on someone else’s clothes, her temper swelled. She recalled the soft words Falcon had whispered in her ear the night before, the tender way he’d held her and all the while, he’d been planning to leave her behind. Damn him.

Her footsteps thumped on the stairs leading down to the main entranceway of the fortress. “Hello?” Her words bounced hollowly off the walls. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

Tapping footsteps alerted Danni to someone’s arrival and she whirled around, dragging her hands through her damp hair. She came face to face with a petite woman with thick hair the color of chestnuts and a warm smile. “Hi.” Danni stuck out her hand. “We haven’t met. I’m Danni Condrey.”

The woman’s hand connected with Danni’s. “Yes, I know. I’m Tess Montgomery Richards, Jaxon’s wife. I’m sure you have a lot of questions. Why don’t we go grab a cup of coffee and talk?”

Danni’s head swiveled as she followed Tess’ flowing glide. “You mean they actually have coffee here?”

Tess’ eyes crinkled with laughter. “What were you expecting?”

Danni bit her lip. “I’m not sure. I really wasn’t prepared for this.”

Tess spared her a sympathetic look. “Falcon didn’t tell you much about his home, I see.”

Danni folded her arms in a defensive gesture. “Falcon tells me what he wants me to know. Other than that, I’m in the dark.”

Tess touched her arm. “I can relate.” She pushed open the swinging door leading into a chrome and white marble lined galley. With efficient movements, she prepared two cups of steaming coffee and carried them to a café-style table in an alcove off the kitchen.

Danni sat down on one of the flowered cushions and automatically reached for the curtain covering the window. A swirling gray mist obscured her vision, hiding even the clouds from her view. Danni quelled the

nausea in her stomach and released the gauzy material. “Where are we exactly?”

Tess sat down across from her and cupped her hands around her mug. “Mystique is a city all its own. It takes some getting used to. Like you, I was mortal when I came here.”

Danni peeked up at her. “You’re speaking in the past tense.”

Tess smiled. “I gave birth to Jaxon’s son a few months ago.” She frowned. “I assume Falcon has shared with you how a mortal becomes immortal.”

“Oh, yes, that’s one of the bits of information he did care to share.” Danni immediately regretted her words. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. Falcon has saved my life on more than one occasion, but sometimes....”

Tess interrupted her with a wave of her slender hand. “You wish he’d be more forthright with you, that you didn’t have to pull information out of him. You wish he’d let you make your own decisions like you did before he came into your life and you wish he would have let you go with him.” Her eyes twinkled. “Was I close?”

Danni grimaced and took a sip of her coffee. “Sounds like you’ve been there before.”

Tess rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Was I ever. Don’t get me wrong. I love Jaxon with all my heart, but when I first met him, he was much more overpowering than he is now. My life wasn’t my own anymore. I resented it at first, but since I’ve become a wizard,” she held up one hand, “it’s a long story. Anyway, since I became a wizard, I can understand why Jaxon feels the need to keep the Assembly’s presence a secret. No one on Earth would certainly understand us. Although, I understand that you took Falcon’s existence better than I did Jaxon’s.”

Danni shoved the mug back from the edge of the table and cupped her elbows. “My husband was into black magic before he died. I saw a few of the spells, nothing too impressive, but I guess I had gotten accustomed to the magic.”

Tess reached a hand across the table and rested it atop Danni’s. “What Falcon is, what we are here, isn’t about black magic, Danni. Wizards are the good people. We help people. We try to make a difference.”

“How? By hiding up here?”

Tess withdrew her hand and sat back in her chair. “I can see you have some preconceived notions about us.”

Danni lowered her gaze. “Again, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that, but,” she lifted her head and as her temper climbed, it took great effort to control her next words, “I can’t see what you or anyone else here is doing to make the world a better place. Who exactly is it that you’re trying to help?”

Tess gave her a strained smile. “Wizards do come down to Earth, Danni. We’ve saved many mortals even in the few months since I became one. But we have duties here as well.” She folded her hands atop the

table. "Falcon saved your life simply because he was in North Carolina at the time. Had he not been there, you would have died."

Danni picked up on the bite in the brunette's voice, but she didn't back down. "And do you always make your own rules and damn the choices of the mortals?"

Tess didn't speak for a long time and when she did, her voice was cold, almost ruthless. "If you're referring to the policemen Falcon eliminated, you should get all the facts before you judge him."

"They weren't going to kill me."

"They were going to take you to Montclair and he had no intentions of killing you, either. He's decided he wants you for himself."

Danni leaped to her feet, anger burning through her. "You don't know what you're talking about. Falcon would have told me that. Even he knows this wizard is trying to kill me."

Tess got to her feet much more slowly. She rested her hands on the back of the chair and gave Danni a long, studying glance. "Oh, really? How difficult do you think it is for a wizard to kill you if he really wanted you dead, Danni? I could do it right now without even touching you."

Danni shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. "Why didn't Falcon tell me?"

Tess' features softened somewhat. "Because, like any other wizard, he feels he has to protect you from everything. I know it's not what you want. It's not what I want, either, but if we truly love them, we have to accept what they are."

Danni turned her face back toward the covered window. "Falcon's gone after Montclair, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." Danni moved her head slightly to see the female wizard's face. "For telling me the truth."

Tess shrugged. "I see no reason to lie to you. Falcon loves you; I can see it in his eyes. And more than anything, he wants to ensure your safety."

Danni bowed her head and tried to make sense of what Tess was saying. She knew Falcon wanted to protect her, but in the back of her mind came the flashes, the vibrant images of the little girl with the big silver eyes so like Falcon's. Eyes filled with tears that ran like drops of blood down her face.

Danni's own eyes glistened with tears. "I'm scared something's going to happen to him."

"Falcon is more than capable of taking care of himself."

Danni's fingers curled into the center of her palms. "There's something I haven't told Falcon. I wasn't sure how." She sucked in a sharp breath. "I've seen a child and after talking with Falcon, I now know she's our child. She has the same silver eyes and my hair and her voice is soft and angelic." A tear leaked down her cheek. "And this little girl," her breath caught on a sob, "is crying for her father. Something's

going to happen to him, something that maybe I can prevent. And if it was Jaxon down there, wouldn't you want to be with him, too?"

Tess sighed. "I suppose I would." Then her eyes narrowed. "Tell me about this child you've seen."

"I have visions. I've had them ever since I was a child."

"Does Falcon know about these visions?"

"No. I don't talk about them with many people."

Tess surveyed her serenely. "And you're only telling me because you're worried about Falcon and you'll use whatever tool in your arsenal to get me to help you."

Danni crossed the room and reached for Tess' hands, taking them in her own. "I don't think you would do any less. I am asking you to help me go to him because I can't bear the thought of anything happening to him, especially when I might be able to warn him."

Tess stared at her. "If I do send you back to Earth, Falcon would have my head."

"Your husband wouldn't let him touch you," Danni reassured her.

"True, but that doesn't change the fact that Falcon's anger isn't a good thing. You've never truly seen him at his worst." Tess tapped her chin with her fingernail. "Neither have I but Jaxon has told me about it. It's not a pretty sight and heaven help anyone who stands in his way. Did you know that Falcon used to lead the Assembly?" Tess didn't wait for Danni to respond. "No one ever crossed him, Danni. Even today, his powers far exceed any wizard alive." She squeezed Danni's hands. "You should trust in him. He doesn't need your help. He can take care of Montclair and knowing you're safe, will help him defeat the wizard that much quicker."

Danni tugged her hands free. "I want to be there, Tess. Even if Falcon doesn't get hurt, he's going to kill Montclair."

Tess blinked. "I know that."

Danni was surprised at the blasé way Tess responded. "Montclair is one of you."

"No, he isn't. He's a fallen wizard. He's chosen to use his powers for his own personal greed. We can't do that. Montclair knows that but he made the choice anyway. Now, he must reap the consequences of his actions."

Danni dragged her hands through her hair. "I can't accept that."

"I'm afraid you have no choice."

"Yes, I do," Danni corrected her. "I can go back to North Carolina, find Falcon and convince him that Montclair, no matter what he's done, is worth saving."

Tess' eyes narrowed. "Why would you care about a wizard who's done nothing more than make your life miserable for almost a year?"

“I can’t explain it, but I know that if Falcon kills Montclair, it will change him.” Danni’s eyes pleaded with the wizard to understand. “Maybe that’s what this vision is all about. Maybe I’m not supposed to save Falcon physically but emotionally. I’m not sure.” She exhaled and dragged her hands through her hair. “I’ve never been totally adept at reading these visions, but I can usually glean enough information to steer me in the right direction.” She paused for effect. “They warned me about Montclair.”

Tess hesitated, casting an uncertain gaze toward the doorway of the kitchen. “Things will not be good around here if Jaxon discovers my assistance.” She winced. “Not too long ago, we had a long discussion about following the rules.” Her eyes sparked. “Of course, he can never stay angry with me for very long.”

Hope swelled in Danni’s heart. “You’ll help me then?”

Tess’s acquiescence was slow in coming. “What the hell? I’ll help on two conditions. One, you follow my rules and two, if Falcon tries to kill me, promise me you’ll be as fervent about saving my life as you are about saving his.”

Danni’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Done.”

Falcon couldn’t sense Montclair though he’d spent the better half of the morning attempting to locate him. Wherever the wizard was hiding, he’d found the perfect spot to shield his aura from Falcon’s internal sensors.

He searched the wizard’s usual haunts, the school, Danni’s house and even made a quick trip back to his own house, but Montclair had gone into seclusion. Falcon didn’t allow his irritation to overcome his common sense. He stopped, regrouped and made a quick decision, which he hoped would give him more information than he had now.

Montclair stood over the mouth of the grave, one hand held aloft. “This will be the last time I resurrect you, Mr. Condrey.” As he spoke, his eyes glittered and his body began to shimmer. It was an effort to pull Doug Condrey back into the land of the living, but Montclair needed him now more than ever. Falcon was close, closing in on him and soon, Montclair’s powers would be too weak to shield him from the master wizard’s perception.

Doug coughed and spluttered and the second his feet touched the earthly soil, he punched the air with a shout of triumph. “I knew you needed me. You didn’t let me down, man.”

