

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Indigo Spell

ISBN # 9781419909795

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Indigo Spell Copyright© 2007 Rachel Carrington

Edited by Carole Genz.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: March 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Content Advisory:

S - ENSUOUS

E - ROTIC

X - TREME

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated S-ensuous.

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

INDIGO SPELL

Rachel Carrington

Prologue

Three hundred years in the past in Mystique

Bravely facing the fire circling the floor at her feet, Charlemaine stood in front of the door to prevent her son's escape. "Jaxon, you cannot do this. Your actions today could have ramifications that far extend the boundaries of our world. Even you cannot conceive the dangers you put yourself or this family in."

Jaxon blinked his eyes toward the ring of flames and winced a little as the vaporous heat intensified. Power rippled beneath his skin, in his eyes. Closing in on two hundred years of age, he believed in himself, in his abilities. He had the power of the wizards behind him. His desire to control was strong and the need to break free of the barriers of his people threatened to overwhelm him. "Step away from the door, Mother. I would not want the flames to harm you." As he spoke, the glow of orange and blue rose higher and licked closer to the silk of Charlemaine's robe. He hoped she would back down.

"You will not use your powers against the woman who gave you life." The booming voice had Jaxon whirling around, facing the stormy eyes of his father. "I have taught you better than that." Blowing a blast of frigid moisture, Jensen snuffed the flames and pulled his wife to his side. "How dare you! You have no more sense than to place your own wants and needs above your own mother. The Assembly will call a Tribunal for this." The older wizard shook with rage.

Jaxon lowered his hand but his muscles bunched, tensed, waiting for his father's attack. "I have made plans for the evening. She does not wish me to go. I am no longer a child to be guided by my mother's hand and she was never in any danger." He saw the fear in his mother's eyes, fear for what he was becoming, but Jaxon banked his guilt. The need for supremacy was stronger. It gnawed at him, demanded release. "Mother's powers exceed mine. She was perfectly capable of extinguishing the flames. She placed herself in front of the door."

Outside the stone walls of the citadel, the wind howled, kicked up a whirl of fog and angry clouds. As the fury blanketed the windows, the three wizards, tension coating their features, faced off. Parents against son in an age-old battle of wills.

"To save you from something even you don't understand." Jensen, his eyes glittering, strode back across the floor, the set of his face screaming his rage. "She knows what your plans are, Jaxon. Perhaps it is wise for you to listen to her." He tapped his foot against polished marble, arms folded.

"And you have every intention of attempting to stop me if I do not agree. I have learned much in my few years, Father. Perhaps it would not be wise for you to oppose me." False bravado and the compulsion of his friends overruled the wisdom Jaxon had not yet acquired.

Jensen's shoulders swelled, his eyes boiled. "You insolent sap! How dare you assume that by means of your insufficient magic you could overpower me? I have been alive far longer than you have known of the universe's existence. Your common sense is overshadowed by your raging need to rule. It is that need which will end with your demise. I would suggest you back down now before you make a mistake you will not be able to correct."

Jaxon stood taller, a more muscular version of the man facing him. "That is assuming I am frightened by you."

"Jensen, Jaxon, please." Charlemaine's graceful voice was lost on the two men locked in a heated battle of wills. She sailed across the floor, her ethereal beauty obscured by the dark shadows of night falling across the room. Even at the lateness of the hour, the gas lamps had not been lit. A simple task, it required only the measured look of a wizard's eye, but the darkness was a welcome shroud to the female wizard. She did not want to see the anger on her husband's face, the defiance on her son's. "Think about what you are doing. Jensen, he is your son."

"And he has stepped over the line."

"Your lines are for fools," Jaxon scoffed. "You and Mother, like sheep, follow the dictates of a ruler when your powers could very well equal his. Do you believe our leader to be so omnipotent that he is deserving of your fear?" He whirled around, pressed his opened palm against the rough-textured wall. "I will not be held under his boot. I will control my own life, follow my own destiny. If you cannot understand the reasons behind my desire to leave, at the very least, you should respect my decision."

"How can I respect your decision when by your very actions you have proven yourself still an adolescent in need of his parents' control?" Jensen took two steps toward his son, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"I am not a child." Jaxon hurled the words back at his father. "You yourself have told me a wizard has attained maturity when he reaches the age of two hundred."

"I told you a wizard would be acknowledged as an adult at that age. Maturity is not an award for age, Jaxon. It is gained through wisdom and knowledge. It is obvious you have not acquired enough of either to assist you with your great plans to take over the world."

Jaxon folded his arms, a perfect imitation of his father's former stance. "And you think to teach me?"

At once, the door flew open, banged against the far wall. A hearty gust of wind billowed inside, pushing back the sweeping strands of Jaxon's long, brown hair. Framed in the open doorway, steel gray hair swirling around his head, Falcon, leader of the Assembly of Wizards, stood proud and tall. His eyes swept over the scene, missed nothing. "No, I will teach you." The words echoed against the walls, bounced around the air. "Jaxon, you will come with me."

"I will not." Jaxon stood his ground.

Charlemaine gasped. "Jaxon, you cannot oppose him. Falcon is the master wizard. Your powers are ineffectual against his."

Jaxon refused to back down, to admit defeat. "We shall see."

Falcon's eyes twinkled. "I like your style, young Jaxon. I do not however care for your insolence. You will come with me. I can see I have been remiss in your training. We shall begin immediately."

"I have plans," Jaxon responded in a harsh tone of voice. "Plans that do not include sitting under your tutelage until you deem I am fit for proper service in the Assembly."

Falcon waved a hand in the air and smiled. "Suddenly you are free for the evening. Your *human*," his lips curled slightly at the word, "friends have conveniently forgotten you were to join them. In fact they have all developed a sudden desire to go home, to be with their families. Now that your plans have changed, you will come with me. And before you speak again, Jaxon, I should warn you I do not intend to repeat myself. You may walk with me like a man or—" he stopped, silver eyes settling on Charlemaine's face, "Shall I complete the sentence in front of your mother?"

Anger burned the back of his throat. Jaxon wanted to lash out, to strike against those who meant well. For those were the same who did not understand him. Would never understand him. They were fools, settling for the small pieces of the world when, with their powers, they could have it all. That was his intention, to take, to rule, to win.

And Falcon must see it. That was why he was here now. He had to see Jaxon's hunger for control, the need to dominate. And Jaxon couldn't help but wonder if deep down inside the old wizard's ancient heart, he felt a rippling of unease.

Falcon had witnessed firsthand the strength of Jaxon's will, the power behind the whisper of his mind and he knew that, without control, Jaxon would be a formidable enemy. Perhaps that was what had led the elder here tonight—worry that one day Jaxon would become the stronger of the two.

"I'm waiting for your decision, Jaxon."

Pride dictated he walk out of the room of his own free will. "I will go with you but do not think you have won."

Falcon's shoulders relaxed only slightly. "This is no battle. There are no winners or losers unless we give in to our greed."

Jensen placed his hand on Falcon's shoulder as Jaxon stepped out into the black night. "Tell me it isn't too late."

Falcon swept a look toward Jaxon's broad shoulders. "There is always hope. We shall have to believe that the young wizard's will can be harnessed, that he will not use the power of the wizards for evil." He flicked the door shut behind him as he stepped out to join his young charge. "Now, Jaxon, shall we go?" He didn't give the young man time to respond before he clamped a hand down on his shoulder and disintegrated into thin air, taking his reluctant protégé with him.

Chapter One

Present Day – Earth

“Stop pulling at my arm, Belinda, I’m coming.” Tess Montgomery shouldered her leather purse and tried to keep pace with her best friend as they marched along the covered walkway leading to the auditorium. “I can’t imagine why you’re in such a hurry anyway. You’ve never liked art. Care to share why you’re suddenly so interested in Impressionist paintings?”

Belinda smiled and winked over her shoulder, staying two steps ahead of her friend. “Well, I thought I might broaden my horizons a bit.”

The suspicious feeling she’d been battling all day returned. Tess knew she should probably listen to it. After all, the last time Belinda Hilton talked about broadening her horizons, Tess ended up in a strip club in a seedy part of town while men whose eyes she couldn’t meet, gyrated in front of her with dollar bills stuck into the waistband of their g-strings. So odds were good she should probably listen to that inner voice which was telling her to run like hell. But it was too late. Belinda had already pushed the heavy wooden door open and, bracing it with one heel, waved frantically to Tess.

“Come on. We want to get a good seat.”

Tess started to remind her friend that the seat didn’t really matter in a silent auction as her money assured her an assigned position but instead she just shook her head and moved into the room filled with Charleston’s top society.

She knew she blended in well in her cream linen suit and her long, chestnut-colored hair swept up on top of her head in an elegant chignon. With her nails perfectly manicured and makeup artfully applied, she mingled well with the ladies of high society. After all, her mother had taught her well but, if the truth were told, Tess was more comfortable in jeans and T-shirt than she was in expensive silk.

She moved through the throng of ladies, murmuring appropriate greetings and well wishes, her private school manners holding her in good stead. She paused long enough to accept an invitation to tea from Mrs. Barnsworth and a compliment from Teensy Malone before gliding to the cushioned chair with her nameplate on the back. Her mother would be so proud. She almost shuddered at the thought.

Belinda settled in beside Tess and practically bounced with excitement.

“What’s wrong with you? I haven’t seen you this worked up since Ed asked you out for your first date,” Tess asked.

Belinda’s smile was firmly in place, her eyes glowing. “You’ll see.”

A small furrow appeared between Tess' normally smooth brows. "I'll see what?" The curtain on stage began to move and with it came a small feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. "Talk to me, Belle. Tell me what I'm supposed to be seeing."

"Just look." Belinda pointed toward the stage.

Tess turned and immediately knew something was amiss. Auctions didn't have announcers dressed in flashy tuxedos wearing gamin grins and too much hair gel. And art auctions didn't make the women of Charleston society titter. And there was definite tittering going on behind her. In fact Teensy had begun to wave a fan frantically back and forth in front of her face as if attempting to ward off a swoon. If indeed women still swooned.

The uneasiness intensified when the announcer's booming voice encompassed the room. "Good evening, ladies, and welcome to the first annual Bachelor's Auction benefiting the children of Caring Hearts Home. My name is Adam Walker and I'll be your host this evening."

Tess' head began to swim and she clutched her perfectly manicured fingers into Belinda's forearm. "What's going on here? You told me this was an art auction. You lied to me." She looked over her shoulder as if afraid that any minute her mother would come marching into the room. She couldn't imagine what would happen then. No doubt pandemonium would ensue.

"No, I told you it was a charity auction. You assumed it was an art auction and I just let you ramble on and on about how you could possibly use another piece for your living room. And once you start talking about art, well, there's practically no interrupting you."

Tess tugged her jacket closer around her body and tossed dismayed glances over her shoulder but the matrons behind her didn't seem to be having a problem with the type of auction. She sighed inaudibly. "I was an art history major." The words came out sounding as defensive as she felt.

Belinda yawned. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Just one more thing to impress your mother but you can't convince me you don't get bored out of your skull sometimes. There has to be a tiny bit of rebel inside of you."

There was no doubt in Tess' mind that this was one of Belinda's harebrained ideas to get her close to a man and maybe, just maybe, another chance for her friend to thumb her nose at the matriarch of the Montgomery family, Colleen. The pair had never gotten along, not since Belinda's aged pickup had left a rather large oil stain in the circular driveway of Colleen's four-million-dollar mansion. Words had been exchanged and, while Colleen's anger manifested itself more passively, Belinda always chose the more direct approach. Definitely not a pleasant memory.

"Oh look," came a whispered voice behind her, drawing Tess' eyes to the stage.

Admittedly her interest had been piqued. To save face, she added for Belinda's ears only, "You'll pay for this and I'm withdrawing my bids."

"Can't do that. The bidding has already been closed. All they're going to do now is parade the men out one at a time and we get to ooh and aah over them and pray our money was enough to land us one of them."

"Land us? Please tell me you didn't bid."

Belinda's nose wrinkled. "Well, of course I bid. Ed's out of town."

Sure the horror she felt in the pit of her stomach must be etched on her face, Tess nudged her friend with her arm. "You're married!"

Belinda grinned. "I know that but I could use some help around the house while Ed's out of town and I certainly didn't want one of those guys who doesn't know how to buy big enough pants to cover his crack. Now keep looking. Maybe you'll be one of the lucky ones."

"I don't want to be one of the lucky ones. I want to get out of here." She started to get up but Belinda's nails scored her arm.

"Please, don't leave yet. You'll miss the good part."

Tess doubted there was a good part but she sank back against the plush cushion of the padded chair anyway. "You told me you were bidding on a piece of art for me."

"I told you I was bidding on a piece of work for you. And believe me, this guy is a real piece of work." Blue eyes glittering, Belinda chuckled. "Don't worry. I think you'll like him."

"You're nuts. Certifiable." But Tess had never doubted that her friend only had her best interests at heart. While her mother's teachings were compelling her to run for the nearest door, her own instincts were telling her to remain put, that her life was about to change, even if briefly.

"Maybe so but after you see this guy, you won't think I'm so crazy after all. I don't know where they found him but I'd take him home in a heartbeat." Belinda winked and scooted lower in her chair. "Besides, take a look around you. All of these women are here to find out if they won and they knew what type of auction it was in advance. So I wouldn't worry too much about that pristine reputation of yours if I were you." The lights dimmed as Belinda's gloat ended.

Suddenly the stage swirled with lights and Tess cringed, placing her hand over her eyes as the host's voice began an excited introduction of the first man leading the meat market parade. Her fingers, of their own volition of course, parted to catch a brief peek.

All muscle and sinew, the bachelor danced from one end of the stage to the other, wearing a buttoned-down white dress shirt, opened to display a wide expanse of his smooth chest, and black trousers which did little to hide the definition of his thighs or the package nestled between his legs. His hair was long and black, tied back in a ponytail, his eyes just as dark and when he smiled, Tess was sure Teensy fainted behind her.

"I'm going to kill you for this," Tess hissed behind her hand.

"Will you just relax and enjoy the show? Where in the world are you going to see this many good-looking men all in the same room unless you're at a gay bar? Now just hush."

Tess might hush but Belinda was going to pay. Right after Tess watched the rest of the show, of course.

* * * * *

Jaxon Richards adjusted the tool belt around his hips and planted his booted feet squarely in front of his friend's unrepentant form. "You do realize of course that once this is all over, I'm going to kick your ass. I can't believe I let you talk me into this." He could only imagine the looks on his brothers' faces.

Harry grinned and shrugged. "I don't know why you're so upset. You knew what you were getting yourself into when I told you about this. Now all of a sudden, I'm the bad guy?"

Jaxon dropped a gaze to the open vest, which covered little of his pecs and nothing of his abs. "You left out the part about parading around half naked in front of a bunch of panting society matrons." He was beginning to doubt his own sanity. Maybe there was something to be said for staying in your own world. "I assumed my skills were up for auction not my body."

Harry continued to grin in his irritating manner. "Well, some women would say they're one and the same. And besides, not all those women out there are matrons and you're not half naked. You wear less than that to the beach."

"In case you haven't noticed, those aren't sand dunes out there, pal." Jaxon adjusted the crotch of his jeans. "And could you have at least bought the jeans in my size?"

The older man's face colored a little. "Well, I didn't buy them. I just gave your sizes to Mallory Whitcomb."

"Who in the hell is Mallory Whitcomb?"

"She's the organizer of this event. She was supposed to provide you with the proper sizes."

"Uh-huh." Jaxon shifted. No doubt Ms. Whitcomb had dropped down a size so she could get a good ogle. "So let me get this straight. Those biddies out there are bidding on which one gets to take me home for the evening and you're going to sit back here and watch me sweat? Does that about sum it up?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't have to be tonight. You can pick which night." Harry grimaced. "Or, she can, rather."

"And suppose I end up with some lunatic?"

Harry scrubbed the back of his neck and coughed a little. "Well, then I'll come looking for you."

"Actually," Jaxon leaned in closer to lower his voice to a deathly growl, "you'll be taking my place."

Harry's head shot up and his eyes widened. "Are you kidding? Sadie would kill me! I told her I was coming with you tonight to offer moral support."

"Yeah, and you didn't feel the need to warn the only friend you've got that his 'skills' were going to be on display for an hour either."

Waving a hand in dismissal, Harry shrugged. "It's not an hour, more like ten minutes and it's for a worthy cause."

Jaxon tugged at the jeans once more, the tools jangling against his hip. "If you say that one more time, I'll kick your ass right now."

Harry backed away, hands extended in a placating gesture. "You're up next. Don't forget. Give 'em your best smile and give 'em hell."

Jaxon could only think of one person he was going to give hell to and that was the man with two working brain cells who was grinning like a simpleton as he passed through the curtains to take the stage.

"Now, ladies, the next bachelor I'd like to introduce to you makes his home in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. At just under six-four, Jaxon Richards is a contractor who can build your wildest fantasy."

Tess didn't miss the look the bachelor shot the host as he walked from one end of the stage to the other. And she didn't miss the bachelor. The host hadn't been lying about his height. And where the three bachelors before him had been lean, this man was brawny, with taut skin bronzed from long hours in the sun and a dark, dangerous edge to his face. Tess leaned in for a closer look as Teensy gasped behind her.

Tousled brown hair, combed with fingers, no doubt, fell over his forehead and even from a distance, his eyes made her shiver with anticipation. She couldn't quite make out the color but they were magnetic, a draw for any woman. A model of perfection, the contractor was a combination of male beauty and raw masculinity. And Tess couldn't stop herself from staring any more than Teensy could prevent herself from hyperventilating.

Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Tess felt her panties grow damp while her heartbeat accelerated. This was ridiculous! She didn't even know the man!

"He makes you cream, doesn't he?" Belinda made a slurping sound.

"Will you knock it off?" But she couldn't take her eyes off the jeans that seemed to mold to his cock like a well-favored hand. Oh, to be denim. The decadent thought brought a smile to her face.

Jaxon walked to the edge of the stage, his jaw clenched. With almost radar perception, those mesmerizing eyes zeroed in on her face and Tess shrank back a little against the heat of his gaze. He looked straight at her, probably hadn't missed the smile either. Dear Lord, he probably thought she was interested in him. Which wasn't entirely inaccurate.

But to dispel the notion, Tess sat back against her chair and folded her arms, pasting a bored expression on her face. "When is this thing over, Belinda?" She was careful to keep her gaze lowered, away from the contractor, but he stayed in her peripheral vision.

Belinda nudged her. "Will you be quiet? This one is looking at you."

The collar of her silk blouse tightened. Why was it so stuffy? The organizers of the event could have at least ensured that the airflow was set at a decent level. They should have prepared for the possibility that with all these women in the room there was going to be some hot air flowing. Especially with all the heavy breathing. Mrs. Barnsworth alone was panting like a sheepdog in the middle of summer.

"And now." The host tore open the winning bid with a flourishing wave of his wrist. "I give you the winner of tonight's auction for Bachelor Number Four, Ms. Tess Montgomery. Ms. Montgomery, claim your prize!"

Tess sat staring in open-mouthed shock, her neck turning slowly toward Belinda. Her eyes narrowed as Belinda poked and prodded her to her feet with a healthy dose of cheering and whistles. Tess had never been more mortified in her life. Or more excited. As her high heels sank into the plush carpeting, she made her way slowly, reluctantly down the aisle toward the stage while butterflies danced in her stomach.

She was really walking toward him, approaching a man who oozed sex, a man who, no doubt, could make her forget everything she'd ever learned about manners. Her feet moved without her consent, drawing her ever closer. She was getting hotter – and wetter. Even now the lips of her pussy hummed and Tess' breath caught in her throat.

When was the last time any part of her body had hummed?

Jaxon Richards didn't move. He simply stood in the middle of the stage, his arms folded across his impressive chest, his chin thrust upward at a challenging angle with a smirk playing about his lips. It was almost a dare and Tess had never been one to back down from any type of challenge.

Shoulders back, head held high, Tess headed toward the steps leading up to the stage. She was almost there when strong hands clamped around her upper arms and amidst cheers of approval, Jaxon lifted her to stand in front of him. Her mouth open, she stared up into steely silver eyes ribboned with gold. Her heart jumped between her breastbone and her stomach.

Good Lord! The man had picked her up as if she weighed no more than a sheet of paper. Heat emanated from his body and her nipples peaked against the fabric of her blouse. She saw the contractor's eyes drop and then lift. He gave her a sexy, lopsided grin that told her he'd seen.

The heat in the room inched up a degree.

"Well, Mr. Richards, as host of this event, I feel I should tell you that your company for one evening came at an exorbitant price, one Ms. Montgomery was more than

willing to pay. In fact she outbid over seventy-five women for one night alone with you." The host beamed as the fluorescent lighting threw his red face into bold relief.

Tess wanted the floor to open wide and swallow her. And then she wanted it to open up beneath Belinda's feet so she'd have someone to pummel in the basement. The contractor's hands still held her arms and he continued to look at her, making her chest too tight and her mouth dry. The silvery gold eyes studied her, much like she was the one on the auction block.

He swept a look from the top of her head, taking a leisurely journey down cream linen, resting on the swell of her breasts, the curve of her hips, before finally returning to her face. And Tess felt like she'd just been stroked with a hot, wet tongue.

She couldn't think of one appropriate thing to say. But she really didn't blame herself. This wasn't the type of situation one was prepared for in the all-girls' school she had attended. In fact she wasn't sure Ms. Emily Halston, the headmistress of the school, would even know the proper etiquette for greeting a man whose company you had just purchased for the evening. And Tess' remaining years in Charleston society certainly hadn't prepared her for a bachelor's auction. Her mother had made sure of that.

The room fell silent.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Montgomery." Jaxon's voice was thick with a southern accent. He released one of her arms to slide his arm around her waist, thick muscle pressing against silk. "Now I can think of only one proper greeting for a lady who paid so much for me." Before Tess could guess his intention, Bachelor Number Four dragged her closer to his frame and dipped his head to claim her lips in a stolen kiss.

And Tess immediately forgot her own name. Heat spiraled through her, warming her from the inside out. Her hand, clenched in a fist intending to push him away, flexed against the wall of his chest, settling over his pecs.

Her breasts grew heavy, achy and she found herself unconsciously taking a step forward. His knee wedged between her thighs and the hard jut of his cock should have shocked her into retreat but instead Tess pressed closer with a soft moan.

All she could think about was sex. Hot, wild sex that wet the sheets and made the mattress slide. When was the last time she'd had a good, hard fuck? Sparks of electricity danced down her back and Tess brazenly touched her tongue to the tip of his.

He growled, a sound of hunger, and bent lower, taking her with him. This man didn't just kiss. He feasted, suckling at her lips like they were ripe strawberries he'd just plucked from a patch. Then he nibbled, lightly biting her lower lip until Tess was drowning in a pool of liquid flames.

His hand slipped upward, almost cupping her breast and she arched her back, wanting to push herself into his palm. Needing to feel his touch. His thumb brushed over the nipple, just lightly grazing but enough to make her jump. She was on fire, out of control, unable to think—until the room erupted in a loud burst of applause. Reality smacked her full in the face. Her face burning, she pulled out of Jaxon's embrace and

took a stumbling step backward. Chest rising and falling with each rapid breath, she swallowed with difficulty as she blinked up at him. This close, he was very tall. She had to tip her head back to see his face – a face she could look at for the rest of the day.

Was there an inch of this man that wasn't perfect? Certainly not one she'd touched. Her gaze dropped slightly and by the bulge in his jeans, she knew he was as affected as she was. The knowledge made her feel marginally better.

"Mr. Richards, it was a..." What in the hell did one say in the aftermath? It was a pleasure to meet you? Not appropriate. Although it had been a pleasure. More than.

She cleared her throat and tried again. "I'll see you Saturday night at seven." With cool aplomb she was nowhere near feeling, she extracted a gold-embossed card from inside her thin, gold-lined purse and held it out.

Jaxon accepted the card, allowed his fingers to brush intimately over her hand. "I'll look forward to it, Ms. Montgomery." The husky tone made her breath snag in her throat.

Tess curled her fingers into her palms as her thighs tingled, turned and tried not to scurry of the stage.

* * * * *

"Saturday evening. What was I thinking?" Tess lowered her head to her hands, obliterating her face. She hadn't been thinking. That had been the problem. From the moment Jaxon Richards had touched her, her mind had gone fuzzy. Melted. And she couldn't recall ever having melted in her life.

"You were thinking he was a hunk and you were going to get your money's worth out of him," Belinda inserted cheerfully around a spoonful of Rocky Road ice cream. "I can think of all sorts of things to do with a man like him. I only hope you're going to use your imagination and not let common sense dictate the evening. You have to live a little. He looks like he'd be up for a good, hard ride, pardon the pun."

Licking her fingers, the plump blonde rocked back on the stool. "Have you ever seen a more fuckable man? Was he as hard as he looked?"

Tess lifted her head a fraction of an inch to shoot a dagger across the table. "You got me into this mess. Now you can help me get out of it."

Belinda blinked and replied in a bland voice, "I don't know what I can do considering I wasn't invited to Saturday night's festivities. Although I will be more than happy to provide any type of recording equipment you require."

"Bitch."

A cackle rent the air. "Give me a break. If you don't fuck that man, then there's no hope for you."

"He's a stranger, Belle! I've just invited a total stranger into my home."

"A stranger whose kiss made your knees go rubbery."

Tess fumbled with her coffee mug. "My knees most certainly did not go rubbery." In fact she hadn't been thinking about her knees at all.

"Sure they did. Everybody in that room saw how he was holding you up." Belinda licked her spoon. "And we were all jealous." The silverware clinked against the bowl as she scooped up another bite. "I know I had to go home and make use of that handy little silver bullet of mine. That man could make a woman come from ten feet away."

Tess shoved the chair away from the table and stood up, surprised to feel the heat rising to her face. "Shouldn't you be getting your house ready to meet Bachelor Number Seven?"

Belinda waved a hand airily. "Doesn't make any difference now. Ed's coming home early. I won't have much of an opportunity to drool." She swallowed, sighed and smiled. "But if you tell me everything that happens Saturday night, I could at least live vicariously, and I mean everything." Her eyebrows waggled. "I have a bet going on with a couple of the society ladies about a certain number of inches, if you get my drift."

"Belinda!"

"Look, I'm married, not blind and I have every right to look. God knows, Ed ruptures an optic nerve every time a pretty woman walks by." She sighed heavily and dove back into her ice cream with gusto. "He used to look at me like that."

Tess ran water into her mug. "Like what?"

"Like I was the last bite of an extraordinary piece of cheesecake."

"Ed still looks at you like that. You just don't see it."

"I wish I could believe you but that's enough about my sorry excuse for a love life. Let's focus on yours. So what are you going to wear?"

"I was thinking jeans and flannel shirt. I'm sure it would make him feel at home."

Belinda glared. "That sounded like something your mother would say and God knows, Colleen Montgomery wrote the book on snobbery. And you're not a snob."

Tess swept a gaze around the eat-in kitchen with the French doors, which opened out onto a balcony overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Just down the way was the Battery, Charleston's well-known park and lovers' meeting place. She often went there alone just to think but the influx of couples walking hand in hand usually depressed her enough to send her hurrying back to the sanctuary of her home.

Belinda added, "Okay, so you live like a snob but you're not your mother."

A grin crossed Tess' face. "I don't think there's anyone who can equal Mom's personality."

"Snobbery is not a personality trait. It's a personality flaw."

"Have you forgotten that Colleen Montgomery has no flaws? Just ask her." Tess continued to grin as she began to clean up the kitchen.

"Why don't you let your maid do that and come for a drive with me? We need to go shopping."

"For what?"

"You need the perfect outfit for Saturday night."

One hip against the counter, Tess studied her friend. "Belle, I only invited Mr. Richards over because you paid a helluva lot of my money for him. Remind me to bring that up again later, by the way. Anyway, once dinner is done, he'll be on his way and I will have fulfilled my portion of this charity auction. So please don't count on anything happening beyond two adults sharing a cordial meal."

"You make it sound so exciting."

Was the flush on her cheeks noticeable? It was getting as steamy in her kitchen as it had been on that damned stage. "It's not supposed to be exciting. This is something I have to endure. As a lady, I will endure it. In fact I've planned a very pleasant evening."

"Fuck plans. I'll bet you hadn't 'planned' on him kissing you like that, did you?"

How did anyone plan on a kiss like that? "Well, no, but this time, I'll be prepared. And besides, that was a fluke. He was showing off for the ladies." And what a show it had been!

"Uh-huh, but just in case, if I were you, I'd wear long-lasting lipstick. I hear there's some pretty high-quality stuff out there, supposed to last all evening. But I guess that would depend on what you're doing with your lips all evening."

"I can assure you the only thing I'll be doing with my lips is talking. That is, if Mr. Richards can carry on a conversation without beer and pretzels."

Belinda winced a little. "You're generalizing."

"I'm being careful, Belle. The man looks positively dangerous, like he could fight ten men in a barroom brawl and come out the winner."

"Only Hercules could do that."

"Did you see the size of those arms? He could probably give Hercules a run for his money."

Belinda leaned in closer, her attention captured. "Did you just shiver?"

Had she? Goose bumps littered her arms but she wasn't about to admit anything without coercion. "Of course not. And even if I did, it was because I felt a draft."

"Oh, you felt something all right and it had nothing to do with the air conditioning." Belinda got to her feet and carried her bowl to the kitchen sink. "You're attracted to Mr. Brawny."

"I assure you I'm not. Mr. Richards is not my type."

"If that man isn't your type, I shudder to think what you would consider your type. I mean, honestly, name one thing wrong with the man."

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with him. When I said he wasn't my type, I only meant that he and I would never be compatible in a social setting."

"I think that depends on whether you were vertical or horizontal."

Tess shot her friend a disgusted look. "Will you drag your mind out of the gutter for one minute? I swear since you've been here all you've done is talk about Jaxon Richards and how fuckable he is!"

"And? I'm searching for the problem."

Ignoring the comment, Tess swept a crumb off the counter and into her palm. "There was something about him."

"Now we're talking."

"No, I meant something different. When I looked into his eyes, even for a brief second, I saw a flash, a spark." She carried the crumb to the trashcan and dusted her hands.

"He felt something for you." Could her friend be any more excited?

"That's not what I'm talking about." Tess sighed. "It's hard to explain but I would swear the man isn't just your ordinary, everyday building contractor."

"Ah, the plot thickens. You agreed to Saturday night because you want to find out what's behind the man. It has nothing to do with the money. God knows, you give more of that away in a week than Ed and I will ever see in a year." Belinda pressed one hip against the counter. "No, this isn't about money at all. This is about your own curiosity."

Tess patted her hair. "You really need to do something about that imagination of yours. Now let's go."

"Go where?"

"Shopping." She suddenly felt a strong desire to find just the perfect little dress.

* * * * *

Jaxon crossed his legs at the ankles and shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not wearing that, Sadie. Harry, you might as well call off your wife. I'm not wearing that..." he pointed with one long, tanned finger toward the outfit adorning his bed, "to a dinner that I don't intend on staying at for longer than it takes to make it through the first course."

The lie came out easily enough but he figured it wasn't anyone's business if dinner segued into bacon and eggs the next morning.

Sadie, a stalwart woman with bushy blonde hair and laughing green eyes, inserted herself in between her husband and Jaxon, pointing a bony finger square in the center of the latter's chest. "Now you listen to me, Jaxon Richards, you're about to spend an evening with a true lady and the last thing you need to do is screw this up."

Jaxon arched an eyebrow and aimed a look at his best friend, which was a clear warning. Make his wife heel, if that was indeed possible. "Screw what up? A meal? Sadie, I know how to hold a fork and make polite conversation, even if it is with a first-class snob." *An incredibly beautiful, delicious snob.*

"You don't even know her. How can you classify her as a snob?"

"Well, let me think." Jaxon snapped his fingers. "Oh yeah, could it possibly have anything to do with her mannerisms, her money and let's not forget the damned expensive car she drove away from the auction in?" He wondered what she wore underneath that prim suit. Would she be wearing lace or serviceable underwear? Did she have a spark of rebel in her or was she pure class all the way?

"Says he with the sports car that costs more than Harry and I make in ten years," Sadie returned smartly.

"It was a gift," Jaxon hedged. Not exactly the entire truth but an easier defense than telling his friends he'd had a little magical help.

Harry's attention traveled to another part of the conversation as he sidled up closer to his wife. "You watched her leave the auction?"

Good God. Did his friend miss anything? "No. She just happened to be leaving at the same time I was."

"Hmm." Harry traded looks with his wife. Looks which irritated Jaxon.

He swept the black trousers from the bed and pushed the blue silk shirt over to the edge before he sat down. "I'll choose my own clothes, thank you, and for that matter I don't even know why you're here, Sadie."

"Harry called me. Thought you could use a little help with your wardrobe."

His gaze dropping, Harry fidgeted with his hands. "Well, when you told me you were going to wear jeans and a T-shirt, I just thought Sadie might be able to help."

Jaxon's teeth snapped together. "If I had wanted anyone's help, I certainly would have asked for it. But I've been dressing myself for years now and amazingly I've managed to make it without drawing too much attention to myself."

"Honey," Sadie placed a hand on one muscular forearm, "you'd draw attention no matter what you wore. You're probably just oblivious to it by now."

Ignoring the comment, Jaxon strode toward his closet. "If the two of you will excuse me, I have a date to get ready for. A date for which Ms. Montgomery paid good money. I wouldn't want to let her down." He gave his friends time to excuse themselves and with a quick brush of his eyes down his long length, he was dressed and ready to go.

Snatching the keys to his car, he headed out into the humid night. To all appearances, he was a normal man en route to a date with a beautiful brunette. But to the glittering silver eyes that followed him, he was playing a dangerous game in a mortal world—a world to which he didn't belong.

Jaxon didn't need to look into his rearview mirror to know he was no longer alone in the vehicle. "I didn't hear you join me."

The seat rustled beneath the man's figure. "Perhaps that is because you were too busy concentrating on this woman you are in such a hurry to meet."

"Perhaps." Jaxon switched on the radio. The tinny strains of a steel guitar pelted the air.

"You are not going to be able to hide behind this façade you have created for yourself much longer."

"It's not a façade. It's my life."

A large hand settled over his shoulder, squeezed. "No, it is not and soon, very soon, I am afraid that fact is going to become very much evident."

Jaxon didn't take his eyes off the road. "Go back to the others and tell them I'm fine."

"Your mother worries about you."

"My mother worries about me when I'm ten feet away from her."

"You are one of us, Jaxon."

"I know that." He sighed. "But for now I need this. Please tell them I need this space. I will return when I am needed there as I promised when I left."

"And if I were to tell you that you are needed now?"

"I would know you are lying and if there is one thing you are not, it is a liar." A smile crinkled the corners of Jaxon's eyes. "I have missed you, Falcon."

Sparks danced in the air and surrounded Jaxon's body. "You always know where to find me."

"And perhaps, after tonight, I will look you up." Jaxon heard the whisper of the wind and knew he was talking to the air. Falcon had disappeared, gone on an arc of lightning skating across the sky.

* * * * *

At promptly six fifty-five, the doorbell to Tess' palatial three-story home rang and she began to yank the hot rollers out of her hair with frantic abandon. At approximately six fifty-six, her housekeeper of ten years announced her visitor while the lady of the house was still trying to figure out if she really wanted to wear that dress she'd just bought. Was it too low-cut? Would Mr. Richards think she was trying to seduce him? Damn. When was the last time she'd had a date anyway?

Ten minutes later, she descended the staircase, wearing the dress and a reserved smile, for once nervous in her own home. "Mr. Richards, I apologize for keeping you waiting." She stopped short at the bottom of the staircase, staring openly at her date for the evening. She could suddenly think of a million and one reasons why she needed to hire a contractor—especially one who looked like Jaxon Richards.

She'd been expecting jeans, maybe a checkered shirt. Her assumptions weren't fair of course but her mind's view even had him wearing the tool belt to dinner. She was glad she'd been wrong.

He'd opted for black slacks, black sports coat and a white dress shirt that was open at the collar. His unruly brown hair curled over the top of his collar, windswept and wild. But it was his eyes that captured her attention. That heady combination of silver

and gold. Or maybe it was just her imagination because no man had silver and gold eyes. Maybe it was the light playing tricks on her. But she'd seen them on stage. They'd captivated her even then. Held her, warmed her. As they were doing now. But then she couldn't dwell on his eyes anymore because his sensual lips were tilting, moving upward into a semblance of a smile.

"There's no need to apologize. The time was well worth the wait." He held out his hand, taking hers. "You're a stunning woman, Ms. Montgomery." His eyes swept over her classically simple, black dress in a manner that made Tess want to run for the nearest closet.

"You have a magnificent house." His deep voice, a low, intoxicating growl, said otherwise. He thought it was a showcase to her wealth, Tess could read it in his eyes. Well, she refused to be embarrassed because she had more money than he did.

"Thank you." Head tilted high, she swept a hand regally toward the small alcove just off the kitchen. "I've had the chef prepare a light meal for the patio. September is the perfect time of the year to enjoy the grounds." She followed the sweep of her own hand with a glide, feet barely touching the floor.

The doors were open to the patio overlooking the garden, jasmine and honeysuckle scented the air. The candles were already lit although night had not yet fallen. With the birds chirping and the crickets just beginning their nightly serenade, the scene was set for seduction. Tess hadn't considered that possibility. But then she hadn't really had a part in the setting. Apparently certain members of her staff were playing matchmaker. She hated to disillusion them but...

Her pace quickening toward the table, she bent low to extinguish the candles. Jaxon's voice caught her. "Don't."

She straightened, looked at him over her shoulder. "Excuse me?"

"Leave the candles."

The imperious tone of his voice made her pause. Ordinarily she would have reacted immediately, standing up for herself. But this time was different. The voice held a command but his eyes were smiling at her and she felt her hand drop to her sides.

"As you are the guest, I'll be happy to leave the candles lit. I'm afraid my staff took it upon themselves to—" she broke off, uncertain as to how she should continue this vein of the conversation. Instinct was telling her to let him know that after this dinner, they would go their separate ways and that was that.

After watching her mother parade a long line of lovers through their house after her father's hasty departure, Tess had no interest in playing the role of a society wife while her husband enjoyed his hour-long lunches at the country club. Colleen Montgomery hadn't been the only woman glad to see her husband take off with his secretary.

Jaxon's laugh sent tingles down her spine. "You can relax, Tess. I didn't think for one minute you had played a part in arranging this atmosphere."

Tess wasn't sure whether or not she should be insulted. It would seem the man was a master at that. "You don't think I'd have the ability to arrange something like this?" And when had he started calling her Tess?

He moved around her and pulled out one of the cushioned wrought iron chairs. "Ability, yes. Inclination, no." He indicated the chair with his hand and she allowed her shoulders to relax a little as she settled herself into the plush cushion. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

As long as he continued to talk to her in that velvety tone of voice, he could ask her anything. "By all means."

"Why did you bid on me if you were so uncomfortable with the prospect of spending an evening with me?"

Tess wasn't quite ready to reveal the truth just yet. For now it gave her the upper hand. "What makes you think I'm uncomfortable?"

"Your hands are shaking and your eyes haven't met mine since the moment I walked in the door."

"Oh that." She dismissed her behavior with a slight laugh. "I've just never been relaxed around men I don't know. Surely in this day and age that would be understandable to you."

Jaxon relaxed his forearms on the glass-topped table. "You've been sheltered."

Tess bristled immediately. "Wealth isn't an automatic indication of barriers, Mr. Richards. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm naive."

"And sensitive." He smiled, a bright flash of white teeth. "And my name is Jaxon. Since I've already taken the liberty of calling you by your first name."

She looked down at her folded napkin, took her time, shaking out the folds and placing it carefully in her lap. "To be honest, I didn't bid on you. My friend did." She glanced up, saw she had caught his attention. Good. It was time for him to be at the disadvantage for a while.

"So why am I with you and not with your friend?"

"Because she bid for me. On my behalf." Tess felt herself beginning to fumble, her perfect manners escaping her. "That is, on my behalf but without my knowledge or consent. Belinda thought she was helping." When had she gotten so nervous? And why was it so hot out here all of a sudden?

"Helping how?" His voice dipped low, a sexy accent to the evening. The lights from the candles played across the hard lines of his face and she felt the perspiration slide down her back, between her shoulder blades. The man was dangerously sexy. Tess tried to focus on their differences, how far apart their worlds were, but there was something about Jaxon Richards, something different. When she looked at him, she didn't see a common laborer. She saw a man who was comfortably fitting into her world, a man who wasn't awed by the trappings of wealth. That, more than anything, was starting to unnerve her.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter." Tess shot a glance toward the kitchen and wondered what was taking the housekeeper so long to bring the food. Surely the woman could hear her silent desperation. She needed a distraction, a way to escape.

Jaxon relaxed back against the iron contours of the chair, smiling. "Your friend thinks you need to get out more."

She lifted her gaze. Had she spoken aloud? How could he possibly know that? It didn't matter. She wasn't about to admit to anything. "I date as much as I want to, Mr. Richards. I stay busy and have little time for a social life."

"Are you determined not to call me by my first name?"

"What's the point? After tonight, we won't see one another again."

"And you're sure of that?"

Her mouth went dry. "Aren't you?"

The slow shake of his head unnerved her. "No."

Butterflies were mating in her stomach. "Well, you should be. This is for one night only."

"A lot can happen in a night."

Didn't she know it? Already, her mind was busily conjuring up images of his long frame sprawled across her bed, the candlelight fluttering beneath the whirl of the ceiling fan. "Not this night."

One eyebrow lifted. "You sound scared."

Her spine stiffened. "I'm not now, nor have I ever been, scared of a man."

"What about being scared of how I make you feel? Isn't that different?"

Jesus. She crossed her legs and scooted further back in the chair. "You like to make assumptions about people, don't you? Is that a hobby?"