Montclair moved into position quickly, taking hold of Doug’s throat. “Hear me well, Condrey. I cannot waste my energies on someone who continually makes mistakes. This will be your last opportunity.”

Doug bobbed his head eagerly. “Right, right. So what’s the game plan this time?”

Montclair brushed his hand down the front of his impeccable charcoal gray suit coat and inclined his head regally. “Follow me. I believe even you should be able to follow this plan.”

Danni pushed open the front door to Falcon’s house. Her sneakered feet snapped across the tiled flooring as she searched from foyer to kitchen for any sign of Falcon. “Falcon, are you here?” The words echoed back down to her from the vaulted ceilings.

Danni took the stairs to continue her search. In a matter of seconds, she confirmed that she was alone. Even the giant seemed to have disappeared. With a weary sigh, she gathered her clothing and headed for the shower. Falcon would return soon enough and she imagined she’d have some explaining to do. But she wasn’t the only one. Falcon had some explanations to share with her as well. Like how he could leave her without giving her the decision to stay on her own. She doubted he’d tell her everything. He’d give her just enough information to placate her. Damnable man. How she could have fallen in love with a wily wizard was beyond her understanding.

She wished she could go out looking for him but a promise was a promise. She’d agreed to follow Tess’ rules to the letter and one of those rules had been to stay inside the house until Falcon came looking for her. Danni hadn’t questioned how Tess had known that Falcon would find her before he found Montclair. It hadn’t mattered at the time. She just hoped she wasn’t too late to prevent Falcon from taking the young wizard’s life. She hadn’t heard any more from the little girl so she had to believe there was still time.

The police station was teeming with activity. A local convenience store had been robbed and garnered the attention of every available uniformed cop within a fifty mile radius. Falcon walked into the middle of the chaos, past the unmanned circular desk and straight into what used to be Chief Harrigan’s office. His instincts guided him well. Montclair had been here. Not too long ago, either.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing in here?” A portly police officer demanded one hand on the butt of his weapon.

Falcon barely flicked the man a look as he continued strolling around the office, searching for clues. “I am looking for someone.”

“You ain’t gonna find anyone in here. Chief Harrigan’s not here anymore. We ain’t got nobody to replace him yet and until we do, I’m acting police chief. Been sent over from Hendersonville. We lost a bunch of our officers in a bad explosion a few days back so we’re all kinda pitchin’ in from the neighboring

counties. Not that you needed to know all that to tell me what you're doing here." The officer swaggered into the room, a belligerent look on his face. "You don't seem to be following me. I ain't hearin' you tell me what you need."

"Because you cannot help me," Falcon responded simply, ignoring the man's gurgle of outrage.

In a second, the gun cleared the leather holster and the acting police chief took aim at the center of Falcon's chest. "Okay, wiseguy. That's enough. Step away from the desk and put your hands behind your head."

"Your chief was killed, was he not? Not in the explosion, I mean. He was murdered. Execution-style if I'm not mistaken."

The gun wobbled. "How could you know that?"

Falcon lifted his eyes then and pinned the officer with a cold look. "I know who killed him."

The officer swallowed. "Every cop in town has been looking for the killer. If you got information, you best tell me what you know. And if you're worried about getting caught in the middle of something, I'll make sure you're protected. I'll put my best man on it. He'll cover you."

Falcon smiled. "I do not require your protection, Officer, nor will I share with you any information that I have. This is one enemy neither you nor your men can fight."

The uniformed cop's chest swelled with importance. "I'd have to disagree with you there, Mister. My men and I are highly trained police officers who...."

"Have you ever fought a ghost?" Falcon's words effectively silenced the officer.

"A-a ghost? What in the hell are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

Falcon touched the desk and his palm burned with the imprint of Montclair's hand. The wizard sat behind this very desk less than an hour before. The heat of his presence was strong. An image flashed into Falcon's mind, fresh dirt, cold headstones and an overcast sky. Falcon muttered a Gaelic curse and withdrew his hand. "If you want to protect your men, keep them here and off the streets."

"I have a robbery to solve."

Falcon held out his hand toward the door of the office and waved his fingers. As if propelled by a puppet's string, a thin man dressed in baggy overalls and carrying a brown sack, stumbled into the chief's office. "This is the man you seek, Officer. He robbed the store and now you can keep your men off the streets as I have suggested." As Falcon walked toward the door, he paused to add. "If you send your officers outside tonight, one or more of them will be killed. They will not be able to defend themselves against the powers that are outside these doors. You would be wise to do as I have instructed." Falcon crossed the threshold and disappeared, leaving a confused robber and a gaping acting police chief behind him.



The cemetery was empty. Falcon's rage bubbled over. He was tired of being one step behind this common wizard. If Montclair wanted to play games, he'd play, but it was time Falcon started making the rules.

He threaded his way through the carved headstones, looking for a specific marker. He stopped three rows in, two sites over. The marble held no expression of love. Just a simple name, date of birth and date of death. Doug Condrey. Falcon wasn't surprised Danni hadn't been able to bring herself to put anything more on the headstone.

Falcon placed his hand atop the cold limestone and the visions slammed into him, almost rocking him back on his heels. He saw Doug Condrey taking on human form once more with Montclair in front of him. He watched the brief exchange between the wizard and his follower. But most importantly, he saw the pallor of Montclair's skin and knew the wizard's energy was draining. It wouldn't be much longer before his magic would be depleted. Montclair had been an idiot to waste his time resurrecting a useless servant.

Falcon whipped around and lifted his face to the wind, trying to pick up the wizard's scent. He'd come out of hiding to raise Doug because tonight would be his final night if Montclair could not obtain the amulet. Without his magic, the wizard would become a human, a mortal subject to the trials and demands of a world in which Montclair could not survive. He'd made no friends and his enemies would kill him in a matter of days.

Falcon debated his next move. The amulet was well-hidden. Montclair wouldn't find it before midnight even with Doug Condrey's help and with Danni safe in Mystique, Falcon merely had to bide his time until... his thoughts scattered.

He focused all of his energies on Danni, seeking her out through time and space to reassure himself of her safety. But the walls of the fortress shielded even him from being able to see inside the Assembly's stronghold. Falcon's uneasiness grew. His mind was telling him Danni was safe, that she had no way to descend back to Earth without his assistance, but his heart was telling him Danni was a resourceful mortal, that she'd left him before without his knowledge. And if she was truly safe, why was a black shroud forming around his heart?

Thoughts of Mystique took him to the gates surrounding the city and within a matter of seconds, Falcon swept inside the fortress, his footsteps thundering against the floors. "Danni." He called her from room to room even though he couldn't sense her presence within the walls.

Jaxon appeared in the center of the hallway, blocking Falcon's path.

"Where is she?" Falcon demanded, his hard gaze pinning the leader of the Assembly with unyielding fury. "Did you send her away?"

Jaxon didn't take offense. "No, I did not."

“If she is here, why can I not sense her?”

Tess came to stand beside her husband, one hand clutching his arm. “Falcon, I’m sorry, but Danni isn’t here.”

Falcon’s heart slammed against his chest. “That is impossible. I left her here this morning. She does not have the ability to leave on her own. She could not possibly have...” he broke off, his rage building. “You.” His eyes focused on Tess’ face. “You helped her.”

Jaxon shielded his wife’s body from Falcon’s anger. “Danni did not want to stay, Falcon. You know it is not within our rights to keep a mortal here without her permission.”

Falcon’s ire bounced back to Jaxon. “I told you she was to remain here. What rights have you to usurp my authority?”

Jaxon squared his shoulders. “I have the right as leader of this Assembly.”

“Stop,” Tess intervened. “Jaxon didn’t know anything about this until I told him.”

“Then he needs to keep better control of his wife,” Falcon stormed. “And you,” he pointed toward Tess, “should stay out of things that do not concern you. You have overstepped your bounds this time, Tess.”

Jaxon’s eyes narrowed and he took one step forward. “We will find Danni. I will help you, but you will not correct my wife. That is not your place.”

“I cannot sense her,” Falcon returned in a ragged tone of voice. “When I was on Earth, I could not feel her. If she is not on Earth, I do not know where she could be.”

Tess’ breath caught in her throat. “She has to be on Earth. That’s where I sent her.”

Falcon’s eyes riveted on Tess’ face. “And are you so sure of your magic that you know you sent her to the right place?”

Tess’ face flushed. “I sent her to Earth, Falcon. I am not a novice with my magic any longer.”

Jaxon placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “We shall find her together.”

Falcon shook off his hand and spared both Jaxon and Tess one last disdainful glance. “I will find her alone. I believe your wife has helped enough for one day.”

“Falcon,” Tess called after him.

He stopped but didn’t turn around.

“There’s something you should know.”

Falcon waited, his shoulders stiff.

“Danni believes your daughter is guiding her.”

Falcon whipped back around, his eyes glittering. “What are you talking about?”

Tess kept her eyes trained on Falcon’s face. “Danni has visions. She’s never told you about them. That’s why she wanted to go after you so desperately. She saw something, more than she told me.” She

moved toward him and caught hold of the sleeve of his shirt. “She was only trying to protect you.”

“I can protect myself.”

“Maybe but your daughter doesn’t seem to think so.”

“I do not have a daughter.”

Tess touched his cheek with the back of her hand. “But you will. Danni has seen her.” She smiled.

“She has your eyes.”

Falcon shook off her hand. “I do not have time for this.”

“If you kill Montclair, you risk more than just losing Danni,” Tess warned.

Jaxon took hold of his wife’s arm. “Tess, that is enough.”

Falcon shot a glance toward the door and then back to Tess’ face. “Thank you for telling me this, Tess, but,” he released a sigh, “I already knew about the little girl. It changes nothing.”

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Danni didn't remember falling asleep but when she woke up lying across the king-sized bed she'd shared with Falcon, his scent clinging to her, night had fallen. The glow of the moon stretching over the mountainside bathed the room in a dim light. Danni scrambled to her feet, all thoughts of sleep fading from her mind. Rushing to the window, she pushed aside the curtain and searched the landscape for any sign of life other than her own.

The house was still, her footsteps echoing as she descended the stairs. Danni moved from room to room switching on lights to illuminate the areas, but even as she reached the main level and turned on the chandelier hanging low over the foyer, she knew she was still alone. Falcon hadn't come home. Maybe he didn't know she had left Mystique. Had she made a mistake? Maybe Falcon had no intention of returning to this house before he killed Montclair.