"You might be surprised to find out my hobbies, Tess." His long fingers curled around the stem of the wine glass.

"I think, perhaps, we should change the subject, talk about something innocuous."

He smiled at her, a breathtaking curl of his lips that made her nipples harden. "Why? Does intimate conversation bother you?"

"Arrogant men bother me more."

"Is that what I am then? Arrogant?" His laughter filtered into the night air and for a brief moment the crickets ceased their chirping.

"That and a few other adjectives, I'd imagine."

"Why don't you share a few?"

She watched him as he poured a glass of wine and her spine tingled. He made such a simple task sexy. Releasing a breath, she leaned back in the chair and came to terms with what she was feeling at the moment. Jaxon Richards had managed to do something that few men in the past ten years had been able to do. He had intrigued her.

"Because not all of them will be as nice as arrogant."

Surprising her, he reached his hand across the table and captured her fingers. "I wasn't the only one up on that stage when the flames ignited."

Her breath whooshed out of her lungs. He'd felt it too. Damn. "Undoubtedly it's not the first time you've ever been attracted to a woman. I know it certainly isn't the first time I've been attracted to a man." Although never one quite like this one.

His thumb caressed her knuckles. "Is that all you think it is? Attraction?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Mr. Richards, are you trying to seduce me?"

"And if I am?"

"You're wasting your breath."

Those silver orbs blinked at her, enticing her. "So sit there and tell me you don't feel a thing, Tess." He pushed the chair back and stood. "Tell me you didn't feel it when I kissed you the first time."

She couldn't breathe. Had she forgotten how? He was coming around to her side of the table. "Look, I think you must have gotten the wrong impression..."

He captured her hand and gently eased her to her feet. "I'm not very hungry right now. Are you?"

She should say she was starved, demand that he release her and return to his seat. But for some reason, one she couldn't possibly fathom, her head began to shake in negative gesture.

"Then perhaps we should wait."

The deep timbre of his voice made her pussy clench. A sharp thrust of need climbed upward and settled around her heart. How long had it been since she'd been with a man, allowed herself the luxury of breathing in his scent, feeling his arms close around her body? Would it be so terribly wrong to allow this man to be the one who finally broke her long sojourn from sex?

He began to guide her away from the table and toward the patio doors and she had the answer to her question.

Chapter Two

"Dance with me." His voice reached out to her the moment they reached the den, a command wrapped in velvet. Once more, Tess found herself obeying, slipping into his arms and the role of the protected woman as easily as she turned on a light switch.

"How do you do that?" she whispered.

"Do what?" Jaxon's hand slipped to the small of her back. His fingers splayed across the bare skin uncovered by the open material of her dress.

She shivered in spite of the warmth their bodies generated. Could a person really burn from the inside out? When had she felt so alive...so uninhibited? "I'm not sure I even remember what I was saying."

"Just relax and allow yourself to feel the music. It'll become part of you." He moved around the room, his steps sure, accustomed to the nuances of the dance. He pressed her hand against his chest, allowed her to feel the beat of his heart beneath her palm.

"This makes me nervous." The words slipped out before she could stop them and Jaxon tipped her head back to smile down into her upturned face.

"There's no need to be nervous."

"I think there is."

The smile broadened. "You don't like to remain quiet, do you?" Without giving her a chance to respond, he tucked her head against his shoulder and continued the dance, moving in intimate combination with her body.

Tess felt her breasts brush his chest and a warm glow started in her abdomen. His warm breath bathed her cheeks, whispered close to her ear and she closed her eyes before she could betray her emotions. How long had it been since she'd been this close to a man and actually felt something? Something like this. She wasn't even sure what "this" was. She couldn't remember and with Jaxon's hand settling on her hip, she couldn't think.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea." She needed distance to clear her head. His spell surrounded her, held her in a web she couldn't break in his arms. And the longer she stayed in his embrace, the easier it would be to give into that inner voice telling her it was okay to give in, okay to just allow herself one night – with no strings attached.

But could she really do that? She'd never had a one-night stand before. They just weren't her style but now, with this man so close she could breathe in the scent of his skin, she desperately wanted to.

Jaxon pulled back enough to place a finger against her lips. "Don't talk. Just feel."

He didn't need to instruct her there. She was doing plenty of feeling. Too much feeling as a matter of fact. And feeling was where danger set in. She tried to pull back

away from him but Jaxon's hold was too powerful. And it was more than just his arms. It was his essence. With just the whisper of his voice, he held her. How could he know she didn't really want to leave, that any effort she made to leave his embrace was just a token response to her fears?

The soothing strains of the love song enveloped them, wrapping them in a potent intimacy. Then, with two fingers, Jaxon tipped her face upward and Tess lost the battle even before war was declared. His lips brushed hers once, twice and her knees went weak.

Jaxon held her face in his hands, raised his lips to her forehead and kissed her gently. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Her eyes went wide. Beautiful? The one word caressed her more than a touch. She couldn't speak.

He cleared his throat. "I'd better leave."

"It's only nine o'clock." She didn't know what had sparked the protest.

"If I stay, we won't dance." The warning came through loud and clear.

The moment of truth. Common sense told her to escort him to the door but listening to that always sent her to bed alone. Tonight would be different. She only had to say the words. "Stay anyway," she whispered, her heart beating loudly against her breastbone.

One hand tangled in her hair. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" His eyes burned into hers and excitement leapfrogged up and down her spine.

Was there any way she couldn't understand? She saw everything in his eyes, read the heat that matched her own and the dark promise that made her stomach quiver. "Yes."

He yanked her closer, pulling her hard against his body, allowing her to feel the thick ridge of his cock pressing against her abdomen. "If I stay with you now, there will be no further conversation. No wine. No soft music and candlelight. I want to feel every inch of your body, to taste the sweetness of your skin and hear you come again and again until you're too exhausted to move. And then I want to start all over."

If he said the words to shock her, he was sadly mistaken. Instead the declaration set off an explosive inferno inside her. Every nerve ending tingled. Her panties were soaked just from his nearness and when his hands climbed up the base of her spine to splay across her back, her nipples peaked against his chest.

"Then do it," she commanded, convincing herself she was ready for anything.

Perhaps she'd been wrong. For her words caused a look of such raw hunger in Jaxon's eyes that for a brief moment she was certain she'd unleashed a wild animal. But it was too late to cage him.

He didn't give her a chance to change her mind. One arm became a steel band that held her securely against his body. His hand cupped the back of her head. He leaned in close to her for a long moment, his lips hovering over hers as if to give her time to absorb the impact of the moment.

But Tess didn't want time. Standing on tiptoe, she closed the distance, fisting her hands in the softness of his shirt. "Come with me." Backing away, she took hold of his hands and began to lead him down the hallway, away from the seduction of the living room and into the darkness of her bedroom.

Heat swarmed, growing from within, engulfing them in its feverish walls. Was Jaxon drawing her to him in some way? Was this some type of hypnosis? She tried to explain away the magnetism but there was a strong connection she couldn't decipher. She felt herself swaying toward him, sinking under his spell.

Jaxon backed her toward the bed, his fingers lightly grasping her hips and she didn't think about pushing him away or stopping him. Everything seemed magical. Powerful. Every sound was enhanced, every scent more exotic, each touch more intense.

Her hand glided over his cheek. "We may regret this in the morning."

"I don't regret anything I do, Tess." His hands came up to frame her face. "And there's no way in hell I'll regret this."

Her pussy began to throb, beating in unison with her heart. And in that moment she was lost. She didn't think about the repercussions or what would happen once they'd made love. She only saw the promise of tonight in Jaxon's eyes and for now that would have to be enough.

"If you want to stop, Tess, you need to tell me now." The heat of his hands burned her skin and his head dipped lower, his lips caressing her cheek. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes." The whisper was barely audible but it was all the compliance Jaxon needed. He guided her one more step toward the bed, his eyes holding hers and in those silver-gold depths, Tess began to drown. His hand swept over her face. "Close your eyes. Enjoy each sensation."

She did as instructed, her teeth nibbling her lower lips. Her nipples peaked, pushing against the slinky black dress. The rustle of his black slacks as he moved made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up and the woodsy male scent of his skin intoxicated her. Then she felt the mattress against the back of her legs before Jaxon slowly lowered her.

She caught her breath and held it but didn't open her eyes, not even when the dress slid off her body. The cool air washed over her skin, pebbling her nipples further. And for a long, agonizing moment, nothing happened. Her heart began to rap against the wall of her chest.

Then he touched her. His fingertips stroked the line of her jaw, the length of her neck and she began to draw shallow breaths. Those wicked fingers crawled down between her breasts, tiptoed down to her abdomen and tickled her bikini line, just above the lacy top of her panties.

Drowning, she clenched her hands atop the comforter. The wispy material covering her pussy gave way beneath the tug of his hand and Tess felt exposed and deliciously sexy. This was crazy. Unimaginable. Decadent. And she didn't want it to stop.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" The heated words spilled over her and for a moment her eyes flickered. "Uh-uh-uh. Closed, remember? It enhances the pleasure."

That she could believe. The lips of her pussy quivered and a drop of moisture seeped out of the crease.

"So perfect," Jaxon began to caress the fullness of her lips, absorbing the slickness of her juices. "I've never wanted to make love to a woman as much as I do you."

She moaned. The man was pure sex, each word a seduction, each move intended to send her spiraling into the sweet oblivion of orgasm. His warmth left her for a brief moment but she kept her eyes shut while he undressed, hearing every sound, using her imagination to paint a vivid picture of his perfection.

His palm swept over her from her neck to just below her bellybutton and she quivered, anticipation building to a pounding crescendo. For a second, he left her again and she resisted the urge to open her eyes. She heard the clink of his belt as it hit the floor and the whoosh of his slacks. Her heartbeat accelerated.

He would be naked now, all corded muscle and perfect skin. His knee dipped the mattress as he returned to her, brushing butterfly kisses over her neck and collarbone. With her eyes closed, she was awash in a sea of sensations. His fingertips lightly pinched her nipples before his lips soothed away the sting. She felt the rasp of his cheek against the side of her breast.

And then a different kind of touch. The breath snagged in her throat as she recognized the warm strokes. He rubbed her thighs with the head of his cock, circling the skin in tantalizing spirals. Working his way up, he straddled her thighs and caressed her bellybutton with his thickness.

Tess bit her lower lip to keep from screaming. The heat and hardness of his cock came closer, sliding in between her breasts. She plumped the mounds and Jaxon began to rock, pumping in and out of the valley.

"Now open your eyes," he commanded in a guttural voice. "See what you do to me."

Following the dictate, she caught sight of the beauty of his cock, thick veins, smooth skin with a drop of moisture clinging to the slit which seemed to grow wider before her eyes.

She opened her mouth to speak but he pressed his finger against her lips. "No words," he whispered, beginning to slide back down her body, rubbing his cock over every inch of her skin, taking his time.

"Are you wet for me?"

The erotic words made her heart skip a beat and she couldn't answer, but then she didn't need to. For his fingers slipped between the lips of her pussy to check for himself.

"Oh yeah. You're wet."

The feel of his hard fingers sinking deep into her channel, stretching her flesh made her hips arch off the bed. Her body begged for his, her pussy weeping with need.

The moon lit the room with a gentle glow, allowing Jaxon to see every inch of her glorious body. When had he last seen such a treasure? Her beauty as perfect as the most exquisite of statues. He'd traveled the world but had never been so enraptured by one woman and never so quickly. His cock hardened even more, testing his control.

"I want to taste you," he whispered. She swallowed and the delicate skin at the base of her throat drew his gaze.

She couldn't move, didn't want to move. His fingers were a gentle brush, gliding over her skin, her abdomen, drifting lower to the slim line of hair covering her cleft. She shivered and her breath souged out of her lungs in a desperate bid for release.

She didn't hear a sound except for the whisper of skin on skin. Biting her lower lip, she clenched her hands into fists.

"Are your eyes still closed?" Her scent reached out to him, a heady combination of musk and pure woman.

"Yes." Why was he asking her to talk? She could barely think.

His lips began a tantalizing journey up her thigh. She tried to keep from moaning but heat exploded in her abdomen and she whispered a word. Just one word. Jaxon.

Nimble fingers brushed over her mound and she arched her back. How long had it been since a man had touched her there?

"Open your legs wider."

She followed the instruction without hesitation, widening the gap between her thighs. The tip of his index finger found her clit easily, the roughness contrasting sharply with the sensitive nub. She let out a long moan and flattened her palms against the comforter. Common sense might have left her, but tonight she would enjoy each touch, each whisper and each sigh.

His index finger moved lower, sinking within the depths of her sheath and Tess pushed back upward against the pressure, whispering her approval. His thumb continued the assault on her clit and little pleas escaped her throat. The heat of his palms imprinted her flesh as he trailed kisses over her abdomen, the tops of her thighs, before his moist breath bathed her pussy. She craved the slickness of his tongue sweeping over her clit and laving the insides of her sheath. Her hands bunched and she waited for that first sensual attack.

When he touched her, her body came alive. The shock of the intimate kiss, coupled with the anticipation of the moment, wrung a cry from the depths of her soul. She dug her heels into the bed and lifted her hips. His hands cupped her ass and held her closer, allowing him to leisurely stroke her slit.

"Oh yes. Oh yes," she moaned. "Like that. Right there."

She bucked against his face while his tongue swirled over her clit. His teeth nibbled the sensitive skin while he worked two fingers inside her. The room filled with the sounds of her soft pants.

He pushed his face into her pussy, wildly stroking and sucking her. He couldn't get enough of her taste. Wanted more. He knew that with each stroke he was losing ground. She was already reaching out to him. Claiming more of him than he'd ever given before.

And when she came, fragmenting, screaming his name, he knew he'd give her whatever she asked for. He slid up the perfect length of her body, loving the feel of her breasts pressed against his chest. "You're so beautiful." Had he already said that? He couldn't think.

"I can't wait," she managed to whisper before she reached for him, dragging his face down to hers. Lips collided and the kiss was raw, hungry and like a starving woman reaching for a piece of bread, Tess fell into it, her hands cupping his face. In the far reaches of her mind, where common sense still resided, she knew she should put a stop to this wild, desperate longing but common sense had been cast aside, walked on by emotions much more powerful and controlling.

Her blood turned to a rich, thick liquid, moving languorously through her veins, humming in her ears. Jaxon's hands moved against her bare skin, drifting over the tops of her breasts and her pulse thrummed, jumping against her neck.

He dipped his head and pressed a kiss against her bare abdomen, causing her breath to hiss out from between her teeth. His hands lifted her hips, drawing her body closer to the devastating scrape of his teeth on her exposed skin.

"Tess, open your eyes now."

She obeyed instantly, opening her eyes to find him rising over her, rolling a condom over the glistening head of his cock before allowing it to barely touch the top of her pussy.

Shivers of anticipation darted down her spine. He was sheer perfection, almost godlike and she would have him, would know what it felt like to feel his hard length invading her body. She lowered her hand, bumping it against his cock before dipping her fingertips between the swollen lips of her slit, dampening them with her own juices. "What are you waiting for, Jaxon?" Feeling wanton and sexy, she brought the digits to her mouth and licked each one.

His eyes darkened and his breath whooshed out of his lungs. His hands cupped the backs of her thighs. "You're teasing the wrong man." He yanked the lower half of her body almost off the bed, forcing the petals of her sheath against his cock.

Tess held her breath as Jaxon began to push into her wetness. She whispered his name as her pussy accepted every inch of his length. He rocked his hips forward and a scream burst from her throat.

His eyes closed and he grew still, holding her aloft. "I knew it would feel like this. Perfect."

Her feet pressed into the mattress. "Fuck me, Jaxon."

The silvery orbs feasted on her face once again. "I thought you'd never ask."

The movement was slow at first, meant to tantalize and tease, but Tess began to pump her hips in time with his thrusts. His fingers dug into her flesh and he lowered his head to kiss her abdomen while he fucked her.

She felt him everywhere. The brush of his balls against her cheeks. The smooth silk of his cock stroking the walls of her sheath. The warmth of his lips against her bellybutton and the dance of his tongue inside that indentation. She was close to coming again but she wanted more. She wanted to feel his whole body atop hers, pressing, pushing until their eyes met when she climaxed.

"Jaxon, please," she whispered.

He raised his head. "Am I not already pleasing you?" His breaths came in short pants.

"I want all of you on top of me."

He didn't hesitate to obey. Sliding her further atop the mattress, he kept pace inside her as he covered her. She hooked her legs around his hips, the soles of her feet against his ass.

"That's it." She rewarded him with a kiss, dragging his lips down to hers to taste her own wild essence. Her tongue swirled against his and Jaxon groaned against her lips. She clenched her pelvic muscles and he broke the kiss to curse.

"Fuck," he muttered, lowering his hands to squeeze the globes of her ass. "I want to hear you scream again, Tess." He began to pump harder.

She tightened her muscles again and watched his eyes glaze. Her hands wandered everywhere, over his spine, his shoulders and up into the thickness of his hair. "You first," she finally responded.

His head fell into the curve of her neck and he began to pump faster, making little noises of excitement. "Oh yeah. Oh yeah." The refrain became unrelenting and then he threw back his head and groaned while spasms rocked his body.

Tess squeezed her pussy tightly and milked him while he jerked atop her. Perspiration coated his skin and she touched her tongue to the saltiness. It had been a long time since she'd felt like this. Sexy. Alive. Wanted.

Her lips nuzzled his cheek before traveling down to his jaw. He mumbled something unintelligible and turned to catch a kiss.

Jaxon knew he would never tire of fucking her but beyond that, he would never tire of hearing her voice, of tasting her, seeing her eyes come alive when he pushed into her. Like now. The way she caught her breath drove him wild and her teeth worrying her lower lip nearly sent him over the edge again, but he would wait. This night would last forever. He would make sure of it.

* * * * *

"What were you thinking? You cannot be with that woman. Do you not understand that you are placing her life in danger? How could you place your own desires over what is best for her?" The words spewed forth like volatile darts as the white-haired man whipped around the room, his silver eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

"Have I taught you nothing? Had I known this was your intention, I would have turned that car around myself last night. A meal. That was all it was supposed to be and, up until now, you've managed to enjoy female companionship without complicating things." He stopped long enough to point a gnarled finger. "And I can assure you this complicates things."

Jaxon leaned one hip against the corner of the rickety table, which fit in with the dilapidated surroundings of the abandoned warehouse and simply smiled at his friend and mentor. "You are getting yourself worked up for nothing, Falcon. You know I would never allow anyone I know to be harmed."

"That is not always your choice to make," the wizard shouted, whirling and darting around the area until his body became a blur. But even then Jaxon could see him, could read the tension in every muscle and sinew of Falcon's massive frame.

"If you will alight for one second, perhaps we can have a normal conversation, one that does not entail my head whipping back and forth to keep time with your aerial pacing."

Falcon lowered his feet to the floor, tapping one foot against the concrete. His bushy white hair stood even taller on top of his head. "Where have I gone wrong with you? Have you not listened to me all these years, my boy? Have you not understood what I have tried to tell you? If you had been following your head instead of your heart, you would still be with your family where you belong and we would not be standing on the precipice of disaster."

Jaxon pushed himself away from the table and walked toward one of the floor-length windows that allowed light into the warehouse. Why his friend chose to make his home inside a dank, drafty, old warehouse when he returned to Earth, he would never understand.

"I have listened, Falcon, but I also have to lead my own life." Especially now. He'd found her. The woman who would change his life. It had only taken one look into those ocean blue eyes, one taste of her lips to know. Last night, when he sank into her heat, his heart had claimed her as his own. It was only the beginning and he'd be damned if he'd let the dictates of the Assembly stand in his way. "You cannot seriously believe one night is a prelude to danger."

Falcon zoomed in closer, coming to stand in front of his charge. "Really? Did you not think of what could happen were she to become pregnant?"

"Well, I'm glad to know that you left during the actual show. If you must know, we used protection."

The reassurance didn't erase the dark frown from the elder wizard's face. "But what of the other problems? This woman has money, prestige. She is well known in the

community. Should you spend more time with her, your odds of being discovered increase. You could place yourself, the both of you in extreme danger. And this woman will be taken, questioned, picked apart by those people who do not understand us. Why do you think we do not associate with others who are not our kind, Jaxon? We watch over them and protect them from afar but we do not get involved in their lives. We simply cannot take the risk of the uninformed catching a glimpse of our power."

"And when was the last time one of us got caught, Falcon? You know we cannot be defeated. Centuries have passed and we are still alive and well."

Falcon ran his hands over his face and cursed in an ancient language. "That is not an excuse to put yourself on display, flaunting yourself in front of these people who would not understand you if they knew the truth!" The shout rattled the tin roof but Jaxon didn't back down.

"I have made friends in this world. I have chosen to live among them. To them, I am a normal male. I have even stripped myself of the trappings of wealth, save my car, so as to attract less attention. Do not tell me I am flaunting myself."

"And the auction? What was that?"

Jaxon felt the color race up his cheeks. "That was a friend's way of matchmaking." He grinned. "And he did not do too bad of a job."

Falcon's bushy brows lowered in a scowl. "Do you even hear what you are saying? This woman will not fit in your world. She would never understand your power, your very existence. You have chosen to live among the mortals and the Assembly has accepted that but we cannot and will not accept your intention to bring a mortal into our realms. It would not work."

Shifting from one foot to the other, Jaxon surveyed his mentor, the one wizard who understood him more than all the others. "Have I mentioned anything about bringing her into our realms?"

"No, you have not, but tell me you do not feel the connection to her now that you've lain with her? She is like a drug in your system now. The addiction has begun. I have long told you of the power women possess." He blew out a breath. "Perhaps I should have warned you more about mortal women."

"Is there that much of a difference between our women and the women of Earth, other than their mortality and our power?"

Falcon resumed his pacing. "You already know the answer to that. A mortal woman cannot protect herself against the unforeseen enemy."

"She does not need to protect herself. I am more than capable of doing that."

"So now you are speaking of watching over her, caring for her." He shook his head almost sadly. "I assumed that once you did decide to take a wife, you would choose from another Guild, another wizard."

"We have not spoken of marriage." Though Jaxon couldn't deny that Tess had intoxicated him and he wasn't so sure he wanted to fight the addiction.

"Tell me then you can walk away from her, that you will not see her again."

Jaxon folded his arms. "I will see her again."

For a brief moment the tension climbed, escalated until muscles were bunched and eyes locked in a quiet duel but centuries of respect for his mentor had Jaxon lowering his eyes, looking away from the compelling plea he saw there. "Do not ask me not to see her again. For once, I have met someone who captivates me. She feels me."

"She feels something but she does not know or understand what it is. Do you really think it would be fair to bring her into your life?"

"Do you really think I can do otherwise now?"

"You have a choice."

"She touches me." Jaxon placed his hand over his heart. "Here, deep inside. I have never felt this feeling before."

The elder wizard sighed with some defeat. "And you are so sure she will stay after she learns the truth?"

Jaxon shrugged slightly. "It is a chance I am willing to take."

Falcon caught hold of his arm as he tried to walk away. "Jaxon, do you understand what will happen if this woman finds out the truth about you and decides to leave? We cannot allow her to keep those memories. Nor her friends or anyone around her."

"I understand."

"She is a mortal." The reminder was spit out from between clenched teeth.

"Of that, I am very much aware but I have chosen to live among the mortals, Falcon. I will follow the bidding of the Assembly when it is required. I do not use my abilities for personal gain, nor to hurt anyone. I have chosen to live my life in a way which best suits me. I had hoped the Assembly would one day understand my reasoning."

Shaking his head, Falcon abruptly released Jaxon's arm. "It is not that we do not understand. It is that we fear for the safety of the mortals with whom you associate. We do our best to protect them, to protect our friends but while our powers are immeasurable, even we cannot be everywhere at once. You leave this woman open to possible harm when you are not with her."

The words caused a slight stirring of unease before Jaxon shook it away. He could protect Tess. He would protect her. "And you would ask me to just stop seeing her."

"I feel I have no other choice."

"Is this coming from you or from the Assembly?"

"Does it need to come from the Assembly to make it law?"

Jaxon stiffened. "I will not follow dictates when it comes to my heart."

Falcon grumbled below his breath and shot a hand out from his side. Sparks dazzled in the air, sizzled before dissipating. Jaxon had long known his mentor's propensity to theatrical displays of temper. Even now, with centuries of knowledge and

wisdom, the older wizard could throw a temper tantrum better than any two-year-old. "We will discuss this at a later date when you have had time to consider what you might be doing to this woman's life."

"I have already considered, my friend." With a wave of his hand, Jaxon was gone, leaving the old wizard alone.

* * * * *

"I can't believe you slept with him." Belinda sat back against the love seat, her eyes rounded with wonder. "Well, I mean I can believe it but...wow."

"I couldn't believe it either until I woke up this morning and found the note he left me. I think I'm still in shock." Closing her eyes, Tess sighed. "It was the most amazing night of my life."

Belle made a gulping noise. "That is so romantic."

"It was wild," Tess corrected. And hot.

"He sounds magical."

Tess curled her feet beneath her and nodded. "You took the words right out of my mouth."

"And he said he would see you again?"

"That's what he said in the note but here's the thing, he didn't say when and when I called directory assistance, he wasn't listed. So I have no way of getting in contact with him."

"You wouldn't call him anyway." Belinda paused. "Then again, I didn't think you'd sleep with him either. He must have really done a number on you to get through those concrete walls of yours."

"I'm beginning to think he doesn't really exist. I mean the man was, well, I can't explain it. He took my breath away and no man has ever done that before." Tess propped her chin in her hands and stared at the logs stacked inside the fireplace. The image of silver-gold eyes filled her mind and she couldn't will away the vision any more than she could the memories of his touch, his scent, his very existence.

"Wow," Belinda extolled again. "It doesn't sound like you'll be forgetting him anytime soon." Her double chin bobbed in time with her head. "You'll see him again. I just know it. I feel it in my heart."

"Belle, there's something different about him." Something she couldn't explain, even to herself. Being with Jaxon was like walking on a high wire without a safety net. But the element of danger didn't overshadow her desire to be with him. Even now she craved him, wanted to feel him again. No man had ever touched her in quite the same way.

"I'll say." Belinda tipped back a bottle of soda, took a long slurp and then lowered it, cupping it in her hands. "And just think. You have me to thank for this." She jumped

a little when the lights in the room flickered. "Hey, it's not storming out there, is it? I swear, you couldn't hear a cannon shot inside this house."

Pushing herself to her feet, she ambled toward the window to inspect the elements. "The wind's picking up. I'd better be getting home before Ed starts to worry. I told him I wouldn't stay long." Returning to Tess' side, she kissed her cheek. "Call me if Bachelor Number Four calls you. I mean immediately. Right after. Understand? God, this is better than a steamy romance novel."

Tess smiled and escorted her to the door, partially walking on air. But for her own sanity, she managed to reply in a slightly droll tone of voice. "Don't let your imagination get carried away with you. Jaxon Richards is just a man with an intriguing personality." And a touch finer than a master violinist's.

"Yeah, and my size sixteen body is just an illusion." Belinda rolled her eyes and tugged open the door. "I'll pray he'll call tonight."

Tess shoved her out the door. "Good night."

Waving her fingers over her shoulder, Belinda dashed through the sprinkling rain toward the battered pickup truck her husband Ed used for his plumbing business.

Tess closed the door and leaned against the solid wood, a smile playing about her lips. An intriguing man? She laughed in the quiet of the room. If Belinda only knew...

Maybe Jaxon was just a figment of her imagination. No real man could whip her body into a frenzy of desire and need simply by whispering to her...at least she hadn't thought so. And with every touch, he'd become more and more real.

She tried to move away from the door and found her legs wouldn't cooperate. Her palms were damp, her respirations quick and uneven. Her eyelids drifted down, rested against her cheekbones. He was with her now. She couldn't understand it, couldn't explain it but she could feel him. Could even smell the scent of his cologne. Her body warmed, pressed toward the hard wood.

Warm wet lips moved along the line of her throat, drifted down to the pulse beating strong beneath her skin. *This isn't happening!* Yet trying to convince herself was futile. Her head bumped against the door, falling back to allow soft kisses to bathe her neck.

Her hands clenched into fists as invisible fingers caught the zipper of her jeans and began to tug it downward. She could only stare as the denim material opened and her panties became visible. She didn't need to move.

Though she was totally alone, she felt the brush of his body against hers, the heat of his skin. Phantom hands took hold of her jeans and pushed them down her hips along with her panties.

The coolness of the wood against her ass startled her and Tess lurched forward, meeting a resistance she couldn't see. "What's going on?"

Silence was the only reply and, as invisible hands traveled over the flat expanse of her abdomen, lower and lower, her teeth sank into her lower lip. *I'm going insane.*

A soft wind began to stir her hair, lifting it from her shoulders, confirming Tess' belief in her own lack of sanity. No windows or doors were open. She was having a daydream. That was the only explanation.

Calloused fingertips took hold of her hand and she jerked in surprise, crying out and trying to loosen the hold. "Jaxon, is this you? You have to say something because I'm feeling a little bit crazy right now. I have to know!"

"Shhhh." The whisper filtered through the air, offering reassurance.

The panic subsided. Tess stifled a nervous giggle. "Oh my God. I'm imagining you."

Her own hand moved without her permission, reaching between her legs and as Tess' fingertips parted the lips of her pussy, she sucked in a sharp breath. She hadn't intended to touch herself but he was guiding her, urging her on. As much as it didn't make sense, it was the only explanation she had.

She closed her eyes and circled her clit with her index finger. An unspoken command pushed her to the floor. She dropped to her knees, her finger still moving across her clit with slow, languorous strokes.

Those same unseen hands urged her backward, adjusting her hips and her thighs as if to set the stage for a perfect viewing. Tess was beyond caring now. Her body had heated to an unbearable level and all she could think about was the orgasm waiting for her.

She slid three fingers of her left hand deep inside the opening of her body. Her pussy contracted around the digits and she moaned low in her throat, arching off the floor.

Something gripped her hand and for a brief moment Tess was sure she'd seen the outline of fingers. The thought should have sent her racing up the stairs to seek the sanctuary of her bedroom. Instead she simply lay there, watching her hand being guided to her mouth. The scent of sex reached her nostrils and a warmth much like the caress of a palm, brushed over her cheek.

Instinctually she parted her lips and licked the moisture from her fingertips, tasting the salty musk of her body's own juices. She shivered a little before lowering her hand back down to her pussy.

Though no words were spoken, she knew every action she was supposed to take and followed every silent dictate. Pinching her clit with just the lightest amount of pressure, Tess sighed with pleasure. Her nerves extremely sensitized, she tossed her head left and right, arching her back as the sensations intensified.

"Jaxon, if you're really here, if you can hear me, touch me."

Jaxon didn't need a second invitation. He'd been watching and waiting long enough until the thick flesh between his legs had grown so painfully hard, he knew explosion was imminent. Keeping his presence cloaked, he took his own pleasure by sliding his finger between the plump petals of her pussy.

Her clit was swollen and if he pressed his thumb against it, he was sure he would be able to feel the blood throbbing beneath its pink hood. Tess began to whimper, her back lifting off the floor to push against his fingers in silent urgency.

He had to taste her. The need compelled him to slide down the length of her body, allowing her to feel just the barest brush of his skin. When his hands abandoned her pussy, she protested but he gripped her hips, reassuring her he hadn't gone anywhere.

The sweet smell of womanflesh reached out to him, drawing him closer. His mouth hovered over her mound for several seconds, blowing soft puffs of air over the puckered lips.

Tess gasped and reached into the air but her hands came up empty. She could only feel what he would allow her to feel. And for now he wanted her to feel his lips, his tongue savoring the delicious flavor of her creamy pussy.

He lowered his head, his tongue moving around her clit with sensual strokes before his teeth nibbled her pink flesh ever-so gently. She moaned his name, her palms slapping against the polished wooden floor.

His hands held her thighs open while his tongue worked up and down the slick valley, drinking her juice and lavishing her with hot, wet strokes. His teeth caught the edge of her clit and he heard the quick, sharp intake of her breath and her pleas for release. Her hips bucked, pressing his tongue deeper into the opening of her body. His strokes became faster, harder, and he slid the fingers of his left hand inside her, using his thumb and mouth to bring her to a shattering climax.

Tess screamed and jerked, her buttocks bumping against the floor as the orgasm caught her in its magical thrall. Her body shuddered with the aftershocks, her heart racing. Finally she managed to pull herself up, using the doorknob for leverage.

The warmth faded, leaving her alone once more, but as she made her way to the stairs, the whisper of his voice told her he would return.

* * * * *

The wind blew the hair away from her face, settling it back around her shoulders in wild disarray as Tess stood on the balcony overlooking the water. The moon hung high in the sky as crickets and tree frogs battled it out in concert. It was a beautiful night, the kind she loved in Charleston. Balmy, breezy with just a slight touch of salt in the air, the scent of the ocean just beyond her window.

Leaning her arms across the railing, she could just make out a lone figure walking along the sands of the beach. The waves slapped against the shoreline and the night winds increased in tempo, stirring the air. The figure moved into the streak of yellow lighting provided by the floodlights outside her house. She caught her breath and quickly stepped back into the shadows of her balcony. It was him.

Jaxon was right below her and even in the distance that separated them, the darkness that shielded her face from his eyes, she knew he'd seen her. And she'd seen

his eyes. Which was damned near impossible but she'd seen them nevertheless. They'd been trained on her, watching her. Glowing almost. Tess should have been afraid but it wasn't fear coursing through her veins. It was anticipation. Need. Just like last night.

With a slight smile, she edged back closer to the balcony ledge, her body singing. "I thought you lived in Mount Pleasant." Her voice was light, musical almost.

He tipped his head back, the wind caressing the silky strands of his hair. "I do but I felt like a walk on the beach."

"I happen to have it on good authority that Mount Pleasant borders the coastline. I would imagine it would be close to beaches." Her eyes twinkled as she leaned over the railing to smile down at him. Could anyone else hear the music in the air, the call of his body to hers? It was impossible but happening just the same.

"I've been spoiled by this one, now that I've seen one of its inhabitants. Why don't you come down and take a walk with me?"

"Was that your master plan?" She could already feel herself being pulled in the direction of his voice.

"That would be a pretty poor master plan. Master indicates something major, large, overwhelming even. Don't you think even a poor contractor could come up with something a little bit more substantial to entice you besides a walk on the beach...especially after last night?" He held out his hand and she felt the tingle, almost as if he'd touched her with that outstretched hand. Impossible, yes? But so were his hands and tongue stroking her by the front door. As much as she tried to deny it, her imaginary lover had been real. She didn't need to be told that Jaxon Richards had a few things up his sleeve besides those bulging biceps.

Tess cupped her chin in her hands, her elbows digging into the wrought iron railing. "I'm thinking that maybe I should be just a little afraid of you."

For a brief moment his eyes seemed to glow. "No, Tess. You never have to be afraid of me." Then the serious tone disappeared and his teeth flashed in a grin. "Now are you going to stop shouting at me and come down here or do I have to come get you?"

She heard the teasing in his voice, the light, casual note and she held up one hand. "Give me one second. The last thing I need is you climbing my banister and breaking your neck."

"I'll be magnanimous and give you five seconds. Then I'm starting to climb."

Jaxon knew he should listen to Falcon. Deep down in his heart he knew Tess couldn't live in his world. And he didn't know how much longer he could live in hers before duty called him back. He'd spent too much time and energy constructing a believable life, the life of an ordinary man with friends, a normal job and family. But he knew that anyone looking beneath the veneer would see the poorly constructed reality. Plain and simple, he didn't belong in this world, yet he was fighting like hell to stay in it. Especially now.

He lifted his eyes toward the balcony, watching the shadowy outline of Tess' figure as she rushed to her bedroom door. On the breeze, he caught the scent of her perfume. His senses were attuned to her. Every breath she took. Every whisper of the clothing against her skin. He knew he was treading into dangerous territory. And he was taking Tess with him.

This evening after her friend had left, he'd ached to touch her and the strength of his magic had enabled him to be with her, to further explore the secret places on her body. She'd been thinking of him, trying to understand his existence. He couldn't battle the desire to caress her again, to see her face as the release washed over her. His touch had brought her immeasurable pleasure and damned him to a restless walk along the beach, his own body hard and painful. He hadn't intended to approach her but sensing her presence, his body had a mind of its own.

Jaxon heard her approaching behind him and he turned slightly to welcome her with a smile, an outstretched hand. "I'm glad you decided to join me."

"You left me few options." She slipped her hand into his, a natural movement. She'd changed into a blue cotton sundress that swished around her ankles when she walked and dipped low enough over her breasts to cause him to swallow hard.

He threaded their fingers and walked toward the shoreline. The winds had increased in strength, carrying their words away, whipping their clothing around their bodies. With a flick of his wrist, Jaxon gentled the breezes. Suddenly the night grew still. Even the crickets seemed to sense the difference. The thick, balmy scent of the air swirled around them, wrapped them in a cocoon of sensuality. The darkness seduced them, enhancing the restless feelings stirring within them both.

Tess shivered a little. "That was kind of eerie."

Jaxon shared a look with her. "What?"

"The winds and then the sounds. Didn't you notice?"

He smiled into her upturned face. "It's difficult to focus on anything else with you beside me."

She ducked her head but not before Jaxon caught the slight upturning of her lips. "Your charm must get you out of a lot of tough spots, Mr. Richards."

He stopped, turning her in his arms. Heat flowed from his body and melded into hers. He felt her leaning into him, accepting his strength. His power. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and just breathed. Her scent. The tang of the air and the beach. He could spend forever wrapped just like this. His eyes popped open at that thought. His forever greatly differed from Tess'.

"Is that what you think I'm doing then—charming you?"

Tugging her hand free of his, she rested both of her palms against his chest. "Last night...I've never...that is, never on the first..." She broke off, her brow furrowing before she tried again. "I felt you earlier. How is that possible?"

"You might be surprised what things are possible if you only open your mind." He lowered his voice to a rich, seductive rasp, wanting to reassure her.

Tess blinked up at him, her head tipped back, the night winds blowing her chestnut hair around her shoulders. He liked the way it was flowing freely much more than the dignified way she'd worn it last night.

"Jaxon?"

He focused his attention on her face. "Yes?"

"I didn't know men like you existed."

He captured a strand of her hair. Sifting it through his fingers, he held onto her gaze. "Maybe I'm one of a kind." It wasn't too far from the truth.

"I can believe that."

"Walk with me." Jaxon wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her close against his side. His cock responded with a quick hardening. Did Tess even know how beautiful she was? Did she know how much his body ached for hers? After barely a day of knowing her and one night, his entire being was wrapped up in hers. He could only imagine what an eternity would be like with this woman.

"You were hoping to find me awake when you came out here tonight."

"I knew you were awake," he corrected. He'd been with her a short hour before, had watched her float around her bedroom, humming. She'd been happy, satiated and her thoughts had been centered on him. "You're a lot like I am."

She scoffed at that. "We couldn't be more different. Sometimes I think you're an illusion, a figment of my imagination."

"I can assure you I'm quite real and I was referring to our thoughts. Our hearts. They are alike." *As are our souls.*

Tess stopped, bringing him to a halt beside her. "Most men don't talk like you do."

"Perhaps that's because most men are afraid of their emotions."

"And you're not?"

"I have no reason to be afraid of those things which make me who I am."

Tess stared at him. Definitely unexplainable. He was a different breed of man. Confident, to be sure, but it went beyond the self-assurance that came with false bravado. Jaxon Richards surpassed the understanding she had amassed of the common man. Perhaps he wasn't so common. That thought scared her more than most. Common she could handle. Extraordinary was a little out of her league. "You're a little frightening when you talk like that."

His fingers flexed against her hip before he resumed walking. "Because I don't fit into some mold you have in your mind?"

"Well, yeah, if you want to be technical about it. Most men are —"

Jaxon brought her hand to his lips and caressed the skin with velvety kisses. "Maybe we shouldn't concentrate so much on most men."

She gave him a soft, hesitant smile, allowing him to lead the conversation.

Lifting his head, he flashed her a grin. "I'm sure we can think of other things to discuss. Things infinitely more interesting." The heat of her gaze seared him. Desire slammed into his abdomen. He wanted her again. His need was a deep, clawing hunger, twisting his insides and fogging his brain. He'd never felt such a powerful punch and he'd faced many adversaries in his time. None of them had weakened him like the sexy lady at his side.

"Tell me something about your life." Tess' soft voice stormed into his musings, compelling him to draw away from the want, even only for the brief time it took to answer her.

"So this is the part where we get to know each other." Laughter rumbled in his chest.

She stepped in time with him, keeping an even pace as if her every movement was in tune with his. "Better late than never."

"I'm not a big believer in never."

"There's something different about you. I want to know what it is." The words came out as a demand.

"Perhaps you don't," he corrected her flatly.

"Is it something that's going to scare me?"

Jaxon drew her closer to the water's edge. "Most things people don't understand can frighten them." He edged her a dark look, saw the intrigue in her eyes and bit back a smile. Tess wouldn't be the type of woman who was scared easily. But neither could he expect her to be willing to give up her entire way of life for him. It was too much to ask of any woman—especially when she didn't understand the consequences.

Turning her in his arms, he cupped her cheeks. His breath feathered over her face, her eyes. He took a step closer to her, matching their heartbeats. He heard her quick, indrawn breath, saw the widening of her eyes and he waited.

Her hands fluttered against his chest. Her throat constricted painfully, preventing even the slightest breath from escaping into the night air. "Maybe we should just talk another time."

His lips brushed her forehead. "If we don't talk, then what should we do now?"

"I don't think you really need me to answer that."

Rock-hard, he took a step closer, wedging his thigh in between hers. "Are you giving yourself to me, Tess?"

"For tonight," she whispered.

He lowered his head. "And what if I told you I wanted more than just another night?" Before she could respond, his lips met hers.

Magic. Stars. Swirling lights. Emotions swept through her mind as Jaxon's lips met hers. His powerful arms encircled her, bound her to him. The kiss was masterful, daunting, overwhelming, using her emotions against her, demanding her surrender. Tongue swept against tongue, tasting, retreating and returning to sample more.

She moaned silently. She was wrapped, secured within a pure silken web of desire. Need, hot and powerful, exploded within her, draining her energy. Clinging to Jaxon's shoulders, she returned his kiss, fighting for breath, for more. His skillful blend of seduction and possession dragged her under, held her captive, the decision to end the kiss in his hands alone. When he lifted his head, she went limp, her heart thundering beneath her breastbone.

Her mind emptied, became devoid of thoughts but her senses were alive, screaming for the touch of his hand, the taste of his mouth once more. Her hands climbed to circle around his neck and she boldly dragged his head back down, feasting once more.

Jaxon gave her what she demanded, allowing her to take the lead. She found herself pressed intimately against his body and knew the exact moment when he ignited. His cock branded her abdomen and caused a moan of pure need to escape her lips.

On fire, she dragged in a breath of the salty air before threading her hands through his hair, allowing the thick strands to sift through her fingers. She craved him and it was almost as if the previous night had never happened. Like this time would be the first. Powerful emotions took on a mind of their own and she succumbed to each one.

His hand slipped along the nape of her neck to hold her closer. All day long he'd thought about her and now that she was in his arms, he didn't want to think anymore. With a short tug, he pulled the top of her sundress free, exposing her breasts to the night air and his gaze. She wasn't wearing a bra and her nipples peaked instantly.

The dress sank to the ground and Tess gave a little sigh of surrender, hooking her arms around his neck, taking a step to bring her body in full contact with the material of his clothes. Denim rasped against her thighs and the cotton shirt he wore lightly chafed her nipples. She shivered with the sensations and tipped her head back to see his face by the light of the moon. "Why can't I stop thinking about you?"

He gave a little groan, unable to answer her. His palms cupped her face as his lips found hers. Breaths clashed, breathing in one another's air. They twisted, turned and tumbled to the sand.

His hands didn't rest for even a second. Sweeping over every curve, they touched each inch. The warmth between her thighs beckoned him and his hand slid lower to answer the summons. His hand slipped beneath the waistband of her thong. Her pussy was already wet, the lips slick with her cream.

Tess moved against him, her voice a whimper. "Jaxon, I—" The words ended on a cry as his index finger rubbed her clit, flicking it lightly, just enough to tantalize her. The callous against that most sensitive flesh caused tiny pinpricks of pleasure to dance along her nerve endings.

Lips moving to her neck, Jaxon pressed sucking kisses against her skin and she tipped her head backward, powerless to fight against the raw emotions laying siege. Her hands pressed down against the rough sand, her nails curved inward. Every nerve in her body tingled and jerked.

"Tess, look at me." His voice was thick with the command and she immediately followed his instruction, surprised to find his face so close she could see the rough growth of stubble on his chin, feel the warmth of his breath against her cheeks. "This feels right." He cupped her face and pressed a gentle kiss against the tip of her nose before moving over her forehead, down her temple.

The sound of her own blood filled her ears, drowning out the sound of the ocean. Her hands fluttered against his chest. She wanted to pull him closer, to cave in to the overwhelming draw of the passion that had built inside her. His lips rested against her shoulder, barely moving and she was dying inside, the demand almost painful.

"I know," she managed to whisper before she turned her face to his, her lips colliding with his once more. The kiss was raw, hungry, desperate, and Tess fell into it. In the far reaches of her mind, she knew wild, frantic longing was irrational. She shouldn't crave a man this much and certainly not a stranger but her emotions were too powerful to control.

Jaxon palmed her breast with his free hand, his thumb swirling around the hard nipple. "Your skin is so soft." The breeze had returned, just a light brush of wind, which allowed the musky scent of his cologne to add to the seduction.

God, she wanted to climb into him, to press her body so close to his that they fused as one. "Less talking," she commanded, though the words were more of a breathless sigh.

"As you wish." He pinched her clit and her nails dug into his forearms. The sounds of her excitement spurred him on. Her pussy pulsed around his fingers as he slid them inside the slick channel. A rush of blood caused his balls to draw tight and he paused to catch his breath.

In the distance, a boat motor growled and the heavy sounds of the water slapping against the hull reached Tess' ears but they didn't compute. Even with the stars overhead and the beach sand beneath her, she wasn't aware of her surroundings. Only Jaxon existed.

"Do you want to come?"

She didn't have an option for her orgasm was already building inside her. Drowning in a sea of savage emotions, she lowered her head to his shoulder. He pinched her clit again, rubbing his thumb furiously back and forth until her muscles tensed, tightened. Shattering in its power, the release spun her out of control, leaving her weak, breathless.

For a long moment she kept her head down while she quivered. Though his cock ached, Jaxon didn't rush her. He stroked her hair until she relaxed completely against

him. "We could go inside. You'd be more comfortable." His teeth lightly nipped her lower lip.

Tess' gaze was hazy, her thoughts muddled as if she were lost in a forest of fog. "Are you really thinking about comfort right now?" She cupped his crotch and his cock jumped beneath her palm.

With a low laugh, she began to unbutton his shirt. "That's what I thought." The only thing that mattered to her was getting his clothes off, feeling his bare skin next to hers. "Now let's get you out of these."

For one desperate moment he wanted to remove them his way, with just a simple blink, but one shred of sanity kept his magic in check. Instead he helped her manually and, with laughs and curses, they managed to remove the rest of his clothing, leaving him lying next to her naked. By the light of the moon, the head of his cock glistened and Tess couldn't resist touching the tip, lightly tracing the wetness.

"Jesus." The one word was ripped from his throat. He grasped hold of the sides of her thong, frantic to see her ripe pussy. One quick tug and the material ripped, sifting to the sand at their feet.

"I want to suck you."

Her words hung in the air while Jaxon tried to focus. Her announcement damned near caused him to explode. Rising up on his knees, he looked at her for a long moment before pushing himself to his feet. Denying her was the last thing on his mind.

She came to her knees and pressed her cheek against his cock. The skin was so deceptively soft. Testing the width, she wrapped her hand around its thickness, murmuring her approval.

Taking her sweet time, she skated her nails up the backs of his thighs while blowing warm, soft puffs of air over his cock. She rubbed her cheek against it again and then pressed a kiss against the hot flesh. Jaxon gripped her shoulders while the muscles of his ass clenched beneath her fingertips.

She licked him experimentally, rolling the salty texture of his juice over her tongue. Swirling, licking and grazing her way down to his balls. With each lick, Jaxon curled his fingers tighter against her skin.

"Take me in your mouth."

"Not yet," she whispered, trailing her tongue down to his sac. He squirmed with every stroke and cried out when she suckled his tightly drawn balls.

Hips flexing, he framed her face with his hands and pulled her head up. "Tess, suck me... Please, you're killing me."

Smiling, she licked her way back up his cock while he jerked. She hesitated over the head, lightly touching the tip of her tongue to the damp crease. His musky scent intoxicated her and she felt her own cream run down her thigh. Rising up higher onto her knees, she closed her lips around his engorged cock.

He let out a shout of pure relief and snagged his hands full of her hair. "Yeah, that's it. Suck me, baby. Suck me. Ah, that feels good. So good."

Tess formed a suction cup with her lips and rode his cock up and down, faster and faster while Jaxon encouraged her with unintelligible sounds. Her hands alternated between tickling his balls and stroking his shaft until his thighs began to shake.

"I'm coming," he moaned. He yanked hard on her hair and staggered forward. Tess braced her hands behind her as the creamy liquid shot down her throat. She continued to suckle him until he sagged against her, his knees bumping her shoulders.

They both tumbled to the ground again and Jaxon wasted no time in breathing. He palmed her breast and squeezed the soft flesh, drawing the nipple closer to his lips. "I want to fuck you again."

She curled her hands around his wrist. "This is all happening so fast."

His eyes darkened. "Do you want to stop?"

She pushed herself to a sitting position, causing Jaxon's hands to drop away. The sounds of the ocean didn't offer its usual comfort. "No, and that's the problem. I don't want it to stop."

Jaxon rose up beside her and began to stroke her hair. "Why is that a problem?"

"Because I barely know you."

"We'll learn as we go along." His tongue touched the tip of her nose. "Unless you're not up to the challenge." The teasing tone of his voice had her smiling.

"I think you need to be the one worrying about being up."

His hand returned to her breast, his lips nuzzling her nipple. "I've always been very resilient." His tongue flicked the tight peak.

Tess' chest grew tight as she climbed onto his lap. She didn't know what tomorrow would bring but for tonight, they had this. And it would have to be enough.

"Wait." Leaning over, he caught hold of his jeans and dug into the front pocket to secure a condom.

"So thoughtful," she whispered, her hands skating over his chest. "But allow me." Taking the foil packet from his hand, she tore it open easily and unrolled it, scooting back on his lap to hold the condom over the head of his cock.

Jaxon closed his eyes as her nimble fingers guided the latex over his stiff shaft. Just that simple touch was enough to create a painful reaction.

"There. Did I do it right?" The teasing smile on her lips told him she knew what she was doing to him.

"Witch." His voice was muffled against her breasts. He shifted, settling her back against his thighs, but she wasn't content with sitting. Securing his cock with one hand, she guided him deep into her channel, watching his eyes widen as she took him all the way in.

"Mmm," she moaned, lowering her head to his shoulder, but he surprised her when he didn't immediately move. Instead his hands gripped her hips, bringing her face up to see his.

"Tess, I've wanted you since the day I saw you standing on that stage. I can't make any sense of it either but then I haven't tried very hard."

"Sometimes wanting isn't enough," she whispered, her hips lifting, driving his cock deeper into her dripping canal. Jaxon braced his hands behind him, giving him more leverage.

She gripped his shoulders and leaned forward to push him against her clit. Rocking, she held him close against her breasts, needing to feel every inch of him. This shouldn't be happening. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real... Her thoughts scattered as the orgasm ripped through her. She arched her back and let out a long wail.

Jaxon continued to pound into her, sweat beading on his brow. His chest muscles grew taut and he came on a series of grunts, wrapping his arms around her waist. Burying his head between her breasts, he drew in several, deep breaths.

With slow, jerky movements, Tess pulled out of his embrace. Last night had been easier. They'd fallen asleep wrapped in each other's arms and when she'd awakened, he'd gone, leaving her only a note. No need for further conversation. No awkward moments.

Finding her dress, she shook the sand from it and tugged it over her head, keeping her eyes on the ground. "Maybe we shouldn't do this again...at least not anytime soon."

His eyes seemed to burn into her skin and he remained silent long after she wanted him to speak, to say anything to break the oppressive quiet.

"Aren't you going to say something?" She finally looked at him.

"Only that I don't think we can stop ourselves even if we wanted to."

She nodded, her eyes voluminous beneath the light of the moon. The need she felt inside was intimidating, terrifying even. "When I'm with you, everything feels so...so...magical." Embarrassed she'd spoken aloud, she tried to move away from him but he held her fast.

Jaxon thumbed her lower lip. "If only you knew..." He broke off and shook his head. "When I met you, I knew my life would change." He rested his forehead against hers for a brief second before putting his hands on her shoulders, a steady gesture for them both. "I just didn't know how much."

"Maybe I should go in now." She didn't know what else to say and when he didn't respond, she watched him for a few seconds longer before pulling away from him. Would she see him again? His eyes told her yes.

Hurrying back to her house, she knew he was watching her. The knowledge unnerved her. Not that she was scared of Jaxon, more of what he made her feel. How he

made her feel. Alive. Strong. Sexy. Men had touched her body but no man had ever touched her soul.

Until now.

Chapter Three

Harry chalked the cue stick, leaned down to level himself with the table and closed one eye. "It sounds like things are going just fine with the winning bidder." He made his shot, winced as the ball bounced off the corner of the table and rolled back to the center. "Damn. How could I miss that shot? That was an easy one. I can't believe I missed it."

"Maybe you were spending too much of your time concentrating on my love life when you should be thinking about your game." Jaxon slapped him on the back and took position at the opposite end of the table. "Nine ball in the corner pocket."

"If you ask me, someone has to think about your love life since you obviously haven't done it in so long." He pointed his finger toward the center of Jaxon's chest. "And I'll bet you twenty dollars you won't make that shot."

"I hate to take your money but you're on." Jaxon grinned, dug a twenty-dollar bill out of the front pocket of his jeans and slapped it on the edge of the pool table. "Ante up."

Harry matched the twenty and leaned one hip against the wall. "There's no way you're going to make it. Not without some serious consequences. Eight ball is too close." He hunkered down to peer closer at the table. "Sadie and I want to meet this Ms. Montgomery of yours."

Jaxon flashed his friend a grin, pulled back and popped the shot. The nine ball slid neatly into the hole, barely missing the eight ball. He straightened, slid the two bills into his pocket and lifted his beer glass. As his friend stared at him, he took a swig of the frothy brew, slashed the back of his hand across his mouth and thumped the frosted mug back down on the table behind him. "You were saying?"

Harry scratched his chin, his eyes narrowed. "You know, sometimes I think you hustle me."

"And most of the time you're a poor loser." Jaxon stepped out of the way for Harry to take his turn.

"Yeah, well, I haven't lost yet."

"Just a twenty."

Harry ignored him. "So what about meeting this lady of yours?"

"You will."

"Could you be a little more specific? You know," Harry waved his cue stick, "an ordinary man would be offended at your blatant attempt to keep your new girlfriend away from him. Might think you were ashamed of him or something. Good thing I'm not an ordinary man."

Leaning back against the bar with his ankles crossed, Jaxon watched his friend survey the table. Harry had been one of the first people he'd met when he'd decided to make his life in Charleston. A good man with a quick wit and a dry sense of humor, he'd been quick to help Jaxon find his way around the city, showing him the best watering holes and the worst places to be caught in after dark. In a short amount of time, they'd become good friends but not good enough for Jaxon to share the truth with him. "Good thing," he finally responded.

"So why didn't you invite your lady to join us tonight?"

Jaxon's abdomen tightened. "No reason."

"Well then you might want to think of one fast because she just walked in." Low whistles erupted from the lower end of the bar.

Jaxon pushed away from the rolled edge and moved into the center of the crowded room just as Tess glided through the throng of sweaty men amidst catcalls and lusty comments. She came to a stop in front of him, her eyes round with innocence.

"I called your house. Your housekeeper," her brows puckered, "told me you were here."

Jaxon swept a dark look around the room, which effectively silenced the snickers and bawdy suggestions. Cupping her elbow, he guided her back toward the door, shielding her body from further prying eyes. "This isn't a good place for you. Especially dressed like that."

She glanced down at her snug-fitting jeans and spaghetti-strap top. "I've lived in Charleston all of my life. This is what I normally wear in September. What's wrong with it?"

Not a damned thing. In fact his cock had stood up and taken notice the second he'd seen her. *Fuck.*

The room grew restless behind them. One patron staggered to his feet. "Say, lady, is he giving you a hard time? You know, 'cause if not, I could give you one." He waggled his hips suggestively and the room erupted in raucous laughter.

Harry positioned himself in front of the pool table, his cue stick held aloft. "Hey, why don't you bunch of cavemen go somewhere and sleep it off? My friend is trying to have a conversation with the lady."

"Harry, it's okay. I'll catch you later."

The boldest of the men, his eyes hungry, wove his way through the crowd to follow Jaxon.

"Hey, Jax!" Harry called out a warning but Jaxon had already turned around to acknowledge the man's presence.

"Come on, honey, hang around a real man."

Tess threw him an irritated look and tugged on Jaxon's arm. "Never mind him. I need to talk to you."

He covered her hand with his and fixed the interloper with a cold-eyed stare. "Excuse me."

"Wait a minute now. What's your hurry?" More laughter accompanied the man's hasty bid to position himself in front of the door. "It looks like there's more than enough of this hot little number to go around. Why don't you be friendly and share?"

Jaxon's jaw clenched and a familiar burning sensation stung his eyes. Anger. It had been a while since jealousy had reared its ugly head. With the flick of his finger, he could send this guy on a journey he wouldn't soon forget. At the risk of exposing himself.

Time for another option. His hand at his side, he closed it into a fist and the room fell silent. No one moved. Or blinked. Frozen in time and space, the patrons had become statues. Jaxon quickly ushered Tess out the door into the night while she stumbled and stared over his shoulder.

As the door closed behind them, laughter erupted once more and his shoulders relaxed.

"What happened in there? Did you see that? They were all frozen. I mean no one moved a muscle. They didn't even blink."

"Maybe they saw something they didn't like." He guided her toward his car, his steps unhurried, casual almost.

Tess came to an abrupt stop and tossed another look over her shoulder. "No, it was more than that. My God, I've never seen anything like it before in my life. You saw it too. You couldn't have missed it." When the silence became a deafening roar, she swallowed a deep breath of air and tipped her head back to see his inscrutable face. "Oh my God. Did you do that?"

"It's a simple magic trick I picked up in high school. Anyone can do it. It's an illusion. It's worked many times to get me out of scrapes like that." He brushed off the amazement in Tess' voice and opened the passenger door. "Why don't you get in and I'll take you home?"

"I drove myself. I needed to see you."

Closing the door, he lifted one eyebrow. "That sounds promising."

"Jaxon, this is serious. A man came to my house this afternoon. White hair, really intense-looking guy. I didn't recognize him. He didn't give me his name but he was looking for you. He looked, well, dangerous. Dressed all in black, that sort of thing. He didn't say much and what he did say, he growled. He just kept demanding to see you, saying he hadn't been able to find you all day and something about a meeting the two of you were supposed to have. Then, right before he left, he told me to stay away from you."

Her fingers curled around his wrist, eyes demanding an explanation. "I know there's more to you than meets the eye and this only added to my suspicions. So out with it. Who is this man and what does he want with you?" She inhaled sharply. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No." He met her gaze only briefly before he lifted his face to the sky. "He's an old friend, Tess. One, it would appear, I need to have a long chat with." He returned his gaze to her face and drifted his knuckles across her jawline. "I'm sorry if he frightened you. He's relatively harmless. Just determined."

"Determined? About what? Why doesn't he want me to see you anymore?"

Taking hold of her hand, he kissed each knuckle independently. "It doesn't matter. I'll have a talk with him." He carried the kiss up to her wrist before heading higher up her arm.

"Are you trying to distract me?" The slight catch in her voice told him it was working.

"And if I am?" One arm drew her closer, settling her against his hip.

Her tongue moistened her lips, causing his cock to jump. "I was asking you to...um... I was thinking..." She broke off as his hand dropped down to curve around her bottom.

Shifting her, he tucked her between his splayed legs, pressing her spine against the window of the passenger door. "Do you have any idea what you do to me? When I see you, I can't think." Lips nuzzling her neck, he drew her even closer, allowing her to feel the thickness of his erection.

She gave a soft sigh and slid her hands up the wall of his chest. "You do realize anyone could walk out here, right?"

His teeth nipped her earlobe. "Scared?"

One leg wrapped around his. "Does it feel like I'm scared?"

"A daring woman. I like that." Lifting the hem of her short top, he slid his bare hand along the flat plane of her stomach, the soft feel of her skin making him bite back a moan. God, she felt so good. So fucking perfect.

Her hands pushed against his chest to back him away but before he could open his mouth to speak, she was lowering the zipper on her jeans. And all the blood rushed from his brain straight down to his cock.

But he didn't need to think, for Tess took hold of his hand and slipped it in beneath her bikini panties. The second his fingers encountered slick, wet flesh, even the desire to speak fled.

Growling low in his throat, he took a step closer, grinding her hips against warm metal while his index finger ground against her clit. Her leg tightened around his. While he flicked and tortured the small nubbin of flesh, his lips feasted on her neck, traveling lower to the tops of her breasts.

Her breaths coming in short gasps, Tess dug her nails into his arms and arched her back, bumping her hips forward.

"Feel good?" he whispered in her ear. Two fingers sank into her creamy heat and she bit back a cry. "Come on, baby. Tell me how it feels."

Lowering her head to his chest, she whispered his name. He intensified the pressure in response, rolling his finger until her clit expanded, growing longer and fuller. More sensitive. Then he pinched lightly, her light gasps spurring him on.

"I'm going to come." The words exploded from her lips seconds before she bucked, grinding her pussy against his hand. Jerking wildly, she cried out, her nails digging into his skin.

Jaxon shushed her with his lips against hers, holding her tightly against him as the aftershocks continued. He kissed her hard, a kiss of possession. Could she feel his brand? It didn't matter. She was his.

No matter what the Assembly wanted.

He slipped his hand free and tugged her top into place as she zipped up her jeans. Silently they walked to her car. As they reached the driver's side, Jaxon brushed the hair away from her face and gave her another brief, hard kiss. "Go home now. I'll call you tonight."

Her forehead bumped against his. "But..."

One finger pressed against her lips. "Everything's okay."

She looked like she wanted to argue but then released a sigh and tugged open her door. "Well, so much for getting any information out of you."

As she slid behind the wheel, Jaxon leaned into the car. "You didn't like what you just got?"

Sticking the key into the ignition, she cranked the engine. "I'm not even going to feed your ego by answering that."

With another kiss, he backed away. "I'll talk to you soon."

He waited until the lights of her brakes glowed red in the dark before he slid behind the wheel of his sports car.

"Damn you, Falcon."

* * * * *

Jaxon flung the metal door open with a wave of his hand and crashed into the warehouse, the blackness of his rage obliterating common sense and reason. The fury dominated and for the first time in a long time, he felt the edge of his control slip. "Falcon! Where in the hell are you?"

From out of nowhere, the white-haired man glided across the floor. He waved his hands in front of him to ward off the approaching storm. "Now I know you are upset but there is no need to come storming into my home like an out of control tornado. We should sit down and talk about this."

"You warned Tess to stay away from me."

"She is not your destiny," the wizard responded with a simple shake of his head. "She would not understand your world."

"I will choose who will be in my life and who will not. Not you. You do not know my destiny. You are not to ever come near Tess again." Jaxon slipped into the more formal speech of his ancestors.

Falcon frowned, looking affronted. "I would not have harmed her."

"You scared her. I saw it in her eyes."

The leader of the Assembly looked positively dismayed. "Well, that certainly was not my intention. I will rectify it immediately." He was, if anything, a gentleman.

Jaxon barred his path. "No. You will stay away from her. I mean it. We are friends. You are like a father to me but you will not come between me and Tess."

"There is nothing between the two of you. You have made no promises to her."

"She is not ready for that."

"You have told her nothing about who you really are. How can you be so sure what she is ready for? And you expect me to believe you are not ready for a family of your own? You are beyond ready. I would not oppose such a desire on your part should you have chosen a more proper consort for your affections. If you insist on having this woman in your life, I will be forced to call a meeting of the Assembly."

Jaxon's shoulders stiffened at the unspoken command, the warning behind the words. Nearing five hundred years of age, he didn't consider himself a child to be forced to follow the dictates of his mentor. A powerful wizard in his own right, he had little difficulty moving obstacles in his path and he used his powers with the knowledge and wisdom he'd amassed through the years. Every fiber in his body rebelled at the control Falcon exercised. Just as everything inside him, those fibers that made him who he was, accepted the domination. Falcon was more than just his friend. At nearly fifteen hundred years of age, he was the oldest living wizard in the universe, the most powerful and, if the situation called for it, the most deadly. And Jaxon had been raised to fear and respect the age of his elders but mostly to reverence the wizard who had taken him under his wing three centuries ago when Jaxon had just tasted the headiness of his powers.

He had been on the verge of losing control, of giving into the dark forces that allowed him to guide people at his whim. He could have had this place called Earth as his personal playground, commanding the unsuspecting as his puppets. Then Falcon had stepped in, confronting him with the truth of his power and the consequences of its frivolous use. Jaxon's powers were a gift, meant to be treasured and used wisely, not for personal gain or pleasure. And he should be grateful the leader had cared enough to save him from himself. But gratitude wouldn't win over desire.

"Then call your meeting." Jaxon's voice vibrated with fury.

The wizard rose into the air, his booted feet dangling. "You know, you really irritate me when you do this. When was the last time you spoke with your mother?"

Jaxon didn't blink at the change of subject but the studied casualness in his mentor's voice unnerved him a little. Falcon had always been the picture of decorum,

never wavering from his chosen mission and never dropping his propriety. "Mother knows where I am. We keep in contact."

"Jaxon, I have given my life in service of the Assembly. We are a powerful people and with our power come certain responsibilities. We cannot force our way of life on the mortals. They would not, they could not, understand."

Turning his back on his mentor, Jaxon walked toward the door. "Times like these make me wish I was mortal."

"But you are not and no amount of wishing can change that."

"Would you have me turn my back on this chance?"

"You can have no proper chance with a mortal."

"That is for me to decide."

Breath hissed out of clenched teeth as Falcon absorbed the information. "Then I have no choice but to call the Assembly together."

"Do as you must. I will answer the summons." He knew he could do no other.

* * * * *

"Jesus. Another fucking hurricane." Belinda switched off the television atop the armoire in Tess' bedroom. The monster storm was approaching the coastline, drawing closer with each passing minute.

"I've already started packing," Tess said around a mouthful of toothpaste as she stood in the doorway of her bathroom.

"Ed and I are heading to Tennessee. You're more than welcome to come along." Belinda assumed a lotus position in the center of Tess' bed and stuffed her hand into the bag of caramel popcorn.

Tess smiled even as her thoughts strayed. She searched for some unknown connection with Jaxon. She didn't think she'd actually be able to touch him, to reach him in her mind but there was always something there, a soft whisper telling her of his safety. The mental contact should have bothered her. Instead it reassured her. "I'm not sure where I'm going this time."

Bringing her knees up to her chest, Belinda grinned. "Oh, I think you know. I wouldn't be surprised if your luscious contractor whisks you away to some fantasy island."

"Please." Though she tried to appear nonchalant, Tess couldn't hide the chill that danced along her shoulders.

"From what you've told me, it wouldn't come as a surprise."

Nothing would surprise her when it came to Jaxon. "I think I've told you too much."

"Hey, I'm not judging. He sounds like one hell of a guy and from what I've seen, well..." Belinda faked a shiver. "Anyway, do you think he's going to evacuate too or is

he one of those macho types who will stick it out no matter what approaches? I hate that."

"We haven't talked about it since the warnings were just issued a couple of hours ago."

"Well, you'd better get cracking. This storm is a doozie and I, for one, intend to be sitting on a mountaintop slurping on a margarita when this thing blows in. You would do well to be thinking along those same lines."

Tess snapped her suitcase shut and tugged it off the bed. "I don't need to be reminded, thanks. But I don't intend to go anywhere until I know what Jaxon's going to do."

Belinda swung her legs over the side of the bed and hopped to her feet. "Are the two of you really that serious? I mean I know the sex is pretty serious but now you're talking about waiting to find out his itinerary before you think about saving your own ass. Sounds pretty dedicated to me."

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I think we are but then I remember it's only been a few weeks. I shouldn't rush into anything but...he's different, Belle."

"Different as in he brings you flowers and chocolates every day or different as in he has a laboratory beneath his house with a potential Frankenstein on the table?"

Tess laughed out loud. "Your imagination works overtime."

"Usually. It's what makes me a good writer. I really would like to meet this guy close up, face-to-face."

"I'm sure you will. It's still kind of new."

Belinda strolled toward the door. "Well, Ed and I are heading out at first light so give me a call on my cell when you get to where you're going. And please don't even think about staying here."

Tess waved away her friend's concern. "That's not going to happen. I'll be leaving soon. According to the forecast, we've got at least twenty-four hours before we'll actually know where this thing is going to land. And there's still a good chance it will turn but either way I'll be long gone by then."

And hopefully on a different mountaintop with Jaxon.

After a long hot bath that left her skin tingling, Tess crawled beneath fresh cotton sheets. She closed her eyes only to open them a second later when she caught the scent of Jaxon's cologne.

Had he returned to her again? Propping up on her elbows, she searched the room, almost relieved to see nothing but the usual furniture and decorations. Chalking it up to another mental invention, she collapsed back against the pillow.

But she could still see Jaxon's face, feel the touch of his fingers as they slipped between the lips of her crease. Her legs moved underneath the sheets, as restless as the night winds.

She didn't know whether to curse or thank Jaxon for reawakening her sensuality. She'd been content with her life before he'd arrived...hadn't she? Sure, she made occasional use of her trusty vibrator but now it paled in comparison to even the slightest touch of Jaxon's lips. Her body humming, nipples peaking, Tess shivered in agony.

She wanted him. Right here. Right now. So where in the hell was he? Surely her imagination could conjure him again. With a groan of regret, she slipped her hand beneath the covers, lifting the edge of the worn cotton T-shirt she wore.

Her nipples were pebble-hard, aching almost. She gave them a hard pinch, wincing at the quick bite of pain. Her breaths became shallow as the excitement increased. With frenzied movements, she yanked her panties down over her hips, kicking them to her ankles. Allowing her legs to fall open, she sought the wetness of her cunt.

Her clit pulsed, engorged with blood, and Tess knew her fingers wouldn't be enough to assuage the ache. Inside the top drawer of the bedside table, she kept her stash of toys but that knowledge only frustrated her. They would be inadequate. Nothing compared to what Jaxon could do to her body.

What in the hell had he done to her?

Feeling almost deflated that she would have to settle, she tugged open the drawer, leaning over to search the contents. Her eyes widened and her hands began to shake. A long black velvet box lay nestled in amongst her old toys, a note taped to the top. As her fingers curled around the softness, her heart beat a faster rhythm.

The note was simple. *Enjoy.*

Heat rushed to her face as she opened the lid. A vast array of sex toys lay arranged in artistic fashion, some of which she'd never even seen before. Her fingertips glided over each one. Excitement built as she lifted a long, silver clamp with glittering diamonds hanging from white ribbons.

She didn't know where the knowledge had come from but she knew how to use these toys and use them she would! Digging back into the box, she retrieved a small round mirror with curved feet. She set it on the bed, angling it so she could see her pussy.

Almost quivering with delight now, she slid the clamp around the outer edges of her clit and watched the tiny nubbin fill with even more blood. Had Jaxon searched inside her drawer, saw that her toys were woefully inadequate or had he merely gifted her with such treasures so she would think of him? She didn't care right now. Right now only one thing mattered.

Widening the gap between her legs, she scooted the mirror closer. It seemed to grow larger, allowing her to see the full length of her pussy, the slick walls and her pulsing clit.

At the first touch of her fingertip to the nub, she bounced her hips off the bed. *Sweet Jesus!* The sensations were exquisite, so powerful. She rubbed back and forth, as soft as melted butter, but the blood had filled her clit, making it extremely sensitive.

One hand plucked at her nipples while the index finger of the other swirled over and around her clit. Ecstasy was right around the corner. The soles of her feet began to tingle and she gulped, her thighs twitching.

Just let it build.

The words should have startled her but instead they only heightened the moment. "Oh God," she whispered as her body began to shake. Climbing higher and higher, she rubbed faster, harder, grinding the tip of her finger against her clit until she cried out, pleading in the night for Jaxon.

I'm here. Let go.

The instruction reassured her and, with one final flick on her clit, she came. So hard, so gloriously perfect that her ass lifted off the mattress, her hips rocking back and forth while she almost sobbed.

As she fell back against the bed, perspiration coating her body, she felt the energy recede as if Jaxon had physically left the room. Removing the clamp with fumbling fingers, she climbed from the bed, surprised to find that her legs would barely hold her.

After cleaning herself and the clamp, she returned to the bed, switching off the lamp before she climbed beneath the sheets once more.

And before she drifted off, she swore a strong, masculine arm slid around her waist.

"Tess, wake up. The storm has turned. You need to wake up." A strong, insistent voice pulled her from a sound sleep. Disoriented and confused, she blinked around the darkness of her bedroom, her thoughts scattered. She could have sworn she'd heard Jaxon's voice but that was impossible considering it was the middle of the night and he wasn't anywhere around. Or was he?

The curtains blew wildly, whipped about by the force of the wind coming in off the ocean. She pushed herself to a sitting position and brushed the hair away from her face. She didn't need instinct to know something was wrong. Something, or rather, someone had awakened her. And dread settled into the pit of her stomach.

Thunder growled long and low in the distance and Tess climbed from her four-poster bed, padding to her window on bare feet. One look outside sent her stomach dropping to her knees. The waves roiled in a tumultuous rhythm and the sky had darkened to angry black. Jagged slices of lightning scarred the inky terrain and as the winds kept up a violent pace, Tess knew the hurricane had turned, directing its violence toward the coast of South Carolina more rapidly than the forecasters had anticipated.

The digital clock on her bedside read three a.m. According to the eleven o'clock news, she should have had at least eighteen more hours. But the storm had increased in forward velocity, arriving without warning. How could it have moved so fast? As she stared at her window a second longer, she could see the headlights of approaching vehicles. The National Guard had arrived to assist with mandatory evacuations.

This was impossible. The storm would have had to increase to at least seventy-five miles an hour to be this close to the coast! Tess swallowed her fear as she threw on a pair of jeans and a light cotton shirt. In a beach house, there would be nowhere to hide. She prayed she could make it to the mainland before the full fury of the hurricane hit. Her hands shook as she thrust her hair into a ponytail and she cursed her decision to leave at first light. But it was simply unheard of that a hurricane could gain that much speed in four hours. She'd thought she had time.

Gathering her suitcase and overnight bag, she dashed down the stairs, toward the sanctuary of her car. The wind drowned out any remaining night sounds and pounded against her ears as she pulled against the door barring her from the outdoor elements. The rain slapped the shore while the waves crept closer to her home. A loud scream, like a woman's voice, rent the air as Tess managed to grapple the door open. Her heart racing within her chest, she slammed it shut again before the winds could tear it from her grasp.

There was no escape. The storm had already moved onto the coast and the trap closed in around her. Caught like an animal in a cage, she gave a quick, desperate look around the room, which offered no respite from the onslaught. The expensive furnishings wouldn't provide enough coverage against a hurricane of this magnitude. Cursing her own stupidity, Tess dropped her suitcases and raced down the hallway, seeking shelter in the bathroom.

Packing winds of up to one hundred thirty miles per hour. The meteorologist's words resonated in her mind as she shrank down against the side of the tub. The house creaked and groaned with each blast of wind against the wooden structure. The foundation trembled and Tess squeezed her eyes shut. She prayed for safety while the beat of her heart competed with the heavy drumming of the rain on the roof. Her blood roared in her ears as her entire body shook with terror. And then the gurgling came, a forceful rush of water as the surf advanced, threatening to overtake the house and its occupant.

Tess got to her feet slowly, took one step outside the bathroom and looked to her right. Even through the blackness of the night, she could see the horrors awaiting her just outside the windows of the spare bedroom. She didn't try to stifle the scream welling up inside her throat.

The water lapped against the side panels of her house, smacked against the glass. In a matter of seconds, the house would be afloat or destroyed. And she would die with it. She sank to her knees. Tears raced down her cheeks but her sobs were silent. She tried to fight back the panic, a useless endeavor. Hopeless. She couldn't be expected to remain calm when the minutes were ticking on her mortality clock. She wasn't a soldier and she wouldn't die like a hero. Terror wrapped its icy claws around her throat.

As tears coursed down her cheeks and the sobs shook her body, she became aware of the sudden stillness. The rush quieted. Even the rains ceased and for a moment the world around her hushed. She held her breath. Was it the eye of the storm? Would she have enough time to escape now? She couldn't remember how long an eye lasted.

The silence settled around the weakened structure of the house and Tess slid up along the wall, her knees too weak to hold her completely aloft. Through eyes clouded with tears, she searched the inky interior.

Before she could make a move to the front door, it crashed open against the wall and, in a whirl of black leather, she saw her savior.

Chapter Four

Jaxon crossed the threshold, scanned the living room before directing his gaze down the hallway and finding her. Their eyes locked. Fear radiated from her shaking body. In two strides, he made it to her side and lifted her in his arms. "We have to get out of here."

"The rain, everything's stopped." Wide-eyed with wonder, Tess looked around.

"It won't hold off for long." He sheltered her against his chest and headed back toward the door.

"Is this the eye of the hurri—" She stopped talking the second he carried her across the threshold and out into the early morning.

Suspended in dead air was a wall of water, its watery grasp reaching out, barred from capturing its intended victim. Black mists swirled around them as the wind fought to free itself from a grip more powerful than its own. And the rain hung halfway between the sky and the ground, held aloft by an otherworldly force.

Bathed in the harshness of the hurricane's fury, the sky simmered above them. The oppressive heat pushed against their clothes. Even the thin, cotton material of Tess' shirt clung to her as perspiration coated her skin.

Silence descended, except for a few rumbles of thunder. A few steps ahead, a watery tunnel opened up and Jaxon heard Tess' indrawn breath. "Jaxon, what's going on?"

"We'll talk later. Now close your eyes." He didn't wait to see if she had followed his command.

She hadn't. She wanted to be aware of what happened around her, needed to see what was going on but the second the air began to contort around them, her eyelids slammed shut in a gesture of self-preservation. She felt her body evaporating, swirling through time and space and then a warm finger tapped her face and Jaxon instructed her to open her eyes.

Her eyelids blinked open, acclimating to her surroundings. Jaxon still held her but only now he was standing in the middle of a large room with a leather sofa, fire burning in the fireplace and a plush Oriental rug in front of the hearth. And he smiled at her like Tess had no reason to be concerned at all. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" Her voice came out as a strangled gasp. "You just beamed me here and you're asking me if I'm okay? No. I am a lot of things right now but okay is not one of them."

He carried her to the sofa and placed her gently against the leather. He squatted down beside her, taking one of her hands in both of his, chafing her palm gently. "I'm sorry. I didn't have time to warn you. The hurricane was coming and —"

"The hurricane wasn't coming. It was there. I was there. And—" Tess pushed herself up, her eyes scanning the room. "Why isn't it here? You live in Mount Pleasant. Why isn't the hurricane here, Jaxon?"

He sat back on his haunches and watched the emotions flicker over her face. "We aren't in Mount Pleasant, Tess. We aren't even in South Carolina right now."

She flopped back against the cushion and draped one arm over her eyes. "I'm dreaming. I didn't really wake up to a hurricane. I'm still dreaming. I still have a good eighteen hours to get out of Charleston before the hurricane hits. I've got plenty of time. I'm going to close my eyes now and this, all of this," she swept out a hand, "will disappear." She closed her eyes, squeezed them tightly.

"I'm not going to go away," Jaxon warned.

She cracked open one eye. "Couldn't you humor me?"

His lips twitched and he brushed his knuckles down her cheek. "I wish I could but you've already seen too much."

She began to shake, the terrors of the night accompanied by the incomprehensible journey to this new place—wherever it was—were too much for her to grasp. Her teeth chattered and she tugged her hand free from his grasp to wrap her arms around her body.

Jaxon waved a hand over her length and a thick afghan provided warmth. Tess' mouth fell open but she didn't give voice to the question in her mind.

"You need to sleep. When you wake up, we can talk."

"You're right. I should sleep. Maybe then I could pretend this is all some weird dream caused by too much pasta last night. And even if it isn't a dream, I don't really want to know how you did all that." She paused and dragged a hand through her tangled hair. Somewhere in the midst of the journey, she'd lost her ponytail holder. She didn't know why she thought about something so mundane. Maybe it helped to keep her grounded to reality. All of this really wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. Peering up at Jaxon, she continued in an almost inaudible voice. "You stopped the rain and that wall of water, well, I don't even know where to begin with that one."

"You're tired." He brushed away her hands and pushed her hair back behind her ears. "Sleep now."

Tess shook her head. "No, I don't think I want to sleep...at least not until you answer one question."

Jaxon's hand hovered near her face, his fingertips lightly brushing her skin. "Just one."

"Okay, but before I ask, please don't try to tell me what happened a few minutes ago was just a magic trick you learned in high school because frankly I don't even think Houdini could have pulled that one off. So I'm asking you to answer me honestly."

He didn't look away and as his silver eyes met her face, she knew his answer wasn't going to be a simple one. "I wouldn't think of answering you any other way."

"What are you?" Her voice broke on a croak.

"I'm a wizard." The three simple words were enough to send Tess into a dark, unconscious sleep.

* * * * *

"Wizard. As in Merlin?" Tess came awake slowly, blinking groggily while Jaxon stood across the room watching her.

He moved to her side instantly, tucked the blankets back around her body. A few minutes after she'd fallen asleep, he'd changed her into a nightgown with a blink and moved her to the king-size bed in his bedroom. And there he'd sat watching her sleep, fear compelling him to stay near her. He'd come close to losing her. Had he gotten to her house a minute later, he would have missed her, lost her forever. The thought terrified him. The power of their connection scared him even more.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, needing to be near her. "Something like that, yes."

"So you do magic tricks?"

The confusion in her voice made him smile. "Not tricks. Just magic."

"And that thing you did with the water and the rain, that's the type of stuff you do?"

"Only when necessary. It was necessary to save your life. Had I been able to save you without magic, I would have."

"Why?"

"Because you aren't supposed to know about me."

"I thought wizards had long white hair and beards." Tess reached up to touch his face.

He caught her hand and held it pressed against his cheek. "Only those who have chosen to grow old."

"You can choose not to grow old? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at that."

"Actually you should. I'm sure there will be more surprises before the day is through."

"I always knew there was something different about you." Tess propped herself up on her elbows and took a look around the room. "So if I'm not in South Carolina, where am I?"

"One surprise at a time." Jaxon pushed her back down against the pillows with gentle hands on her shoulders. "You need to get some more rest. I'm going to make you something to eat."

"Make as in cook it over a stove or make as in conjure something up out of thin air?" She huddled beneath the blankets, her eyes filled with suspicion.

This was going to be interesting. He sighed and stood up. "The magic isn't all of who I am. Yes, I am a wizard but I am also a man."