Her teeth worried her cheek and she didn't know what to do with herself. There was no one to call. Danni hadn't made many friends in Mills River and those she had made had quickly disappeared when Doug had died. It hadn't taken them long to figure out that Danni attracted trouble and being family people with children of their own, they hadn't wanted to be a part of that trouble. Danni couldn't blame them, but she wished she had a friend to call now. She laughed abruptly at that thought. What would she tell a friend? That her wizard boyfriend was searching for another wizard so he could kill him? But it was okay because Falcon was only doing it to save her life? Wouldn't Chief Harrigan have loved that one?

Danni paced from the sofa to the window overlooking the hill leading up to the main driveway. The Olde Towne lanterns hanging along the front walk provided a dim view of the vast expanse of green grass and shrubbery but Danni didn't need lights to know that no one was coming. She twisted her hands behind her back and pressed her face against the coolness of the window pane. Should she have stayed in Mystique and was it too late to return now that she'd made her decision?

She spun around, her eyes searching the room. For what, she didn't know. How did one contact a wizard anyway? Falcon certainly didn't seem to have a problem doing it. Of course, she doubted the members of the Assembly would make it very easy for a mere mortal to contact them. They had to protect themselves.

"Okay, so if I wanted to get in touch with one of you guys, what would I do?" Danni spoke aloud, to reassure herself that she was still in control. "Tess, can you hear me? I'm thinking that this wasn't such a good idea. So if you're listening, maybe you could just poof me back up there. I'd just like to wait for Falcon. Hello? Can you hear me?" Danni tipped her face to the ceiling, searching for a sign that she'd been heard. Nothing. "Damn. Okay. Maybe there's a book, an instruction manual, so to speak. Falcon has to

have one of those around here somewhere. I mean, he's a man, after all, and I know from experience that men cannot remember everything." Grateful for something to do, Danni dashed through the house, going from room to room in a mad, desperate hunt for a way to contact Falcon or even a member of his family.

Two exhausted hours later, all Danni had found was a strange looking candelabra bearing engraved words she couldn't understand and a smooth, perfectly round oval with more gibberish. Danni sank down onto the edge of the bed in the spare room and drew her knees up to her chest. If an instruction manual existed, Falcon had hid it well. Too well.

Sudden inspiration hit that launched her to her feet. If magic had worked for Doug, maybe it could work for her. With another race around the house, Danni had procured the items she needed to begin her first spell. If she'd understood it correctly, it was a drawing spell, one that would, hopefully, draw Falcon to her.

Seated in the center of the circle, her head bowed, the candles lit all around her, Danni clasped her hands together and began to meditate, humming low in her throat. Feeling slightly foolish, she tried to concentrate on the words she was supposed to recite, but the unfamiliar pronunciations stuck in her throat until finally, she gave up and sank down against the floor with a mixture of exhaustion and misery. Where in the hell was Falcon?

Climbing slowly to her feet, Danni extinguished the candles and left the bedroom, her heart heavy. Nothing was working. Falcon had told her before that he could find her if she was in danger. Maybe that was a good sign. Falcon knew she was safe, so he had decided to focus on the task of finding Montclair. Yes, definitely a good sign.

Carrying the candelabra into the dining room, she sat it in the center of the table and leaned in closer for a better view of the markings. "Sure wish I could figure out what those words mean." She ran one hand over the etchings in the brass. "For some reason, I think those words would be enough to help me contact Falcon." She tried to sound out the unfamiliar syllables one by one.

"Danni, what in the hell do you think you're doing?" The harsh, familiar voice boomed behind her and Danni spun around with a mixed squeal of delight and fear.

"Falcon!" She rushed into his embrace and threw her arms around his neck. "I didn't think you'd ever get here."

"I wasn't supposed to be here," he said with soft reproach in his voice.

Danni stiffened slightly. "You're angry with me."

He nuzzled her hair. "Should I be?"

She relaxed only marginally. "If you'll let me explain..."

Falcon touched two fingers to her lips. "Plenty of time to do that later. For now, we need to get out of here. Now."

Danni blinked up at him. "You haven't found Montclair yet."

"I don't need to find Montclair. He's found me. We can talk once I make sure you're safe."

"I can't say I'm sorry I left Mystique. I wanted to stay put, but there were things that were happening. I needed to be here, closer to you. If this puts us both in danger, I'm sorry, but I couldn't stay up there without you."

Falcon gave her a look, which did little to reassure her. "I never really expected you to obey orders, Danni. You've given me trouble at every turn, but," he smiled down into her upturned face, "it doesn't make me love you any less."

Danni noticed the smile didn't reach his eyes and for a moment, she wanted to question him further, but he had already looped his hand around her wrist and was dragging her toward the door.

"Wait." Danni dug in her heels. "Wouldn't it be quicker to go your way? I mean, the way you normally travel?"

Falcon gave her an irritated look over his shoulder. "Montclair can track us that way. Now please be quiet." He began to move again, pulling Danni with him.

Danni fell silent while they traipsed through the woods. Something wasn't right. Hadn't Falcon told her before that Montclair couldn't track him? Or had that been her imagination? She knew he'd told her that Montclair's abilities didn't match Falcon's. So why then was he in such a hurry to get away from the wizard? Perhaps it was just to make sure she was safe once more. Then, why wasn't he taking her back to Mystique.

"Falcon," she whispered as the leaves crunched beneath their feet.

"What?" He didn't turn around or stop. He just kept up a brutal pace that had Danni panting behind him.

"Why don't you just take me back to Mystique if you're worried about my safety?"

"It's too late for that now." The cryptic words sent a cold chill down Danni's spine.

"You're scaring me."

Falcon made a harsh sound in his throat. "You should be scared."

Danni stopped, forcing Falcon to either stop with her or drag her behind him like an unwieldy sack of potatoes. "Falcon, what has gotten into you? You're not telling me anything."

He stopped and spun around, cupping Danni's chin in his hand. Danni winced a little at the pressure but she chalked it up to desperation. "Montclair has found the amulet, Danni. He can track us both at will now and unless I get you to safety, I won't be able to fight him. I have to know that you're safe."

Cold fingers of fear licked at Danni's skin. "But he couldn't find me in Mystique."

"He would never allow that to happen now. He'll be prepared for that. Danni," Falcon softened his voice and gave her a gentle kiss. "We have to keep going."

Danni began to walk again. “Where are we going?”

“To someplace that will work against Montclair. He won’t be able to use his new abilities here.”

Danni felt somewhat relieved. The news certainly explained Falcon’s sense of urgency. Her labored breathing made it difficult to keep pace with him, but somehow, she managed. She knew Falcon only wanted to protect her and she’d put them both in this situation. She only had herself to blame if something happened to him. She reached out for him, touching his arm. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. We can talk about everything later. For now, it’s more important to make sure you’re safe.”

“You’ve always protected me before. I have no doubt you’ll do it again.”

Falcon didn’t respond and the knot of dread in the pit of her stomach grew tighter.

Danni’s breath puffed out in chilly fogs of air as they jogged across the dew-damp grass. Low-lying mist blanketed the mountains and despite the coldness of the night, a fine sheen of perspiration covered Danni’s skin. She looked around her as they raced toward safety. She had no idea where Falcon was taking her, but the desperation in his movements compelled her to keep silent. He had enough to think about. She needed to remain quiet and let Falcon do the planning for now. He’d let her know if he needed her help. She laughed silently. Not that she could ever imagine Falcon asking for her help. It was unthinkable, in fact.

The side of the mountain loomed in front of them. Impenetrable. Unmovable. Danni’s breath caught in her throat when Falcon kept walking straight toward the unyielding rocks. She squeezed her eyes shut as the stone bore down upon them. Any second now, she expected to feel the crunch of bone connecting with rock. But then, she blinked opened her eyes and they were inside the mountain, moving through the tunnels with unwavering speed.

“Falcon.” Danni tugged at his sleeve. “Could we slow down a minute?”

Instantly, Falcon stopped, turning slightly to see her face in the thin sliver of light afford by a narrow crack in the stone. “Catch your breath, but make it fast. We need to keep moving.”

Danni stood on tiptoe and touched his face, surprised when he flinched. She dropped her hand instantly. She didn’t have to be a genius to figure out that Falcon blamed her for this. If she’d stayed put where he’d told her to stay, they wouldn’t be in this predicament. Falcon could face Montclair without having to worry about her. Her shoulders drooped a little but she kept a reassuring look on her face. “Falcon, I promise that when we get to wherever we’re going, you won’t have to worry about my following you again. I’ll stay put.”

He gave her a grim smile. “I’ll make sure of that this time.”

Danni shuddered at the bite of this tone. “What do you mean?”

Falcon slid his hands down her arms and captured her hands. “Danni, as much as I love you, I cannot

trust you to keep your word. When I face Montclair, I will have no choice but to make sure I face him alone.”

He kissed her forehead, a gentle brush of his lips against her skin. The action didn’t warm Danni. “I promise you I won’t hurt you, but I cannot allow you to put yourself at risk again,” he continued in a bland tone of voice.

Danni curled her hands against his palms and looked up into his face. Expressionless, his features mirror the reflection of stone. Something must have happened before he’d found her. Something he wasn’t telling her. She’d never seen him like this before. “Falcon, what’s wrong? And before you attempt to convince me that nothing is wrong with you, I already know there is.” She brushed her hand down his arm. “Please talk to me.”

Falcon’s silver eyes seemed to penetrate through to her soul. “I wish I could, Danni, but this is something that I must do alone.”

“Will there always be secrets between us?”

He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly against his chest. “Not always. In time, you’ll know everything you need to know.”

She pushed against him. “With you deciding what I need to know. That’s not how things should be, Falcon.”

Falcon touched a finger to her lips to silence her. “No. This is how things should be.” He dipped his head and caressed her lips with his. A slow, exploring kiss, a brief touch before he backed away from her.

Danni stared at him, moving her fingers over her lips. With warmth she didn’t feel, she took the hand he extended to her and fell into place beside him while her mind whirled with possibilities. There might be a lot of things she didn’t know about wizards, but one thing she did know. The man who’d just kissed her wasn’t Falcon.