"A man with extraordinary abilities."

"True, but you are safe with me. I would never harm you or attempt to frighten you in any way."

"It's too late for that. You took twenty years off my life with that magic stunt of yours."

Jaxon wanted to tell her he could give her back those years but now wasn't the time. The summons just arrived. He'd been expecting it. The Assembly waited for him. And he had no doubt he would be subjected to a verbal spanking. He bent down, kissed her cheek and backed away from the bed. "I'll be back shortly. Get some more sleep."

* * * * *

It had been a long time since Jaxon had seen all the members of the Assembly congregated together and now, seated around the large oval table, they all wore matching frowns and indigo robes. And from the silence in the room, he could only assume this wouldn't be a pleasant meeting.

"Did you think we would not know what you had done?" Andion, a powerful member of the Assembly with little compassion for those wizards who stepped across the invisible lines in the sand, posed the first question.

Jaxon didn't sit. He stood with his back pressed against the heavy wooden door, his eyes scanning the room. He noticed his father sitting to Falcon's right, his mother to his left. Besides Andion, the room held Braeden, Jaxon's older brother by a century, Rane, his younger brother, Nexon, a wily wizard who much preferred to hold his tongue than to voice any dissenting opinion, and Jeridan, his father's brother. It would appear his entire family had been assembled to witness his public reprimand.

"I knew." Jaxon kept his voice quiet, yet it disturbed the members of the Assembly. Some shifted, trading glances with one another. There could be no mistaking the hardness of his tone. He would not back down, which would make their task much more difficult.

"I had asked you not to see this woman anymore," Falcon inserted, his fingers pressed together in a gesture of disapproval.

"And I told you I would see her again." Jaxon walked toward the table. "She would have died had I not intervened."

"Perhaps that would have been for the best." Andion drew Jaxon's attention once more.

His eyes narrowed, he approached, coming within a few feet of the disapproving wizard. "You would have let her die."

"We are not discussing what I would have done, Jaxon. We are discussing what you have done. You have made this woman aware of what you truly are. To that end, you have affected us all."

Jaxon swept a hand around the room and an arc of fire circled his head. "That is what this is all about? I have opened myself up to a mortal and it is the beginning of the end? Is that what you think? Tess is not just a mortal to me." Tempers flared and the flames sizzled across the marble floors. Not a wizard in the room could miss the palpable tension on Jaxon's face.

Falcon raised his hand to quiet the dissenting voices in the room. "You are in love with her. So you have said."

The urge to snap back was strong. "It is true."

"We did not just bring you here to discuss your involvement with this woman," the Assembly's leader continued.

"Her name is Tess Montgomery." Jaxon locked eyes with his mentor, refusing to back down.

Falcon accepted the resistance with a short inclination of his head. "Be seated. We have much to discuss."

Uneasiness crowded the features of his family and friends. A dark urgency swarmed the room and in an instant, Jaxon knew. His jaw hardened, his eyes narrowed. "The Coven of Allesandra is about to rise again."

His mother and father stared at their son, speaking in unison, "How could you know that?"

"I am not sure how I know. I feel it. I feel them. Did I guess correctly then?" He directed the question toward the leader.

"It is true. They have gained power as evidenced by the hurricane."

The hurricane? "What are you saying?" Though his voice was whisper-quiet, no one could miss the underlying steel.

Falcon didn't look away from Jaxon's glower. "Did you really think the hurricane's rapid approach was without assistance?"

Jaxon hadn't considered it. His only thought had been protecting Tess. His jaw tightened. "Why would they try to kill her? They don't even know her."

Andion snorted, a most undignified act for such a pompous wizard. "Perhaps you would be wise to focus on the situation at hand, Jaxon. The witches cared not about your girlfriend. They wanted to flaunt their renewed strength."

Before Jaxon could spin around to direct his wrath at the older wizard, Falcon raised his hand and continued, "As well you know, their last attempt to gain supremacy

was a difficult battle. This one will be the ultimate test of our power. We must focus, combine our strength for the war ahead. Your involvement with this...Tess," Falcon caught himself, "will only make things more difficult for you."

Jaxon sifted through the truth of what the leader said. He hadn't forgotten the last battle with the Coven. Five powerful witches with more knowledge and power than any other witch they'd ever encountered had challenged the Assembly to a majestic duel of sorts. And while the Assembly had managed to overthrow the witches, the casualties had been vast. Human lives had been lost as the witches didn't hesitate to use every means at their disposal in their attempt to oust the wizards from power.

"I understand, but Tess has already been exposed." He pinned a look at Andion's pinched face. "And I will not change what she has learned."

"You want her to know about you, about us. How completely selfish of you." The aged wizard pounced to his feet, his shoulders thrust forward in an intimidating stance. "Did you not think of anyone but yourself when you saved this woman? Or were you allowing the sexual pleasure you found in this woman's arms to outweigh your duty to your people?"

The mental counting didn't help. Jaxon took a step closer, his eyes blazing. "What is between Tess and me is not your concern."

"I beg to differ since I am one of the Assembly. You have challenged my right to retain my privacy. Some of us," Andion sniffed, "choose not to live among the mortals. You have a duty to protect those of us who desire our secrecy."

"Tess only knows of me. She knows nothing of the rest of you."

"And you believe she won't ask more questions, want more information?" Andion's voice thickened with sarcasm. "You are quite the fool, young Jaxon."

Fire sizzled from the points of Jaxon's fingertips. "Do not make the mistake of assuming I am still a child, Andion. You might not like what you reap for such an assumption."

"You would dare challenge a wizard with more years on this earth than you, someone with more power than you could ever hope to attain in a lifetime?" Andion's eyes glazed, his hands clenched into fists. "And you attempt to scare me with the paltry fireworks a mortal magician could accomplish? You have not yet seen true power." The white-haired wizard whirled and chopped the air with a sweep of his hand. Blue flames sizzled and spiked, shaping themselves as daggers and, with another wave of his hand, they sped toward Jaxon, aimed at his chest.

Jaxon didn't flinch as the flames bounced off an invisible protective wall that now surrounded him. He merely arched an eyebrow and inquired in a polite tone of voice. "If that is all you have, I have no need to worry."

Fury sparked from Andion's eyes and his arms began to circle, creating twin maelstroms that sucked the oxygen from the room and rippled the air with dark, violent rage.

"Andion, stop this at once!" Jensen leaped to his feet, rounding the table to stand beside his son. "You will not challenge my son! I forbid it! And what you discuss is of no importance now. We have to work together if we are to subdue the Coven once more."

"Jensen is right." Falcon inserted himself between Jaxon and Andion. "Andion, take your seat. Jaxon, sit. The night grows shorter and we have to discuss our next step."

Instincts putting him on the alert, Jaxon's head lifted. "I cannot. Tess is awake. I must go to her. I will return once—" he broke off. "I shall return."

* * * * *

Tess sat on the edge of the bed, testing the strength of her legs when Jaxon entered the bedroom once more. "Where am I?" she asked the question politely as if preparing to discuss the weather. She tugged the comforter over her legs, shielding her body from his view.

Jaxon gave a sigh and handed her a silk burgundy robe. "In my home."

"But not your home in South Carolina. I would appreciate more specifics, please."

He rubbed his upper lip with his index finger and tilted his head to one side, observing her wobbly effort to stand. "Do you need some help?"

With some maneuvering, she managed to slide her arms into the sleeves of the robe and belt the sash around her waist while remaining seated. "What I need are answers. That's all you can give me right now."

"We are in the Himalayan Mountains."

"Himalayan Mountains." She finally pushed herself to her feet. "I might have known. It couldn't have been someplace simple like Kansas or Arizona. No, it would have to be the Himalayan Mountains because that makes things even more difficult. How am I supposed to get a flight out of here?"

Jaxon watched her erect the wall, a defense mechanism. He resisted the urge to go to her, to pull her into his arms, to comfort her. He doubted she would appreciate the effort. She had a desire to hate him and he had no choice but to allow it. "You aren't ready to leave yet, Tess."

"I was scared. Not hurt." Her arms folded over her chest, protective, defensive.

"And you're still scared."

A spark flashed in her eyes. Jaxon recognized the battle signal. Okay, so he'd been a little wrong. She didn't just want to hate him right now. She wanted to hurt him. "I'm sure you can't be surprised by that." The words shot out like tiny daggers.

Jaxon took a few steps toward her, stopped to survey her warning posture and took two more steps, which put him at her side. He wrapped his arm around her waist, ignored the stiffening of her spine and guided her toward the window. "Look out here. What do you see?"

"I see mountains and I'm not interested in a history lesson." She held up one hand and visibly collected herself. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to snap at you. I haven't thanked you for saving my life."

"There's no need."

"You risked a lot to save me."

"The risk was minimal." He deflected her gratitude.

"Well, regardless, thank you. And I hope this doesn't sound ungrateful but I would like to know when I can get out of here."

He brushed her hair with his palm. "We have to talk first."

"Actually I've decided we don't. In fact you can keep all your secrets to yourself. I'm not interested. Not at all. It's better this way. I can go about my life and you can do whatever it is you do when I'm not around. I presume when you left me, you were with the other wizards." Tess stopped, angled her body so she could get a better look at his face. "One can only assume there are more of you. I can't imagine you would be the only one remaining."

He hated that Andion was right. He had known this would come but it didn't make it any easier to deal with. Tess deserved the truth but it wasn't going to do her any favors. "There are more like me, yes."

"How many more?"

"I haven't counted."

She pulled away from him. "These mountains, they're where you go to hide when you can't deal with the outside world, right?"

"This is my home." The words were simply stated. Jaxon didn't defend who he was. There was no need.

"And what about South Carolina. What is that?"

"I live in two different worlds, Tess. That is my choice. I cannot change who I am. I can only change how I live."

"You mean you've chosen to live like I do, as a human?"

"Yes."

"And you can choose not to?"

"Yes."

"Could you elaborate?"

Jaxon smiled. She was irritated. He liked that better than fear. "I have chosen to live my life as you do simply because I like the way you live in your world. There is a sense of freedom I do not have otherwise. Would you like to sit down?"

"No, I don't want to get comfortable. I just want the truth." She fidgeted with her hands. "You kissed me like a man." Her head tilted. "You did everything like a man."

"I am a man." He watched a combination of confusion and suspicion skate across her face.

"No, you're not. You're a wizard."

"Okay, fine. I'm a male wizard with all the desires and needs of a man."

She turned her back on him, directing her gaze out the window, but Jaxon didn't need to see her face to know indecision warred within her. A part of her wanted to run, to escape what she didn't understand but the other part, the part he hoped was the strongest, was interested, intrigued even. "I have to let Belinda know where I am. Of course, she'll never understand how I could be in the Himalayan Mountains so soon. I mean you can't get to Asia by plane in twelve hours. That's how long it's been since we saw each other, Belinda and I. She would never understand. But I have to call her." She stopped, looked over her shoulder. "Do you even have phones up here?"

"You can call your friend but what you can tell her will be limited." He had moved to stand behind her and his hands now fell to her shoulders, massaging gently to ease the tension.

"You don't need to tell me that. I'm not about to get on the phone with my friend and tell her I've met a real-life wizard. She'll think I've finally gone over the edge."

"And we couldn't have that now, could we?" He nuzzled her neck with his lips. He loved her scent, the taste of her skin. She was more intoxicating than his first magic spell, more powerful than his most recent. And she was scared. He didn't like that he had frightened her, that knowledge of his world had frightened her. "I know you have a lot more questions and I will answer those I can."

"Which means you're going to continue to keep things from me. You know, I don't think we can have any type of relationship. You have too many secrets, secrets which shouldn't be told to anyone, least of all a human." Tess turned, her body brushing his. "Are you in trouble?"

He lifted one eyebrow. "In trouble?"

"With your group, the other wizards, for telling me?"

"They weren't happy."

"What did they do to you?"

He brushed at her hair. "Nothing. They did nothing."

She lifted her hand and captured his. "I knew there was something different about you."

"You've said that already."

"I felt like repeating it." She ducked her head and rested her forehead against his chest. "So, is it like against the rules for me to be here with you like this?"

"I have no rules. How I choose to live my life is my own business."

"Hmm, I doubt the other wizards think that way."

Jaxon chuckled, dropping his chin to the top of her head. "You have a lot of wisdom, Ms. Montgomery."

"But I wasn't wise enough to figure you out."

"Most people cannot figure me out. That doesn't lessen your intellect or wisdom." His hands rubbed her arms, soothing.

"And do you whisk those people to your home in an attempt to help them?"

Jaxon kissed her hair. "You are the first woman I've brought to my home. And the only mortal."

Tess shivered. "I don't know that I like that word. Mortal. It implies you're not mortal."

His arms enveloped her. Would it help her to know she was the only woman he'd ever wanted to bring here? The only one he could imagine letting into his world? "Let's take one big leap at a time. Too much information will only add to your fears."

She pushed against his chest. "Don't treat me like a child. You haven't before now and I don't need to be coddled just because I know what you are."

"Duly noted. Are you ready to eat?"

Her stomach rumbled in response. "I suppose I do need to keep my strength up. In case I need to run for my life."

"You did not believe me when I told you I would not hurt you?"

"I believed you but there is only so much a woman can take in one day, especially when you're considering the type of things I'm seeing." She followed his lead out of the bedroom.

He gave her a wry smile. "Then I shall have to be extremely careful."

"Will I meet the others?"

Jaxon came to a dead stop in the middle of the hallway. "I don't think that would be a wise idea right now."

"They don't approve."

"It is difficult to please a wizard."

"Hmm, I haven't found that to be the case." She slid her hand along his stomach as she strolled past him, leaving him standing in the middle of the hallway with erotic images dancing in his head.

"Damn."

* * * * *

"Okay, let me get this straight. You left town with Jaxon and you're not sure when you're coming back. Where are you going?" Belinda's voice held depths of worry.

Tess clutched the receiver to her ear, grateful for the sound of her friend's voice, a link to sanity in this world gone mad. "I'm not sure. He hasn't told me yet." Though she kept her voice soft, she didn't doubt Jaxon could hear every word. He hadn't left the bedroom.

"And have you told your mother?"

Tess chuckled a little, picturing Colleen Montgomery's mouth falling open in a perfectly scandalized manner. Her mother never showed emotion. They were a sign of weakness and the Montgomery family could never be called weak. They'd made their fortune steamrolling over the less fortunate. In her father's desperate bid for the top rung of the ladder, he'd turned his back on his best friend, sold him out to the highest bidder and then walked out on his wife when his secretary offered greener pastures.

It was no wonder the Montgomerys didn't have too many friends. Except for Tess. She had Belinda who had stuck by her side through the trials of growing up in the Montgomery family, had helped her sneak out of the house at midnight so she could be one of the girls, had even covered for her when Tess was too hung over to come to the phone when her mother had called. And now Tess heard her own voice lying to Belinda. She hated it, hated the way it made her feel inside.

"Hello? Are you still there?" Belinda called her back to the present.

"Yes, I'm still here. I'm sorry. I was drifting for a moment. Mother hasn't met Jaxon."

"I should hope not! I haven't met him either."

"You will and so will my mother...eventually." Tess hoped anyway. For once, she wanted Colleen to approve of someone she'd fallen in love with instead of giving her a million reasons why the man was unacceptable as a potential husband.

"Well, that answers my next question. You haven't even told her about Jaxon or where you are. You haven't told me where you are for that matter."

"We're headed up the coast. I think we're going to catch a flight out of Bangor. Jaxon owns some property in the mountains."

"Which mountains?"

The lie clogged in Tess' throat. "Look, just tell Mother I'll call her later. I have to go now. He's waiting for me in the car. I'll miss you."

"How can you not know when you're coming back?"

"Because I'm not so sure I want to come back, Belle."

The line crackled with static and silence before Belinda responded in a small, slightly wounded tone of voice. "Oh, I see."

Tess sighed, retracted her words. "That's not what I meant. Of course I'll miss you but when I'm with Jaxon, it's like...magic." She wasn't too far from the truth.

"Well, I guess I can't fault you on that one. Just promise me you'll keep in touch."

"I promise. As much as I can. Don't forget to tell Mother and if you wouldn't mind, contact my attorney and have him take care of the house for me. He'll know what to do."

"And if he asks questions?"

"He doesn't get paid to ask questions." A knot the size of a peach settled in the pit of Tess' stomach and suddenly all she wanted to do was end the conversation. "I really have to go now."

"You do realize Colleen's going to flip."

"My mother flips over a broken nail. I'll talk to you soon."

"You'd better."

Tess replaced the receiver and dropped her head, her hands shaking a little. "I don't know what I'm doing." She sensed Jaxon standing behind her.

"You're listening to your heart." His arms went around her waist, settled her against his chest. He held her tight, offering strength, but Tess knew the offer included more. A bond had been forged, probably unbreakable considering the man behind her...or the wizard rather.

She tilted her head back to see his face. "And you can convince me this is all real, that I haven't lost my mind?"

Jaxon circled her in his arms, drawing her even closer to his body. "Doesn't this feel real?"

She rested her head on his chest, unsure of how to respond. "I'm not even sure I know what real is anymore. I can tell you, for now, it feels right but that doesn't mean it is right. Amazing chemistry doesn't build a strong relationship." And incredible sex. She couldn't forget the incredible sex.

He cupped her chin, lifted her head to see her eyes. "Look into my eyes. Tell me what you see."

She focused on the silver-gold orbs. They were a potent draw. She could see herself in the swirls, see the promise. She quickly looked away before she started to melt. Those eyes were her downfall. "This can't be happening."

His arms tightened. "But it is and we both need to accept it."

"That's easy for you to say. There's not much for you to accept. But there's a whole lot for me to accept."

"Granted, but you're not alone."

"Except when you fly off and leave me." A whisper of a smile touched her lips. "Do you fly?"

"Sometimes but mostly, no."

"Oh, that's right. You prefer to beam. Sorry, my mistake."

He grinned down into her face. "I like your sense of humor."

"Wait until you see my temper." Tess knew she should push away from him but her arms crept around his neck, brought him closer. "In the meantime, you could really help to ease some of my fears."

"And how could I do that?" He leaned in, his lips inches away from hers.

"Kiss me. Make me believe I'm really here. That we're really here. That—" Her words were silenced by the press of his lips.

A hungry explosion of exploration and heat, the kiss took on a life of its own, stifling breaths, fusing their mouths together in a passionate surge. His hand cupping

the back of her head, Jaxon swept his tongue into her mouth, twirling it around hers, before drawing back to suck on her lower lip.

Tess' hands fisted in his thick, brown hair as she ground her hips into the thickness of his cock discernible even under his jeans. She shifted, rubbing her body up and down against that delicious warmth. Low curses vibrated against her lips while rough hands dove underneath her robe to cup the fullness of one breast. Desire pushed rationale aside and she tumbled backward, toward the cushiony softness of the bed.

He lifted his head and pinned her with eyes filled with desire. "Do you really want me to make this real for you?"

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she nodded.

He slid one hand along her cheek. "Then close your eyes and don't open them until I tell you to."

Slightly hesitant, Tess obeyed, trying not to peek.

"No peeking." His finger traced the bridge of her nose.

"I wasn't peeking," she lied.

His hands slipped beneath her thighs, lifting her as he had when he'd saved her. "Where are you taking me?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you ask too many questions?"

"Many times." She nestled against his chest, loving the feel of the strong muscles against her. "So where are you taking me?"

"Shhh." He bumped his forehead against hers. "Open your eyes. We're already here."

Tess cracked open one eye first and quickly slammed it shut. She couldn't have seen what she thought she'd seen. Water. Everywhere. Surrounding them. "Umm, Jaxon, I don't know if you remember this or not but I came close to drowning. Not really a big fan of water right now."

Chuckling, he lowered her until her feet touched something cool and slick. "You're not going to drown." His thumbs caressed the corners of her mouth. "Now open your eyes and look around. I want you to see my world."

With an extreme amount of caution, Tess opened both eyes and sucked in a breath so sharp her lungs ached. They floated below the surface of the ocean surrounded by walls and floors made only of glass. A blowfish bumped against one side of the bubble and she could only stare, fascinated as sea life came alive in front of her.

From striped bass to hammerheads, the ocean was a hive of vibrant activity. An octopus lumbered by, sending out a spray of dark ink which splattered against the glass. Tess shrieked and backed away, bumping into Jaxon's solid chest.

"H-how is this possible?"

"Weren't you listening? Anything is possible now, baby." The gurgle of the ocean combined with the sexy drawl of his voice sent her senses into overload. "Now what was it you wanted me to do again?"

He didn't give her time to answer before he lifted the hair away from her neck and started to kiss his way down to the collar of the robe. Sucking on one earlobe, he dragged her closer against his body, enabling her to feel the fullness of his erection.

Tess leaned back and wrapped one arm around his neck, pulling him closer. His fingers slid down the side of her breasts, dropping lower to reach the tie holding the robe closed.

The material fell away, slithering against the floor like a crystal snake. He simply touched the front of her nightgown and it parted. "Oh yeah, this is what I wanted to see." Lifting one breast, he took the nipple into his mouth, nibbling and suckling until she writhed against him.

Hunger slammed into her and she rode it wave after wave while sparks sizzled down her spine. She knew she should be angry with him, should question him. But later. For now she just wanted to know, to feel that he was real. She cried out for him, her hands extending but he moved out of her reach, his fingers hooking in the thin scrap of expensive silk covering her pussy. He bared her treasures to his gaze and she felt the heat of those sinful eyes impaling her before he dropped to his knees.

Water sloshed against the sides of the walls and but for the tiny glow of a string of lights lining the top of the glass ball, their world would have been dark. Grateful for the ability to see Jaxon's face, she watched him slide down onto the floor.

Looking up at her, he winked and crooked his finger. "Come to me."

Her knees wobbled. "I'm right here."

He shook his head. "Lower."

Bracing her hands against the cool glass, she lowered her body until she hovered over the top of Jaxon's face. "Is this what you want?"

In response, he grabbed her hips and tugged her down hard, grinding her pussy against his mouth.

Tess' hands smacked the wall while a seahorse bumped against it, its eager nose pressing close to the glass. As she stared at the small creature, Jaxon's tongue lavished her, worshiped her, his hot mouth suckling on her clit like a fine piece of candy. He buried his face deeper into her pussy, grasping the globes of her ass to press her even closer.

A wave shifted the bubble, making Tess' knees hit the shiny floor while her hands curled into fists. "Oh, that's good," she whispered, encouraging him by rocking her hips forward.

Teeth nibbling, fingers pulsing against her flesh, he dove into her, inhaling her scent, savoring her cream. She couldn't see his face, only the darkness of his hair against her thighs, but she could feel every inch of his deliciously perfect tongue as he slipped the hot member inside her channel.

While he licked the walls of her pussy, his fingers stayed busy rubbing her cheeks, his thumbs tweaking the plump orbs. Her palms grew damp and she flattened them against the wall again.

She was close. Her scalp started to tingle and her vision became hazy. Every muscle in her body drew taut, constricting into one tight knot before exploding into a burst of sweet bliss.

Her hands slipped down the wall while she rode out the orgasm, screaming Jaxon's name and rocking her hips back and forward. Every nerve cell reacted, sweeping her away into a powerful vortex.

Just like that it was over, leaving her weak, breathless, replete.

Jaxon lifted her up and stood. "You taste like sweet wine." He kissed her, allowing her to test the veracity of his words. With a groan, he lifted his head. "We must go back."

The bubble rocked again and Tess looked around, noticing for the first time that the frenzied movement of their glass cell had drawn several spectators. With a laugh, she touched the wall and the sea creatures moved closer. "It's beautiful here."

"We can come back anytime."

"Good, but next time, it's my turn on the floor."

* * * * *

"The Coven will not wait much longer. Even now I can feel their impatience." Falcon crossed his legs, waved a hand toward an empty chair.

Jaxon sat opposite his mentor, one hand tapping a rhythm on the dark wooden table separating them. "How much longer do you think we have?"

"Days maybe, a week if we're lucky."

The old wizard's eyes rested on Jaxon. "I will need you here."

Eyes closed, Jaxon drew in a breath. He'd felt that one coming since his arrival. And now would come a speech about the all-important requirements of the Assembly. "I can't leave Tess."

"Your strength is needed here."

"You have Andion and my father as well as my uncle. Their combined strengths are enough. I will be here when I can."

Falcon rose, never in a rush, strolling around the circular meeting room. His soft-soled boots made little sound against the marble floor. Only the swish of his robe could be heard. "You are next in line to take my place as leader of the Assembly."

An invisible hand seemed to close around Jaxon's throat. "That's impossible! My father is the second oldest wizard. The right of passage should fall to him."

"The leader is not chosen simply because of age."

"I cannot rule over family members older than I am. Besides, this is a moot conversation considering you are going to live forever."

Falcon smiled and waved away the comment. "No one lives forever, Jaxon."

"You're an immortal."

"But even an immortal can choose not to live forever." The meaning was clear.

Jaxon got to his feet, shoving the chair out of the way with the heel of his boot. "Why would you choose not to live? You are needed here. You would never turn your back on the Assembly."

"No, that I would never do. But I have trained you for this purpose, to assume the role of leader. When next we face the Coven, we shall need a strong commander to take charge. You have the power now."

"Leading was never my choice."

"Who you are makes you a leader, Jaxon. There is no choice to make. The authority will be yours."

Palms against his temples, Jaxon backed away. "Tess is waiting for me. I have to get back."

"If you insist on keeping her with you, you should prepare her for what lies ahead."

"It is too soon."

"The Coven will not wait for you to gain the courage to enlighten her."

The warning followed Jaxon, weighing heavily on his heart.

* * * * *

Tess took her time inspecting the house. She wasn't quite sure what she was looking for, a hidden passage maybe, a secret library. Her reading skills were admittedly lacking when it came to wizards and fairy tales but perhaps it wasn't too late to brush up on the subject.

Jaxon had spared no expense in decorating the home. Filled from brick end to brick end with tastefully framed art, solid antiques and vases from the Ming Dynasty, the house was a picture peeled off the pages of *Home Beautiful*. The banister was lined with gold, the doorknobs twenty-four karat. Belgian lace covered the windows and imported carpets graced the floors. Ornate chandeliers hung suspended from intricately designed chains woven with mother-of-pearl and gossamer silk. Each room screamed wealth and class. All of this from a South Carolina contractor. Tess descended the staircase in her search for more of Jaxon's secrets.

The library wasn't too difficult to find. Books called to her and with floor-to-ceiling shelves lining the walls, she could move into the room and never leave. She whirled around in the center of the plush area rug, her arms open wide. She loved everything about libraries, the old smell, the quietness but especially the feel of the books in her hands.

She poured over a thick novel, an escapade involving a worn hero's daring attempt to save his lover from the hands of a wicked warlord, when a shadow fell across the room. For a second, she couldn't breathe. The air tightened, thickened. Jumping to her feet, she twirled around in a circle, looking for an intruder but she was alone. The room was empty and she could breathe once more.

Tess closed the book and pushed it back from the edge of the desk. "Jaxon?" Her voice was a whisper, fear tapping her on the shoulder, making her aware of the possibility she had a visitor other than Jaxon. A visitor who wouldn't be welcome in his home.

A movement caught her eye and she shot out of the library, racing out into the hallway in time to see an apparition float against the wall. A dark, hazy shadow, it reached gray fingers to disturb the art as it moved. Doorknobs turned and chairs moved as it glided down the long stretch of hallway.

Tess followed, more than slightly hysterical. In the past twenty-four hours, she'd faced hurricanes, walls of water held still by the whim of a hand, her body disintegrating into thin air, a wizard and now a spirit. Her head spun while her world tilted crazily.

"You must be Jaxon's little girlfriend." The apparition solidified into a beautiful woman with flowing black hair and eyes the color of midnight. Her skin was so pale, it was almost translucent, her voice a musical cadence which mesmerized her victim.

Tess blinked at the spirit woman and fisted her hands in the pockets of the robe she still wore. "Who are you?"

The laughter was a tinkle of sound. "You mean he hasn't mentioned me? How disappointing. I never imagined Jaxon would be so misguided. I mean to actually believe he could fit into the world below. It's clearly a place he doesn't belong." Long fingernails scratched the light switch plate as the cold gaze raked over Tess' body. "I can't imagine what he sees in you. You're not exactly his type of woman."

"I don't know who you are but I'm sure I don't want to have this conversation with you."

The gauzy material of the long, blue dress floated around her ankles as the spirit crossed her legs in midair. "No, I can't imagine you would. It would appear Jaxon is keeping you firmly ensconced in the dark."

Tess' irritation climbed another notch. She had had just about enough of these spirits, wizards and faeries. She thought she'd been open-minded enough. But she had to draw the line somewhere. It appeared she'd have to draw it with the ghostly visitor. "Get out." She made her voice firm.

More laughter greeted the instruction. "You think you can just order me out and I will obey your commands? You cannot force me to leave here. I am part of the earth, part of the sky. I go where I want to go, stay as long as I want to stay."

"Until I tell you to leave." Jaxon materialized beside Tess, taking hold of her arm. The words whipped out of him, saturated in fury. Power and darkness swirled around

him. His face was implacable, his eyes twin darts of rage and as the air grew heavy, Tess could only watch as the wizard and the ghost squared off.

"You are back soon. I thought you would be with your little buddies for at least another hour or so. You know how they like to drone on." The spirit observed her fingernails before dropping her hands back to her sides. "I've missed you, Jaxon. It has been a while since you and I have played one of our little games. Haven't you missed the challenge?"

"You will leave my house now." His hand swept up, opening the door. "Don't make me send you out."

"Such theatrics. Fine. I shall go but I think I shall have another conversation with your little friend in the future. You will make sure she understands about my conversation, won't you?"

A low growl of fury, a blast of wind and Jaxon had sped forward, his hand closing around the apparition's throat. Tess didn't have time to think how he could actually capture a ghost. She backed toward the stairs, horror lodging in her throat. Who was this woman? This ghost? And how had she gotten involved with a man who was born a wizard?

"You will leave my home and you will not return. To do so would be at your own peril." The words simmered out of him, low and deep. Tess could barely make them out. She saw a flash of fear in the spirit's eyes. Seeing firsthand Jaxon's tenuous hold on control, she understood why even the ghosts would be afraid of him.

Shimmering blue light encapsulated the spirit and then she disappeared, fading into the night. Jaxon's hands fell and his breaths came in hard, struggling gasps. "Tess, are you all right?"

She continued to back up the stairs before stopping on the third. "Actually that would be no. Not right at this point, I'm not. In fact I don't think I'm going to be all right for some time. I'm going to go upstairs now and try to absorb what just happened here. You know you just scared off a ghost."

"She wasn't a ghost." He walked toward her. "Her name is Athena and she is a witch, a very powerful witch."

"Oh, of course." Tess nodded slowly. "A witch. Because you can't have wizards without some witches being in the mix. Of course. I understand perfectly now." Her hand bit into the banister, her only link to reality.

"If you will let me explain—"

She held up one hand. "Don't bother. I'm not interested in half-truths and you won't tell me the secrets you don't think I should know. It doesn't matter because I'm not interested in learning more than I already know. I want to go back to my own life, Jaxon. I just want to go home. Can you please tell me how I can get home?"

In two strides, he had joined her on the stairs, his arms reaching out for her, drawing her into his embrace. He held her tightly, her head pressed against his chest.

His intention was to comfort but his words graduated the fear to terror. "Tess, you *are* home."

Chapter Five

Tess didn't want to waste her energy arguing but her pride made her push him away. "What do you mean? I'm not going to be allowed to return to my home now?"

The look on Jaxon's face gave her the answer she really didn't want even before he spoke. "Did you really think I'd be able to send you back after all that you've seen?"

"And it is all about what you want, isn't it?"

"There's a lot more at stake here." He reached for her again but she held up one hand, unwilling to hear his explanation.

"What is at stake is my life."

"Your life will be here."

"And I don't get a choice?" She wanted to hit him. "I suppose you think a few fucks entitle you to run my life now. Why am I not surprised? Except for the magic, you're just a typical male!"

With a sigh, Jaxon managed to take her in his arms again. He nuzzled her neck and brought her closer to the warmth of his body. "Look, I'll be happy to debate this with you later but for now..." His words trailed off.

Moving her head to evade his lips, she fisted against his shirt, drawing his gaze down to her face. "I have another question for you."

"I'm listening."

"What happens now? Now that I'm here, I mean? Do your people not have laws against kidnapping?"

His knuckles brushed her cheeks. "It's not kidnapping." His eyes seemed to burn into hers. "And do you really want to leave?"

Her teeth worried the inside of her cheek. "What are my options?" When he didn't respond, she frowned. "Why did I even ask that question? And why are you asking me if I really want to leave? You already know the answer! Do you enjoy fucking with peoples' lives, Jaxon? Do your people get a thrill out of moving us around like pieces on a chessboard?"

Jaxon fisted his hands in her hair and met her studious gaze with a hard look of his own. "This is not a game to us, Tess." He shot a curse up at the ceiling. "I have to go."

"Let me guess. You have to rush off to vanquish something." Bitterness coated her voice.

He slid one hand along her spine. "I'd much rather stay here with you. I want you to understand...and maybe one day you will."

Tess pulled back to see his face. "I was kidding about the vanquishing something but you obviously aren't. You're going off to kill something or someone, rather. Should I ask? Do I want to know?"

Jaxon kissed her to interrupt the flow of words. "I don't have much time. All I can tell you right now is that Athena has four sister witches. Together, they are called the Coven of Allesandra and they have a plan in mind that, left to their own devices, will change the course of the world."

Tess slapped a hand to her forehead and stumbled back against the banister. "Oh, here we go. World domination and all that. You know, I was wondering when this was going to come into play. Do you realize how utterly bizarre this sounds?"

His hands framed her face. "I can only imagine. I have lived with who I am my entire life. You're getting slapped in the face with it far too quickly. I wish I could slow things down a bit but there isn't a lot of time."

"Are the witches planning their bid for world domination tonight?"

"Probably not."

Tess sighed and took hold of his hand, her anger diminishing. Each time she touched him, she lost a little of what she'd left behind. The magic was all too real, the man even more so. Nibbling at her lower lip, she brought his hand to her cheek.

"Then you can stay with me tonight." She heard Jaxon's breath catch and she smiled a little. One point for the home team. "I don't want to be alone in this house again, Jaxon. What if Athena comes back? I mean ghosts I can handle but I think I'm a little out of my league when it comes to dealing with witches."

His palm rasped against her skin. "You might be for now."

Tess didn't ask any questions. There would be plenty of time for that later. For now she wanted to concentrate on surviving one day at a time. "Is my life ever going to be the same?"

Jaxon walked up the stairs, taking her with him. He paused long enough to answer her question. "There is one way." He continued up the stairs, reaching the top landing before he faced her again. "I can erase your memories or, to be more accurate, rewind the clock."

"You can change time?"

"Something like that. You would have no memory of me, this house or anything I've told you. Your life would resume as it was before we met."

Tess blinked, considered his words. "You can't just rewind it to before the hurricane? I don't think I want to go back before I met you."

He smiled at that. "I'm afraid it's either all or nothing. The Assembly would not be willing to risk your discovering this information again. And I'm not so sure I could stay away from you."

She walked past him and into the bedroom. "And if I choose not to go back, what happens then?"

He moved so fast he now stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. He pressed her against him, leaning her against his strength. "Then we'll be together for a very long time." Ever so gently, he moved his hands upward to cup her breasts and Tess felt a long sigh leave her body.

"How long is a very long time?"

"Forever." Lips traveling across the back of her neck, he began to massage her breasts through the thin material of the robe. "And that really wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

Tess' heart began to thunder. How did he expect her to think when he was touching her like this? "Jaxon, you can't expect me to just accept this. I barely know you. I mean we've slept together and I do feel a connection but to expect a relationship is unreasonable."

One hand left her breast to travel over her stomach. The heat of his palm burned her skin and Tess arched beneath it as it moved to caress her between her thighs. "Our way is much different from the ways of mortals. When a wizard falls in love, he knows immediately. There is no question in his mind. He just knows. We have no doubts, no fears and usually the woman doesn't either." Clever fingers pressed against her clit, causing little electrical shocks to travel from her pelvis to her toes.

"So why is this time different? Why don't I know?" Conversation was becoming more and more difficult as the pressure of Jaxon's fingers increased. "You should stop," she whispered.

"I will...in a minute." His lips grazed her neck, her cheek while his fingers lightly pinched her through her panties.

"You haven't answered my question." Her breaths came in short gasps. And then he was touching her, warm skin against wet. Where had her panties gone? Could he have removed her clothing without her knowledge? The thought brought a bubble of hysterical laughter. Of course he could. He was a wizard, for God's sake. He could do anything.

She tried to remember why she should push him away but his fingers were sliding in between the crease of her pussy and she couldn't think. "M-my questions," she managed to stutter.

"Later. For now I want to listen to you come."

The hardness of his cock pressed against her spine and she couldn't resist grinding her hips against it. He swore below his breath and shoved two fingers deep inside her pussy.

Tess cried out and rocked forward, squeezing the muscles of her channel. His thumb flicked against her clit and her legs began to shake. "Jaxon, please." She didn't know what she was begging for other than release.

"Do you like this?"

Her head fell back against his chest. "Yes, yes." How could she not? His thumb worried her clit until it became engorged with blood. Just the slightest scrape of his finger created wicked sensations in the pit of her stomach.

"Should I stop?" The naughty whisper was meant to tease, to entice, but Tess wasn't in the mood for games.

She clasped her hand around his wrist to hold him in place and began to ride his fingers as if they were a cock. The moist noises of her wet cunt pumping against his hand were the only sound in the room save her staccato breaths.

God, this was perfect. The thickness of Jaxon's shaft against her back, the heat of his body and the erotic scent of his masculinity—a heady mixture of spice and earthly male—drove her nearly mad. And she wanted his cock to be inside her instead of his fingers. "Jaxon, fuck me."

He pumped harder, alternately pinching and rubbing her clit. "There's no time." His teeth nipped at her neck while he worked a third finger inside her scorching channel. He was rewarded with a small squeal of delight. "Later, I'll fuck you but now I want to hear you come."

His blood heated to boiling levels as she pushed ferociously against his fingers, jackknifing her hips forward to press her clit against his thumb. He didn't want to stop, wanting to spend the next few hours, days, in bed with her, tasting her, caressing her. Fucking her over and over again until she forgot all about South Carolina and the home she'd left behind.

"I can't hear you," he whispered.

"God, this is so good," she replied in a broken voice that was half plea and half growl.

"Are you close?"

The words sent her spiraling, whipping her body into a vortex of feeling, powerful emotions draining her. The orgasm gripped her so tightly her entire body arched upward. She cried out, hearing only the sound of her voice but not the words. And when her muscles relaxed, she collapsed against Jaxon's chest, melting into his strength.

He held her close against him for a moment longer before removing his hand and restoring her clothing. Kissing the top of her head, he turned her in his arms and rested his forehead to hers. "Now, in answer to your question, to date, no wizard has ever fallen in love with a mortal."

How could he think about resuming the conversation when she was so deliciously tired? Her hands crept up to clasp his forearms. "So you're a black sheep, so to speak?"

He kissed the tip of her nose. The gentle gesture warmed her from the inside out. "I guess you could say that. More like a renegade. But my family will come to accept you eventually. It will just take time."

His warm breath bathed her face and Tess closed her eyes. She wanted to sink into him, to drop into his arms and allow him to take her away from her thoughts, her fears

again. It wasn't conceivable she had fallen utterly in love with him, not in such a short amount of time, but the emotions were strong, overwhelming almost. She knew him by touch, by the scent of his skin. And each time they made love, she wanted him with a mind-numbing desperation.

"I wish I could stay with you now."

"You're a busy wizard and now you have this witch thing to deal with." She laughed a little. In truth, she needed some time alone. Perhaps to convince herself that what was happening was real. Or maybe to try to wake up from this dream.

"You'll be safe here. Now that Athena has played her cards, I'll put the proper protection into place."

"Let me guess, a fire-breathing dragon?"

Jaxon chuckled and brushed his knuckles down her cheek. "You're thinking too medieval. It's a simple spell, designed to keep out the bad guys...or witches." He winked at her and took a step back, taking hold of her hand. "If you need me, just say my name."

"And you'll come running?"

"Or beaming." His hand gripped hers for one second longer before he released her.

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation. Just go, but before you do—" She snatched him back, dragging him by the collar, captured his lips. Instantly Jaxon responded, pressing her against the wall. His hands fisted in her hair, pulling her under a torrent of desire.

She wrapped herself in his taste, the warm feel of his lips against hers. His kiss was elemental in its possession. Branded her. Claimed her. And Tess wouldn't fight him. Couldn't fight him. The desire to leave him vanished. She needed him. Craved him.

Jaxon raised his head and kissed her hard one last time. "The summons is much stronger now. I have to go."

She caught his hand, feeling almost guilty. "Wait. What about..." she ended her sentence with a raised eyebrow.

He grinned, a lazy sensual grin. "We can pick this up later."

"Tonight," she corrected.

He chuckled. "It's a date." The kaleidoscope evaporated, taking Jaxon with it.

Something was wrong. Tess sensed a change in the atmosphere. The sky outside had grown dark, not the ordinary dark signaling the approach of evening but a deep, rich black that warned of impending danger. Clouds boiled overhead and thunder rippled in the air. As the storm brewed, she stepped out onto the front porch, casting her eyes toward the sky.

"What's going on up there? I presume that is where you are." She didn't know if she was talking to Jaxon or to herself. She couldn't hear him but she felt him, a sensuous

whisper of his hand against her skin. The touch should have reassured her but Tess was a born worrier and as such she didn't let problems go so easily.

* * * * *

"Your lady is disturbed," Andion announced in a haughty tone of voice.

"She can feel the dissension," Jaxon responded, taking up position opposite the elder wizard as if preparing for hand-to-hand combat.

"Perhaps you should go reassure her," the older wizard sneered blatantly.