Doug huffed and puffed his way down the mountain, cursing his benefactor with each breath. He should be thankful Montclair had dragged him back to the present considering he’d been face to face with a savage looking Neanderthal who’d been trapped in the Underworld for longer than Doug even wanted to know. And the brute had been itching for a fight for quite some time. Not that Doug had been eager to give it to him, but not fighting in the Underworld was about as possible as not breathing above ground.

But Doug didn’t feel thankful. Given his choice, he’d face the Neanderthal again. He’d already come face to face with Falcon Kendrick and he wasn’t happy about having to stick his neck out again. He’d no doubt that once he imparted his information to the wizard, he’d be skating right back through the darkness of the Earth’s belly. Falcon would make sure of it. And the way Doug figured it, there were a helluva lot more



things he'd rather be doing than coming eye to eye with a wizard with an attitude.

So Doug considered his options. Okay, so he didn't really have many of them, but without the amulet, Montclair's magic was limited. Kendrick's, on the other hand, weren't. In fact, he doubted that Montclair could match power with Falcon Kendrick even if Montclair did come into possession of the amulet. Either way, Doug knew he wasn't long on Earth once again unless his source stepped up to the plate and helped him out. That's what Doug was banking his money on. For some odd reason, the one calling the shots needed his assistance. Doug liked that.

Maybe he shouldn't be cursing old Monty for resurrecting him again. On second thought, maybe he owed the old wizard a handshake and a slap on the shoulder. Along with a dark magic spell which would send Montclair's sorry ass to the depths of hell himself. Doug grinned and stuck his hands into the pockets of his slacks. The day had just taken a turn for the better.

He'd deliver the message to Falcon Kendrick as instructed but Montclair hadn't made a mention about having to deliver it in person. And while Falcon was rushing to save his lady love, Doug would be getting the hell out of Dodge. He didn't like it that he'd have to leave Danni behind but he wasn't foolish enough to think that he could fight Kendrick and win. He'd already come out the loser in one battle and without Montclair to bring him back again, he'd be stuck down below. Nah, he'd give up Danni for a chance at life again. And what a life it would be.

Falcon made it to his house just as the message arrived. A dark mist covered the landscape, seeping in under the door and from the spiraling depths, a long thin fingernail wrote the words on one wall of the living room.

Falcon's eyes narrowed while the black magic pummeled the air with a thick, noxious smoke, sucking the oxygen from the room. "That's enough," he demanded, whisking the spell away with a sweep of his fist. At once, the air cleared and Falcon could breathe again.

"I'll deal with you later, Condrey. For now, one enemy at a time."

Danni sat down on a boulder and rested her head against the hard, cold stone. From a distance, she heard the dripping of water. The sound echoed eerily throughout the caverns. Scurrying feet made her draw her knees closer to her chest and rest her chin atop them. "How long do you think we're going to have to wait?" Her voice came out on a croak and she cleared her throat. She hoped he'd just think she was nervous. Which was the truth.

The man proclaiming to be Falcon sat down across from her and dropped his hands down between his splayed knees. "Not too much longer. I can feel him."

Danni's heart lodged in her throat. "What will you do to him?"

Silver eyes lifted and connected with hers. "Does it matter?"

Falcon had asked her that same question a few weeks back. For an instant, Danni wondered if her mind was playing tricks on her. Was this man really Falcon and she was just so paranoid now that she was grasping at straws to explain his erratic behavior?

"It's difficult for me to understand killing no matter how it happens," Danni pointed out.

His lips twisted. "You've never seen the things I have seen, Danni. Perhaps that would make you look at things differently." He moved forward so suddenly Danni almost didn't see him. He crouched down in front of her, his hands on her knees.

Danni shrank back against the rock and held her breath. "What are you doing?" Her voice was a mere whisper of sound.

"I'm going to kiss you."

"Maybe now isn't such a good time," Danni hedged. "I mean, Montclair could be right around the corner."

"I know exactly where he is." The voice took on a sinister edge and Danni's heart dropped down to the tops of her sneakers.

She closed her eyes and continued to hold her breath as the realization pummeled her. It wasn't Falcon's hands touching her nor was it Falcon sitting in front of her. It was Montclair.

Falcon reached the tunnels within minutes. He'd taken more time than he would have liked because of the weather. A pounding rain had begun the second he'd stepped outside the house and with the lightening scorching the earth, he didn't want to chance moving through the air in his customary manner. The disturbances in the atmosphere could confuse his direction.

The mouth of the cave yawned open into black depths where light and air faded. Falcon gave himself a second for his eyesight and breathing to adjust to the limitations before he began to walk, slowly, patiently, stalking his prey.

Danni pushed Montclair's hands away from her knees. "Please don't touch me."

"Is that any way for you to talk to the man you love?" The words carried a sneer.

Danni swung her legs to one side of the boulder to avoid Montclair's hands. "I know you're not Falcon."

Cruel lips titled into a smile. "Aah. Apparently, you are smarter than I gave you credit." Montclair jumped to his feet and stretched. "Definitely glad that is over. I do not know how much longer I could have stood pretending to be your lover. He really is a poor excuse for a wizard, Danni." He winked and pushed his hands against his lower back before lowering his head.

Danni watched in stunned surprise as Falcon's body gave way to Montclair's. A startling transformation, the handsome appearance of Falcon's face melted into the cruel beauty of the younger wizard's. Danni shook her head to clear her thoughts and using the rock behind her as a brace, pushed herself to her feet. "Why did you bring me here?"

Montclair smoothed his hands over his hair and adjusted the knot on his silk tie. The picture of perfection, he exuded confidence though Danni had caught a glimpse of weariness in his eyes before he'd quickly schooled his features. "That should be obvious, my dear. I brought you here because Falcon has something I need. I saw no other way."

"Do you really think Falcon will trade for the amulet?"

Montclair appeared to consider the question before his eyes crinkled with a smile. "Absolutely. Unfortunately for him, he has allowed himself to fall in love with a mortal. A sad state of affairs if you ask me. He could have so much more than what he has now if only he chose to use his abilities to their fullest extent." The wizard swept his hands wide. "He could rule this round sphere you call Earth. Alas, but he has a conscience, something which will ultimately lead to his demise."

Danni knew the wizard was only trying to frighten her. She wouldn't give him the pleasure. "If I remember correctly, your last confrontation wasn't a victory for you."

Montclair's face turned a mottled red. "It was a draw."

Danni allowed herself the faintest of smiles, to throw the wizard off-guard. Let him think she was relaxed, without a care in the world. "Perhaps, but I don't think Falcon will see it that way and this," she angled a hand toward the darkest part of the cave, "he will only see as a challenge. I've never known Falcon to back down from a challenge." She paused for the count of ten and added. "Have you?"

Montclair threw his shoulders back and stalked away from Danni, positioning his back to her. "Do you know he is on his way now?"

"Of course he is," Danni replied in an almost bored tone of voice. "That was, after all, your plan."

Montclair tapped the wall of the cave with his fingertips. "You seem very confident."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Perhaps because this time, I have the upper hand."

“You had the upper hand at the school,” Danni noted.

Montclair whipped back around, his pale eyes flitting over her face with something akin to hatred in their depths. “Do you think me so stupid as to not know you are baiting me?”

Danni shot back a quick response. “Do you think me so stupid as to allow you to scare me?”

“This will not have a happy ending for you or your love, Danni Condrey.”

Though the words chased a cold, numbing fear down her spine, Danni remained resolute. “That remains to be seen.”

Montclair lifted his head and as he closed his eyes, Danni saw the slight swaying of his body and knew his strength was almost gone. Without the amulet, he wouldn’t be able to hold his own against Falcon. She breathed a little easier. Falcon wouldn’t have a difficult time defeating him.

“He is near.” The wizard’s voice was faint.

Danni walked toward him, her fear receding. “Montclair, you can’t fight Falcon like this. You won’t win. In your weakened state, Falcon will kill you in a second.”

Montclair rested one shoulder against the wall and stared out into the darkness. “I will be able to hold my own against him until I can obtain the amulet.”

“Your skin is the color of paste and your eyes are glassy.” Danni turned to face him. “It’s taking every bit of your strength to remain standing right now.”

“Then perhaps this is to my advantage. Falcon will not kill someone who clearly cannot defend themselves.”

“Why can’t you just go back home?” Her voice was almost pleading.

Montclair’s eyes sparked. “You do not know what you are talking about. I have no home.”

“You mean because of the way you left it? Surely your family would forgive you. People make mistakes all the time.”

The wizard slid a little lower down the stone wall before catching himself. “You are a fool if you believe that wizards have the same compassion as you humans. Were I to return to my home, I would be eliminated.”

Danni frowned. “They would kill you?”

He nodded. “Exactly.”

“Have you considered your other options?”

Montclair laughed abruptly. “I have no other options, Danni. I must have the amulet or I will die.”

Danni gave a sad sigh. “Falcon will never give you the amulet.”

“You are underestimating the power of this thing you call love,” Montclair said.

Falcon heard voices when he rounded the third curve of the cave. Silently, he crept forward, keeping himself aligned with the wall, allowing the elements of the rock to give him the camouflage he needed to advance on the wizard.

Carefully, he blanketed his aura from Montclair should the wizard be attempting to track him. He moved forward steadily, patiently, all the while listening to the conversation between Danni and Montclair.

He was proud of Danni. She sounded calm, unruffled. She hadn't allowed him to frighten her and in the end, that would hold her in good stead. He hadn't wanted her to be here when he took care of Montclair but now he would have no choice. He would do his best to shield her from what must take place, but in the end, she would have to decide whether or not she could accept what Falcon had to do to protect her and his people.

The voices were quieter now even though Falcon knew he was closer to them. He heard the strain in Montclair's voice and knew the wizard was weaker. Danni's voice was comforting, urging the wizard to relinquish his thirst for power and to return to his family. Falcon's lips curled into a sneer. Montclair would never return to his people voluntarily.

Falcon came around the last bend and stopped. He saw them now and the vision before him gave him cause for concern. Danni was standing too close to the wizard, their bodies almost touching. Though Montclair's face was pale and he was leaning against the wall, Falcon knew the craftiness that lay behind the visage he was presenting to Danni.

Falcon lay in wait, determining his next course of action. He could summon the others. In seconds, they would come. Easily, they could overtake the wizard and Danni's chance of being hurt would be less. But Montclair's chances of survival would be slim. The thought took him aback. How could he still be considering saving the wizard's life? He checked himself and found the rage which had swirled within him once he'd discovered Danni was with Montclair had disappeared. Now, all he was feeling was a great sorrow.

He didn't know Montclair very well, but from Charlemaine, he'd learned that the wizard had once held a promising future. He'd been the pride of his leader, acing all the tests of the novices and ascending to the highest ranks of his guild within a few weeks of his 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, a phenomenal feat considering the difficulty of those tests. Falcon didn't need to hear that Charlemaine wished for Montclair's redemption but beyond that, she wished for Falcon's mercy. Before, Falcon was sure he couldn't give it. He wondered what had changed him.

He watched Montclair take hold of Danni's arm and anger sparked within him. They'd wasted enough time. Montclair made his decision, had chosen his path and now, Falcon would stop him before the wizard could hurt anyone else.

“Your love is here,” Montclair whispered, his fingers tightening around Danni’s arm.

Danni’s breath captured on a gasp. “Please don’t do this, Montclair. He could really hurt you.” Even as she spoke, her words fell on deaf ears.

He gave her a look filled with calm acceptance “Such is the choice I have made.”

Danni peeled his fingers away from her arm, amazed that the touch of his skin was so cold. The wizard had lost most of his strength. Even standing upright was difficult for him now. “But it’s not too late to make another choice. You can change your mind. Please.”

Montclair looked down at her, his eyes confused. “Why would you attempt to save my life when many times, I have attempted to take yours?”

Danni had no real answer for the question but she tried anyway. “Because I can’t stand the thought of Falcon killing someone else for me.”

“So your compassion is not for me. My mistake. Now, stand behind me. Falcon has been waiting for the right moment to make his presence known and I believe that time has arrived.”

Danni didn’t move. “No.”

Montclair gave her a hard look. “No?”

Though her legs had begun to shake, she refused to give in to the demand, hoping the wizard would find an ounce of caring still remaining within him. “I’m not moving.”

“I do not wish to hurt you, Danni.”

“You can’t hurt me,” she replied.

Montclair flexed his fingers at his sides. “How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because she knows I would not allow it,” Falcon stated matter-of-factly as he moved out of the shadows.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Montclair pivoted slowly, one hand curling around Danni's upper arm. Falcon saw the effort it took for the wizard to even move. He knew that Montclair was holding onto his last dregs of strength. Falcon wouldn't take pleasure in felling this wizard if it came to that.

"Ah, Falcon. I was wondering when you were going to show up."

Falcon didn't smile. "You knew exactly when I arrived." He sent a questioning glance toward Danni. She reassured him with a faint smile. Falcon relaxed only marginally. "Now release Danni and you and I can talk."

"Do you think me a fool, Falcon? The moment I release her, you will kill me."

Falcon shifted his stance slightly but it was enough to put Montclair on edge. The wizard moved farther back into the depths of the cave, taking Danni with him.

"Don't come any closer," Montclair ordered.

"I do not need to wait for you to release Danni to kill you, Montclair. Surely you know that your strength is at an all time low. It would not take much of my energy to end your life."

Montclair's lips twisted into a parody of a smile. "You want Danni out of here so she will not have to see me die."

"That is my preference, yes," Falcon admitted.

"Then perhaps it is in my best interest to hold onto your lady friend." A spasm of coughing racked Montclair's lean frame and he leaned against the wall once more for support. "After all, why should I give up the one thing standing between me and certain death?"

Falcon dipped his hand into the front pocket of his pants and extracted the amulet. He danced it on his palm, enticing Montclair as easily as a charmer attracted a snake. "I have what you want. To get it, you only need to release Danni."

Montclair glued his pale eyes to the stone. "You will never relinquish the amulet. You know it will give me the powers I need to destroy you."

Falcon laughed without humor. "You really are a fool if you believe this gem will provide you with enough magic to kill me." Falcon shook his head. "You have a lot to learn, young Montclair." He extended the amulet, allowing the chain to dangle from the tips of two fingers. "It is within your grasp. Take it while you still can."

Montclair licked his lips and swayed toward the promise. His hand slipped on Danni's arm and his knees wobbled. Falcon saw the desire in the wizard's eyes and knew it was only a matter of time before Montclair made a move toward the stone.

Falcon stood perfectly still, giving the younger wizard time to inch forward. Montclair's thirst for power overruled his common sense and he took a faltering step forward.

Falcon heard Danni suck in a short breath and he gave her a sharp look, instructing her without words to remain silent. Montclair fell into his trap neatly, moving toward the gem one hesitant step at a time. Less than an inch away from the dream, Montclair stopped, his hand hovering over Falcon's. He lifted his eyes and fixed them on Falcon's stoic face.

"Why would you give this to me? I could easily turn around and destroy the woman you love." Montclair's voice was a weak rasp.

Falcon lifted one eyebrow. "I protect what is mine, Montclair. Harming the woman I love is no longer a possibility."

Excitement edged out reason and Montclair snatched the amulet. Staggering backwards, he yanked the chain over his head and settled the stone against his chest, his eyes closed as he waited for the power to overtake him.

Falcon whipped his body in between Montclair's and Danni's, shielding her from the wizard's rage when knowledge hit. "Danni, back slowly toward the entrance of the cave."

Danni didn't question for once and Falcon was grateful. He waited until she'd taken up his former position and then he released a relieved breath.

Tiny flames began to lick the ground at Montclair's feet, restrained energy. The wizard hummed with delight and opened his hands wide to welcome the surge of power, this new magic that would save him. Sparks showered from the low-hanging ceiling of the cave and settled around Montclair's shoulders like a bright orange blanket.

Montclair's eyes opened and the pale orbs had taken on a liquid glow. "You just made your last mistake, Falcon." He balled his hands into fists. "Now, you will see how much magic the amulet holds and what I can do with it." He lifted one arm and punched the air. A rumble of thunder shook the ground and the wizard stumbled, bumping his shoulder back against the hard rock behind him. Montclair looked uncertain and righted himself, holding his fist aloft once more to emphasize his control of the situation.

Falcon held his arms away from his body. "I give you an open mark, Montclair."

"Then you are the fool," Montclair snarled, raising his hand higher. Preparing to hurl a deadly bolt of energy, he was unprepared for the snap of lightening that stung his feet. He cursed and leaped away from the dangerous current, his wild eyes searching the ground.



Falcon's lips twitched. "Do you wish to rethink your decision to destroy me?"

Montclair's eyes narrowed as his gaze returned to Falcon's face. "What have you done to the amulet?"

Falcon held his hands up, the gesture of innocence. "Who said I did anything to it?"

"Do not play games with me, Falcon. You have changed the stone somehow."

Falcon moved in closer for a better inspection of the gem in question. "It has been unused for quite some time. Perhaps its magic is a little rusty."

Montclair's fingers curled into fists again. "You knew this would happen."

Falcon flicked the amulet with the tip of his finger and took a step away from the wizard. "I knew only that you would not be able to control the magic the amulet holds. No young wizard can. Your confidence greatly exceeds your abilities. That amulet was meant for good, to aid in the protection of innocent humans, not in the destruction of their world or to give a greedy wizard more power than he needs at such a young age."

Montclair roared his disapproval and surged forward, his hands aiming for Falcon's neck. Danni screamed out a warning, but Falcon had already anticipated the move. He shot to one side and slammed his fist into the small of the wizard's back, sending Montclair sailing toward the far wall of the cave.

Montclair gave a grunt of pain and spun around, his eyes murderous. "You will not leave here alive, Falcon."

The words didn't instill the fear Montclair sought. Falcon knew the wizard's abilities were limited. Even if he were able to glean more magic from the amulet, it wouldn't be enough to allow him to overtake Falcon. "Then two of us will die here today. For I have no intention of allowing you to walk away today."

Danni stepped forward but before she could speak, Falcon shot her a look and gave a hard shake of his head. He watched her war with the desire to intervene, but eventually, she backed away once more and subsided into silence.

"You will not kill me in front of your woman," Montclair reminded Falcon.

"I can easily send Danni away so she will not witness your demise. Would that make your impending death easier to face?" Falcon asked in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

"You think I am too weak to offer a defense." Montclair began to circle his opponent. "Your smugness will be your weakness in the end." He clapped his hands together and produced a shiny, silver dagger with a wicked blade. "Now you will see your mistake."

Falcon's shoulders tensed but he didn't move. "You waste too much time with words."

Montclair's lips thinned. "For once, I agree with you, wizard." He lunged forward. The tip of the blade sliced thin air and the young wizard whirled, ducked low and nicked the side of Falcon's shin.

Danni gasped and clenched her hands into fists. From the corner of his eye, Falcon saw her restraint and mentally congratulated her. He needed her to have faith in him, to trust in him enough to allow him to handle this situation.

Falcon didn't acknowledge the wound on his leg nor did he produce a weapon of his own. Defeating Montclair would not require an excessive use of his magic. The younger wizard was weak and growing weaker despite the new magic afforded by the amulet. Falcon had coated the stone with a binding spell, restricting the magic until he could return the gem to its proper owner. He had counted on Montclair believing the tale about being unable to control the magic. Without that belief, Montclair would have searched for the spell.

Falcon kept his eyes trained on Montclair's pale face as the wizard danced around him. "Why do you not strike out at me?" Montclair asked.

Falcon shrugged. "I have nothing to prove here. In a few minutes, your strength will be gone and it will be a simple matter to remove you."

Montclair cursed low and parried again. Falcon spun and missed the tip of the blade this time.

Montclair's eyes gleamed, his chest heaved and with a sudden burst of inspiration, he dove toward Danni. She tried to evade his grasp, but the wizard was too quick. One arm latched around her throat, Montclair dragged his prey closer to his body. He held the dagger against Danni's breast. "I would suggest that you do not move, Falcon. I understand that Mrs. Condrey has been injured once before. You were able to save her then." The wizard clucked his tongue disapprovingly. "Unfortunately, you will not be able to save her this time. I will make sure of it."