"Do we not have enough to think about without having to referee the two of you?" Rane came to stand beside his brother, giving Andion a hard look. "I thought we were here to talk about the witches."

"And we would be able to do so if Jaxon would be so kind as to drag his mind back to the subject instead of worrying about the woman he left behind." Andion strolled around the meeting table, his hands clasped together in front of him. "Maybe it would be better if we asked her to join us."

Jaxon saw the wizard's intention one second too late. With a wave of his hand, Andion had taken hold of Tess and lifted her from the safety of Jaxon's house. Through a clear bubble, the wizards could see Tess squirming in the palm of the wizard's giant hand as he moved it across the sky.

"Damn you, Andion! Put her down!" Jaxon's fury consumed him, taking control. The words burst forth out of his throat, an ancient spell of cursing, but he took no pleasure in watching the wizard's knees buckle.

Andion smiled grimly and tipped his hand. Jaxon watched in horror as Tess began to slide across the opened fingers.

Falcon swirled into the room, his white hair standing on end. His hand disappeared into the mist and easily captured Tess' falling body. Then, curling his fingers around her, he brought her safely in, easing her through the portal to the Assembly's room.

Her eyes were huge in her face by the time the leader settled her feet on the floor. Jaxon went to her immediately, taking her in his arms, but she didn't accept his comfort. Instead she pushed against his chest. "Which one of you did that?"

"Tess, wait." Jaxon tried to control her but she'd already moved out of his embrace. She circled the room, her steps controlled. Only Jaxon read the fury in her posture, the rage clouding her eyes.

"Was it you?" Tess jabbed her index finger at his brother's chest.

Rane smiled. "No, it was not me."

"Oh, you think this is funny? You think it's amusing to play with my life simply because I'm a human? Well, you don't see me laughing, do you?"

"Tess, wait a minute." Jaxon attempted once more to rein her in.

She held up one hand. "Stop it. Just stop it. I want to know which one of your friends was laughing at my expense. Which one thought it would be funny to dangle me from the tips of his fingers as if I was nothing more than a pesky mosquito." Blue eyes filled with anger zeroed in on Andion's tall thin frame. "Was it you?"

Andion tapped one finger against his chin. "It was. And Jaxon, you would be wise to control your woman."

Jaxon grimaced as Tess' temper exploded. "You arrogant son of a bitch! You almost killed me! Does that mean nothing to you? Does my life mean so little to you because I am not one of you? How dare you assault me and then shrug as if it were of no importance! I hope those witches find you and I hope you're the first casualty of this war." She thumped the wizard's chest and gasped when he stumbled and fell to his knees. She inspected her hand as if to reassure herself it was just an ordinary hand.

Andion clutched at the back of a chair, his face growing white. "It would appear I underestimated your power, young Jaxon. Your spell seems to be taking effect."

"It would appear." Jaxon felt no mercy nor would he give any. Tess' eyes touched his face and curiosity burned strong in her gaze. But he could tell her nothing.

"Is he going to die?" She touched his arm.

Jaxon continued to watch the fallen wizard. "No, but he will suffer. And he will think twice before putting your life at risk again."

Falcon grimaced and cleared his throat. "That will be enough, Jaxon. It is time to release him. We have a visitor." He cast a pointed glance at Tess.

"He didn't really hurt me. He just scared me. Jaxon, that's enough." Tess knelt down beside the wizard, taking his shoulders in her hands. "He's hurting. Please stop."

Jaxon's face cleared and in a low, gravelly whisper, he released the ancient wizard from the grasp of the spell. "Do not expect an apology, Andion. You could have killed her."

Andion swayed as he climbed to his feet, Tess' arm supporting him. "I would not have killed her."

"She did not know that." He turned his back on the shaking wizard and Tess while Falcon frowned at him in displeasure.

"Well, now that act one of our little drama has concluded, shall we move on to act two?" Rane drawled into the mix.

Jaxon spun around, sweeping a hand toward the gathered group of wizards. In a brusque, no-nonsense tone of voice, he made the introductions to Tess. "And now that you have met everyone, I shall take you home."

"No." She took a backward step, out of his reach. "I don't want to go home. I want to stay."

He held out his hand. "That is not going to happen."

"I've earned the right to be here. You took me away from my family and friends and thrust me into your life. You owe me this, Jaxon. I want to know what's going on and keeping me in the dark isn't going to convince me to stay."

Rane smirked. "She seems to be firmly under your spell."

Jaxon sent his brother a disgusted look. "I did not use a spell. Tess will make the decision if she wants to stay or go."

"If I stay," she interrupted, "I don't want to be your trophy wife. I want to know everything."

"Wife?" A chorus of the word rounded the table as surprised gazes shot to Jaxon's face.

His silver and gold eyes were trained on her face, his hand still extended. "We should go home and discuss this."

"Wait one moment," Falcon interceded. "Young lady, do you have any idea what is required of a wife in our world?"

Nerves jangling, she shook her head. "It would appear your friend or son or whatever he is to you has been sadly lacking in my tutelage."

Jaxon's jaw clenched. "Here is not the place to discuss this."

"That is the way to keep them firmly in the dark." Rane chuckled and tipped his chair back on two legs. "Perhaps the two of you would like some time alone since you seem to have a lot of cleaning up to do, my brother."

"Stay out of this, Rane." Jaxon's voice whipped across the table. "Tess, these are pressures you do not need."

"Don't you want me to make an informed decision?"

He cursed in Gaelic, bringing raised eyebrows around the table. "Falcon, I shall return...alone." He didn't give Tess the opportunity to argue. Sweeping her into his arms, he wafted through the open window on a whisper of the wind.

By the time they arrived back at Jaxon's house, his fury had abated. Confusion had taken root. This type of situation was new to him. No precedents had been set to guide him. No wizard had ever taken a mortal wife. So it would appear he was on his own. As was Tess.

They didn't speak as they climbed the stairs and made their way to the bedroom. Jaxon kept his hand at Tess' back, guiding her toward the bed. He easily turned down the blankets with a wave of his hand, switched on the overhead light with a snap of his fingers. "You must be exhausted."

She caught hold of his wrist before he could back away from the bed. "Don't. I'll tell you when I'm exhausted, when I need to eat, when I need anything. I'm used to running my own life."

He dragged a hand through his hair and sat down on the edge of the bed. "You should not speak in front of the Assembly."

"Because they've already questioned your judgment about me. I didn't need that display up there to tell me that. Okay, you're right. I am exhausted but not because of lack of sleep. Sleep is not going to keep me from asking questions and it isn't going to cure me. I know we made other plans for tonight but I think it's important we get things out in the open. We were going to have to have that talk eventually anyway."

Jaxon sighed and nodded. "It would appear eventually has arrived."

Tess' blue eyes filled with tears. Shards of pain pierced Jaxon's heart. He'd never wanted to hurt her, to cause her pain. He reached for her but she held up her hands to ward him off. "I think more clearly when you're not holding me."

"There's no need for you to think, Tess. You can just listen." He opened his arms, beckoning her, relieved when she gave into the temptation, sliding into his embrace, his welcome. With her head pillowed on his shoulder, she relaxed against his chest.

It took Jaxon a few minutes to gather his thoughts, to pick out the proper starting place. But when he began, the words flowed, segued easily into sentences, paragraphs of explanation.

"I want to start by telling you I love you. I've loved you since the first moment I saw you from the stage." His arms tightened, thick bands around Tess' tiny waist. "Your life will be very different than the one you've known in South Carolina and because of what is happening with the Coven, we cannot leave, at least not for a long while."

"My friends will worry."

"I could change the time in their lives without changing the time in yours. I could make them forget you, if you think it would be easier for them." He left the decision in her hands.

"I wouldn't want them to forget me."

He rubbed her back. "Being the wife of a wizard is much more difficult than being the wife of a mortal. There is only one other female in the Assembly at this time and that is my mother. She will be the only female you have to talk to."

"But I could call Belinda...couldn't I?"

Jaxon fell silent for a moment, allowing her to draw her own conclusion.

"That wouldn't be allowed?"

"The Assembly would be concerned over your continued contact with your friends. They would expect their secrecy to be protected. As you know, I have failed them in this by bringing you here."

"Then why did you bring me here?"

"Because I couldn't let you die and that night, the night of the hurricane, my only thought was to protect you. Bringing you here was instinct. I didn't know my presence would be required once I arrived. This is where I come when I need to regroup, to relax. It's rare for me to be needed here. I thought only of helping you." Jaxon pressed a kiss

against the wealth of chestnut curls. "Perhaps, in the Assembly's eyes, I have made a mistake. But I do not believe so. I wanted you with me."

Jaxon's hands kept up a steady rhythm in an attempt to soothe her. "Tess, I cannot have a mortal wife. Facing the Coven is only the beginning. Now that the Allesandra witches have decided to rise, there will be more risings, more battles. I cannot risk your life and I cannot always be around to protect you."

"Just spell it out for me, Jaxon. What exactly are you talking about?"

"You will have to achieve immortality."

He drew back to watch her visibly swallow, digest the information. Her eyes flickered while her teeth gnawed on her lower lip. "And how would I go about doing that?"

"By conceiving my child."

Tess' breath shuddered out of her lungs. "So I would have to get pregnant right away."

"Soon after the marriage ceremony, yes. The Assembly would not be willing to risk waiting too long after that."

"Okay, so if I become your wife, get pregnant, I'm immortal. That doesn't sound too bad. What's the down side? There's obviously something you're not telling me."

He released her and eased her back against the mattress. "Your life will be your own no longer. You will not be able to simply get in a car and drive to the store. You will always be under guard, under protection because your life will constantly be in danger."

"But if I'm immortal, how can I be killed?"

He cupped her chin in his hand. His eyes held hers, needing the contact. "The witches do not take away your life, sweetheart. They take away the quality of that life."

Tess closed her eyes. "Stop beating around the bush and just tell me how they do that."

"They will take the child from your womb and raise him or her as their own." Jaxon saw the horror before she masked it. "It has been done before. The mother was never the same. She lost her son. He was raised as a warlock, practiced the black magic and in the end, he used it against his mother. She chose to end her own life. The Assembly lost her and her husband once he took the life of their son. Wizards cannot kill one of their own. To do so brings about their banishment from the Assembly. They leave stripped of their powers, forced to live as mortals until old age claims them. Most of them do not survive past the first year."

"But the boy wasn't one of their own. He had turned."

"He was of their blood. That is the witches' trump card. Once they gain control of a wizard's child, their chances of ruling the universe increase tenfold. To that end, they are constantly on the lookout for a child. As long as they get them before the child turns three, the witches can raise that child as one of their own."

Tess kept her eyes closed but her hand reached out to grip Jaxon's. "So you're telling me I would have to get pregnant right away to ensure my own immortality but if I do that, I increase the chance of providing the witches with a wizard's child."

"Yes."

"Would you kill your own child, Jaxon?"

"I would not want my child to live and be raised as a witch."

"But if that child was returned to us—"

"It doesn't work that way. Once the child is gone, unless he is saved within seventy-two hours, the child is lost to us."

"Who makes these rules?"

Jaxon lay down beside her, resting his hand on her hip. "They've been in place for centuries."

"Yeah, well, remind me to have a talk with your governing body." She shivered.

"You just did. I don't think it went over so well." He tried to inject some levity in his voice but the gravity of the situation prevented it. She had to understand what would happen...and that she had no choice.

Tess sat up cross-legged on the bed and clasped her hands together. "So if I'm following you correctly, I'm not going to be able to really talk to my friends or family. I have to get pregnant but I could lose my child if the witches get to him or her first and the only woman who will understand any of this will be my mother-in-law. You don't know how enticing this sounds." She rolled to her side to fit her body close to his. "That's giving up a lot, Jaxon."

As she spoke, he saw the reality of the situation and the inequality pummeled him. Why had he never seen it before?

She continued speaking but he was barely able to focus on her words, her questions. The pain ran deep within him and the knowledge of what he must do was nearly crippling him.

"Is there anything you have to give up or am I the one doing all the compromising?"

"The risk of banishment is higher with a mortal wife, one not born of a wizard but that does not matter now." Jaxon dipped his head, kissed her, savoring the taste of her lips. "I have never talked about this with another woman, a mortal woman, and now that I have, I see what the future will look like for you. I cannot do this to you simply because I love you. I have chosen my wants over yours and the risks are too high. Your life will never be the same here and I fear you will never be happy again. Women who are born into this life can accept our ways. It would be more difficult for you to do so." He kissed her again, a gentle brush of his lips over hers. "I shall take you back to South Carolina in the morning."

"And if I told you I don't want to go back to South Carolina?"

"The decision has already been made." Jaxon got to his feet and moved around the bed. "I will love you forever, Tess, but I cannot, in good conscience, bring you into my world."

She reached for him but he was too far out of her grasp. "You've already brought me here. Do you think this is something I want to forget?"

"Do you think this is somewhere you can actually live? Have you considered what will happen in the future?"

"You mean without you? Yes, I've considered it."

Jaxon shook his head. "Without your family, your friends, the life you have known these past thirty years."

"First of all, let's leave my age out of this, shall we? Second, how about giving me a chance to make a decision for myself?"

"Because your emotions may rule you."

She glowered at him. "Are you telling me you can read my mind now? You have no idea what I'm going to say or what's ruling me."

"Eyes really are the mirrors to the soul. And wizards have always had extremely superior eyesight." Jaxon's lips tilted upward in a mocking grin.

"At first," Tess scooted to the edge of the bed, "I didn't want to love you. I was scared to love you. You know with the hurricane thing and all, but now I'm beginning to see I need to love you."

His eyebrow arched. "You need to love me?" Was he hearing her correctly? Could she really walk away from her life, all that she had known in South Carolina, to be his wife?

She bobbed her head. "Because you need me."

He folded his arms. "I need you." It was true but he wanted to wait for her analysis before he gave in.

"Exactly. You've been living without a woman for far too long, Jaxon, and while you may well be a superior wizard, your decorating skills leave a lot to be desired. I mean for a man who doesn't want to draw attention to himself, you've done a hell of a job encasing this house in gold and silver. Not exactly muted stuff." She climbed to her feet, crossed the room to stand in front of him. "You also need a woman to balance you. If not, you're going to end up like that old wizard up there. What's his name again?"

Jaxon's lips twitched. "Andion."

"Yes, that's him. Andion. I mean it doesn't take a genius to figure out the man needs a woman. He's way too much into spells and magic. He needs to find the love of a good woman. She could help with his manners." She tapped his chest. "And I can help with yours."

"I don't think you really understand what you're getting yourself into." Jaxon felt himself weakening even as he felt the push of the Assembly to let her go. His eyes darkened, shot fire toward the ceiling before settling back on her serene face. His

shoulders relaxed, the tension easing from his body. Indecision evaporated as his destiny sealed.

"Why don't you let me worry about that?"

"Because you're a mortal and you have no concept of the changes which will come."

"You've prepared me for some."

"But not all. Some even I cannot share with you...at least not until the proper time."

"More of those damnable rules, right?"

He touched her hair, her face, just needed to touch her. "Something like that."

"Jaxon, I love you. I want to be with you. If that means accepting this way of life and your freaky family, then so be it."

His eyebrow arched. "Freaky?"

"Well, even you have to admit they're not even close to normal. I mean two of them didn't even speak while I was up there. You would think they would have something to say about a mortal being in their midst."

Jaxon tucked her closer to his body. "You will come to know their ways all in good time." He felt her shoulders droop. "But no matter what happens, no matter what you learn in the next few weeks or months, know this one thing. I love you. I will always love you."

She leaned against him. "And that's as much as I need to know right now."

"That's nice to hear." His breath brushed the hair away from her cheek. His hands began to stroke her spine and like the powerful engine of a sports car, she began to purr, moving in time with the sensuous movements.

"You're hot, aren't you?" he whispered.

"Do you really have to ask that question?"

He leaned back to see her face, twirling one lock of her hair around his finger. "You know, it so happens that I don't have anywhere to be right now."

Tess snagged hold of one of his hands. "Actually you do."

One eyebrow lifted as he waited for her to finish the thought.

"You need to be right here." Slowly she began to unbutton his shirt, sliding her hands across the muscles of his chest, ever so gentle as if he were a fine piece of porcelain.

"You have something naughty in mind, don't you?" Though Jaxon asked the question, the dilation of his pupils told Tess he had the same thought.

Giving a little laugh, she pushed him backward onto the mattress. "Sit." The thrill of the command intoxicated her. She was in charge and for now she would call the shots. "Take off your shirt."

Keeping his eyes trained on her face, Jaxon obeyed, easing his shirt off his shoulders, allowing it to fall on the bed behind him.

Tess undressed with agonizing slowness, torturing him, teasing him with each sway of her hips, each flash of skin and when she finally stood naked in front of him, Jaxon's cock throbbed against his zipper.

"Get rid of those pants," she demanded, standing with her legs apart. As he stood to follow her dictate, she wet her index finger and reached down between her legs. Her clit was already moist and sensitive. Each nerve in her legs tingled—like electric shock waves.

Tossing her head back, she moaned and dipped her legs, giving Jaxon a better view of the glossy lips of her pussy. Her hips rotated to the rhythm of her fingers, the pace lazy and alluring. "Now sit back down." Her breath hitched in her throat as she dipped another finger into her sleek channel.

He sat, legs open, one hand curved around his cock. Nostrils flaring, he began to stroke himself while watching her seductive foreplay. "Spread your lips wider." He took over the command and she obeyed, letting him see her swollen pink flesh.

Jaxon drew in a deep breath. "Lay down on the bed. I want to watch you come."

Shaky legs carried her to his side but her hand was sure as it reached out to stroke his shoulder. Her fingertips ghosted up his neck, lingering on his lips to allow him to taste her juices.

He groaned and sucked her fingers into the moist cavern of his mouth, laving her fingertips with his tongue while his hand pumped his cock.

Tess withdrew her fingers slowly and lay back against the bed, her knees up, thighs parted. As her finger began to roll over her clit, her eyes met Jaxon's. The silver seemed to burn into her skin.

Nipples peaked, breaths coming in pants, she lifted her hips off the bed as she stroked faster. Harder. "Ohhhhh." Her head thrashed against the mattress.

"That's it, baby. Let me watch you." His voice hoarse, he climbed upon his knees to watch her pump her fingers in and out of the slick well of her pussy.

Her hand clenched in the comforter. The orgasm was so close she could feel the burn starting at the back of her thighs. Her skin began to tingle, growing warmer and warmer until heat exploded in the pit of her stomach. Muscles clenched in powerful contractions, wringing loud cries from Tess' lips.

Before the quivers could recede, Jaxon moved her fingers aside, licking the cream all around her slit. She moaned and held his head in place but he wasn't staying. Rising up, he slid his hands under her ass. "Turn over."

Eyes still heavy from the aftereffects of her release, Tess mumbled a protest but his insistence had her rolling to her side and then her stomach, her breasts pressed flat against the bed.

The feel of Jaxon's tongue on the cheeks of her ass made her muscles clench again. He followed the wetness with a firm slap of his palm. She jerked and gave a small cry of

pain laced with pleasure. He slapped again and she buried her face in the thick comforter.

He kissed the pain away before his teeth nibbled gently at her pinkened flesh. God, she was so hot, burning from the inside out. She wanted him to fuck her but what he was doing to her now was too perfect to make him stop.

"Get up on your hands and knees." The guttural command made her pussy clench and without hesitation, Tess climbed up, offering her ass like a pale sacrifice.

Jaxon's hand slipped between her thighs, reaching for the wetness he found inside her soaked cunt. His fingers wiggled deep into her pussy and her back arched. "I'm going to fuck you, Tess."

The words made her shiver for they seemed to be a warning more than a sensual announcement. She felt his fingers slide between the globes of her ass, using the wetness of her pussy to coat the small rosebud opening between the cheeks. For a moment her heart raced.

She'd never been fucked from behind before. Her muscles tensed but Jaxon sensed her anxiety and gently soothed it away with massaging fingertips and licking kisses at the base of her spine.

Rocking to and fro, Tess' body began to hum beneath his expertise and when his index finger slipped into her ass, she pushed back against it, wanting it deeper. She felt her muscles contract around the digit and she bit her lower lip to keep from crying out. Imagining the feel of his thick cock pushing into that tight channel brought some of the nervousness rushing back.

"Have you ever been fucked like this before, Tess?"

She didn't think about lying. "No."

"Do you want me to stop?"

A hesitation. Just a small moment of silence while she made a decision. "No."

He moved forward almost instantaneously, sliding the crown of his cock between the lips of her pussy, coating the tip with her moisture. All the while, he calmed her with soft words and strokes of his palm on her bare back.

Anticipation formed a knot in the pit of her stomach. With each stroke of his shaft, she began to tremble, reaching out for another orgasm, but Jaxon pulled back, taunting her, taking his sweet time, increasing her need.

While his cock tantalized her, he began to work two fingers into her ass, stretching the taut skin. She couldn't think anymore. Blind urgency enveloped her and she began to ride his fingers with wild desperation.

Jaxon slid his cock between her cheeks and touched the tip to the snug opening. One hand holding his shaft, he pinched her flesh with the other, distracting her.

Tess wiggled and pressed backward. "Jaxon, please. Fuck me." She couldn't get any hotter if the world was on fire.

The head of his shaft touched her opening and Jaxon's hips moved forward, slowly guiding his length into virgin territory. She gave a small cry of pain and he paused, giving her time to adjust.

His fingers dug into her hips, holding back the driving need to thrust into the tightness. "Tess, I—"

"For God's sake, fuck me!" she practically screamed the command, allowing him to sink into her. She took his length fully with only another short cry that soon segued into a moan.

Holding her steady, Jaxon gave his body free rein and the primitive urges took over. His cock began to ram into her ass, pushing and stretching her tender skin while Tess panted and rocked back against him.

The orgasm drawing closer, he slowed, leaning forward to slip one hand between her splayed legs. He tweaked her clit and she jumped, the movement driving his cock further into her ass.

"You like that?" His fingers plumped up the swollen flesh while she ground her hips against his.

He couldn't wait any longer. The urgent need to pump overtook him, driving him back to his knees. Hips thrusting, he stroked once, twice and then the orgasm broke free, tugging him deep inside a pool of sensual delight. His hot seed jetted into her rear and he jerked as the tight muscles contracted around his cock.

"God!" His head dropped to her spine while his thighs continued to shake.

Tess moved beneath him with a drowsy murmur. "After all of this, I could use a nap."

He chuckled and rolled to his side, taking her with him. "I'll give you fifteen minutes before we go again."

Chapter Six

"The wizard is taking a wife." The chant echoed throughout the bedroom, bouncing off the walls, pushing against the heavy, wooden door. "The wizard is taking a wife and the witches will take the child."

Tess stirred beneath the heat as a glowing, red palm flattened itself over her lower abdomen. She moved beneath the touch, squirming but it was relentless, harsh even. Pressing her back against the mattress, grinding into her skin.

"She will bear a girl child." The voice became a luminous hiss in the darkness. "And we shall call her Shantay."

She came awake then, bathed in sweat. Her heart tripped. Her palms were cold and clammy. She touched her hand to her stomach and swallowed a scream as the heat of her skin singed her fingers. She couldn't cry out, couldn't speak. Thank God, she could still run.

Leaping from the bed, she tore open the door and raced down the hallway. She didn't know where she was going. She just pushed open the door where Jaxon had said he would be. The empty room caused panic to take root. For a moment her limbs refused to cooperate. She forced herself to gather her thoughts, her wits. It was just a dream. Granted, a very bad dream but nothing more. And who wouldn't have such a dream after the information she'd gleaned from Jaxon about her new life?

Finding her voice, she called out to him, descending the stairs. She silently congratulated herself on her calm demeanor. No need to panic. No cause for alarm. She was just a normal woman going in search of her wizard boyfriend who—okay, so maybe not so normal. "Jaxon?"

The air whirled around her, spiraled. Blue flames ignited the hardwood floor at her feet and when Tess looked up, Jaxon stood in front of her, eyes filled with concern. "Are you all right?"

She touched his arm, needed the connection. "That's amazing." Momentarily distracted, she lowered her gaze to the sparks at his feet.

He caught her chin and raised her head gently. "What happened? I heard the fear in your voice."

She shook off his concern and resisted the urge to fall into him. "I had a dream but now, standing here in front of you like this, I feel kind of stupid. It was just a nightmare."

Taking her arm, he guided her down the hallway and into the kitchen. "Come on. I'll fix you a cup of hot chocolate and you can tell me about your dream." His shoulder bumped hers. It was oddly reassuring.

"Really it's okay. I don't even remember it that well."

He turned to look at her. "Do you want me to help you remember it?"

Tess leaned one hip against the counter. "No, that's okay." She'd spoken quickly, too quickly. She saw the flare of awareness in his eyes before she looked away. "I'll just drink some cocoa and go back to bed."

Jaxon placed two mugs in the microwave and leaned against the counter beside her. "Tess, tell me about the dream." Though his voice was soft, she couldn't miss the air of authority, the command.

She swallowed, kept her eyes trained on the floor. "It was about a witch." She snuck a peek and saw she had his full attention. Not surprising. She would imagine wizards always took notice when the word witch was mentioned. Probably had to do with self-preservation.

He tucked her hair behind her ear, leaned in closer to her. "Tell me."

"A voice was calling out, saying I would have a girl child. She was chanting something like the wizard will take a wife. And that the witch will take the child." Tess twisted the hem of her nightshirt in her hands. "They would call her Shantay." She focused her eyes fully on Jaxon's face and watched the fireworks in his expressive eyes. "What is it? What's wrong?"

His jaw clenched, his hands curled into fists. "Shantay." He pushed off from the counter, shot around the room with enough speed to create a minor wind. His hands punched the air, sparks trickled down, an amazing display of gold and silver flames.

"Jaxon, what is it? Dammit, will you talk to me?" She picked up the nearest object she could find—a measuring cup—and flung it into the air, hoping to strike him, to grab his attention.

His feet hit the floor, the measuring cup held in his hands. "I have to summon the Assembly."

"It's four-thirty in the morning. I doubt they'll be happy about having their sleep disturbed. Why don't you tell me first and then we can decide on a course of action together?"

"This doesn't concern you. I'll take care of it."

She positioned herself in front of him and snatched a handful of his soft, cotton shirt. "Like hell you will. And how can you say this doesn't concern me? It was my body the witch was touching and—" She broke off, sensing she'd just tripped another trigger. Sighing, she rocked back on her heels as more flames and Gaelic curses singed the air.

"She touched you?"

"My stomach and—" She gave a squeak as Jaxon pushed her back against the counter and yanked the bottom of her shirt up to reveal her bare midriff. "It was lower."

His lips curled into a snarl as his hand slipped beneath the silk tap pants she wore, feeling the heat. "Damn her."

"You know," Tess whispered into his ear, "that's not what most men say when they've got their hands down my pants."

His head shot up, his eyes flickered. "Most men? As in more than one?"

Tess grinned, relieved to have caught his attention once more. "Two actually but that's only because I'm selective. So tell me about Shantay and this witch who stole into my dreams."

He removed his hand and adjusted her shirt. "It was Athena."

"The ghostly witch. You know, she's really starting to piss me off." Tess touched his arm, drew him closer to her. "She knows I'm going to get pregnant with a girl."

"She's guessing. A witch's clairvoyance does not extend to a wizard's womb."

"I'm not a wizard," she pointed out gently.

Jaxon considered the statement and nodded. "My protection should be enough. I will talk to the Assembly at once."

She hooked her arm through his and held on. "We will talk to the Assembly at once but before we go, do you think I could put some clothes on?"

He waved a hand and Tess found herself clothed in jeans and a crew-necked sweater. "I should make you stay here," he muttered while she was still marveling over the quickest clothing change in history.

"Women in this century aren't really big on cavemen, honey. Let's just go."

* * * * *

"Athena has crossed the line," Falcon spat out the words, a mixture of anger and disgust.

"You do not have the proper protection to watch over this woman." Andion flung a hand toward Tess who was seated to Jaxon's right.

Jaxon gritted his teeth, counted to ten. It never worked. "This woman has a name."

Andion held up one hand. "Please spare me. I know of her name. I am not interested in learning any more." He swept a glower toward the leader of the Assembly, his bushy brows lowered. "Falcon, do you not see what this young scoundrel has brought upon us with his lack of control? It is reminiscent of three hundred years ago when his control was weak. You had to save him. Would you risk all of our lives by saving him now as well?"

"Silence." Falcon's hand smacked the table causing Tess to jump. Jaxon placed his hand on top of hers to reassure her. The leader was a mixture of bluster and high octave when he was annoyed but generally harmless. Jaxon knew over the years he'd given the elder wizard many reasons to put him in his place but Falcon had been content to let

him make his own mistakes. Experience was usually a more effective teacher and sometimes much harsher than the snap of a wizard's fingers.

Falcon drummed his fingers on the edge of the table. "Andion, if you cannot deal with being in the same room with these two, then you are free to leave. I do not have enough time to referee petty squabbles and you, Jaxon, will restrict your comments to Andion so as not to arouse him any further."

"It would appear Andion doesn't need any help getting aroused," Tess inserted.

Silence fell around the table like the thump of an anvil as all eyes swung to her flushed face. "Tess." Jaxon's voice held a warning. He didn't really expect her to heed it. It wasn't that she tried to be disrespectful. It was, well, he wasn't quite sure, but he was more than a little surprised that her *faux pas* didn't disturb him. In fact his lips twitched and with great effort, he suppressed the urge to smile. "Please be quiet."

She threw him a disgusted glance. "Be quiet? Why? So all of you can shoot arrows at each other and accomplish nothing?" She scooted her chair back and got to her feet. "Falcon, if you want my opinion, you waste far too much time with all of these meetings."

Charlemaine clasped a hand against her throat while Jensen growled low in his. Jaxon heard the snort of Rane's laughter, the rumble of Braeden's. He didn't look at them, knowing that to see their expressions of amusement would be his downfall. He clasped his arm around Tess' wrist in a failed attempt to pull her back down to the chair beside him.

She moved her arm out of his reach and circled the table, stopping in front of the leader's still form. "Now I know you're not asking for my opinion but I do have a stake in this, considering it was me that witch accosted. I would assume all of you are powerful wizards. Am I right?"

Falcon kept his eyes trained on her face. "You are."

"Then appease my curiosity and explain why in the hell everyone is sitting around here, resting on their laurels, while that witch floats in and out of my dreams at will." She held up one hand, not quite finished with her diatribe. "Okay, I know, I know. It wasn't your idea to have me here in the first place but," she included the group in her sweeping gaze, "I'm here now and everyone is just going to have to deal with it. I don't know how you're used to doing things up here but where I'm from we suit action to words. We don't just talk about running out of time. We actually do something before we do run out of time. So seeing as all of you, including Father Time over there," she pointed a finger toward Andion, "have amazing abilities, at least I assume they're amazing based on what I've seen Jaxon do, why don't we just focus on how you're going to defeat Athena while you're actually en route to her place of operation?" Subsiding into silence, she folded her arms and tapped her foot while wearing a "well?" expression on her face.

For a long, tense moment, silence continued to reign. No one moved. Or breathed. Until Falcon lifted his face to the ceiling and laughed. Loud and long. Sighs of relief filtered out of compressed lips as the others finally joined in.

Tess frowned. "Not quite the reaction I had in mind."

Jaxon stood, moved into place beside her. "Honey, I do believe that is the first time the leader of the Assembly has ever been dressed down by a mortal."

She worried her lower lip with her teeth. "Well, it wasn't just directed at him. It was directed at all of you." Her palm smacked his chest. "You most of all. Athena was in your house once before and you let her go. And now she's back and it would appear she at least has a plan. What do all of you have?"

Jaxon touched her face, her shoulder, smiling. "We don't always reveal our plans, Tess...especially not to..." he caught himself and stopped.

Her eyes narrowed. "Especially not to mortals? Is that what's bothering all of you? That I'm still mortal? For heaven's sake. Of all the men in South Carolina, I had to meet Merlin's cousin." Her anger aimed another thump at Jaxon's chest. "Why couldn't you have been normal?"

"You would not be having half the fun you are having now," Rane observed, wry humor twisting his voice.

"Yeah, well, I think my heart could do without some of this fun. Okay, let's move on. We're wasting even more time. Who or what is Shantay?" Tess clamped her hands on her hips and jutted her chin forward, clearly demanding an answer.

Falcon climbed to his feet, his eagle eyes pinned on Jaxon's face. "Where did she hear that name?"

Jaxon's response was straightforward, without emotion. Falcon preferred it that way. Deliver the problem in a simple and clean manner and he would deliver the solution. "I can only assume Athena. That's the name they have chosen for the next child they will take. They have decided that child will be mine."

"Why Shantay?" Tess touched Falcon's hand and sparks shot from her fingertips. She immediately clutched her hand against her breast and stared up at the wizard. "Okay, that was weird."

"Falcon doesn't like to be touched by mortals," Andion explained in a somewhat awed tone of voice.

She elbowed Jaxon in the ribs. "You could have warned me."

"I didn't know you were going to touch him."

She let the matter drop. "Again, what is so special about Shantay?"

Jaxon answered Tess' question. "It is the name Athena has chosen for the future ruler of the Coven, the witch with the greatest power. The name means Enchanted."

Stepping away from him, she looked around the room. "Great. At least she has high hopes for my child. Goals are important. So where's the door?"

Slipping back to her side, Jaxon took her hand. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to kick this witch's ass." Tess found the door, a solid panel. The doorknob was nowhere to be seen. She felt along the smooth board. "Where's the doorknob now? You know," she turned back around to face the Assembly, "I think if I'm going to become a part of this family, such as it is, I don't want to be left out in the cold. I want to know about your plans, especially those plans that involve Jaxon, me or our future children. Is that too much to ask?" When silence greeted her question, she threw up her hands. "Great. Okay. I've stepped over another line. Could someone please give me a rule book?"

Jaxon took her arms in his and pulled her close, ignoring the interested gazes of his family and friends. "Honey, you didn't break any rules. It's just going to take you some time to adjust."

Falcon moved into position close behind them, so close that the heat of his body enveloped them. "You don't have that much time, Jaxon. If Tess is the woman you are to marry, you must make haste in protecting her. You cannot do so without the ceremony. Her life is in grave danger right now. Athena could have easily taken her last night."

Tess shivered, pressed her palm against Jaxon's chest. "What ceremony?"

He didn't meet her eyes. "The wedding."

"Why am I getting the feeling there's a little more involved here than just saying I do?"

"The ceremony is binding. Permanent. There will be no turning back," Falcon informed her.

"I didn't imagine the wizards would honor divorce. With all your power, that would give you a bad name," she teased, even though Jaxon read the fear in the depths of her eyes. "Don't worry about it. No matter how strange this seems to me, I am where I'm supposed to be. Don't ask me how I know that because I just realized it myself. Of course, I'm not even beginning to think about the future and immortality and all that stuff. God, I thought dealing with reporters and newly discovered cousins was difficult."

Falcon nodded his head, a gesture of his approval. "Then it will be done. Tonight."

"Tonight?" Tess shook her head. "No, that's not possible. I have to have time to plan, to prepare. There's invitations and the wedding cake and—"

Jaxon covered her mouth with his hand. "The ceremony is quick and private. Tonight at midnight, you will become my wife." His eyes burned into hers as if daring her to accept the challenge.

She peeled his hand away. "And then what happens?"

The wolfish grin brought a chorus of chuckles from the male wizards. "Do you really need to ask?"

Her nose wrinkled. "It's nice to know that even wizards can be crude." She tipped her head back to see Jaxon's face. "Even though they're a bit tardy. At any rate, I guess

I'll see you guys tonight at midnight. Try to look at least moderately happy for Jaxon, will you?"

* * * * *

Charlemaine's pacing made Tess nervous. Or maybe it was more the way her future mother-in-law watched her which made her nervous. She couldn't be sure. She wanted to ask her to sit, if even just for a moment. Long enough for her to calm down herself. After all, she was getting married in less than an hour and with Charlemaine's arrival, Jaxon had disappeared. Traitor.

"I have not had the opportunity to speak with you before now." Charlemaine finally sat, crossed her slim legs and adjusted the rustling silk of her dress over her knees. Softness filtered into her gaze and Tess relaxed a little.

She tweaked the last pin in her French braid and scooted back away from the mirror, giving the older woman her full attention. "Well, we're both here now and it looks like we have some time to kill. So why don't we have that conversation?"

Charlemaine's eyes lifted, connected with Tess'. There was fear in those glossy, green depths before Jaxon's mother quickly shuttered her gaze. Fear for what? Or for whom?

"I know you think we are not happy for Jaxon and for you. On the contrary, I am happy for the both of you. I am pleased my son has found a woman who touches his heart, his soul. His father and I were beginning to despair he would never find someone. He did not seem interested before now. But," she released a sigh, "I would be lying to you if I said I was glad he has chosen to marry a mortal."

"But that won't matter once I become pregnant. I'll be immortal."

"That is true but Jaxon, being a male, probably did not give you all of the information you would need in order to make an informed decision."

Tess leaned forward and touched Charlemaine's hand. "And you think warning me now is going to help? I'm sorry if you don't like that I'm a human, mortal or whatever you want to call it. Jaxon and I didn't choose to fall in love with one another. It just happened. Did you plan to fall in love with Jaxon's father?"

Charlemaine smiled as the point hit home. "No, I suppose not. But I was already a wizard. The risks were not the same."

"I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize your family or the Assembly."

"I know you love my son but some things are beyond your control. The love between a wizard and his wife is a powerful thing, more powerful than the witches who now threaten you. They may be able to take your child but they will never be able to come between you and Jaxon, not once you are husband and wife." The older woman got to her feet, resumed pacing. "The passion is intense, overwhelming even, for a woman not accustomed to our ways."

"I've already experienced it." A shiver danced its way down her spine.

The wizard nodded. "I thought as much."

"Please don't tell me there are rules against premarital sex."

A chuckle broke forth from the older woman's throat. "None that I'm aware of." She clasped her hands together in front of her, her smile fading. "There is no doubt in my mind that Jaxon loves you, Tess. Once a wizard has given his heart, he will not take it back but then," she turned to face her son's choice, "neither will he give you yours."

"I've already been warned about the no divorce. Why don't you just tell me what you really want to tell me instead of dancing around it? After all I've learned these past few weeks I can assure you I can take it."

Charlemaine smiled her acknowledgment. "I am sure you can. You are a strong woman. You must have been a force before you met Jaxon."

Tess' eyes narrowed. "My personality isn't going to change."

"But that is the problem. It must change. You cannot challenge your husband in the face of the Assembly. You cannot challenge the Assembly like you did this morning. It is not acceptable and will not be tolerated once you are one of us."

Tess stood, shoved the stool back under the dressing table. "I will never be one of you, Charlemaine. I may marry your son but you'll never fully accept me into your family because I'm not a wizard. I can't do all the little magic tricks like pulling a star from the sky or bending a tree because I need a bridge. That's not going to happen. I have accepted that. I have accepted my differences. I just wish you did."

"I can see you truly do not understand." Charlemaine went to her, took her hands. "Tess, once you are joined with my son and you bear his child, you will be expected to become one of us."

Heart pounding, Tess arched one eyebrow. "I thought you had to be born a wizard."

"In our realm, you are but there are other wizards, those who can be trained, who learn to acquire some, if not all, of our skills. This will be expected of you."

"And you don't think I can do it."

Charlemaine allowed her hands to drop back to her sides. "It is not my intention to attempt to frighten you. Believe it or not, I like you. I think you will be good for my son but I worry about what the future might hold for the two of you."

"You're not by yourself on that one."

"I can see your fear."

Tess adjusted the full-length tulle skirt she wore. "As I'm sure everyone can."

Charlemaine softened her next words. "You are stronger than you give yourself credit for. My son would not have chosen you had he not seen this strength. Only the strongest of mortals survive in our world."

Were the words meant as a compliment or a warning? "Is this your idea of an olive branch?"

"I look at it as extending the hand of friendship."

"With reservations."

The female wizard nodded. "I am sure in time the reservations will recede."

Not exactly the warmest welcome to the family she'd ever heard but Tess figured it would have to do. "Thank you."

Charlemaine moved about the chamber, her steps measured, assured. She came to a stop in front of the door and tilted her head to one side. She ran one hand along the brick wall and Tess heard the rasp of her skin against the rock. "My son belongs in our world. He knows what we require of him."

Tess couldn't decipher if there was a threat hidden within the words. Her temper sparked anyway. "He met me in my world. That's how I know him, as a building contractor who donates his time and himself for charity causes, who plays pool with his friends and treats me like I'm the only woman in the world who matters." She brushed a hand over her thick braid and glared up at her future mother-in-law. "Are you trying to help me or intimidate me?"

Green eyes blinked back at her. "I want you to know that the man you are marrying is unlike any man you have ever known."

Shoulders relaxing a little, Tess managed a small smile. "I figured that out on my own."

The hand on her shoulder brought her eyes upward. Charlemaine stood behind her, a smile on her face, approval in her eyes. "Jaxon has chosen you. And he has chosen well. You will be more than a match for my son's unstable temper and dark moods and a welcome addition to the Assembly. Now I believe it is time for a wedding, is it not?"

Chapter Seven

Athena, leader of the Coven, a formidable witch who had achieved far more than her sisters by way of power, hung suspended in midair, her legs crossed, fingernails tapping against her forearm. "So the wizard is taking a wife. A mortal wife, no less. Who would have believed it?"

"He will not let his guard down," Arista pointed out with a trace of bitterness. As a young witch, she'd crossed paths with Jaxon more than one time and had suffered great loss at his hand, including the life of her true blood sister, Oena. But now her powers had strengthened and she was eager for a taste of the revenge Athena had been crowing about the last century.