Falcon battled back the rage burning within him. He cursed his inattentiveness that had put Danni at risk. He should have been watching her more closely. Or better yet, he should have sent her away the second he'd given Montclair the amulet. For now, the young wizard had the upper hand, but Montclair didn't need to know that.

Falcon approached slowly, his steps steady and sure. "You will not kill her, Montclair. You need her."

Montclair glared at Falcon over the top of Danni's head. "What are you talking about?"

"Danni is the only one standing between you and certain death." Falcon's teeth gleamed whitely in the darkness of the cave. "Without her shielding you, you would be dead right now." Falcon sent Danni waves of reassurance in his eyes. "You are safe, Danni. The wizard will not harm you."

"Stop doing that." Montclair's voice rose several octaves. "You are not in control of every situation, Falcon. That is impossible." He tightened his hold on Danni's neck. "Tell him what I am doing right at this very moment, Danni."

Danni could only gurgle while her hands attempted to claw the wizard's arm away from her throat.

Falcon focused his gaze on Montclair's wrist until the smell of burning flesh rent the air. Montclair yelped with pain and indignity and loosened his hold automatically.

"Parlor tricks will not help you win, Falcon," Montclair lifted Danni's body with the ease of one hand. "And they will not help you save Danni's life. In fact, I have decided that you should watch her die." He twitched and swallowed visibly as Falcon's gaze zeroed in on his face.

Falcon's shoulders rolled forward and his breaths came in short, even sounds. He didn't move. As still as a hawk watching its prey, he stood, hands hanging loose at his sides. He appeared the picture of calm and as his eyes focused solely on his enemy, Falcon watched Montclair begin to squirm. "Release Danni, Montclair, and there is a remote possibility that I might let you live."

Montclair's lips curled into a sneer. "We both know you are lying, Falcon. Now back away slowly." Montclair tossed a quick look over his shoulder and began to drag Danni backwards with him. He held out one hand in front of him, keeping the other tightly fixed around Danni's throat. "I will take your lady friend with me until I can determine what exactly is wrong with the amulet. I have already ascertained that you have bound it somehow. Once I have released the powers which are rightfully mine, I will free Danni."

"Now who is lying?" Falcon's voice was rigidly cold.

Montclair lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "You have no choice but to believe me. Attempt to follow me and you will find Danni's body before you find me."

Falcon followed the wizard with his eyes only, watching him drag Danni out of the protection of the cave. He dropped his gaze to Danni's face and bored into her eyes with a message only she could read. He would come for her. He wanted her to know that. Trust him. She would be safe. He would never allow Montclair to harm her. Montclair still believed he needed Danni and as long as the belief in the need was there, Danni would be safe.

Danni's eyes were wide with a mixture of fear and disbelief but she never took her eyes off Falcon's face. He reassured her with a combination of his steady gaze and three simple words. "I love you."

"I am deeply touched," Montclair responded in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"I do not expect that you would know what love is, Montclair," Falcon replied.

Montclair's boots snapped over the rocks and twigs and he quickened the pace toward the exit. "Remember, Falcon. Try to follow me and you will only hasten your woman's death."

Falcon allowed Montclair to leave with Danni while the anger burned within him. He could have killed the wizard, probably should have killed him, but with Montclair using Danni as a shield, there was a minute possibility she could have been harmed. No matter how small, Falcon wouldn't take that chance. He loved Danni too much to put her at even the slightest risk.

“It is time you allowed us to help you,” Jaxon spoke for the entire Assembly gathered in the main room of the fortress. As he made the announcement, a chorus of agreements followed him.

Falcon held up one hand. “No, there is no need. I know where Montclair has taken Danni. It is only a matter of time before I will have her safely back home.”

Charlemaine moved forward and touched Falcon’s arm gently. “And what of Montclair?”

Falcon didn’t spare her a glance. “We have already had this conversation. I will do what needs to be done, what I should have done when Montclair first attempted to harm Danni.”

“Danni will not want you to kill him,” Charlemaine pointed out.

“Mother,” Jaxon interjected, “the decision does not belong to either one of us. It is Falcon’s woman who Montclair has taken. Falcon is within his right to punish the abductor in any manner under our laws.” Even as he said the words, Jaxon reached out to comfort his mother, draping his arm around her shoulder. “I am sorry. I wish there was another way, but this action has proven that Montclair is beyond redemption.”

“If you know where Montclair has taken Danni, why have you not gone to him?” Charlemaine asked.

Falcon smiled almost evilly. “Montclair needs time to believe he has escaped me, to think he has outsmarted me. He will let down his guard and release Danni.”

Jaxon came to stand by his friend. “As I have said before, we shall help you.”

Falcon touched his shoulder. “No. I have already made my decision. This is my battle. Montclair is a weak wizard. He can be defeated.”

“He has already won one battle,” Rane drawled from the sidelines.

Falcon whipped his gaze around and fixed it on Jaxon’s brother, his eyes narrowed to slits. “Do you have something to say to me, young Rane?” He emphasized the differences in their ages sharply.

Rane instantly backed down. “No. I was merely making a comment.”

“Then perhaps you should think before you make them,” Falcon returned in a deceptively calm tone of voice.

Jaxon quickly ran interference. “Will you bring Danni here before you finish the task with Montclair?”

“Jaxon,” Tess finally spoke up, “you’re talking like Falcon’s killing Montclair is cut and dried. It’s not. None of us knows what Montclair is going through. He could have his reasons for doing everything he’s done. Maybe Falcon should talk to him, try to reason with him.”

“And then afterwards, we can sit down to a spot of tea,” Falcon shot back with fury.

Tess blinked at the anger behind the words. “Making a suggestion should not subject me to your disdain, Falcon.” She clamped her hands on her hips and stood up to the former leader of the Assembly as

she'd done many months ago when she'd first arrived in Mystique.

Falcon glared down at the petite brunette. "Were your suggestion of importance, you would not feel the sting of my disdain."

"Enough." Jaxon walked in between the two. "Falcon, since your decision is made to finish this yourself, we will remain here. Should you need us..." he didn't finish the sentence.

Falcon nodded abruptly while Rane thumped his fingers against the hardwood of the table. "I do have one more question, Falcon."

"Then ask," Falcon, responded abruptly.

"If you did not wish our help, why did you come?"

Charlemaine gasped her distress. "Rane, Falcon is still a part of us. He has every right to come here, to...."

Falcon touched Charlemaine's shoulder to calm her. "It is all right, Charlemaine. I understand the reason behind Rane's questioning." He directed his penetrating gaze toward the younger wizard's face. "I did not come to tell you I do not need your help. I came because in my heart, this is still my home, where one comes for refuge and respite. That is why I am here right now. I know where Montclair is taking Danni and while a part of me wants to rush in and drag her to safety, another part, the wiser part, knows that Montclair will be prepared for such a rash action. I must proceed with caution. Coming here has given me time to renew myself, to tap into my store of self-control." His lips twisted sardonically.

Rane ducked his head to hide his smile. "I meant no disrespect, Falcon."

"I know that," Falcon softened his voice. "You are within your rights to ask me such questions. You are a member of the Assembly."

Jaxon clasped Falcon's forearm. "As are you."

Falcon returned his eyes to Jaxon's face. "My membership will expire soon."

Jaxon's eyes clouded. "You are certain of this calling?"

Falcon swept a glance around the room to include all the anxious faces. "I am sure. The Fates have decreed a new course of action for me."

"Does this course of action include Danni?" Tess asked quietly.

Falcon allowed the words to sink in for a moment before responding. "I do not know."

"Don't you think it's important enough to find out?" Tess continued.

Jaxon took her hand in his, a simple gesture instructing her to be silent. "I do not need to reiterate our willingness to help should you require it, Falcon."

"I am grateful." Falcon moved to the center of the room. "Take care. All of you. And be well."

"He sounds like he's saying good-bye again," Tess whispered.

Jaxon squeezed her hand. "He shall return as the Fates allow. For now, he has another mission. A higher calling."

Danni didn't recognize the squat cabin, but that didn't surprise her. She wasn't familiar with much of the scenery beyond Falcon's back porch. Seated on a rickety wooden chair next to a fireplace where a meager fire burned, she watched Montclair's every move. He paced from one end to the other of the sagging wooden structure, his pale eyes searching the walls as if to see through the cracks.

"You're only going to tire yourself out like that," Danni called out to him.

Montclair stopped briefly to stare at her. "Do not pretend to be concerned about me, Mrs. Condrey. You wait for your lover to rescue you."

"That doesn't mean I want him to kill you."

Montclair resumed the incessant pacing, his feet thumping against the slatted boards of the floor. "Your life would be much simpler were I not in it."

Danni saw no reason to deny the truth behind the wizard's words. "True, but that doesn't mean I want you dead. There has to be another way even if you did torture me for almost a year."

Montclair ceased walking once more and spun around to face her. "You think I was torturing you?"

"Weren't you?"

"I was trying to retrieve what was rightfully mine."

"If it was stolen, how was it rightfully yours?"

Montclair scowled at her. "I did not steal it. An aged wizard gave it to me."

"After you conned it from him, I'm sure."

The scowl deepened. "I assured him I would take care of it."

Danni tipped her head back to glare up at him. "Did you tell him you intended to suck it dry, to use its powers for your own greedy gain?"

Montclair thumped his way to the door. "I believe I left that part out."

"I thought so."

"Why do you not wish Falcon to kill me?"

"Because I still believe there's good in you."

Montclair sneered at her. "Ever the naive little innocent believing all people are eternally good. How dreadfully banal."

Danni pushed herself to her feet and shuffled across the floor. Montclair had shackled her ankles with leg irons to restrict her movements. She rattled as she walked up beside him. "Mock me all you want,

Montclair, but even you have to realize that I'm the only one standing between you and certain death. This time, though, I'm not so sure I can convince Falcon not to kill you."

"What makes you think I want you to save me?"

Danni hadn't considered that. She rubbed her chin and looked out the dirty window pane in front of her. Without the benefit of the moon, there was little to see. "You want to die?"

"I want to live not exist," Montclair growled back.

"So live." Danni made the statement simple as if trying to explain a particularly difficult subject to a small child.

Montclair swept a hand in front of him with open disgust. "It is not as simple as you make it sound. I have turned my back on my family and friends and have disgraced them. They will not so easily forgive me."

Danni's shoulders began to relax. "Why did you do it?"

Montclair hooked his hands over the top of the door ledge and leaned his weight into the door. "Because I was convinced power was my only chance at life."

"And now that you know you've made a mistake, you can correct it."

Montclair laughed shortly. "In my world, you do not just apologize for your mistakes and move on. You are punished, banished. That is why I am here. My guild will not take me back."

Danni folded her arms in a belligerent stance. "So that's it? You just give up then?"

The wizard didn't immediately speak and after a while, Danni began to think that he wouldn't answer her. But finally, Montclair drew in a ragged breath and summoned up a response. "Danni, I have made choices in my life. I must suffer the consequences of those choices." He backed away from the door. "Beginning now."

The planks splintered as the door flew open and framed in the open doorway, Falcon was a terrifying combination of power and fury. Flames danced in his eyes, sparks glittered from his fingernails and his hair blew wildly with the wind. Behind him, thunder rolled, lightening created furrows in the ground and a heavy, driving rain began to fall. Retribution had arrived.

"Danni, are you hurt?" Falcon kept his eyes on Montclair as he spoke.

"No." Danni positioned herself in between Falcon and Montclair, putting her hands against the blue silk covering Falcon's chest. "Falcon, I want you to listen to me. Montclair doesn't want to die. You can't kill him."

Falcon barely spared her a glance. "This no longer concerns you, Danni. You will wait outside."

Danni gritted her teeth, irritation climbing up her spine. Falcon had an annoying habit of dismissing her like a bothersome child. Apparently, wizards hadn't learned how modern day women liked to be treated. She tilted her head back to see his face. "Don't push me away. Listen to me." She balled up her fist and

punched him squarely in the solar plexus. The bunt was enough to catch his attention, but Danni doubted it had caused him much pain. “Montclair knows he’s made a mistake. He wants to rectify it but he knows the guild won’t take him back.”

Falcon’s eyes narrowed. “He is correct. Now, stand aside.” Without giving her the opportunity to obey, Falcon moved her forcibly to one side of the cabin. “I have given you the option to wait outside for me. Since you have indicated your desire to remain here, you will remain silent. Do not interrupt me, Danni. I will do what needs to be done.” He cast his gaze upon Montclair who was offering no signs of resistance. “Montclair understands this. So must you.” He pressed two fingers against Danni’s lips to still the sounds rising in her throat. “I will send you outside if you do not listen to me.”

Falcon straightened and walked away from her, coming face to face, almost nose to nose with Montclair. “You have disobeyed the rules of your guild, broken every law of our people. For those crimes, you have been banished, stripped of your power and restricted to life on Earth as a mortal. Had you chosen to live out the remainder of your days in peace and quiet, you could have died as an old man. Your crimes against Danni are indicative of your desire for a quicker death. As the highest ranking member of the wizard people, I am here to carry out your sentence.”

Montclair didn’t speak. He simply blinked in response to Falcon’s damning words and clasped his hands behind his back.

The wizard’s acceptance gave Falcon pause but he had a task to complete. Montclair had proven redemption wasn’t an option. At every given opportunity, he had destroyed lives and created havoc. He did not deserve to live.

“You will not fight me on this,” Falcon instructed.

Montclair inclined his head almost regally. “You will do what needs to be done.”

Falcon eyed him strangely. “Very well then. Turn to face the wall.”

Danni clamped one hand tightly over her mouth. “Falcon, please.” The words came out muffled.

Falcon held one fist in the air and lowered it swiftly. The blow caught Montclair between the shoulder blades and he rocked, falling to his knees with a grunt of pain. Another blow shoved him to his hands and still another made him cry out.

Danni raced forward, but stopped inches away from Falcon’s statue still form. His hands lowered to his sides and Falcon watched his enemy with a new eye. “Get to your feet, Montclair,” his voice was harsh.

Montclair climbed unsteadily to his feet but didn’t turn around.

“Why did you bring Danni here?” Falcon demanded.

“It was the only way I could show you the truth. Look behind you,” Montclair instructed.

Slowly, Falcon pivoted. And his breathing came to a halt as Doug Condrey slipped from the shadows.



Danni gasped as Doug strolled toward them, his hands in the pockets of his immaculate slacks. “Surprised to see me, love?” He whispered against her hair as he passed by. “I would imagine all of you are surprised to see me. All of you except for Montclair. You see,” Doug inspected his fingernails, “I allowed all of you to believe that this wizard was the one in charge. Hell,” his chuckle was a rasp of sound, “even he believed it. It wasn’t until recently, this latest resurrection that Montclair began to realize that he wasn’t bringing me back because he wanted to, he brought me back because he had no choice.” Doug laughed with unabashed delight. “And to think that a few short hours ago I was considering leaving this fair town. It’s a good thing I decided to hang around. I might not have been here to see this.” He clapped his hands together. “If you could see the looks on your faces right now. Priceless.”

Danni backtracked toward the wall, the chains rattling with each move.

“It would appear I have all of your attention now.” Doug gave a wry shake of his head. “You all thought I was so weak and ineffectual. And you,” he pinned his gaze on Falcon’s stony face, “you thought you’d killed me, didn’t you? Goes to show that you shouldn’t put so much stock in your own wizardly abilities when the source of my power is much stronger.” Doug held his hands out from his sides and smiled benignly at the two wizards. As his feet began to rise from the ground, his eyes glowed red and feral. “I believe it was you who told those unfortunate police officers to learn more about their enemies, wasn’t it, Falcon? Maybe I’m not quoting you exactly, but it was something along those lines, I’m sure.” Doug’s voice deepened to a guttural growl. “Perhaps you should take your own advice.” He began to spin slowly, a mere circle of movement, which stirred the air with a malevolent aura. “Once he learned the truth, that I hold the true power, Montclair quickly fell into line. Now, my next question is simple really. Feel free to consider your answer because it really is a matter of life or death.” Doug’s feet thumped against the ground and he thrust his shoulders back with an air of importance. “Will you serve me or should I kill you?”

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

Falcon didn't immediately respond. He gave himself time to learn this new enemy and gave Doug more than enough time to become comfortable in his role. Time enough to lower his defenses and allow Falcon the opportunity to find out what was really going on.

"Are you certain your source is strong enough to defeat a wizard?" Falcon made his voice conversational.

Doug didn't hesitate in his response. "More than." He clicked his fingernails together. "What's your answer then?"

Falcon raised his head a fraction of an inch and met Danni's gaze across the distance of the cabin. Their eyes connected and held. They communicated without trading words and she nodded slowly, letting Falcon know she understood the choice he was about to make and the possible repercussions.

Falcon took a step back, his hand sweeping behind him to connect with Montclair's abdomen. He shoved him out of the way and braced himself for whatever attack might come. "My answer would have to be no. I serve no man."

Doug's eyes darkened to a glowing, virulent scarlet and his lips twisted into a cruel smile. "So be it. Know that your decision not only affects you but the lives of those with you and possibly your friends and family members. They will come looking for you and they will be destroyed as well."

"That is providing you can defeat me," Falcon intoned in a deadly low tone of voice.

Doug tipped his head slightly. "If I kill you first, you will not be able to watch Danni die. Decisions, decisions."

Falcon's eyes narrowed and his blood began to boil within his veins. "If you wish to kill Danni, you will have to kill me first."

Doug's eyes lit with glee. "Ah, a challenge. I've been waiting for this moment, the chance to lock horns with a true wizard. Not like that pathetic excuse for a wizard, I've been pretending to follow these past few weeks. How tiresome was that." He chuckled at his own wit. "Let me tell you. It was all I could do not to roll my eyes when he rattled on about his own self-importance." Doug grinned broadly. "I don't see that in you. Amazingly, for all your powers, you are quite humble." His lips peeled back even wider. "Well, then, let's get to it, shall we? I'll try to make it quick and painless. Although," he held up one finger and tapped his chin, "I don't recall my death being quite so painless when you choked the life out of me." The last word ending on a rolling snarl and Doug launched himself toward Falcon.

Falcon ducked and spun, catching Doug by the ankle as Danni's ex-husband flew overhead. Falcon

flung him against the back wall and leaped a few feet away, whirling around to face his adversary once more.

Sparks tap-danced along his forearms and twin, blue lasers illuminated the ground at his feet as his power flowed from every pore. He called upon every ounce of his magic, his ability, knowing he would need it to defeat this man who was but a receptacle for an unknown source of energy.

Doug coughed and cursed, bouncing to his feet with a grin, which belied his foul mood. “Good move.” He spat at the ground. “Maybe you could teach it to me. Oh, wait, I’m going to kill you. So that wouldn’t work.” He lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. “My mistake.” Doug opened his mouth and roared, the horrific sound permeating every corner of the cabin. As the deep cry pounded on the eardrums of his victims, Doug began to rise again, his feet kicking the air to propel him forward.

Falcon saw the attack and rose to meet it. Closing his hand into a fist, he silenced the howling, startling Doug. Like two aerial swordsmen, the wizard and the man collided in mid-air. Falcon hooked one hand around Doug’s wrist to shackle him and as they traded blows, sounds of sizzling flesh and electrical sparks filtered out into the night sky.

Doug’s curses became louder and more violent. He reached for a handhold, something to help him gain control of the battle, but Falcon anticipated his every move, diving and weaving until Doug was exhausted even with the power from his source.

“Damn you, wizard,” Doug shouted, lunging forward with one last attempt. Danni saw his fingernails extend into lethal daggers and she cried Falcon’s name, allowing him to turn just in time to prevent a fatal wound. The nails raked Falcon’s shoulder and with a Gaelic curse, Falcon flung his attacker to the ground.

Doug landed in an ungainly heap against a rotted board. He held his head in his hands and grumbled below his breath while he attempted to push himself to his feet.

Falcon landed on his feet inches away from Doug’s feet. “Enough.” The word rang like the strike of a hammer against Old Liberty and as Doug looked up to meet the face of his executioner, Falcon tipped his fingers forward. Flames lanced across the room and Doug screamed with pain as the fiery streaks consumed him.

It was over in an instant and while Falcon stood still to ensure Doug’s demise was complete, Danni walked up behind him and touched his spine. He leaned into her shoulder and gave into her comfort. “He is dead,” he whispered with an ache in his voice.