Athena swept a gaze over her fellow witch, a slight smile tilting the corners of her full lips. "That's the beauty of it. We do not need his guard to be lowered...only hers. I have seen her temper, her fire. Her child will be the next leader of our great coven. She will have her mother's strength, her father's power and our magic. She will be undefeated. And Jaxon's wife will bring her to us."

"How can you be so sure? Jaxon's protection is strong and even if we can reach the mortal, he will not let her go without a fight." Hestra joined her two sister witches at the tower window, her long, flowing blonde hair swept back from her face with a blue ribbon. To the mortal eye, she was a beautiful woman, rivaling Athena, but underneath the mark of beauty lay a cruel and calculating heart. She'd been instrumental in helping the Coven overtake several weaker bands of witches, absorbing their power. This power enabled the Coven of Allesandra to pit their new forces against the Assembly once more. To Hestra, the need to overtake the wizards was more than revenge, it was a thirst for supremacy, an all-consuming desire to win.

It was one of the things Athena liked about her the most. "I will take care of Jaxon."

"And what about Braeden, will you take care of him as well?" Hestra didn't bother to hide her disdain.

Athena turned, eyes clashing with her sister witch. "Braeden is no concern of yours."

Hestra ascended to the air. Her hand touched the ceiling in a gesture of irritation. "And he should not be a concern of yours. You are a witch, Athena, a witch who has gained immortality, something few witches are able to accomplish. You lead a strong band of your sister witches and yet you would love a wizard."

Athena's hand swept the air, creating an arc of black rage. "Enough. We will not discuss my past with Braeden."

"You fell in love with him," the blonde witch scoffed.

"Before I knew he was a wizard. That part of my life is over."

"I'm sure we'd all like to hope so but you can't blame us for the doubt."

"Whatever you think matters little to me. I lead this coven and you shall simply have to trust me."

Arista rejoined the conversation. "Could you kill him should that become necessary?"

A cold chill ran down Athena's spine. "He is immortal. It is not nearly so easy to kill him as you would imagine." She knew the words were a hedge but she wasn't so sure she could give the response her sisters sought.

"Even immortals can be killed. Our magic is strong and together we can do anything." Hestra's pointed words hit their mark, bringing a frown to Athena's face.

"We don't need to discuss this right now. The spell is ready. At nightfall, I will slip into the bedroom and —"

"Jaxon will be there," Arista noted. "There needs to be another time, a better place."

"It must take place at the exact time the moon rises here high in the sky. By my calculations, that would be two a.m. Jaxon and his new bride," Athena's words carried a wealth of scorn, "should have adjourned to the bedroom by then."

Hestra's feet kicked the air. "And if they aren't?"

Athena circled the air with the palm of her hand and opened a window into the world below. "I don't make provisions for failure. This will work. We have no other choice. We will make it work." Her lips tilted upward in a cruel smile. "Soon this land and all the land surrounding it will belong to the Coven. We shall reign and rule and the wizards shall be banished forever."

Arista and Hestra exchanged glances that simmered with doubt but they joined in the chant of power. "We will reign and rule forever. The Coven of Allesandra is strong and mighty and no force can withstand ours. Together, we will destroy the Assembly. Together, we shall achieve the highest power ever coveted by a witch. Eternal rulers. The world shall be ours."

* * * * *

The air hummed with electricity, vibrant sparks dancing off the walls. Tess clasped her hands together in front of her to quell the shaking and shifted from foot to foot. The long walk down the narrow corridor leading to the main Assembly room had been tough enough but this infernal waiting preyed heavily on her peace of mind. She remained alone in the room at Falcon's request. He'd asked for a word alone with Jaxon, just him and the other members of the Assembly. Which left her alone. And growing more impatient with each passing minute.

She'd already seen what there was to see of the room. The brick walls choked off what little light could filter in from the lone window. Candelabras lined the upper walls, creating a warmth she didn't feel. Polished marble lay at her feet and echoed with

each step. The great table had been moved to make way for the coming ceremony. In the corner of the room, closest to the door, a dais had been erected where Falcon would seal her fate, join her life to Jaxon's.

Tess' abdomen clenched as another wave of panic gripped her. She still had time to run, but where would she go? Her doubts magnified as the door behind her swept open.

"Tess, sorry to have kept you waiting." Falcon's voice held no real apology as he approached her.

"I bet," she muttered below her breath.

"Excuse me?" Falcon directed his eyes to her face, an expression of polite inquiry on his.

She waved her hand. "Never mind." *Arrogant bastard.*

"Jaxon will be along momentarily."

"If you don't mind me saying, ordinarily the groom is waiting at the altar for the bride, not the other way around. I've never been to a wedding where the groom actually walked down the aisle."

Falcon's lips twitched. "Jaxon won't be walking down the aisle, my dear."

A ray of light slashed across the bleak gray wall and then Jaxon appeared to stand beside her, wearing a tuxedo and a smile. "Sorry, I got held up."

Tess couldn't control the racing of her heart. He looked magnificent. The black material of the jacket stretched across his broad shoulders. His hair had been tamed for the occasion but she much preferred it casual and wind-tossed. He'd shaved and her palm itched to touch the smoothness of his cheek. She covered her desire by a quick quip. "So I noticed. I thought you were going to leave me standing at the altar."

"Not a chance." He winked and took her hand. "We're ready."

She looked over her shoulder. "Wait. Aren't we going to wait for the others?"

"The others are here." Jaxon kept his eyes turned straight ahead.

"I don't see anyone."

"The others will be attending the ceremony through other means than actual physical presence. It is our custom. A wedding is a private affair between the man and his bride," Falcon informed her, sweeping his hands wide.

Her fingers clenched around Jaxon's hand. "Okay. Well. I suppose we're ready then. If we don't require a witness, that is."

He brought her hand to his lips, kissed her knuckles. "Our ceremonies are vastly different than those of mortals, Tess. As are our marriages."

"I was just waiting for you to remind me of that one." She peered up at the leader of the Assembly, her eyes narrowed. "There's nothing in your little speech about my obeying the husband or bowing and scraping, is there?"

Falcon exchanged a glance with Jaxon, his eyes crinkled with amusement. "No, I can assure you there is not."

"Good. Then I'm definitely ready." She hoped she sounded braver than she felt. Tying herself to a wizard hadn't exactly been one of her goals in life but marrying a good man was. And Jaxon was definitely a good man. Strong. Powerful. Loving. He made her feel safe, protected. Loved. Important factors in a marriage. She squeezed his fingers once more, he responded with a squeeze of his own.

"By the way, you're beautiful," Jaxon whispered for her ears alone.

With yards of satin and lace, the wedding dress Tess had chosen was an off-the-shoulder creation designed to fit her curves. She'd spent more time than she'd had that afternoon with the dressmaker once the dress had been chosen. Bearing a three-foot train and tapered sleeves with lace panels, which narrowed over her hands, the gown made her feel like a princess, even if she wasn't so sure she would be living the fairy tale.

She gave him a nervous smile and tried to relax, to concentrate on the melodic flow of Falcon's voice.

"A wedding ceremony is a sacred joining of two hearts, two lives. As you stand here today, the two of you shall become one. In spirit. In life. Eternally bound. Your love will be your strongest ally, your most powerful force. Together, you are indomitable. Separate you will be no more." Falcon held out both hands and while Tess watched in awe, he created circles in the air, whirling vortexes of sound and wind.

Cold swept over her but before fear could set in she found herself in Jaxon's arms and she allowed herself the luxury of placing her head on his shoulder.

"Hold on," he whispered in her ear.

As Tess' nails dug into his arms, the winds increased, sweeping back and forth over them, threatening to tear them apart. She couldn't breathe or move her legs. Steel bands crawled up her body, encasing her in a metal tomb with Jaxon. Before panic could set in, he kissed her, bringing her thoughts back to what really mattered.

Together, they rocked as the winds intensified outside their steely circle and just when Tess was sure they'd be swept away, Jaxon raised his head and held his palm against the side of the metal wall. Instantly it splintered into thousands of tiny missiles, soaring into the air overhead before disintegrating like a snowball in the hot noonday sun.

She kept her head back, watching until the last piece of metal had disappeared. "What was that all about?" she whispered.

"Before the Assembly, your hearts have been bound, your lives joined. From henceforth, you shall be husband and wife." Falcon lifted his hands, shifted the ground beneath their feet and guided them gently through the air.

Tess stilled the scream in her throat.

Jaxon reached for her hands. "Just hold onto me as you did before."

She didn't need the instruction for her fingers wrapped tightly around his. She focused solely on his face as the air began to swirl around them. Clouds of indigo circled, spiraled and arced around them, under and over, giving way to a stream of light that bent across the open sky. "Jaxon, we're flying." Her voice was bathed in awe.

His arms went around her and as their bodies showered into the light, his lips found hers, sealing their union.

The bedroom door slammed against the wall and they practically fell inside, wrapped in one another's arms. Jaxon's hand fisted in Tess' hair, deepening the kiss. She pulled away to gasp for breath, pulling the oxygen into her lungs as her world spun crazily.

"Why am I so nervous? It's not like we've never done this before." Shaky laughter accompanied the words.

Jaxon placed a finger over her lips. "Because you're focusing on the ceremony, what it means to be the wife of a wizard."

Her hand curled around his wrist. "Maybe."

"Don't focus on what I am, Tess. Focus on who I am. For tonight, I am just a man who is going to make love to his wife. Nothing more. Nothing less."

She touched his face, smoothed her hand along his clean-shaven jaw. "When you're with me, holding me, I can almost forget you're a wizard." His eyes flashed with a dark fire he quickly banked. But she saw the reaction and knew her words had stung.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean I wish you weren't a wizard. It's just that your power scares me sometimes. I've seen the dark side of it and I wonder if I'll see it again."

He began to unfasten the buttons on the back of her dress. "Probably. The magic is within me. It's part of who I am and there are times, although they are few and far between, when the magic is in control. Those are the times I struggle to remember who I am. But you must know I will never harm you or our children. I couldn't hurt you physically any more than I could a member of the Assembly."

She rested her head against his chest. "You cursed Andion."

His fingers paused in their task. "It was a small curse and it couldn't have gone any farther. Falcon would not have allowed it. And I was reacting out of anger for what he had done to you."

The cool air kissed her skin as the dress slid from her shoulders, skimmed over her waist to drop to the floor. She saw the flare of desire in Jaxon's eyes and knew the time for conversation was ending. Linking her fingers behind his neck, she urged his head lower. "Maybe we can talk about this another time."

"I was thinking the exact same thing." He obliged her with a kiss, his hands splayed across her back, nimble fingers deftly opening the clasp of her bra. As her breasts spilled free from the lace, Jaxon kissed each one. Then, infinitely gentle and tender, he lifted her, carried her to the bed.

She fell back against the stack of pillows, reached her arms out for him but Jaxon held back, took his time removing his jacket, the tie, his cummerbund. It was a slow, enticing striptease. He kept his eyes locked with hers while he removed the remainder of his clothing, his shirt, the snowy white T-shirt.

Tess' breaths slowed as she watched him. The lamplight bathed his skin in the glow of seduction. Hard, bronzed muscles rippled with each movement. Her eyes dropped with his fingers to the waistband of his pants but she crawled to her knees, catching hold of his wrists to stop him.

"Allow me." Her voice was a husky whisper, her face flushed with anticipation.

He cupped her face. "I don't think that would be such a good idea."

She dropped her hands, leaned against his leg to brush her hair over his thigh. She heard the groan. Empowered, she ran her hands along the backs of his legs, palms sliding over expensive linen. The heat of his erection scorched her abdomen as she climbed to her knees once more.

Jaxon dipped his head in an attempt to taste her lips again but she evaded him, drew back. Shaking her head, she wagged her finger in mock admonition and lowered her hands to the catch of his trousers. "Just wait."

He closed his eyes and held his breath. The zipper resounded in the silence, heralding the beginning of a long night. Her hands were satiny soft against his skin. Pleasure and pain rocketed through his body. His cock throbbed, sweat beading on his skin.

She pushed past the barrier of his pants and one small hand curled around his stiff shaft beneath the soft cotton of his underwear. She tipped her head up and smiled slightly but he wasn't watching her. His eyes remained closed, his body drawn as tight as strings on a cello.

She'd touched him many times before but tonight was different. The feel of his skin beneath her hands enticed her to explore further, to want to know even more about this man she'd married.

Hand moved, just a fraction of an inch but it was enough to send Jaxon's breath whooshing out of his lungs, a sound which quickly ended in a Gaelic curse. Tess slid her hands around behind him, cupped his buttocks in a tight squeeze before lowering the slacks and his underwear. She pushed back from the edge of the bed, crawling on all fours.

He stopped breathing again, anticipation a dagger in the center of his chest. The torment of waiting dragged on until the first touch of her cool lips against his solid core almost toppled him over the edge. His senses snapped, blurred. His focus narrowed to the scent of her hair, the touch of her moist mouth. Hands clasped her shoulders. But he didn't pull her away. Couldn't pull her away. He simply held on while her mouth gripped him in a slick, wet hug.

Nails lightly scraping his sac, she twirled her tongue over the crown of his cock, laving the rim. She took her time, enjoying every moan he made, the way his fingers bit

into her skin and the trembling in his thighs. Already he was close to orgasm and the knowledge thrilled her. Here was a man who could hold back walls of water, stop a hurricane in its tracks, keep a wizard at bay and scare the hell out of a witch. And he was helpless beneath her hands. Life couldn't be any sweeter than at this moment.

"I want you on the bed." The commanding tone of her voice surprised her but she didn't back down. Instead she took hold of both of his hands and tugged him forward. "Now."

One eyebrow lifting, Jaxon stepped out of the tangle of his slacks and crawled onto the bed. The light in her eyes made him smile. She was incandescently beautiful and his heart swelled as he watched her.

His arms lifted, reaching for her, but she wagged a finger, slipping off the bed like soft silk. "Stay put." In a manner of seconds, she'd returned with his tie and cummerbund. Fashioning a makeshift blindfold with the thick material, she wrapped it around his head, covering his eyes.

Jaxon swallowed hard. "Jesus, Tess, what are you doing to me?"

"Shhhh." She touched a finger to his lips. "Put your hands over your head."

Desire curled low in the pit of his stomach as she took hold of his wrists and effectively shackled them to one corner of the four-poster bed. Though he didn't need to, he closed his eyes, waiting, desperately craving the next touch.

Tess sat back on her heels and simply looked at him for a long moment, taking in every inch of his hard, nude body. His cock stood tall and thick and if she were to touch it now, it would jump beneath her palm. "Do you want me to suck you again?"

A small noise escaped from Jaxon's lips. "God, yes." She was going to kill him. Any second now and his body would fragment into millions of pieces. He resisted the urge to pull the tie loose from his wrists though every thought urged him to take hold of her, to get lost in the silky feel of her skin.

Nails scraping his balls again, Tess leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his stomach. "Does that feel good?"

He couldn't respond. His breath was trapped somewhere between his rib cage and his clavicle.

Feeling wickedly sensual, she wrapped her hand around the base of his cock. "I can't hear you."

Mumbling something that sounded like a curse, Jaxon jerked his hips, pushing them upward to shove his cock deeper into her hand. Body burning from inside out, he couldn't form a coherent sentence, could only lie still and pray for the sweetness of release.

"What's that?" She tiptoed her fingers up the length of his cock. "You can't talk?" His sharp inhalation gave her the response she wanted. "Good, because I want you to listen to the sounds my mouth makes when it sucks you, to hear my enjoyment as I taste your cum."

Jaxon grabbed the knotted tie with one hand and gave it a yank, but Tess' next words stopped every move.

"If you break the tie, Jaxon, you don't get the pleasure."

He grew still, his muscles going lax. "Dammit, Tess. Suck me. Take me in your mouth."

She smacked his thigh so hard it stung her palm. "No talking."

He didn't know where in the hell she'd been hiding this persona but he liked it. The domineering tone of her voice and the seductive whispers, hell, yeah. He liked those a lot. His cock couldn't get any harder but the sweet anticipation of her lips kept him compliant.

Tess slid down his body, rubbing her breasts over his thighs before gently guiding his shaft in between the full globes. The only sound she heard was Jaxon's moan. Arching her back, she shoved forward until the tip of his cock touched her chin. Then, holding her breasts together, she began to move up and down, giving him just enough soft friction to make his muscles tense.

Rocking back, she took hold of his cock with her hand again, pausing long enough to appreciate the thick steel before lowering her head to touch her lips to the crown. The salty tang of his cum enticed her and she swirled her tongue over the head, licking away every drop of fluid.

"Oh Jesus, Tess, I can't—" As she took him fully into her mouth, words ground to a halt. The fire was about to be quenched, only now he would take the upper hand. Yanking the tie free, he swept the blindfold away from his eyes and snagged his hands in her hair. "Not like this. I want to come inside you."

She looked up, her mouth still wrapped around his cock. Her eyes crinkling with a smile, she guided him deeper into the hot, wet cavern and Jaxon threw back his head with a groan.

"Please." It was the only word he could get past his parched throat.

Drawing back, Tess moved away slowly, the picture of supreme satisfaction.

"Don't look so smug," he growled. "It's my turn."

Falling back against the pillows, her chestnut hair contrasting starkly with the white cases, she beckoned him like a sea nymph. "Then show me what you're bringing to the party."

His knee dipped the mattress, his hands pressed on either side of her body. He didn't speak as he moved over her, lowered his head to caress her neck with his lips. His curiosity aroused, he continued the exploration lower, found one peaked nipple and drew it into his mouth. His hands closed around her hips, dragged her up off the bed as he feasted on her skin.

She reached for him but her muscles weren't cooperating. Weak and boneless, her arms fell useless to her sides. He parted her legs with his knees, rose up over her. Silver-

gold eyes locked with hers, waited for her invitation. She moved restlessly against the blankets, whispered a breathless, "Yes."

And Jaxon lowered his body, his cock sinking into the hot depths of her channel. Tess closed her eyes, overwhelmed, as the sweet caress of his body, the gentle thrusts enraptured her. Perfect. The one word to describe the sensations. An elemental connection as before but this time fraught with new emotions. Shaken, she managed to lift her hands, to slide her palms along his arms, his shoulders. Her muscles contracted, undulated. Her hips moved in perfect rhythm with his, accustomed to the presence of his body. Synchronized magic.

He pressed his palms against the mattress, retreated from her body until the tip of his cock barely touched the lips of her pussy. "Open your eyes, Tess. Look at me."

Without thought, Tess obeyed. Her breath caught and he plunged into her, pinned her against the bed. Taking hold of her legs, he tipped her hips higher, pushing his shaft so deep inside her she gasped.

His intention to take her gently faded away, leaving behind an instinctive urge to brand her, make her his forever. He set a furious pace, retreating and thrusting with rapid jabs of his hips.

She wrapped her legs around his back and held on for the ride, lost in the perfection of his cock stretching the walls of her channel. The orgasm hit her hard, stunning her with its punch. She cried out and dug her fingers into his back as her muscles contracted, then relaxed and warm waves of pure, sensual ecstasy washed over her.

Jaxon pumped once, twice, before releasing his seed with a long, animalistic groan. The vibrations of his climax made his muscles spasm and he collapsed on top of her, panting.

For a long moment they lay still. Skin to skin. Heart to heart.

Breath labored, Jaxon rolled, taking Tess with him. Tucked her next to his side. He held her against his chest, his heart, his eyes closed. Emotions stormed his soul, scared him. He loved her. Needed her. And the need scared him most of all.

She gripped his hand, drew it to her lips and kissed the palm. "I love you." Her words were soft, almost timid.

He raised his hand only slightly and the light faded, replaced with the shadows of night. He needed the darkness. More than just his body had shattered with the release. "I love you too. More than I thought possible."

"And that scares you."

He marveled she could read him so well. So soon. He could only imagine what twenty years or even ten would do for her abilities. "Yes." He didn't think of lying to her.

Tess caressed his chest. "Good." The maddening touch of her fingers against his skin caused Jaxon's body to stir to life once more.

He pulled back, tried to see her face, but the moon had receded and the room had slipped into complete darkness. Perhaps he'd extinguished the gas lamp too soon. "I think you're going to have to help me with that one. Is it good that I'm a little intimidated by how I feel about you?"

"I believe the correct word is scared, Jaxon."

He scowled. "Don't get too comfortable with it."

"It's natural." She propped her head in her hand, her elbow on the mattress. "We came into this so quickly neither one of us had time to prepare. I don't think we could have prepared. You've never felt this way before." She touched his face with her fingertips. "And to me, that's very good."

He turned his head slightly, found her fingers and kissed them one by one. "Now that I've found you, I'm scared of losing you."

She snuggled against him, secure in his embrace. "You're not going to lose me. We're going to be together for a long time. In fact I'm pretty sure by the time eternity rolls around you're going to be sick of me."

He squeezed her hip. "The odds of that happening are infinitesimally low."

She rolled, pushed him back against the mattress. She straddled his body, her knees dipping into the mattress on either side of his hips. "Well, in that case, I hope you're not sleepy, Wizard." Her hands moved, skated across his lower abdomen, lingered just over his navel.

"Wizards can go without sleep should the need arise." Jaxon found himself holding his breath once more, impatient to feel the silkiness of her skin capturing his hard flesh.

"Oh, the need has arisen." She lowered her hand, shifted her hips. "And so has something else, I feel." Her fingers tested the length of him, sheltered the breadth within her palm.

He ran his hands up her legs and settled his fingers around her hips. "I'm afraid my body has a mind of its own with you."

"That wasn't a complaint. In fact I think I rather like your body's mind." She pressed upward and with one hand, guided his cock between the lips of her pussy and into her moist cleft. "And I could get used to this." Her breath escaped on a sigh while Jaxon's heart stuttered.

"That was my intention."

Chapter Eight

Tess came awake struggling. She fought against an invisible hand pressing her solidly against the mattress. She tried to open her eyes but her strength was depleted. Weakened, she felt the darkness shrouding her, not the darkness that accompanied night. This was blackness, a cloud of evil. She opened her mouth to scream but the words came out silently, faded into empty air.

"Baby born of this woman's womb, join your heart and soul, you will belong to the sisters five and share their world no more." The incantation continued in a rapid string before another voice joined the one.

"Woman of this earthly world, when the time is right, you will bring your unborn child to us, under cover of the night. She will remain safe within your womb until that day will come when we shall see new birth and our daughter shall be born."

Tess continued to fight, managed to turn her body, to bump her shoulder against Jaxon's. He awoke instantly. She heard the rush of air leave his lungs, felt the light bathe her face even though she couldn't open her eyes.

"Tess, what is it? What's wrong?" He shook her gently but she couldn't respond. Tears filled her eyes as the horrid chants began to fill the air around her, heard only by her ears.

Then a rush of wind, a cool, cleansing breeze, poured over her and Jaxon's voice resonated. "Witches five show yourselves. Bring yourselves into the light." Tess saw the brightness of the overhead light but she still couldn't open her eyes. He continued to speak to the air, one by one drawing the witches out. "Now I command you. You will show yourselves and take your punishment."

A loud screeching, like voices from beyond the grave, spewed forth and the weight lifted from her chest. Opening her eyes with a sigh of relief, she pushed herself to a sitting position and stared in horror as five beautiful women surrounded the bed, each wearing identical expressions of shock and concern.

Jaxon stood beside her although she hadn't felt him leave the bed. Fully clothed in indigo robes adorned with gold trimming, he presented a picture of masculine strength and power. His eyes darkened with loathing, his hands curled into fists at his sides. Tension popped in the air, crackled, sizzled as the wizard she now called husband faced off against the five witches. She should have been worried at the inequality but his stance reassured her he was in complete control.

"It would appear your magic has greatly improved since last we met, Jaxon." Tess recognized the witch who spoke. Her ghostly apparition. Athena.

"I warned you what would happen should you come into my home again, Athena."

The witch lifted a hand in apparent disregard for the wizard's throaty warning. "Technically we weren't in your home. Only in your bride. We came to claim what should be rightfully ours."

Tess clutched the blankets against her neck and blinked, batting her gaze from her husband's stormy face to Athena's serene one. One second Jaxon was beside her, the next, he was gone, only to reappear side by side with Athena.

The remaining four witches stepped backward as their sister rounded on the wizard. "Much improved. I'm impressed."

"Then this should really impress you." His hand shot out and captured her throat.

Another witch tried to move forward but he stayed her with a simple toss of his hand. Frozen like a quartet of statues, the witches could only stare in growing horror as their leader hung suspended in the air, supported only by the wizard's hand.

"You have entered my home for the last time." Jaxon's voice, dark with fury, vibrated with the strain of controlling his emotions. "In ancient times of days gone by, the witches roamed here not..." The words were a chant, a stream of promise, which brought collective gasps from the remaining witches.

A spark of fire cascaded through the bedroom window, slanted across the floor. A tall, lean body unfolded from the bolt and strode across the room. "Jaxon, release her." Braeden took a position at the end of the bed.

Jaxon didn't spare him a look. "This is not your concern, brother."

"I say that it is. We have discussed this. Killing Athena is not part of the plan. You will release her."

Jaxon did flick a glance at his brother then but only to rake him with a gaze so contemptuous Tess could only feel sorry for Braeden. "You allow your weakness for this witch to control you. You have brought shame to the Assembly with your connection."

His ears barely registering his brother's words, Braeden didn't move. "Release her before you have to contend with the remainder of the Assembly."

Athena coughed delicately. "Really, guys, it's nice that the two of you are fighting over me but perhaps you would like to be alone. My sisters and I would only be too happy to leave."

Jaxon's fingers clenched. Tess saw the whitening of his knuckles and flinched. "What kind of spell did you use? Did you draw my child to you?"

A knowing smile crossed the witch's face, making Tess shiver. "Now you know I can't reveal my secrets."

As his fingers continued to press, Tess leaped from the bed, dragging the comforter with her to cover her nudity. Stumbling, she made her way to his side, touched his arm. "It was something about a baby born of this woman's womb and that it would share our world no more."

Braeden took a visible step backward. "Jaxon, I know what you must be feeling inside but you cannot kill her. Not this way. If they must die, let them all die together."

Jaxon shook off Tess' hand and raised his arm. A fireball danced in the center of his palm. "That can be arranged."

The four witches tried to move. Tess saw the struggle in their eyes but their magic was powerless against his. Compassion for the four women compelled her to intervene. "Jaxon, don't! Whatever they have done, tried to do, they don't deserve to die. There must be something else you can do."

"Yes, Jaxon," Athena purred, "There must be something else you can do. You should listen to your wife. It would appear she has a wealth of wisdom you do not possess."

"You would be wise to remain silent," Braeden inserted.

The four witches managed to join hands and they began to chant. Slowly the binding spell holding them powerless weakened. Arista broke free first, lunged at Jaxon, still chanting. As her fingertips ignited with flames, she raised her voice, called upon the goddesses for assistance.

Tess saw the shards of glass coming, watched them gliding toward Jaxon's chest as a scream bubbled up in her throat. She forced her legs to move, her only intent to save her husband.

"Tess, stay!" His voice was barely above a whisper.

She continued to run forward but Braeden captured her around the waist to lift her out of harm's way as the slivers bounced off the protective shield covering Jaxon. "Listen to your husband. Do not interfere."

She struggled against the arm shackling her waist. "He's in danger."

"He can take care of himself."

"Arista, stay back!" Athena commanded.

Jaxon turned slightly, fingers flexing. As his hand rounded to a fist, he took one step forward and swept his arm wide, connecting with the air. The force flung Arista against the far wall. Still holding Athena's throat, he approached the fallen witch and lifted her with a simple curl of his fingers, effectively pinning her to the wall.

"He's going to kill her," Tess whispered in horror. Braeden's arms still held her, preventing her from doing more than watching. "You have to let me talk to him."

"Tess, you will leave the room," Jaxon said in a calm, cold voice.

"No, I won't. I'm not leaving so you can kill this woman."

"She is not a woman. She is a witch. They have no redeeming qualities. You waste your pity."

Jaxon's entire demeanor had changed. His speech patterns, his stance, everything portrayed him as a wizard and not the man she loved. She wondered if she could reach him now. "It doesn't matter. I'm not leaving you." She made her voice firm.

He swept her a look and she felt the command all the way down to her toes as easily as she felt the clothes sweeping over her body. In the blink of an eye, he had covered her, removing the comforter to clothe her in jeans and a knitted sweater. She lifted her gaze and almost thanked him.

Then the door swept wide. A powerful, consuming wind pushed against her body. Braeden opened his arms and released her into the onslaught. She couldn't fight against the push that propelled her out the door and into the hallway. The lock on the door clicked into place and prevented her return.

Tess didn't stand outside to listen to the end of the battle. She spun around and headed down the hallway, her own temper snarling.

* * * * *

Braeden whipped around, pointed toward the puff of light glowing in the dark sky. "Holy Hell, she's summoned Falcon."

Jaxon smiled grimly. "I am not surprised." He scattered a glance around the room. The cleanup took a matter of seconds. Order was restored before the leader could make his appearance.

Braeden ran his hands over his face and shot a bleak look toward the door. "You are going to have one hell of a time controlling that one."

"Who says I want to control her?" He opened the bedroom door with a crook of his finger. "Tess." His wife was nowhere in sight.

"Pouting, no doubt." Braeden scoffed his opinion.

Jaxon didn't waste his energies on his brother's disdain. He strode out into the hallway. His senses guided him to his wife. He found her on the balcony just outside the spare bedroom. She watched Falcon's approach, her arms folded, the wind whipping her long, chestnut hair around her shoulders.

He stood beside her. "I couldn't let you stay." He didn't touch her, didn't even lean against her. He gave her the space her anger required.

"You treated me like a child."

"You didn't need to see that."

"Did you kill her?"

He didn't respond, allowing his wife's gaze to rake over his face. He knew she was searching for his answer. Unable to find it, she drew in a shaky breath and looked back out over the gardens.

"And what about the others? Did you kill them as well?"

"They live." His voice sharpened and Tess knew he didn't like this line of inquisition. Suddenly weary, she lowered her head.

"She didn't deserve to die."

"The attack was unprovoked, Tess. I had no choice. Had I not retaliated, word would have gotten out that the Assembly was weak, unable or unwilling to defend ourselves. I couldn't let that happen."

"So you just kill a woman instead? That makes the Assembly more powerful, more superior? You killed one woman to save the Assembly's reputation? You'll have to forgive me if I'm finding that a bit difficult to understand."

He draped his arms over the balcony's edge and directed his gaze toward the blackened sky. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Maybe that's because I'm still not sure what I've gotten myself into. You've told me only what you think I should know, not what I want to know. You never told me, for instance, that you kill people. I think I would have remembered that one." She drew in a stuttering breath. "I couldn't reach you in there. You were different."

"I won't apologize for what I am."

Her hand slapped the air. "I'm not asking you to apologize for being a wizard but you killed a woman."

"You're missing the point. She was a very powerful witch."

"She was a woman." Tess spun around, enunciating each word as she pressed her back against the railing. "You have ten times her power. She didn't stand a chance against you."

He moved forward, muscles rippling beneath the soft silk of his robe. "Then she shouldn't have made the challenge."

"She was trying to protect her sister."

"Athena did not require her assistance. That's why my brother was there. Braeden would have intervened before I could hurt Athena. Arista didn't know that but I can't be held responsible for her lack of knowledge. She attempted to take my life. I responded in kind. And now you expect me to regret that I'm more powerful, better able to protect my family? Am I supposed to apologize because I succeeded where Arista failed? Had I not awakened tonight, the curse would have been complete. The witches would have succeeded in their mission and our child, any future child, would have been lost to us." Jaxon whirled around and took hold of her shoulders. "You summoned Falcon."

"I called to him, yes. I didn't know what else to do. I hoped I would reach him in time to prevent you from killing Arista."

"He would not have stopped me."

"He's your leader."

His hand tightened on her arm. "And Falcon knows the consequences for challenging a wizard. A witch alone cannot win against one of us. Arista knew that. She chose to place her life on the line by using her magic against me."

Tess shook off his hands to move farther back into the shadows. "And for that, she had to die, right?" She gave him a scathing look he felt down to his bones. "Your leader awaits you."

"He awaits both of us."

She turned to look back out into the blackness. "I don't want to see him."

"You called to him. He has responded to your request." Jaxon took two steps toward the door of the bedroom, stopped and held out his hand. "We must go."

She stood her ground for a few seconds longer before she gave in and walked past him. "Fine. We'll go in but don't expect me to forget this, Jaxon."

Falcon greeted Tess and Jaxon in the hallway en route to the living room. They joined Braeden by the French double doors. "Braeden has informed me that Arista is dead. The witches will retaliate."

Tess struggled against her temper. "That's it? A woman is dead and all you can say is the witches will retaliate?"

The leader lifted one eyebrow, sweeping a glance back and forth between the wizard brothers. "You expect compassion for those who would try to end our existence?"

"I don't know what I expect from you. I certainly didn't expect my husband to commit a murder a few feet away from me."

Jaxon's jaw clenched. "It was not a murder, Tess."

She held up one hand. "I'm sure you'll call it justifiable homicide or whatever terminology you wizards use but in my world, it's murder."

Falcon surveyed her for a long moment before responding. "Regardless, the witches will seek revenge."

"Athena saw the challenge." Jaxon placed his hand at the small of Tess' back but she moved away from him, out of his reach. He frowned, slanting her a glance, but he allowed the separation. For now.

She came to a stop by the grand piano. Her words were colored with bitterness, her eyes downcast. "You were trying to kill her sister. What was Arista supposed to do, believe you would have enough compassion not to complete your task?"

Eyebrows lifted, Braeden and Falcon exchanged glances. "Perhaps we should discuss this at daylight." Falcon made the suggestion with a slight inclination of his head toward the window.

"That sounds like a plan." Braeden followed their leader to the window, paused long enough to rest his hand on Jaxon's shoulder. "I wish things could have turned out differently."

"I did what I had to do, what any of us would have done in the given situation."

"We shall meet at dawn in the Assembly room." Falcon directed his gaze toward Tess. "You are more than welcome to join us."

Her head shot up although her face remained expressionless. "I think I'll pass. I believe I've seen enough magic to last me for the next year. And," her eyes were cool when they came to rest on her husband's face, "I don't need to hear any more of Jaxon's explanations. He can justify murder but I can't." She pushed away from the piano, walked past him out of the room.

"She will not forgive so easily." Falcon's observations weren't required. Jaxon nodded his head anyway.

He kept one eye on the doorway through which his wife had disappeared. "Falcon, there's something I must do with Tess. It's important."

The leader didn't dispute the obvious. "The witches will need time to regroup, possibly call in other covens to join with them before they make another attack. I will postpone tomorrow's meeting but forty-eight hours is all the time I can give you." He paused. "Do you actually have a plan?"

"Part of one. I'll just have to wing the rest of it."

One bushy white eyebrow arched. "Wing? Wizards do not wing, Jaxon. They prepare."

Jaxon sighed. "Not once they've married a mortal."

* * * * *

"We're going back to South Carolina." Jaxon's words snapped Tess to attention. She came up off the bed, stood with the backs of her knees bumping the mattress.

"What are you talking about?"

"You need to see your family and friends again. I should have taken you back before we married."

She wanted to kick him and wondered if wizards bruised. "You regret marrying me because I don't agree with you?"

He came to her side instantly. His hands took hold of hers. "No. Never. I only meant that you should have been able to see your family, to tell them you were getting married. I'm sorry."

Oh, the wizard was good. His charm was potentially lethal, designed to disarm her, take her mind off Arista's demise. She tugged her hands out of his and walked around the bed. "Jaxon, I don't know if I can accept what you've done."

"You don't have to accept it. It's happened. It's over. We move on."

Her temper rose, obscuring logic and reason. "And that's it? A woman is dead and you think we should just move on. How convenient. It must be nice to be so powerful that the loss of a life is insignificant to you. Where I come from what you did is murder."

"We aren't living in your world, Tess." The words snapped out, surprising her. She'd seen his anger before but never directed at her. His eyes glittered, lips pulled tight, revealing disapproval in every nuance of his face.

"Don't think you can intimidate me."

"I'm not trying to intimidate you. I'm trying to make you understand that when you married me you left your world behind."

She propped her hands on her hips. "If that's the case, why are you taking me back to South Carolina?"

"So you can say goodbye."

The words created a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Goodbye? Are we going somewhere?"

He raised a hand as if to touch her then dropped it back to his side. "Yes. We'll have to move to the Assembly's citadel, at least for a while. While we wait for the Coven's attack, we must be together, to ensure the combination of our strengths."

Weariness crept into her voice. "Where exactly is this citadel anyway? I mean you always blink me there. Is it on the mountain too?"

"Not this mountain but a mountain, yes. We should go." He held out his hand, waiting patiently for her to take it.

Tess continued to watch him, wanting more of a response to her question, needing more. "There's something you're not telling me."

"There are many things I cannot yet tell you." Jaxon continued to hold his hand out to her. "You should not worry about those things which have not come to pass."

The words were boldly spoken, rang out with the deep authoritative voice of power. Yet she heard more. She looked beyond the chiseled features, the face of the man she loved. Underneath the masculinity, the raw power, she saw the agony, the pain over what he had done just minutes earlier. And the fear that she might not be able to accept it.

That trepidation compelled her to reassure him, though her anger still simmered. "I love you, Jaxon."

His features softened. "I know, but I am an enigma to you. In time, you will learn to trust me."

"I do trust you. I just," her shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug, "don't know if I want to know everything you do, at least not now."

He didn't wait for her to take his hand before reaching and clasping his fingers around hers. "We need to leave. Although Athena will be with her sisters now, she'll be watching for an opportunity to avenge Arista's death."

"You said Athena saw the challenge. I thought that meant she wouldn't retaliate."

Jaxon wrapped his arm around her waist, drew her to his side. "Witches always retaliate, honey. It's what they do."

"Can they find us in Charleston?"

"They won't know where to look and in answer to the question you're about to ask, witches cannot track us."

"Not even with a crystal ball or something like that?"

Jaxon smiled and touched the tip of his finger to her upturned nose. "Not even with a crystal ball or something like that."

* * * * *

Colleen Montgomery glared at Tess with more than just disapproval. Fury glittered in her hazel eyes and the longer she stared, the more uncomfortable Tess became. Her high heels made tapping sounds against the marble tiles as she paced from the foyer to the living room, pausing to cast an icy glance over her shoulder every few seconds.

"Mother, why don't you just say what's on your mind?" Temples throbbing, she tried to massage away the ache. Why in the hell had she asked Jaxon to drop her off alone at her mother's house?

"Do you have any idea how irresponsible it was for you to take off like that without telling anyone? I had no idea where you were, if you were safe." Colleen made the most out of her acting abilities, dabbing at her eyes with a cream, linen handkerchief.

"I called Belinda, Mother. She knew where I was or at least who I was with."

"Yes, she told me all about this Jaxon Richards. What I want to know is who is he? You never mentioned him to me, not once, which leads me to believe this is some sort of clandestine affair of which you are ashamed." Colleen shuddered. "I cannot imagine what must have been going through your head. Did you not take into consideration the feelings of your family, what this might do to the family name?"

Tess snuffled a giggle and wondered what her marriage to a wizard would do to the good ole family name. It was true the Montgomery family was a force to be reckoned with in Charleston but she doubted it would compare to the force of the Assembly. She pictured Colleen's faint, a perfect imitation of an overwhelmed lady of old. "Mother, this wasn't something I planned."

Colleen's chin couldn't have lifted any higher. "That much is obvious. And where is this...this...man anyway? If you have not come to your senses and dumped him, I demand to meet him at once."

"You will meet him and I didn't dump him. In fact I married him." She could have been more delicate, could have worked up to the marriage part but she knew her mother, knew that Colleen was working herself up into a full-fledged temper tantrum. And Tess figured the best way to head her off at the pass was to use the shock factor. It seemed to work. Colleen stared at her, mouth open, eyes bulging.

"You...you...that's impossible. You wouldn't have gotten married without your family and friends. Even you wouldn't be that inconsiderate. Of course you're not married. The idea is preposterous. Not to mention the fact that you simply would not

marry a...a...building contractor. You are perfectly aware of your responsibilities and you would not shirk them for a man you barely know."

"Mother, I shirked."

"Oh, oh," Colleen took a couple of stumbling steps backward, grasping at the arm of the sofa behind her. "I think I'm going to faint."

Tess noticed her mother aligned herself perfectly with the sofa so as to spare her tailored dress from coming into contact with the floor. "You're not going to faint. You're going to listen to me. Jaxon and I love each other. We saw no reason to wait to get married. It's not like I had any desire to be a June bride."

"Saw no reason?" Colleen parroted, her voice rising an octave higher than her normally strident voice. "What about your mother? Did you even stop to think that as my only child, I would want to see you get married? Did that ever occur to you, Tess?"

The headache intensified. She had the sudden, overwhelming desire to leave, to disappear. "Let's try to make an effort to discuss this calmly. After all, we wouldn't want to alert the neighbors." Her lips turned upward in a parody of a smile.

"Calmly? Do you really think that's going to be possible considering the news you just delivered without so much as an apology?"

"An apology?" Tess tilted her head to one side, considered the words. "I have nothing to apologize for. You would never have approved of Jaxon." At least not the only way she could know him. Her mother was big on power, so in another world, she might bestow her bountiful blessing on the union if she knew the wizard behind the man.

"And yet you married him." Colleen whipped her head around as the doorbell pealed.

"I'll get it. It's probably Belinda."

"You invited her to a family conversation?"

Tess had never gained her mother's approval and had long ago realized it was a futile quest. Colleen Montgomery approved of few people in her world. "Jaxon and I can't stay long. We wanted to see everyone before we left."

Colleen trailed after her to the door. "Left? You're leaving? Going where?"

"Jaxon is taking over the family business." It wasn't exactly a lie.

Her mother's eyes glinted with the hint of curiosity. "And what, pray tell, is the family business? A construction company?"