Danni began to stroke his back. “He was already dead, Falcon.”

Falcon reached for her free hand and held it against his chest. “It’s not over, Danni.” His eyes lifted to search the wall as if he could see through the decaying wood. “Somewhere out there is the source who gave Doug this power. I will need to find him.”

Danni squeezed his fingers. “And you will. Later. Tonight, you’re going home...with me.”

Falcon touched his forehead to hers. "That sounds like a plan." Falcon caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and lifted his head. "Montclair." He sighed heavily. "It seems we have a decision to make."

Montclair squared his shoulders. "No. There is nothing to decide. I have already made my decision."

Falcon eyed him warily. "And what is that decision?"

Montclair yanked the amulet and the chain popped from his neck. He juggled the stone in the center of his palm for a second before extending it. "Take this. Give it back to the proper owner."

Falcon didn't reach for the amulet. "And what about you? What do you plan to do now?"

Montclair turned his gaze toward the door. "I shall do as I have been condemned. I will live my life as a mortal here on Earth."

Falcon felt the squeeze of Danni's hand once again. An unspoken message. "Perhaps there is a more constructive way for you to spend your time."

Montclair stiffened. "Penance?"

Falcon smiled slightly. "Such as it is." He stepped away from Danni but still held tight to her hand. He needed the link with her. "The Fates have summoned me to begin a new guild, to train young wizards to be stronger and better than they have ever been before." His lips twitched. "It would appear these young wizards are being chosen from the," he paused, "cast-offs for want of a better word."

Montclair's brows lowered. "The Fates want you to train banished wizards to be even more powerful? That does not make sense. Perhaps you misunderstood their directions."

Falcon didn't take offense. "I did not misunderstand. You are one of the chosen ones. I could not see it at first, but I see it now. I see your future, Montclair. Now the choice is yours. Submit yourself to me and learn of these new ways or live your life here on Earth as a mortal."

While Montclair considered this new option, Danni rested her head against Falcon's chest and whispered, "I'm proud of you."

Falcon gave her a mock scowl. "I am only doing what the Fates have instructed me to do."

Danni gave him an impish grin. "I'm sure the Fates told you to include Montclair in this school for delinquents."

Falcon looked away from her probing gaze. Damn mortal women. Too intuitive for their own good. "Montclair, have you made your decision?"

Montclair took a step backward. "If I go with you, what will happen?"

"First, you will be stripped of all your powers until you can learn to control them again. Until I can show you how to control them." Falcon met the young wizard's gaze steadily. "The task before you is not an easy one, but I believe you can learn to overcome this desire for power you feel inside of you. You can

become stronger and better for our people.”

Montclair thought for a second longer then nodded. “I will come with you.”

Falcon released Danni’s hand and took a step forward. “Hold out your hands, then.”

Montclair did as he instructed and Falcon placed his palms atop Montclair’s. Danni watched in awe as a glow of light spun out from beneath their joined hands. Then suddenly, Montclair slumped and Falcon caught him, bracing him against the wall.

“Is he all right?” Danni asked.

Falcon accepted her sympathy with a smile. “He is a wizard who just lost what was left of his magic. It will take some time to grow accustomed to this feeling of weakness.” Falcon rested his hand on Montclair’s shoulder. “But he will be fine.” Falcon held out his other hand to Danni. “And with that, I believe it is time we returned home.”

As the day wound to a close, Danni stood on the balcony overlooking the mountains. The brisk air whipped her long skirt around her legs and sent a chill through her silk blouse. She leaned her arms on the wooden railing and inhaled the fresh scent of clean mountain air, a heady combination of honeysuckle and pine.

The full moon dropped low and provided a bright, yellow illumination to the dew-dampened grasses and as an occasional owl hooted in the distance, a peace settled around Danni’s shoulders. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this relaxed, this safe.

She heard Falcon’s approach and turned to greet him. He’d changed into black jeans and a soft white sweater which emphasized his broad shoulders. The wind ruffled his hair and his silver eyes held intoxicating warmth.

They hadn’t spoken much since Falcon had arrived back home after leaving Montclair with the Assembly. Danni didn’t know if it was because they didn’t know what to say or because, for once, the silence was welcome.

Falcon walked up beside her and slipped his arm around her waist. He didn’t say anything and for the longest time, Danni rested her head on his shoulder and continued to watch the night.

When she finally spoke, her voice was a whisper on the wind. “Is it really over?”

Falcon kissed the top of her head. “For now it is.”

Danni’s hand bunched against his sweater. “What happens now then?”

Falcon turned her in his embrace to hold her tighter against his chest. “Whatever you want to happen.”

"I want to be with you." She felt his body relax as she said the words. She leaned her head back to see his face. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"A lot has happened," he hedged.

"And undoubtedly, a lot more is going to happen, but for some odd reason," a laugh bubbled up within her breast, "I'd rather be with you when it happens."

Falcon lifted one eyebrow. "Odd reason? That's comforting."

Danni turned her attention back to the mountains. "We can't stay here, though, can we?"

Falcon's arms tightened around her waist. "I have to answer the calling, Danni."

She sighed heavily. "I know. I wouldn't ask you to do otherwise. I'm just not so sure I'm ready to give up being a mortal, living here. Can you understand that?"

He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and then her lips. "Yes, I can." He nuzzled her cheek with his. "But can you understand that I can't stay here?"

"Of all the men in the universe, I have to fall in love with one who doesn't belong in this world. How much sense does that make?" Danni gave a mock grumble and pushed away from him as a shiver raced down her arms. Suddenly, her face cleared and she tipped her head back to see his face. "I have visions."

Falcon lifted one eyebrow but didn't speak. His silence allowed her to continue.

"I should have told you earlier, but I didn't know how. Besides, I wasn't even sure if I believed in them. I've had them for most of my life but since I met you, they became more real. Stronger." Her breath hitched in her throat. "I had one of a little girl." She gave him a wistful smile. "She has your eyes."

"Danni." Falcon interrupted her by catching her around the waist.

She stared up into his twinkling, silver eyes. "What?"

"You saw our daughter."

Her heart tumbled within her chest. "How can you know that? I don't know that. It isn't possible."

Falcon waved a hand over her face to clear the worry. "In my world, all things are possible. The child came to you to protect us." He placed his hand over her womb. "She especially wanted to protect her mother."

"But each time I tried to help, I only got us in more trouble."

Falcon gave her a hard kiss. "Danni, do you know what it means to me to know that you came after me because you were worried about me? It shows me the depth of your love." His hands crept up her body to cup her face. "I've never loved you more than I do right now."

Danni smiled mistily and cleared her throat. "Do you know where we're going?"

Falcon released her to lean his spine against the railing and face her. "We? You're willing to leave here then?"

She clamped her hands on her hips. “If you think I’m ever letting you out of my sight again, you couldn’t be more wrong. I still haven’t mentioned that stunt you pulled. How could you leave me in Mystique like that?”

Falcon cupped his chin in his hand and watched her with laughter darkening his eyes. “Stunt. I’m not sure I like that word. I suppose this is where the dressing down comes in.”

“Did you expect to get away with it?”

Falcon shoved himself off the railing and strolled toward her. “A wizard never expects to be questioned by a mortal. Ordinarily, they don’t have the right.”

Danni challenged him with a stern look. “Then who does have the right?”

“The leader of the Assembly and...” Falcon paused for effect. “My wife.”

Danni’s breath caught and stuttered out of her lungs. “Your wife. She has the right to question you?”

Falcon tipped his head to one side. “Most women do question their husbands. Even among our people.”

“Hmm.” Danni considered his words. “I didn’t know you had a wife.”

His eyes crinkled with laughter. “I don’t. Yet.”

She ran a fingertip down his arm. “Oh. You know someone you’re going to ask then?”

His brows dipped. “Ask? Wizards don’t usually ask.”

Danni sidled up next to him. “Then I’d suggest you think like a mortal man.”

Falcon reached for her. His chest brushed against her breasts and a spark of pleasure shot down Danni’s spine. “Giving me instructions already?” His voice carried a blatant invitation.

Danni gave him a sexy smile. “There’s lots more where that came from.”

He cupped her face in his hands once more and thumbed her lower lip. “Do you know how much I love you?”

She held onto his wrists while her heart thrummed its rhythm in tune with the blood racing through her veins. “Hopefully, as much as I love you.”

Falcon’s breath sighed out of his lungs. “Marry me, Danni. Your life will never be the same, but I can guarantee it won’t ever be boring.”

Danni melted into his arms and inhaled his clean, masculine scent. “It hasn’t been the same in a long time, Falcon, but I haven’t complained.” She winked up at him. “Well, not much.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Was it a question?”

His laughter rumbled against her ear. “I need you in my life, Danni. I need to wake up next to you every morning and listen to you breathe beside me in the bed each night. I need to hear your voice telling me

you love me or even telling me I'm a pain in the ass. I need it all." His breath mingled with hers. "Now will you marry me?"

Danni clung to him as the tears brushed the backs of her eyes. "Now that was a marriage proposal." She stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. "I'll give you my answer inside." She took his hand and began backing toward the French doors.

Falcon held fast. "I asked you out here. The least you could do is answer me out here."

Danni wiggled her hips and dropped his hand. "Well, I had something else in mind, a much better way to say yes, but," she began to undo the buttons on her blouse, "if you insist..."

Falcon backed her against the doors and grabbed her hips. "I think I can wait."

Danni tossed back her head and laughed lightly as her hand dipped lower. "Actually, I don't think you can."

Falcon's eyes burned into hers and then suddenly, Danni found herself slung over his right shoulder. She bounced against him as he trudged into the house, kicking the door shut with a swing of his foot. Danni laughed out loud and bunched her hands in his sweater as he carried her caveman-style toward the couch. The second she thumped against the cushions, Falcon leaned over her, silver eyes sliding over her face like a silken caress.

"I don't think you want to wait any more than I do, Mrs. Condrey."

Danni held out her arms to him in open invitation. "You know, for once, I believe you're right."

Falcon began to grumble about her choice of words but then Danni reached for him and thoughts spiraled into the air. With the silence of the night sweeping over them, they became one, joined together in body, mind and soul. Together, they'd found their home.