Tess opened the door, saved from responding to her mother's sarcastic question by Belinda's squeal of delight. Enveloped in a hug, Tess relaxed for the first time since setting foot on South Carolina soil once more. "Belle, it's good to see you."

Belinda pulled away, clasping Tess' shoulders. "I thought I would never see you again! Did Jaxon come with you?"

She pulled her into the house, eager to have a friend with her to face her mother's displeasure. "Yes, he did. He'll be here shortly. In the meantime, I'm telling Mother

about us.” Issued sotto voce, the warning gave Belinda enough heads up to paste a smile on her face.

“Mrs. Montgomery, how wonderful to see you again.” Belinda extended her hand in perfect politeness.

“Isn’t it though?” Colleen accepted the proffered hand reluctantly. Tess knew at the first given moment her mother would excuse herself to the restroom to wash her hands. “Well, if you ladies will excuse me, I have to visit the ladies’ room.”

Belinda and Tess traded glances, waiting until Colleen closed the door on the guest bathroom before erupting into peals of laughter. “Oh God, your mother will never change.”

Tess hooked her arm through Belinda’s and guided her to the sofa. “Did you expect her to? Jaxon wanted to say goodbye to his friends. He should be here shortly.”

Belinda’s eyes widened with fright. “Goodbye? You mean you’re leaving? I thought you were back to stay.”

Their hands linked. “I wish I could but Jaxon is taking over the family business. We only have a couple of days.”

“Where are you moving? When will I see you again?”

Tess hated this part. “We’re moving to Nepal and I’m not sure.”

“Nepal.” Belinda’s face scrunched with confusion. “Isn’t that like in Asia?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Who is this man? The family business is in Nepal?”

“Jaxon is part Nepalese on his mother’s side.” Tess squeezed Belinda’s hand for reassurance. “But I’ll call you every chance I get.”

“So this guy isn’t just a contractor.” Belinda sighed. “It figures. I can’t imagine why I thought you could actually end up with a normal guy.”

“Look at the bright side, at least I got married.” She grinned and winked.

“I should hardly think that’s something to be proud of, Tess.” Colleen returned to the living room. “And I think it appalling that your new husband,” she wrinkled her nose at the word, “would not have the common decency to greet me alongside you. Apparently his friends were far more important.”

Tess got to her feet. “I asked for this time, Mother. I wanted to tell you myself, just in case you weren’t happy about it.”

The barb went ignored. “You never did say what type of business Jaxon’s family is involved in.”

Tess searched her brain for a feasible business endeavor. Then brightening, she responded with a cheerful, “His family deals in power, electricity. In fact they are the biggest assembly of power companies in Nepal and the surrounding countries.” Silently patting herself on the back, she pasted a hundred-watt smile to her face.

Colleen's eyes had taken on an avaricious gleam. Tess knew her mother smelled money, lots of it. Not that the Montgomerys didn't have a fair share of their own but one could never have enough money. "I see. Then perhaps I might visit you one day in Nepal."

Belinda bounced to her feet. "Mrs. Montgomery, aren't you the least bit upset your daughter is moving so far away? I mean it isn't like we're talking Tennessee here. We're talking across the world. It's an entire universe apart from us."

Colleen waved a hand. A diamond winked in the last rays of sunshine pouring through the French windows. "Belinda, my dear, we are a thoroughly modernized nation. It is a simple matter to book a flight to Nepal."

"For you, maybe," Belinda muttered to herself as she sat once more.

Tess heard the sound of a car's engine. "That must be Jaxon now."

Belinda scurried after her, peering over her shoulder. "He looks even better than I remember."

Tess smiled as Jaxon unfolded his length from the same black sports car she'd seen parked in her driveway the night of their first date. It seemed such a long time ago.

Mirrored sunglasses hid Jaxon's eyes but his lips were parted in a smile only for her. Long legs covered the distance up the driveway while Belinda purred from behind her friend.

"My God, he's absolutely gorgeous."

Tess had to agree. He had changed to black jeans and an emerald green knit shirt that stretched tautly over his biceps. She wanted to run her fingers through his wind-tousled hair and drag him down to her for a kiss. But Colleen's irritating voice tapped her on the shoulder, reminded her they were not alone.

"Hi, honey." Jaxon removed his sunglasses, ducked his head for a quick kiss and turned his charm on Belinda, who was staring in open-mouthed amazement. "You must be Belinda. Tess has told me a lot about you." He stuck out his hand.

Belinda's jaw snapped shut and she babbled some semblance of a reply while she shook his hand.

"And this is," Tess moved aside to introduce her mother, "my mother, Colleen Montgomery. Mother, this is Jaxon Richards, my husband." Tess had seen predatory gleams before but her mother had perfected the look. Colleen gazed at Jaxon as if he were the answer to a maiden's prayers.

She sailed over to where her son-in-law stood and wrapped her arms around his waist to give him an affectionate hug, which lasted longer than was considered decent in polite society. "Why, Jaxon, it's so wonderful to finally meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Mrs. Montgomery." Jaxon managed to put Colleen away without embarrassing her.

"Tess tells me the two of you are moving to Nepal." She practically simpered.

Jaxon's silver-gold eyes fell on Tess' face and she read the question in those eyes. Exactly how much had she told her mother and friend? Her gaze must have reassured him for Jaxon broke eye contact and returned to the conversation. "That is why we came back to South Carolina. I wanted to give Tess the chance to say her goodbyes and tie up any loose ends."

Colleen patted her hair back into place. "I was telling Tess that perhaps I could visit you sometime in the future. I've always wanted to see Nepal."

Tess glared at her mother. She'd never heard about Colleen's desire to tour Asia. She decided to let Jaxon dig them out of this one. "What do you think, honey?"

He wrapped an arm around her waist. "I think that's a wonderful idea. We'll have to let you know when things settle down. Right now we're in the middle of an attempted hostile takeover. I'm afraid all of my energies are going to be used dealing with that matter when we return."

Tess swallowed a nervous giggle. A hostile takeover. How apropos. "I've told Mother and Belinda your family owns several power companies in Nepal." She turned her gaze back to her mother. "They generate a lot of electricity."

He squeezed a warning. "Well, I'm sorry we won't be able to stay longer but perhaps we can all meet for dinner tomorrow evening. I know Tess is tired from the trip and needs to relax. Since both of our houses are still hurricane-damaged, we'd planned on going back to the hotel and taking it easy tonight."

The gleam was back in Colleen's eyes. "Yes. The trip. Tess, darling, you haven't mentioned where you've been all this time."

"Just up the coast," Jaxon intervened in a smooth-as-butter tone of voice.

"Well, perhaps next time, you can encourage Tess to call her family before she takes off on a tour of the Eastern seaboard."

Belinda quickly jumped in. "I'm just so excited for the both of you. I never thought for one moment when I bid on you for Tess that the two of you would end up married and living in Nepal."

Colleen's breath escaped on a low hiss. "Bid on him?"

"Oh Lord. I wasn't supposed to say that, was I?" Belinda shot Tess an apologetic look, which Jaxon intercepted with a smile to reassure her.

"Tess and I were involved in a charity auction for a children's home. That's how we met," he said casually in response to his mother-in-law's curiosity.

"And she bid on you?" Ice dripped from every word.

Tess joined the conversation. "Actually Belinda bid for me."

"I see. And how much did you go for, Mr. Richards?"

"Mother." Any minute her head was going to explode. As if sensing her pain, Jaxon came to stand behind her, his hands massaging her temples. The heat of his fingers soothed her, easing away the ache.

"Don't 'Mother' me, Tess. I'd like very much to know how much you paid for your husband. After all, it is a mother's duty to make sure you didn't pay below retail."

Jaxon remained perfectly still, eyes narrowed, focused on his mother-in-law. He didn't need to be told that Colleen Montgomery's sophistication and poise were in perfect synchronization with her old money snobbery and bitchiness. While she coveted the new money her daughter had acquired through marriage, she wasn't letting go of the haughtiness that, in her mind, kept her a rung above everyone else.

"The bids were sealed, Mrs. Montgomery, but I'm sure with your connections you could obtain the information for a nominal fee," he finally replied, his tone civil.

"But Belinda would know how much a husband costs these days," Colleen continued in a syrupy sweet tone of voice.

His shoulders tensed, anger twisting in his gut. "If you're interested in going down that route to acquire your next husband, I'm sure I could make a couple of calls for you."

Colleen's cheeks flushed. "I would never stoop so low as to bid on a husband. I am perfectly capable of meeting a proper gentleman in the right setting."

Jaxon's civility disappeared as he took a step forward. "Define proper, Mrs. Montgomery. Would that be a man with plenty of money willing to keep his mouth shut and his wallet open?"

Tess' fingernails dug into Jaxon's arm but he was beyond noticing. Instead he thrust her behind him in a protective gesture.

"I can see that once the veneer is washed off, you revert to your customary manners, Mr. Richards. Perhaps I should adjourn to the ladies' room, possibly giving you time to recover the charm you have apparently misplaced."

"I believe the ability to charm depends on one's desire to charm."

"No amount of money can take the place of proper breeding. My daughter was raised to be a lady although she fought me every step of the way. Over the years I have discovered that her manners are waning. Now, with this marriage, I can only imagine what abhorrent behavior she will indulge in." Colleen sniffed and adjusted her silk blouse that rode low over her breasts. "While I applaud your eye for aesthetics, Tess, as your new husband is quite handsome, I am greatly disappointed in your lack of discernment when it comes to class."

"Oh, Mother. Could we, for once, skip the histrionics?" Tess closed her eyes and shook her head while Belinda came to stand beside her to offer support. "I don't need to prove anything to you and furthermore, I could give a rat's ass about your approval or disappointment."

Tess' words didn't faze Colleen. She was on a roll and felt she had gained sole possession of the floor. "It is bad enough you have insisted on maintaining a friendship with this...this woman." She pointed a manicured finger toward Belinda. "A woman so beneath you she could never hope to attain your status but now I discover you picked your husband at a meat market. I have endured the years of your friendship with

Belinda, much to my own embarrassment, while I watched you slide down the ladder of prestige because of it. And now you hope to boost your own self-worth by marrying a man with wealth and good looks. Well, I can assure you this marriage will not help you achieve rank in our society simply because our class will not recognize an outsider with claims of power and influence."

"That's enough." Jaxon's voice sliced like a sharpened saber. "Mrs. Montgomery, you are free to look down your nose at me, to consider me lacking on your scales of importance and even to share those feelings of disdain with me. But you are not free to insult my wife."

Colleen threw back her shoulders and tilted her chin. Her stance indicated she was prepared for battle. "She is my daughter. How I talk to her is my business."

"You couldn't be more wrong." There was no mistaking the threat in Jaxon's voice.

"You have no right to interfere with our relationship, Mr. Richards."

"I have every right. She is my wife now, a part of my life. Love and honor aren't just words my people say in a ceremony. We respect our wives, love them and protect them. And we allow no one to humiliate them, publicly or privately. You will apologize."

Colleen gurgled with outrage, her eyes narrowed. "Go to hell."

Tess began to walk to the door, eager for an escape but Jaxon stopped her by catching hold of her wrist. "Wait. We aren't leaving until your mother apologizes."

"My mother isn't big on apologies. Don't waste your time."

He smiled ever so politely. "I believe you were about to apologize, Mrs. Montgomery." He narrowed his vision to Colleen's face, captured her gaze and allowed her to see the spark of fire in his eyes. He steepled his fingers while angling his shoulders to prevent Tess and Belinda from seeing his actions. Blue flames danced from his fingertips as he raised one eyebrow. "Mrs. Montgomery?" The threat was clear and Colleen visibly paled.

"I-I, Tess, you know I don't mean half of the things I say. I'm certain you didn't take it quite as literally as your husband did." She flicked a glance toward Jaxon's unyielding face and continued. "But at any rate, I apologize. I certainly did not mean to upset you."

Jaxon placed his hand at the small of Tess' back. "I believe we're ready to go now. Belinda, Tess and I would love for you to join us tomorrow."

Tess started moving toward the door but stopped to add over her shoulder. "I guess I'll be seeing you, Mother."

Colleen only jerked her head in acknowledgment of her daughter's words and slumped down onto the sofa, her eyes glazed.

Tess didn't wait for Jaxon to put the car into gear before she began the interrogation. "Okay, what did you do to her?"

His teeth gleamed brightly. "I merely showed her the wisdom behind an apology."

"You threatened her. I can't believe you threatened my mother." She mulled over the information. "So what exactly did you do? Because this could come in handy in the future."

He reached across and took her hand in his. "Let's just say I'm sure it's not something your mother is going to share with anyone."

"Of course not. Fireballs and lightning bolts aren't usually things you care to talk about, especially when those same instruments threaten your health and wellbeing."

"Not fireballs or lightning bolts, Tess. You were there."

She snapped her seat belt into place and sank back against the calfskin. "I can imagine that was a 'Depends' moment for my mother."

"Was she always like that?"

"She was much worse when I was a child. I could never do anything to please her. I was never good enough." Tess was careful to keep the regret out of her voice but Jaxon read her too well.

"That hurt you."

She shrugged, trying to brush off the concern, the feelings of inadequacy. "It used to but after a while I stopped trying to please her and just started living my life."

"Is that what you're doing now, just living your life?"

Bringing his hand to her lips, she kissed each knuckle individually, not really knowing how to answer his question. She hadn't found her own life in Jaxon's world and she doubted he would understand her continuing struggle. "Things feel so different."

"Things are different now."

"I'll be glad to leave."

He looked at her briefly before he returned his eyes to the road. "That surprises me."

"Because you thought once I saw Charleston again I would want to stay."

"Yes, I did."

"I thought that too but I'm not the same as I was before the storm, before I met you." She shivered, folded her hands in her lap. "It's going to be difficult for me to accept what happened, Jaxon."

He didn't need to ask what she was talking about. "I can understand why. In your world, Arista was a human. In our world, she was a powerful witch bent on destroying the Assembly through any means available."

"Couldn't you have sent her somewhere, someplace where she couldn't harm anyone?"

Jaxon considered the question before nodding slowly. "Yes, I suppose I could but her intention was to kill. I saw it in her eyes."

She tugged on the shoulder harness and turned her face toward the window. "You're right. To me, she was a human." She didn't need to look at Jaxon to feel his disappointment. He wanted her to accept him as he was, without question, without reservation. How could she make him understand it wasn't so simple for her?

Jaxon squeezed her knee gently. "I know things aren't going to be easy for you. There's a lot for you to digest in the coming months but don't ever doubt I love you." Silence descended for a brief moment before he added, "I take it you won't miss your mother."

She rolled her head on the rest to look at her husband's profile. "No, but I will miss Belinda."

"I'm sorry. I wish—"

"No, don't. I think deep down in my heart I knew when I married you that I would lose this life."

"But you've gained another one."

Tears pricked her eyelids. "Yes, I have."

"I'm here with you, Tess."

She allowed the silence to return, needing the quiet to allow the events of the past twenty-four hours to sink in. But more than that, to face the upcoming loss of what she'd known for the past thirty plus years.

Her life as Tess Montgomery was gone.

* * * * *

The first thing Tess noticed about the hotel room was that it was set for seduction. Overflowing with lighted candles, the intoxicating scent of sweet perfume and the sounds of the waves crashing against the shore, it whispered sensuality. Silk sheets adorned the bed. The sultry sounds of a bass guitar filtered out of hidden speakers and as the lights flickered over the bed, the bathroom door creaked open.

"Did you call in some favors or is this some of your magic?" she whispered, almost afraid that words would break the mood.

Jaxon laughed a little and turned her in his arms. "Does it really matter?" He bumped his forehead lightly against hers. "Why don't you go change into something a little more comfortable? I'll pour us a glass of wine."

Looking back over her shoulder as she walked to the bathroom, Tess couldn't help but watch how he moved. With panther-like grace, he strolled to the mini-bar, muscles in his back and thighs undulating slowly.

Beautiful. She'd used the word to describe him before but tonight, with the moon gleaming in from the floor-to-ceiling windows, he took her breath away. He personified masculinity and perfection.

"You're staring at me." The low, amused drawl made her jump.

"It's hard not to." The admission didn't embarrass her. She met his gaze as he looked up and winked at him. Lifting the small overnight case at the foot of the bed off the floor, she continued her walk into the bathroom. "I'll be out in a few seconds. Don't go anywhere."

As if he could. Every muscle in his body came alive—especially one. His cock grew to a painful stiffness behind the zipper of his pants as he stood there, staring at the closed door.

How could he have gotten so lucky? Or did luck have anything to do with it? He preferred to call it destiny.

Seconds later, but what seemed like hours to Jaxon, the bathroom door creaked open. He turned in slow motion, caught his breath and held it for the beat of ten. Tess approached him slowly, a perfect scene from an old black-and-white movie. The wait was worthwhile.

She'd freed her hair from the confines of the braid, allowing it to flow loose and sexy around her shoulders. The black satin she wore adhered to her curves, cupped her full breasts and drew attention to the creamy mounds that peeked over its lacy edge. The flirtatious hem swirled around the tops of her thighs, translucent enough to give Jaxon a tantalizing peek of dark curls at the apex of her thighs.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long." Her voice poured over him like warm honey. Her eyes were inviting, brazen, and he shifted his stance to ease the pressure between his legs.

Bringing his hands to the edge of his shirt, he gripped the material and tugged it over his head. "I'm not complaining." He heard the raspiness of his own voice. "You look incredible."

Desire slammed into his abdomen as she circled him. She trailed one hand along his spine, dipped her fingertips into the waistband of his jeans. Moist kisses followed shoulder to shoulder and Jaxon sucked in a sharp breath. Then her hand dropped, gliding over his ass before sweeping to the front of his jeans.

"You're so hard." The words were a low purr of satisfaction.

"I can get harder," he warned.

Her eyes glittered when she lifted her head to meet his gaze. "Prove it." The throaty whisper gave Jaxon all the impetus he needed. He whipped around, caught a handful of Tess' hair and dragged her lips to his. He heard her murmur of satisfaction before he bent into the kiss. Her lips were moist, warm and opened to the thrust of his tongue. He tasted the minty freshness of her toothpaste, felt the satiny softness of her skin, the warmth of her body pressed against his. He inhaled the light fresh scent of her shampoo, the sweetness of her soap. She made a low sound in her throat and the soft rustle of satin whispered over her skin. His senses were attuned to her, his body raging with his need.

Lifting her in his arms, he swirled and carried her to the bed. A goddess against the mound of pillows, Tess looked up at him, opened her legs to welcome him. Jaxon swept

the remaining pillows aside with an impatient flick of his hand before he joined her on the bed.

The roles reversed as he took the position of seducer. He watched the flames lick in her blue eyes as the waves of emotion danced around her pupils. Hunger pummeled him as he slid his palm up the inside of her leg, over her thigh. She jumped slightly, bringing a smile to his lips. He lowered his head, touched his lips to the sensitive spot behind her knee and Tess inhaled sharply.

"Jaxon, I want—"

"I know exactly what you want, baby, and I'm going to give it to you." He raised his head to meet her slumberous gaze. "But not yet. I want to taste you again. All I've thought about today is getting you alone and taking my time eating you, sliding my tongue over your soft clit."

Tess' legs moved restlessly against the silk beneath her. "You're making it hard for me to breathe."

"Just relax." His fingers tiptoed up her leg, across the flatness of her abdomen. He trailed the back of his hand over her warm, damp pussy, bent his head to kiss the moist slit. Her body arched and he heard his name, a broken plea for release.

Tess moaned, her juices bathing his hand. Head raised, he stroked the plump lips with the pad of his index finger before gently opening the pink petals with his thumbs. "You're so beautiful." His tongue traced the wet flesh, teasing before swirling over her clit.

She gasped and twisted, grasping the sheet. "Oh God, that's so good."

His hand against her pubic bone, he pressed her back against the mattress, moved his lips along her bikini line while his fingers slipped inside her throbbing channel. His thumb massaged her engorged nubbin, stroked her until she cried out. Sweat poured over her skin, bathed in the dampness and the light of the candles.

"Easy, baby," Jaxon crooned before he replaced his fingers with the kiss of his lips. He nibbled her, suckled her and tasted her, savoring the juices of her body as they flowed over his tongue.

She was so sweet and creamy. Burying his face deeper into her pussy, he sucked her clit into his mouth while she began to thrash beneath him, bucking her hips and begging aloud.

"I'm...close."

"Mmm," he growled, driving his fingers deeper into her slick channel. He couldn't get enough of her taste, her scent. He wanted to touch her everywhere with his tongue, explore every inch of her hot, tight pussy, watch her face as the orgasm tore through her.

"Jaxon!"

She came on a loud cry, her fingers nested in his hair while her hips lifted, pushing her sheath against his face.

He continued to suck at her clit while she shivered and jerked. "I want you to come again."

Her fingers tightened in his hair. "I want you to fuck me."

A ball of liquid heat slid from his stomach down to his toes, coercing Jaxon to slide up her damp body. "Yeah?"

Hands now flexing against his shoulders, she nodded, her tongue slipping between her lips. "Fuck me, Jaxon. Fuck me hard. Like the first time."

Shifting his weight, he curled one hand around his cock, moving it ever so gently over her clit. Her breath shuddered out again and she bit down on her lower lip.

"Jaxon..."

"Just wait," he commanded, rubbing his thickness over her sensitive flesh faster and faster, enjoying every moan she made, each swift intake of breath, the clench of her hands against his skin and finally the wild, frantic moves she made when she climaxed again.

Then he moved, pushed into her with one hard thrust before the orgasm was complete. The contracting muscles closed around his cock like a curled hand and his breath hissed out from between clenched teeth. Damn, it felt so good to be inside her.

She opened her legs wider, accepting the invasion of his cock. Their hands connected, fingers linked and they rocked together.

"Harder," she demanded.

Grasping her ass, he lifted her hips and drove into her, his fingers biting into her skin. Muscles bunching, he pounded his cock into her pussy, wrapping his arms around her legs for better leverage.

The animalistic sounds he made matched hers. They moved as one, thrusts and parries in seductive yet wild harmony. His balls clenched, drawing up so tightly he struggled to breathe.

"Oh yeah. Oh yeah," he moaned.

She reached for him, curled her hands around the back of his head. "That's it. Just like that."

"Here it comes. Here it comes." His legs straightened as the orgasm punched him like a solid right hook. He felt the heat of his seed as it filled her pussy and for a moment his vision clouded. The aftereffects rippled through him for several seconds until he could relax.

Her legs slid down, her hands falling away from his body. He lowered himself to kiss her forehead, her cheeks, her eyes, then her lips. Then he pushed the weight of his body up onto his hands and looked down into her flushed face. "I love you."

Tess' lips turned up into a temptress' smile. "I'd never doubt that. I could stay like this forever."

He touched her face, forcing her to open her eyes. He held her with just that simple connection. "Do you know what you do to me, what you've done to me?"

"I hope it's the same thing you've done to me." She stirred against him and draped her leg over the backs of his thighs.

His body responded instantly to the pull of hers. "I'd never imagined being this close to anyone before I met you."

She arched an eyebrow. "You mean sexually?"

He gave her a disapproving look. "No, I don't mean sexually and you know it. I mean this type of closeness, just being here with you, listening to you breathe, knowing you're mine."

"You might come to regret that in the next few months," she teased him while her hands began a gentle exploration of his spine and lower. "I love the feel of your body, the muscles, the hardness." She tipped her head back, laughed huskily. "Especially one particular hardness."

Jaxon curled his fingers around her chin. "I'll never regret marrying you, Tess. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"I thought we'd already covered that area. Forever. Eternity and all that. At least Falcon seemed pretty solemn when he talked about it."

"You enjoy baiting me, don't you?"

"Actually I like the way you respond when I bait you."

Moving his hips, he guided the head of his cock toward her heat. He watched her eyes widen then narrow as the first wave of pleasure rippled through her body. "Is this what you like?"

Tess' nails curled into the flesh of his hips. "That and so much more."

Chapter Nine

"You just wouldn't believe how Ed has been treating me ever since he came home last night," Belinda crowed, her hands fisted over her chest. With a dreamy expression on her face, she gushed on. "It's like something out of a movie. He brought me flowers. He hasn't brought me flowers in over two years. In fact the last time he brought me flowers, he was only trying to get himself out of the doghouse." As she chattered on, Tess and Jaxon walked a few steps behind her, holding hands, shoulders bumping with casual ease.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "All of a sudden, I get this feeling that you had something to do with that."

"We shouldn't be the only ones who have such happiness."

A lump swelled in her throat. "I'm glad she's so happy. It'll make leaving easier."

Jaxon drew their entwined hands up to his chest, pressed them over his heart. "She'll be happy for a long time."

"Forever, even?"

"For as long as they both live."

She sighed. "Which isn't forever. Will I know when they die, Jaxon?" She made sure her voice was low enough to prevent Belinda from overhearing. "I mean I don't want to know. And how am I going to explain my continued existence to their children or their children's children? I don't understand how this all works."

"It takes some adjustment," Jaxon admitted.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"There is no way to answer your question." He frowned, dipping into his memories. As an immortal, he'd never gotten close enough to mortals to have to explain his existence. His human friends were few and far between, except for Harry and Sadie. He'd grown to care for them but they wouldn't remember him any longer. He'd removed every trace of his life from their minds. He would remember them but he couldn't risk their memories of him. He'd jeopardized the Assembly one too many times. Now it was time to protect them.

Tess poked him in the ribs with her finger. "Are you still listening to me? I get the distinct impression you were a hundred miles away."

Jaxon felt the ripple of unease, a sudden shifting of the air around him. The summons came through strong and clear. He stopped walking and brought her to a stop with him. "The Assembly needs me."

"I thought we didn't have to leave until tomorrow." Disappointment colored her voice.

"Something must have happened."

"Dammit. I should have known it was too good to last."

"You knew we couldn't stay."

"I'll have to tell Belinda."

His hand curled around the nape of her neck while he dipped his knees to catch a better look at her face. "Hey, it's going to be okay."

"Says you." She smiled a little. He knew it was meant to reassure him. She wanted him to know she was trying to bravely face whatever lay ahead of them. But deep inside his heart, he knew she was nowhere near prepared for the danger that lay in store.

"Don't worry. I'll protect you."

"You worry about protecting your family. I can take care of myself. I've been doing it for years."

"You don't know what witches are really capable of doing. That night, when Athena came to our room, it was a show, not the true mark of her power."

"I've faced wizards and I've heard they're far more powerful than any witch." Tess tapped his cheek with her fingertips. "Besides you won't let anything happen to me."

He forced a grin. "I didn't think it was physically possible to be wrapped around a woman's finger. I'm not quite sure whether I should thank you for demonstrating the process or not."

She laughed and dragged him with her to catch up with Belinda. "Belle, Jaxon just got a phone call. I'm afraid we're going to have to leave now." Keeping her voice light and airy, she continued. "It's something about the takeover and his brother is all worked up. Just between you and me, I think he needs some tranquilizers."

Belinda stopped walking, dismay on her face. "But Ed wanted the two of you to come over for dinner. He really wants to meet Jaxon."

"And he will. It'll just have to be the next trip. I'm really sorry." Tess hooked her arm through Belinda's and steered her toward Ed's battered pickup truck. "We'll be back soon...at least as soon as we can."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Although, now the way you've been talking about Ed, I can't imagine why you'd want another couple around."

Belinda blushed like a new bride but before she could respond, Jaxon intervened.

"It was nice to meet you, Belinda, and I can't thank you enough for the bid."

Their shared laughter created a warm feeling in the pit of Tess' stomach until she caught a glimpse of Jaxon's face. The summons was stronger. She could see it in his eyes.

Belinda wrapped her arms around Jaxon's neck, dragging him close for a brief, intense hug. "Thank you for being such a great guy. I know you'll make Tess happy and that makes me happy. Take care of her."

"Always." He kissed her cheek. "If you ever need anything..."

She waved away the offer. "Before the two of you arrived, I might have taken you up on that offer but now I don't think I'll need anything for a long time."

"He really does love you." Jaxon captured her eyes, held her gaze. "The two of you have a long life ahead of you and after last night, you might want to start decorating that nursery you've always talked about." He pulled back, smiling into her stunned face.

"Jaxon has a gift," Tess quickly explained. "He can spot a pregnant woman a mile away, even before she knows she's pregnant. According to his family, he hasn't been wrong yet."

Belinda began to cry, tears rolling down her cheeks to plop against her cotton shirt. "I have to tell Ed. I need to buy paint and—" She stopped herself, enfolded Tess in another hug. "I'll miss you too. Have a safe trip back and call me so I'll know you got there all right."

"We will." Tess held on for as long as she could.

As Belinda walked away, Jaxon held Tess' attention, needing to distract her. For in his mind, the spell was forming, taking shape to shadow the people they would leave behind. A spell to ensure the safety of the Assembly.

* * * * *

"The prodigal son returns." Athena retreated from the window of the tower, eyes glowing black with hatred.

Hestra turned away from the black cat she'd been stroking. "We shouldn't wait to avenge Arista's death. To delay would only give the Assembly time to prepare."

Athena laughed, more a bitter cackle than an announcement of humor. "The Assembly won't be able to prepare for us, my dear sister. They anticipate our strike but they can't know the plan I have in mind." She backed into the upper tower, the moonlight striking a pale path. "Tell me, Hestra. Did Jaxon recant the spell?"

Hestra's eyes widened for a brief moment. "No, he didn't. He only knew about the spell we had cast on the child that had not yet been conceived."

Athena smiled then, a mere parting of her lips to reveal even, white teeth. "As I said, the wizards cannot know my plan."

The screech of an owl heralded the arrival of visitors to the tower. "Come, my sister, let us go join our new friends. We have much to discuss."

"Those witches aren't our friends, Athena. They are of the Coven of Ballhastra. They have attempted to overthrow us more than once to gain control of the tower."

Athena placed her hand on Hestra's shoulder and began to guide her toward the depth of concrete stairs. "You worry much for a powerful witch. Don't be so concerned. These witches will be our friends because they don't wish to become our enemies. Trust me."

* * * * *

Jaxon thought of home and as the image blinked into his mind, his feet touched solid ground, the edge of the mountain overlooking Nepal. With his arm around Tess, whose eyes were still clenched tightly shut, he turned, steered them toward the mansion seated atop the craggy mountain's peak. "We are home, my love."

She cracked open one eye and sighed. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that."

"It comes with time."

"I trust you had a safe journey." The deep male voice interrupted their conversation and brought a frown to Tess' face.

"I don't suppose you would ever think about waiting until you're invited before you just show up at our home, Falcon."

The leader fixed her with an odd look. "An invitation? How quaint and perhaps, at a later time, I would willingly oblige you. But for now," he pointed a finger over the edge of the mountain, "the Coven is busy."

Jaxon knew why he hadn't noticed the turmoil across the valley or the glimmering lights flashing from the window of the stone tower the witches called home. He'd had Tess in his arms. She distracted him. He didn't miss the censure in Falcon's eyes as he returned the leader's gaze. "They are in battle. Do you know of the coven they are attempting to overtake?"

"Ballhastra. Their leader, Aguinar, has been quite ill for the past few years. Unlike the Coven of Allesandra, they have not acquired the immortality which would prevent such an illness."

Jaxon's eyes flicked back across the valley as a blue arc of light swept across the sky. "I am surprised Aguinar would lead her witches into such a battle when she is not at full strength."

Falcon joined his protégé at the ledge. "Perhaps it was not Aguinar who chose to initiate the war."

Considering the words, Jaxon felt Tess' presence as she moved into place beside him. Her small hand slipped into the crook of his arm. He covered it with his own. "Athena is looking for reinforcements."

"She has lost a sister. She is looking for revenge."

The air shimmered, sparkled and Andion's booted feet hit the dirt just to Falcon's right. "We are ready."

Tess nudged Jaxon with her elbow. "Ready for what?"

Andion's arrival was followed closely by Jensen, Charlemaine and Rane. Standing in a semicircle, the wizards looked ready for battle. Their indigo robes flowed to the ground, brushing against the dirt at their feet. The atmosphere around them sparkled with electricity and a strange kind of excitement.

"Why am I not getting a good feeling about this?"

Hearing the panic in his wife's voice, Jaxon gently set her away from the edge of the mountain. "You should go inside, my love. We have work to do."

"We, meaning you and the other merry wizards. Jaxon, this could be a trap."

He ran his thumb over her lower lip and winked at her. "Then we'll just have to make a trap door."

"Where are the others? You need more than just the six of you, don't you? I mean I thought you all fought together."

Attempting to reassure her would be futile but he tried anyway. He didn't like the idea of leaving her when she was so worried. "We do fight together, honey. The others have remained behind for a purpose. They will offer assistance from a distance."

"Jaxon." The softness of the earth muffled Falcon's approaching footsteps. "We must go."

Jaxon leaned in, kissed Tess once, twice, before backing away from her. "You don't need to worry about me or any of us for that matter. I'll be back before you know it."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's me. This is going to cause me to have a heart attack before I'm forty."

He held her hand for as long as he could before the call to duty made him relinquish his treasure. Releasing her, he joined with the remainder of the Assembly and disappeared.

Damn him! He could just disappear and leave her to wonder and wait, her imagination creating horrifying images in her mind. Tess' irritation increased, expanded until she paced the living room at a rapid rhythm. Her fingers returned to her hair countless times, tangled in the thickness before dropping to her sides once more. How much time had passed since Jaxon had evaporated with the others?

She swept past a black leather sofa, an antique rocking chair polished to a gleaming shine and an apothecary table from the 1800s. The whisper of wealth didn't soothe her. All of his money couldn't protect Jaxon from the witches.

Stomping to the front door, Tess tugged it open. The night offered no respite from her turmoil. The sky, now the color of an inky mist, blinked with lightning. The winds stirred, an ominous warning to the approach of a storm. Emotions raged to compete with the rumble of thunder in the distance.

Tess moved to the edge of the mountain, her feet crunching over rocks and sticks. Peering down into the valley below, she squinted but her vision failed her. The wizards

had obviously been using some kind of superior vision or looking spell to enable them to see the tower as she could only see trees and shadowy, unknown figures.

And she could only wait and pray Jaxon would return to her alive and well.

* * * * *

The walls shook. Lightning danced across the concrete floors and circled the wizards from feet to head. Gathered together, the sextet of wizardry descended to the top floor of the tower. The battle between the covens halted. Weary witches turned of one accord to stare at the intruders. Some paled. Others gasped. Only Athena smiled.

"Welcome to my home, Jaxon. I didn't think I would ever see you here again." Her eyes flicked over the remaining wizards, dismissing them. "And especially not so soon." She brushed a hand down the length of her supple body. "I wish I could say I've missed you."

Aguinar stepped forward, her hands raised in supplication. "Falcon, our battle is not with you and yours. We are here to defend our right to remain separate and apart from the Coven of Allesandra, no more."

Athena shoved a hand against the old witch's shoulder. "Stop groveling. These old guys aren't big on compassion."

Aguinar stumbled and righted herself by placing a hand against the brick wall. "We only wish to leave."

"And so you shall." Jaxon responded to the witch's request with a sweep of his hand toward the stairs. "But only you and the remaining Coven of Ballhastra are free to leave. Our business is with Athena and her sisters."

The older witch's eyes strayed to Falcon's face as if seeking permission from the highest of powers. He inclined his head slightly. "What Jaxon says is true. You may leave."

Athena's hand shot up and a row of bars secured the doorway. "No one is leaving without my permission. It is still my home."

Jaxon removed the steel rods with a glance and a quick toss of his head. "Fight your own battles, Athena. You should not ask these witches to risk their lives for a cause only you believe in."

Athena's lips thinned, the only outward sign of her disapproval. When she spoke, her voice was still unruffled, soft even. "You take great liberties here. I wouldn't come into your home and presume to make demands."

He took a step forward, ignoring the warning hand of his leader. "Have you forgotten your midnight foray into my home two nights ago? And the meeting with my wife? You came without invitation, to make demands. You placed not only your own life in jeopardy but the lives of your sisters as well. But then no one here is surprised you would place your own greed above the lives of those you have promised to protect."

"My sisters trust me. They know I will do what is best for them, for the Coven."

"And does Arista still feel that way?" The velvety softness of Jaxon's voice, more than the words, brought a startled gasp from the gathered witches. Slowly, in unison, they backed toward the stairs, seeking escape, a refuge from the impending war.

Fury flashed in Athena's dark eyes. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "You would dare speak my sister's name when it was you who took her life?"

Jaxon circled the witch, power rippling with each move. He walked with the self-confidence of a formidable opponent, one who, facing his enemy, knew his own strengths. "I only took what Arista willingly sacrificed. Perhaps she should have considered her actions more carefully."

Athena lifted her shoulders in a halfhearted shrug, her poise restored. "And perhaps you should protect your wife better." She whipped her head around, met Jaxon's fiery gaze. And smiled. "It is never wise to underestimate your opponent."

He didn't need to open a window to know that Athena's evil had touched Tess. Fear touching his heart, he focused on his home. Running the instant his feet touched solid ground, he broke through the door and pushed into the living room. "Tess! Where are you?" He didn't acknowledge the thump of feet as the other wizards raced to join him.

Jaxon took the stairs two at a time, racing, praying, cursing Athena with every breath. Tess hadn't answered his call and the emptiness surrounded him. Bathed in fury, he shoved open the bedroom door and found her. Crumpled beside the bed, her hands clutching around an antique ice pick, Tess sat with her eyes closed. Blood trickled from her mouth but her heartbeat was strong. He breathed a prayer of gratitude as he ran his hands over her, searching for injuries.

"She is alive." He stood, lifted her in his arms.

Charlemaine placed a hand on her daughter-in-law's hair. "We should take her back to the citadel. She has lost a lot of blood. We will need to heal her."

"She is not one of us. She needs a doctor," Andion pointed out.

"I can heal her." Jaxon's voice was cold, unrelenting.

Jensen stepped in front of his son. "It is not wise to use your powers now, not with your emotions controlling you. All of us can feel your anger. Falcon and I will take care of her." He touched Jaxon's shoulder. "Trust me. We will see to her."

Tess stirred against Jaxon's chest. She mumbled his name and reached out for him, searching blindly with open hands.

"I'm here. You're safe. I'll take care of you." Jaxon held her closer, tighter, and began walking toward the door.

The wizards around him exchanged glances as Jaxon's voice lost the formal edge. He'd easily slipped back into the man Tess knew.

"The witch was here." She blinked open her eyes and centered her gaze on his face. "I got her."

She couldn't be talking about what he thought, could she? No mortal had ever gotten close enough to hurt a witch. He stopped walking and looked into her weary face. "You got her?"

A weak nod accompanied a raised ice pick that glinted with blood. "She was here before. I recognized her." She paused, licked her lips. "I stabbed her." Her eyes widened, horrified. "Oh God, I stabbed a witch. She's going to kill me."

Jaxon shifted her in his arms and resumed walking. "No, she's not. She's never going to come near you again." The words were dark with promise.

Falcon intercepted his path, holding out a staying hand. "Tess, you say you wounded the witch?"

She turned her head and Jaxon saw her wince as she tried to focus on the wizard's face. "Yes. I've never stabbed anyone before. Am I going to go to jail?"

"You're in our world now and we make the rules here. You're not going to jail," Jaxon reassured her, his voice strong with conviction.

She relaxed a little, slid a hand up the wall of his chest to curl it around his neck. "Good. I don't think I'd like jail much." Her eyelids drifted closed.

"Tess," Falcon placed his hand on her arm, "this is important. Where did you stab the witch?"

"In the bedroom."

"No, I mean where on her body did you stab her?"

She shuddered. "In the shoulder, I think. I was hiding in the bedroom because I heard something." She cracked open one eye. "I'm not a coward but she's a witch."

Falcon smiled to reassure her. "No one would ever accuse you of being a coward, Tess. Are you sure that is the witch's blood on the ice pick?"

A gasp followed another nod. "Ow. My head hurts. Yes. I stabbed her in the shoulder once she came into the bedroom. I was behind the door. She didn't know I was there." Her eyes rolled to Jaxon's face. "Why didn't she know I was there? Couldn't she sense me?"

Jaxon shouldered Falcon out of the way to resume walking. "Not all witches have the power of discernment. The witch you encountered doesn't have the abilities Athena has."

"Is Athena going to come after me?"

How can I tell her what she wants to hear? This had taken him by surprise and few, if any, wizards were ever caught off guard. What the fuck was his problem? He carried her to the sofa and placed her gently on the cushions. "Rest now. We have much more work to do."

"Isn't that what you said before you left me alone?" Tess' voice held enough pique to make Jaxon grimace. He had no doubt, once she'd fully recovered, there would be hell to pay. And he couldn't blame her. He'd left her alone while he'd gone off to fight a

battle with a witch who for the moment had gained the upper hand. But he'd take it back.

She pushed herself up against the arm of the sofa, one hand curving around the back of her head. "God, what a headache. You didn't know that witch was coming, did you?"

Dammit. He couldn't lie to her. Jaxon traded glances with his mentor before he nodded slowly. "Athena knew I would try to protect you. She staged a battle to draw me out, to leave you alone and unprotected. She knows you're vulnerable right now."

Tess' brows drew together. "You mean because I'm human?"

"Because you're still mortal."

"Have you ever, have any of you ever, considered the possibility I might not get pregnant? You know, some women in my society are unable to bear children. What happens then?"

Frowning, Jaxon looked down at her. "That should not be one of your worries."

"Why not? How can you be so sure I'm going to get pregnant or are you just going to wave some type of wand for that too?"

"You need to trust me." He heard Tess' teeth snap together and he couldn't blame her. If he were in her position, he wouldn't want to be pacified either. "Relax and stop worrying. Just let me take care of you."

"Are you going to use magic on me?"

Falcon cleared his throat and stepped forward. "That is the easiest way to heal you."

Her brow remained furrowed. "I'm not sure I like the idea of being the target of your magic. What if something goes wrong? I could end up as a billy goat somewhere in the East Indies."

Rane gave a snort of laughter. "It would appear your wife does not share your confidence in your abilities, my brother."

Jaxon silenced him with an uplifted hand. "Nothing will go wrong, honey. I have healed other humans. I can assure you they are alive and perfectly well. Now just close your eyes."

"I'd rather keep them open so I'll know what's happening."

He knelt down beside her, touched her cheek. "I'd rather you closed them." He ghosted his hand over her face, watched her eyes close as she succumbed to the potency of his spell.

"If you are sure you do not require our assistance, we shall leave you to tend to her." Falcon placed his hand on Jaxon's shoulder. "Once she has returned to full health, the two of you will join us."

Jaxon nodded, his eyes still on Tess' sleeping face. As he healed her with the magic of words and movements, the fury raged inside him. Like a storm that ravaged homes and lives. Like a hurricane even he could not control.

* * * * *

"She drew your blood!" Athena raged.

"I am aware of what she drew," Hestra snapped in response. "The pain is quite real."

Athena reached out, smacked the wound with the palm of her hand and the ragged edges sealed. The blood dissipated along with the pain. "If you would concentrate on your powers instead of those human males you find so fascinating, you would be able to heal yourself as well as I can."

"You know that I want this as much as you do. I too want to defeat the wizards. But Arista has died and I start to wonder whether supremacy is worth dying for. Some of us just want to live normal lives."

"Some of you are fools. As long as the wizards are in power, we won't be able to lead normal lives."

Hestra stood up to the formidable witch without consideration for her own safety. "Your definition of normal differs from mine and my sisters'. Ultimate control could get us all killed and revenge will come at too high of a price."

Athena's eyes narrowed as her face contorted with fury. "As the leader of this coven, it is my decision whether or not we seek revenge."

"Everything is your decision," Hestra snapped back.

"I have sacrificed my life to ensure the continuation of the Coven. Those who don't wish to be a part of what I've created are free to leave. Have always been free to leave."

"We all know what happened to Harmony when she left. You killed her."

Athena approached, a whirl of ire and darkness. "I protected the Coven."

Hestra clamped her hands on her hips. "You didn't trust her to keep silent about us."

"She was a witch who turned her back on what she was. You can't leave the magic behind. It is a part of you, a part of all of us. We can never go back to being what we were before we found the magic within us."

Though her eyes still blazed with fury, Hestra's shoulders sagged. "Had I known this was my fate, I might have thought differently about my desire for magic."

Athena's breath hissed out in a burst of shock and outrage. "You belong to the Coven, Hestra. Never forget that. There is no time for regrets and fanciful dreams. You are a witch of the Coven of Allesandra. You have been given much and as such, much is required of you. You will protect the Coven, do your duty, or like Harmony, you will reap the consequences of your unwise decision."

Rage simmered in Hestra's eyes. "I would never turn my back on the Coven but I don't have to like what the future holds in store for us."

"Leave me. Your clumsiness will aid the Assembly in their attempts to thwart us. With the blood of a witch, they can cripple us with the right spell. And there is no doubt

in my mind that Jaxon and Falcon will create that spell. I have to be ready to dilute it, to protect all of us."

Hestra started toward the stairs, stopped to add. "Since I am so clumsy, perhaps it would be best if you did your own dirty work next time."

Athena's eyes shot sparks. "You will do as instructed."

Hestra whirled, tossed her hair back over her shoulders and glared at the leader of the Coven with open hostility. "And suppose the wizards discover the spell? I'm not going to be the one who goes one-on-one with Jaxon when he finds out we—"

Spiraling into the air, Athena whirled forward until she could land inches away from Hestra, interrupting the woman's speech. "I repeat, you will do as you are instructed."

For a brief moment the tension mounted. Witch faced witch, both imposing in their own right. Sides chosen, they squared off, hands fisted at their sides, eyes blazing with inner fury and contempt. Until the roar of the wind dragged them toward the window and forced their attention to the night skies. And the incoming storm. With lightning bolts like daggers and winds ripping the bricks from the tower, the tornado whirled forward, threatened the safety of the witches confined within the concrete walls.

"Jaxon has certainly worked himself up into a fine temper." Athena's voice crackled with laughter, indifferent to her own lack of safety. "I would imagine this," she swept a hand toward the sky, "is supposed to scare us. With all of his might, he conjures a whirlwind. How utterly banal. Would I have even a morsel of his abilities, I would rule the world." And with the arrival of Jaxon's child, she would.

Chapter Ten

The cool kiss of the night air brushed Tess' skin. She heard the rush of the wind as it circled around her. Slowly her eyes opened, just a crack. In a room with only a burning candle to offer lighting, she propped herself up on her elbows to take note of her surroundings.

"Okay, Jaxon, where have you taken me to now?"

"You are beyond the portals of reality." The high-pitched voice snagged her attention and she whipped her gaze toward the foot of the bed. Nothing. She saw nothing.

"Where are you? And who are you?"

"I am here." The voice carried a trace of irritation.

"I can't see you." A sigh followed the rapid tap-tap of footsteps. Her eyes widened as she watched a miniature version of a man stalk into her line of vision. "You're an elf," she noted with a frown. "I can't imagine why I'm surprised to see an elf. I mean, after all, I'm married to a wizard, am currently ensconced in his wizardly family home and have faced off against a witch. No, I'm not surprised. Or at least I shouldn't be surprised."

"If you're finished talking to yourself, I shall introduce myself."

Tess flopped back down against the stack of pillows beneath her. "Don't cop an attitude with me, Shorty. I don't even know where I am."

"Obviously you weren't listening when I told you —"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, beyond the portals of reality. Have I mentioned that isn't funny?" She turned her head, directed her gaze toward the minuscule man.

The elf's brows puckered. "I was not trying to be humorous. I was merely trying to appease your curiosity. And my name is Narvil, not Shorty. I take offense to Shorty."

"Of course. You would. You're an elf."

"I am well aware of what I am, Madam Tess. Jaxon has instructed me to stay with you while you acclimate yourself to your new surroundings. He believes I might be able to answer any questions you will have."

"Okay. Fine. Does anyone here talk like a normal person?"

Narvil's eyebrows rose. "I do not understand you."

"Don't you ever use slang? Speak casually? It's like living with a bunch of English professors."

Narvil grunted his disapproval. "We speak as we have all of our lives."

Tess sat up, swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. I'm not going to spend the next ten minutes arguing with an elf. Could we get some lights on in here?" Giggles erupted from the corner of the room. She dragged a hand through her hair before scrubbing her face. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. Narvil, do you want to ask your friends to join our little party?"

He stamped his small foot in disapproval. "Those are not my friends. The giggling you heard was from my sons. My wife has failed to control them."

"Narvil!" The disapproving, high-pitched voice made him shift his stance uncomfortably.

Tess stood, wobbled for a moment while she considered her new bedroom. Apparently Jaxon had taken the time to move the comforts of home along with her. She recognized the armoire from the bedroom she'd shared with her husband. The closet door gaped open, revealing a wealth of her clothing hanging neatly on the rods. Her robe draped across a nearby rocking chair and even her bedroom slippers had been blinked over. She supposed she should feel grateful. Right now however immensely overwhelmed better described her emotional status.

"You know, Narvil, I could really use something to drink."

"Of course. We have a wide variety of refreshments. What would you like?"

"A soda, anything with caffeine. Why don't you run along and get it? I'll wait for you right here."

The elf folded his arms—a gesture meant to be intimidating. "Jaxon mentioned you might try to get rid of me, Madam Tess. I'm afraid I cannot oblige you."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, I'm going to go find my husband so you can feel free to tag along and while you're at it, stop calling me Madam Tess. It makes me sound like the owner of a brothel." She rounded the bed and headed toward the door. One step toward freedom, she ran into the solid wall of Jaxon's chest. His arms closed around her, preventing both her fall and her escape. "It's about time you got here."

His eyebrow arched and with a nod of his head, he dismissed her companions. "I see you've met Narvil and his family."

"Only Narvil. His family stayed in the background, not that I blame them."

"How do you feel?"

"My head doesn't hurt anymore. I would imagine I have you to thank for that."

Jaxon cupped her chin, tilted her face to his. "You're upset."

"You could say that."

"Because I healed you?"

She struggled her way out of his arms and backed toward the bed. "Because you didn't know about the witch. Because I didn't know about the witch and, oh hell, because this isn't what I expected!" When Jaxon started to approach her, she held up one hand to ward him off. Did he even know how close she was to hysteria right now? "No, don't. Jaxon, I don't think I can do this."

His expression didn't falter. He remained calm, almost emotionless. "Tess, there is no out."

"I know all about the no divorce rule but Falcon didn't say one word about a couple living apart from one another."

"Living apart?" His voice dipped several octaves, going dangerously low.

"I want to go back to Charleston."

"There's nothing for you in Charleston."

"My friends are there. My life is there."

"Your life is here," he corrected.

"Where in the hell is here? Never mind. That doesn't even matter. Look, if you're honest with yourself, you would see that my presence is only making things more difficult for you and your family."

Jaxon's expression became more mutinous. "My family is accustomed to the difficulties of our world. Your presence doesn't alter that fact."

"Jaxon," she turned to face him, arms folded, posture defensive. "I need some time to myself, time to absorb what is happening to me. I want to go back to Charleston."

"No." The hard, simple word enraged her.

"No? You're not my keeper. You don't control where I go and when I can go. Unless you plan on holding me captive, I'm going home."

He moved so swiftly Tess only saw a blur. His hand captured her arm and he half dragged, half walked her toward the nearest window. Flinging open the curtain, he pointed out toward the smoky exterior. "Look out there, Tess. Tell me what you see."

"Fog. Thick fog. What's your point?"

"That isn't fog. Those are clouds." The curtain fell back into place. "We aren't on the mountain anymore. In fact we are nowhere near the mountain."

"Narvil mentioned something ominous like being beyond the portals of reality. Since I don't know exactly where that is, I suppose you tell me." Tess held her breath, fearful of his answer.

"We're above the Milky Way."

"That's impossible."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Impossible? Have not these last few weeks taught you that we make the impossible possible?"

"What is this place, Jaxon?"

"We call it Mystique. It is our home where we assemble as one, to share, to protect and to gain strength."

"And to hold innocent women captive," she snapped.

Jaxon's breath escaped on a long huff of air. "You're my wife. You're not a captive."

"Aren't the two one and the same in this world?" Fury danced in the air between the two of them. "Wait. I've been in your meeting room. Was I here before? In Mystique?"

"Yes, although that was a rare exception. Normally we cannot allow a human to see Mystique without the proper precautions."

"So now you've taken those precautions?"

A smile tugged at his lips. "When I married you, yes."

"One more way I'm tied to this place now."

"How can you look at it as being tied? You married me because you loved me. At least that's what you told me."

She felt the chill of her own stare as she winged it across the room. "I do love you. I'm just not so sure I knew what loving a wizard meant."

"It means sacrifice but it also means you have a world of knowledge at your fingertips, an infinite cache of power. Doors have been opened to you. You will see worlds you've never seen before, experience pleasures, taste life in a way you could have only imagined before now. But with these gifts comes the understanding that you are now one of us and as such, I'm afraid leaving isn't one of your options." His voice hummed, a low, hypnotic sound.

Her shoulders drooped. "So you do intend to hold me captive here."

"If that is how you choose to look at it. I choose to see it as keeping you safe. If it helps, I am not free to leave either."

"You could have me home in the blink of an eye and don't lie and tell me you couldn't. I've seen you do it, Jaxon. In fact I've seen you do a lot of things that, frankly, I would rather not have seen. But it's too late for all of that. I know I've crossed a line, that there's no turning back, but can't you understand I need some time to absorb all of this? Can't you give me that?"

His fingertips dug into her skin, not painfully but forcefully enough to speak his answer even before the words came out. "Time I can give you. Space, I cannot. You won't leave me. I can't allow that."

"Allow? Do you even hear yourself?" Tess brushed off the hand that still held her arm, pivoted and walked toward the door. "You're talking like my master instead of my husband. I didn't marry you because I needed a keeper. I married you because I loved you, because I wanted to be with you. Right now I'm not so sure."

When had he changed? Or had he always been this way and she'd been too blind to see it? Was this really the man she'd married? She didn't doubt his love for her but this arrogance, this...this coldness intensified her fears.

Jaxon didn't move, didn't try to prevent her from opening the door. "You won't find your life in Charleston."

"I'm willing to take that chance." Tess yanked open the door, took a step and shrieked. A wide, yawning chasm opened up beneath her feet and the wind rushed

through her hair as she tumbled through space. And then Jaxon held her close against his chest, carrying her back to the safety of the bedroom.

Shaking, she sat down on the edge of the bed. "What in the hell was that?"

"I thought you understood when I said you can't leave."

"I'm a prisoner." She scooted to the top of the bed and pulled her knees to her chest. "I never thought it would come to this." She looked up at his face and for a moment, however brief, she thought she saw a sheen of tears in the depths of those silver-gold eyes.

"I didn't want it to come to this." Jaxon sat down on the edge of the bed, dropped his hands between his splayed knees. "Do you think you would be any safer in South Carolina? Tess, Athena knows you now. She knows what you mean to me and she would find you. You would not be able to escape her and I know you would not be as fortunate with her as you were with the other witch. Athena would have no qualms about killing you."

How much was he not telling her? Tess glared at him. "You told me they couldn't track us."

"As long as I'm with you, they can't."

"I see. You left that part out."

He rolled his shoulders forward but she wouldn't allow herself to feel sorry for him. She needed her anger. "You're only vulnerable without me."

"I'm vulnerable with you." The words were cloaked in bitterness.

His jaw tightened. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"Let me be clear on this. To save my life, I'm going to have to stay here in my little six-hundred-square-foot cell."

"You are free to explore at will. You will not be held inside this room."

The bedsprings creaked beneath her as Tess shifted. "So why couldn't I leave just now?"

The look Jaxon gave her was maddeningly calm. "Because we weren't finished with our conversation."

Her knees dropped. "You did that?"

The unanswered question lingered in the air as he blinked at her.

"I really underestimated you." She slid to the opposite side of the bed, away from him. "You know, there are different methods of abuse, Jaxon. Putting your wife's life in jeopardy would constitute abuse."

His body tensed and he rose slowly, the same picture of grace she'd witnessed before but this time much more controlled. Dangerous. "You were never in any danger from me. I have told you repeatedly I would never hurt you."

"You already have." Tess presented her back to him, wrapped her arms around her waist. Why couldn't he see that by forcing her to remain, he was going to kill what they

had? How could she trust a man who clearly didn't trust her? "It's apparent I have no choice in this matter so I'll stay. But only until this insurrection is over. Once you and your family of wizards have taken care of the witches, I'm going home...to Charleston."

She didn't hear Jaxon approach her. Didn't know he was behind her until she felt his hand on the small of her back. "There's nothing for you in Charleston."

"My life is there. I'd say that's something."

His hands curved around her shoulders and drew her around to face him. "Look at me." He waited until she obeyed his command. "I'm telling you the truth. There's nothing for you in South Carolina."

Comprehension came slowly but when it arrived, Tess closed her eyes, shook her head. "No. You said you wouldn't erase their memories."

"No, I didn't. I said I could."

"And I told you I wouldn't want them to forget me."

"I did what I thought was best."

"And what about Harry and Sadie? Did you do what you thought was best for them as well? Or was it just best for you and the damned Assembly? And should I ask about your car, your house? Did you poof them away as well? God, you erased more than just our friends' memories. You erased our lives."

Jaxon remained stoically silent, fueling Tess' anger. She pushed against his chest and gained her freedom. "Damn you! How can you make all these choices without my knowledge or consent? Don't you see that this isn't a partnership? We don't have a marriage, Jaxon, and you didn't want a wife! You wanted someone you could control, someone who would warm your bed at night and passively accept your dictates during the day. You picked the wrong woman. I won't be controlled by you or any other man or wizard." She whirled, her steps fast and furious as she moved to the far end of the room. "Are you telling me the truth? Did you really erase Belinda's memories? How about my mother's? Are you telling me the fucking truth?"

"I have no reason to lie to you." His voice held no regret. Tess supposed she could have forgiven him had there been even a remote trace of remorse in his voice.

"Give them back."

"What?"

"Give them back their memories. You erased them with a spell. You can give them back."

He came to stand in front of her, his hands in his pockets. He only touched her with his eyes, a simple gaze that settled on her face. "I will not give them back."

"Then we have nothing more to say to each other. You've made me a prisoner here. You've taken away my link to the only life I've known. I could've forgiven you for holding me captive but for taking away my friends, my life, I'm not so sure I can."

"In time, you'll come to understand that what I did, I did for love. Your friends wouldn't understand why you couldn't contact them. They would've grown bitter,

resentful even. You'd have lost them to their anger. My heart couldn't allow that." He reached for her then but Tess backed away until her spine touched the wall.

"Your heart. You did. Everything is about you, Jaxon. Your needs. Your wants. I can't accept that. I can't accept that I've no say in this marriage."

"That isn't true. I have listened to you."

"And then you've done what you wanted to do anyway." She dared him to deny her words.

"I do only what is necessary to protect you."

"And the Assembly."

The wall of his anger butted against hers. "The Assembly's privacy must be preserved. You do not understand."

"Maybe I don't want to understand. Maybe just once I want to be a normal female and feel!" She slid along the wall but she had nowhere to run. "You're going to do whatever in the hell you want to do anyway. So I don't even know why you bother to talk to me about it afterward."

"Tess, you need to listen to me."

"Go to hell."

Jaxon snatched hold of her arm and her hand swept up, connecting with his cheek in a slap that resonated across the room. For a long moment his eyes burned into her, fury swirling in the silver depths. "Where I go, you go." Dropping his hands to capture her wrists, he brought her arms high over her head.

"Jaxon." The one word protest ended on a shocked gasp when one of his hands tore at her clothes, quickly baring her skin completely.

He shoved her legs open and cupped her pussy while his gaze held hers. "Show me your anger. Let me feel it."

Her head snapped back and she glared at him. "Do you think sex will make this go away?" Even as she asked the question, her body reacted to the plundering of his fingers. Her thighs jerked and she couldn't hold back a gasp.

"I'm not trying to make it go away." Jaxon pushed her tighter against the wall, arching his fingers upward, deep into her channel. His cock jutted up and he pressed it against her abdomen, letting her feel the hot rush of pleasure her body gave him.

She turned her head to the side and the slim column of her throat drew his attention. A warm, wet lick laved her skin and though her anger still burned strong, she wouldn't resist. Sex wouldn't resolve the issue but it was preferable to fighting – at least for now. "Let go of my hands," she demanded.

Still holding her arms above her head, Jaxon shook his head. "I don't think so." His eyes glittered and lowering his head, he licked the tip of one nipple, drawing an elegant circle around the peaked tip. The sound of her startled breath urged him on.

His fingers began to rotate inside her, spreading wide, turning over and over like he was screwing the lid on a jar, sweeping each side of her pussy. Her tight muscles offered just enough resistance for the friction to be exquisite – and torturous as hell.

With the briefest thought, he swept his clothes away, giving his cock the room it needed to grow longer, harder.

He wanted to pull his fingers out and bury his rod deep inside her, banging her against the wall until she begged for more. And more. That's what they both needed. A good hard fuck. Not making love. A fuck. Hot, animal sex with sweaty bodies and skin slapping skin.

The images stirred in his brain and his cock began to pulse, the head almost purple with blood. "I'm going to fuck you." He growled the words in her ear.

Tess arched against him, lowering her knees to push his fingers deeper. As much as she wanted to push him away, to demand he release her to salvage her pride, she craved the feel of his thick cock expanding inside her pussy even more. "Then do it."

Releasing her arms, he grabbed her thighs and lifted her high against the wall, her hips above his. No more words. No more time for thinking, arguing or doubting. He just wanted to fuck her, make her feel as alive as she made him.

One hand guided his cock to the opening of her pussy. His hips jackknifed and he plunged into the sweet wetness. As the warmth spread over his taut skin, he closed his eyes and bumped his forehead to hers. "Ah God," he whispered.

She couldn't have said it better herself. Digging her nails into his shoulders, she leaned forward and nipped his ear, giving permission for him to continue. She wanted it hard and rough, fast and wild.

Jaxon captured a nipple in his mouth and gave it a quick bite. The sharp sting startled her but she rode the aftermath of pleasure it brought, clenching her vaginal muscles to hold his cock as tightly as a gripped fist.

He grunted, drew back and rammed into her so hard her hips slammed against the wall. She cried out and held on. His fingers pinched her legs but she didn't complain. He pressed so close to her she could barely breathe but she didn't push him away.

This was...perfect. And with every thrust of his hips, he impaled her on his cock, driving it so deep within her channel she swore she felt it lift her womb. "That's it," she panted, finally managing to urge him on.

Faster and faster, he hammered his hips, bruising her flesh. Their bodies came together in a wild frenzy, skin dripping with sweat at the frantic pace.

His balls drew so tight they ached. Close to coming, he shoved one hand between their bodies and flicked her clit. Tess exploded with a scream, pushing her hands down on his shoulders for leverage. The orgasm was as wild as the sex, brutal in its intensity.

Jaxon drew back one more time and slammed into her, releasing a long groan as he came. The tight muscles continued to pulsate around his cock, draining it of every last drop of juice, draining him.

Their foreheads touched again and as their breaths mingled, Jaxon lowered her until her feet touched the floor. He opened his mouth to speak but Tess covered his lips with two fingers.

"I think we've said enough for now."

Stepping back from her, he re-clothed them with a sweep of his hand. "This conversation isn't over."

She turned her back toward him. "Of course not. You don't want it to be over and we both know you always get what you want."

"Tess." His voice held a warning she didn't heed.

"You didn't really think sex would make me forget, did you?"

"That wasn't on my mind when I was fucking you."

The harshness of the words made her wince. "Just go away. I need to be alone now." She didn't turn around until the door banged shut behind him.

* * * * *

Charlemaine placed her hand atop her son's and gave him a reassuring smile. "You must give her time. This is a lot for a young woman to accept."

"I do not think she will ever accept our way of life." Jaxon slid his hand out from under his mother's and scooted away from the table. He stood, his shoulders squared, his back ramrod straight. "She is scared and I have only compounded her fear by taking away her friends' memories."

"You did what you thought was best for the Assembly."

His hands curled into fists, the urge to hit something, anything, strong. "I did not ask Tess."

"You are not accustomed to asking a woman's permission before you make a move, Jaxon."

He unfurled his hands to rest them on the back of the chair he'd recently occupied. "That is not a good enough reason for her."

"You have a lot on your mind right now. Perhaps this is not the best time to be focusing on this. Your father has asked to see you. Go to him and maybe I shall have a little chat with your wife."

Pivoting, he fixed his mother with a compelling gaze. "Do not frighten her any more than she already is."

"She needs a woman to talk to."

"She needs her life back." Could his mother see the fear in his eyes? Did she know how frightened he was at the thought of losing his wife? And he knew his actions could very well push Tess so far away from him, he'd never get her back. She might be here with him in body but not in spirit.

Charlemaine joined her son at the door. "This is her life now."

"I am beginning to have my doubts about that."

"What is done is done." She leaned up for a hug, an unusual show of affection. "Tess will grow and she will learn. Until then she will need your love and compassion."

Jaxon muttered something unintelligible below his breath but managed to bestow a smile upon his mother. "I am not sure she will speak with you but you are welcome to try."

"Your wife is a lot stronger than you give her credit for. Besides, I might have just the thing to take her mind off her new way of life." Charlemaine winked and disappeared before Jaxon could give voice to his concerns.

* * * * *

Tess had traversed the area of the bedroom at least ten times when her mother-in-law put in an appearance.

"Charlemaine, I'm not surprised to see you here." She didn't stop pacing.

The female wizard smiled. "Jaxon has spoken with me about your concerns."

"Concerns. Is that what he called them?" *Bastard.*

"That was my word actually."

"Well, you couldn't be more off-base. What I have aren't concerns. I have fears. But right now I have anger. A whole lot of anger. And if I could get my hands around your son's neck, I'd test this whole immortality deal."

Charlemaine chuckled and patted the edge of the mattress. "We should sit down and have a little talk."

"If you're here to convince me that your son was only doing what was best for me, please don't waste your time. I'm not interested in hearing how the weight of the world rests on Jaxon's shoulders or how he did what he did because he loved me. That's an insult. He should've had the courtesy to talk to me first, to find out how erasing my friends' memories would affect me."

"I agree."

"And furthermore, he had no business—" Tess brought herself to a halt. Words and footsteps ceased. "Excuse me?"

"I agree with you. Jaxon should have discussed the matter with you first. Unfortunately my son is not accustomed to having his actions questioned or having to offer any explanations beforehand. He has always been able to do what he wants when he wants to do it. You see," Charlemaine patted the bed once more, waited until Tess walked toward her and sat down, "as much as this is new to you, it is also new to your husband. While you are adjusting to our ways, he is growing accustomed to having a woman in his life...a woman who refuses to be controlled."

"That doesn't make what he did right."

"No, it does not but unfortunately if you expect an apology, it is not going to happen. I have been married to a wizard for centuries now and he is not any more eager to admit his mistakes than his son is." Charlemaine crossed her legs, drew her robe closer around her knees. "I do remember the one time Jensen felt the need to apologize." Her eyes carried the wistful memory. "He prevented me from seeing my parents simply because he was afraid I would leave with them. We had not been married long and I was miserable. I can tell by the look in your eyes you find that shocking." She placed her hand atop Tess'. "My dear, you are not the only wife of a wizard who has had difficulty adapting."

"But you're a wizard too."

"That is true but Jensen and I are from two different guilds of wizards. While Jensen was raised here, I lived in another realm. Had my father not come to Mystique to assist in an uprising, I probably never would have met my husband. My parents would have liked that." Her eyes crinkled with her smile. "They have never cared for him, only because he is obstinate, overbearing and well, a lot like my father."

Tess felt some of the tension slipping from her shoulders. She wanted to grab for it, hold it tightly to her. She didn't want to relax. Relaxation signified acceptance and she couldn't accept how her life had been planned, shaped and changed without her consent. "It would appear that Jaxon is a lot like his father."

Charlemaine chuckled. "He would not see it but, yes, he is. They almost came to battle once. Did my son tell you?"

Tess tucked her legs beneath her, entranced in spite of her wariness. "No."

"I would not imagine he would volunteer that information. Jaxon keeps that part of his life secret. A long time ago, my son had visions of ultimate control. He was young and foolish. He wanted to use his powers to benefit himself. When a wizard turns, gives into the dark forces of magic, he can become a terrifying opponent. Jaxon had lived with the wizards, knew their ways, their thoughts even. Even at a young age, he was powerful. It is possible that had Falcon not intervened, my son would have been lost to us but, more importantly, the Assembly could have been destroyed."

"So Falcon saved him."

"In a manner of speaking. In reality, Jaxon had to save himself. He had to accept what he was, just as you have to accept it now. Acceptance is not made easier because we are wizards, Tess. Sometimes it is even more difficult to accept that with all of our power and knowledge we are not our own. Unlike the witches you have seen, we use our magic to make the world a better place. We cannot strive for control of the universe. Our magic is a gift, one we must cherish. We nourish the good in our souls and pray the evil does not overtake us. It is a daily struggle, helped by love." Charlemaine shifted on the bed to face her. "I have looked into my son's eyes and seen the depth of love he carries for you. Do not take it lightly. His love will require much sacrifice on his part as well as yours. He must accept your limitations as you must accept his achievements."

Tess let out the breath she held. "I'm not sure I know how to do that." Admitting her weakness was the easy part. Facing her life with a wizard and all the changes involved, well, that was another matter. She'd need strength she wasn't so sure she had.

"Of course not. That is why I am here. Just consider me an ally. Now," Charlemaine stood, "come with me."

Tess didn't move. "I can't leave the room."

"Nonsense." Charlemaine pulled Tess to her feet and with an impish grin, snapped her fingers.

A labyrinth of walls and corridors, the citadel astounded Tess as she moved through its intricate tunnels with her mother-in-law. She heard the whispers of music, the crash of thunder and the chime of a clock. Her footsteps rang hollowly against the concrete floors. Gray walls surrounded her, prevented even a sliver of sunlight from grazing the path ahead. Would there be sunlight above the Milky Way?

Tess' head swam as the halls gave way to a majestic room shaped like an octagon. Walls of pure gold melded into floors of diamond. The beautiful strains of a violin drifted from an unknown location. A feeling of peace washed over her as she stood in the center, her eyes round, her heart pounding in her chest.

"It's beautiful. What is it?"

Charlemaine wrapped an arm around her shoulders, held her close. "It is called the Serenity Chamber. We come here when the world outside has taken us by storm. Even wizards need a place to relax." She wiggled her fingers and produced a plush sofa with overstuffed pillows. "With the loss of your old life comes the beginning of your new life. Changes are not always negative." She held out a hand and directed Tess toward the sofa. "Sit. Let the tranquility help you to put your thoughts in order. Inner turmoil can lead to outer dissent."

"Am I being hypnotized?" Tess wondered aloud.

Charlemaine laughed, a light tinkling sound. "No. You have just begun the first stage of your journey into our world. Here is where we begin to introduce you to the knowledge and wisdom you lack."

Her mother-in-law's voice echoed. Tess' head snapped up and she found herself alone. Sinking back against the cushions of the sofa, she closed her eyes. She imagined she would have to get used to being alone. It seemed Jaxon was always disappearing.

* * * * *

The bitterness of defeat coated her tongue. Athena didn't like defeat and yet she faced it more frequently nowadays. The wizards were a wily bunch. They'd taken shelter in the citadel, an impenetrable tower that housed the secrets of the Assembly. She ached to see inside its hallowed walls, to glimpse the power within. To hold in her hands a sampling of that power. She thirsted after the supremacy the wizards held and

cursed their stupidity. How could they not see what they could be? She saw. She saw it all. And she wanted it even if for just a day. Ultimate control was an aphrodisiac and she wanted to taste the thrill. She would have that chance. She vowed it before the Fates.

Her hand unfurled. A tiny black stone glistened in the center of her palm and she smiled, held it close to her lips with a whisper. The ancient curse burst from her lips, sealing the fate of the child to come.

* * * * *

The soft touch stirred her awake, inducing Tess to open her eyes. In the glow of the light bouncing off the golden walls, Jaxon knelt by her side. His hand cupped her cheek, held her skin against his palm. "I didn't mean to wake you."

She searched her memory. Wasn't she supposed to be angry with him? For the life of her, she couldn't think why. Instead she gave into the demands of her body and drew his head down for a leisurely kiss. When Jaxon pulled back, she caught the startled look on his face. "You were expecting more anger."

He slid his hand to her wrist, lifted her hand to his lips. He patiently kissed each knuckle while she shivered. "The thought crossed my mind, yes."

"I waste my energy being angry with you." Tess stroked his hair, sifted it through her fingers. The thick, silky strands curled around her digits. "I miss us, Jaxon."

He lifted his head, blinked at her. "We're still okay."

"But for how much longer? I feel like our world is spinning out of control. Not this world that we're living in now but the world we have when we're together. All of this scares me. You scare me. I don't want to lose you but then I'm afraid to stay with you." She closed her eyes and attempted to reach the tranquility she'd found for a brief moment.

Jaxon ran his thumb along her lower lip. "You're afraid of the unknown. Once you start learning more, you'll understand what you can't see doesn't necessarily mean danger."

"You're spending too much of your time worrying about me. You're going to make a mistake."

"I don't make mistakes."

"And apparently I don't make babies." She winced and tried to retract the words. "Never mind. I shouldn't have said that."

He stood, moved her feet out of the way to sit down beside her. "Is that what you're worried about?"

"It's crossed my mind. I'm over thirty and some women have difficulty getting pregnant past thirty."

"You're not some women. Now come here." He coaxed her into his arms, settled her head on his chest. His hands began to move up and down her spine in slow, rhythmic strokes. "You need to stop worrying."

She turned her face into his chest and inhaled the scent of his body. A strong, masculine fragrance, a mixture of cedar and spice, tickled her nostrils. She ran her hand up the wall of his chest to the strong column of his throat. His pulse leaped beneath her palm. "I need to start believing all of this is real but I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon. How can you be so sure I'll get pregnant? Are you seeing something I'm not? I don't even know why I'm asking you that. Most things you see I don't see." She gave a little laugh, devoid of humor. "I'm living in a fantasy world." She pushed herself up with her hands against his chest. "Actually it's a world most women would dream about. Most women would love to be in my shoes right now but all I can think about is that witch coming back and next time, I might not be so lucky. That's all it was, you know. Luck."

Jaxon pressed a finger against her lips to silence her. "Has anyone ever told you that you babble?"

Tess smacked his arm. "Has anyone ever told you that you're arrogant, conceited, overbearing and—" She laughed into the kiss, holding his head to keep him in place. Her tongue delicately traced the outline of his lips before lightly touching the tip of his.

One hand cupping her cheek, Jaxon leaned in, quickly taking the kiss farther. Hungry for more, he lifted her off the sofa, sucking on her tongue while his fingertips massaged her scalp.

Her nipples hardened to pebbles that grazed his chest and he groaned. Now wasn't the time for anything more. Damn Falcon and his constant demands. Retreating, reluctance in every move, he touched his head to hers. "Damn. I shouldn't have started this."

Tess gripped the collar of his shirt. "You have to leave."

"Yeah, I do."

She tipped his head upward and kissed him again, hard and fast, just like he wanted to fuck her right now. "Then go and hurry back."

He stood, his legs as heavy as thick slabs of concrete. Dammit. "I'll be right back."

"Knowing Falcon, I doubt that."

Jaxon leaned in for another kiss and felt the impatient pull of his leader's command. Scrubbing the back of his neck with one hand, he straightened again. "I'll try to be right back."

"Don't worry. I won't hold you to it." Lying back against the sofa once more, Tess closed her eyes and for a moment he had the overwhelming desire to ignore the leader's dictates and give into his own desires—to give new definition to the Serenity Chamber.

"Jaxon, you'd better go." Her soft voice echoed Falcon's irritated summons.

"Yeah, I know." Cursing the Assembly, he faded into a mist.

* * * * *

"We must prepare for what is to come." Falcon paced around the table where the wizards sat, his robe flowing out behind him. "The witches will act soon."

Jaxon tried to pay attention but as the leader's words drifted into the air around him, his mind drifted, replaying the image of Tess lying on the gold settee, her hair curling around her face, her eyes heavy with sleep. So sexy. So beautiful.

His body tightened and he cursed his reaction while scooting closer to the table. The scrape of the chair brought Falcon's gaze to his face and Jaxon managed to fake an appropriately interested expression. He doubted the leader bought it for his frown only intensified. Fortunately he continued his dissertation on the next steps the Assembly would take to protect themselves.

And Jaxon's thoughts drifted again. Drawing in a deep breath, he swore he could smell the scent of Tess' skin and he reached out to her, needing to feel that connection to her again.

Tess stirred on the settee as a soft sweep of wind brushed her ankles. Dropping one arm over her eyes, she shifted her hips as the sensation climbed higher. Nibbling on her lower lip, she held her breath. "Jaxon?"

The answer came in a gentle brush of fingers over her thigh. She smiled, welcoming the warm feel of her husband's hand. "I might have known you wouldn't leave me to my own devices." Guided by his hands, she rolled to her back and lifted the edge of the robe, sliding it up her legs. "You know, you really should be paying attention to what Falcon is saying. I'm sure the meeting's important."

A phantom hand drifted over the silky scrap of material covering her pussy and Tess closed her eyes on a whispered sigh of pleasure. Apparently Jaxon had no intention of paying attention, and who was she to argue?

Warm fingers closed around her wrist, lifting her hand. She didn't need further instruction. Raising her hips up off the cushion, she hooked her fingers in the elastic and tugged her panties down to her thighs. Cool air bathed her pussy and her breath hitched in anticipation.

"Is this what you want me to do?" Even as she asked the question, she slipped her hand past her bikini line. Short curls tickled her fingertips and she heard Jaxon's low hum of appreciation. "That's what I thought. You're watching, aren't you?"

Determined to give him a show, she parted the lips of her pussy, revealing her rapidly swelling clit. Using her index finger, she lightly traced the sensitive bud, jerking a little as the tingles began low in her abdomen.

Arching her back, she tipped her hips forward and pressed a bit harder, panting a little. "Mmm, this feels so good. If you were here now, I'd want you to lick me."

"Jaxon?" Falcon's voice yanked Jaxon back to the Assembly room even though the blood had left his brain. "Is there a particular reason you're not participating in this discussion?"

"I think something's up," Rane inserted with a sly grin.

Cursing below his breath, Jaxon shot his brother a glare. "Mind your own business." He cleared his throat, shaking his head. "I'm just listening." And watching. He kept that part to himself.

Rane nudged him with an elbow. "Bet you're not hearing what we're hearing."

Jaxon shifted in the chair and turned his back on his brother. "Don't make me repeat myself."

For a moment he concentrated on Falcon's words but the sounds of Tess' pleasure drew him back.

Her fingers slick with her own juices, Tess moved her ass back and forth atop the cushions. "Jaxon, I wish you were here." Knowing he could hear her, she continued to talk to him as the fingers of her left hand sank deep into her channel while the index finger of her right hand worried her clit.

"I'm so close to coming right now. You know that, don't you?" Thrusting her head back, she tightened her thigh muscles and dug her heels into the sofa. A moan slipped past her lips and her body began to shake.

She moved her finger back and forth across the moist nubbin, rocking and grinding her hips. A soft, sensuous breeze washed across her abdomen, inviting a smile. He was with her now.

"Touch me," she instructed, taking her hand away as she issued the invitation.

Tiny pinpricks of sensual delight tangoed up and down her spine. Though she couldn't see them, she felt the light pinch of his fingers tantalizing her clit. The scent of his cologne enveloped her and the climax began to build, drawing the muscles in her abdomen tight.

"Oh God." The second the cry left her lips, the orgasm shot through her. Her lower hips juttied off the sofa, her hands gripping the cushions while she pumped against invisible fingers.

The descent came much too quickly. She wasn't ready to awaken from the delicious haze but her muscles undulated, taking the decision out of her hand. Legs trembling, she dropped her arm off the sofa and breathed out with her eyes closed.

"I'm sure Falcon appreciates your full attention," she murmured with a smile before slipping into a light slumber.

Jaxon realized one second too late that the room had fallen silent and all eyes were on him. Swallowing her juices, he tore himself away from the touch of Tess' skin and returned to the Assembly room.

“My apologies. Tess needed my attention momentarily.”

Falcon’s brows drew together in a frown but he only made a grunting noise.

Rane dug his elbow into Jaxon’s side. “You know you’re going to hear about this later.”

Shifting in the chair to ease the pressure of his zipper against his cock, he shot his brother a grin. “Yeah, but it was worth it.”

Chapter Eleven

"Tess, wake up." Jaxon kissed her mouth softly to nudge her out of her dreams.

She stirred, stretching like a lazy feline basking in the noonday sun. "Mmm, not yet."

"I have something to show you, something you need to see. Wake up." He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the floor-length window, pushing aside the curtains with a simple movement of his finger. "Are you awake?" He chuckled as Tess fought consciousness. "Open your eyes. You don't want to miss this."

She cracked open only one eye and surveyed Jaxon's grinning face. "This had better be important." The glow from the bedside lamp formed a halo around her thick chestnut hair, giving her an ethereal look.

Jaxon couldn't resist inhaling the fragrance of the soft strands. "I guess I'll have to get used to you not being a morning person."

"Considering the time," her opened eye lowered to the face of her watch, "I doubt this could be considered morning."

He shifted her warm body in his arms and stepped closer to the window. "It's three a.m. Now will you open your other eye and look?" Her breast rested next to his arm, the plumpness beckoning him.

Tess peered out into the darkness. "I don't see anything."

"Look down." He waited for her reaction while every nerve ending in his body hummed with awareness. Soft and curvy, she awoke cells in his body he hadn't even known existed.

She struggled against his arms. "Put me down and maybe I can see something." The second her feet touched the floor, she pushed open the window and leaned out. "What is that glow?"

"It's the moon."

"That can't be the moon. It's below us."

His arms closed around her, sheltering her against his chest. "Believe me, it's the moon. Now watch." He raised his hand. The blackness shifted, parted. The brightness of the moon's glow peaked and shot upward to form a laser of light. Jaxon caught the wondrous look on Tess' face and his grin broadened.

She turned a fraction of an inch to see his face. "You're doing that?"

He looked down at her. "I wanted you to see Mystique the way I see it."

Tess reached for his hand, entwining her fingers with his. "I'm starting to."

The sky popped with a loud, long hiss and she whipped back around, her eyes round. "What was that?"

Jaxon moved her out of the way to shield her from the blackness sweeping over the moon. He stood in front of her as the ethereal cloud cover gave way to red, glowing eyes and long, scarlet-tipped nails. The night shot daggers that bounced against the windows, cracking the glass. Eerie, high-pitched cackles segued into screams of horror.

Tess shouldered her way to the window and stared out into the night. "What's going on?"

"Get back." Jaxon's voice snapped with the command. He gave her a slight shove to emphasize his instruction.

The fiery battle between black magic and earthly powers intensified, lit the sky with sparks and blue flames while Jaxon stood watching. Screams became moans, pleas for mercy.

Tess' fingernails bit into his arm. "Jaxon, what's happening?" She came to stand behind him once more, ignoring the displeased look he sent her over his shoulder.

"Come away from the window." He attempted to move her but she dug in her heels. "Tess, you don't need to see this." His fingers were more forceful this time as they curled around her upper arm. He guided her across the room just as the windowpane shattered. Shards of glass fell to the floor and a gust of green mist poured into the room.

Jaxon quickly shoved Tess behind him, bracing for battle. He felt her hands on his spine as she leaned against him, seeking shelter. "You have taken your life into your own hands this night." His voice rang with authority, deceptively calm. Inside, his fury knew no bounds. It raged against his breastbone, beat at his temples. He faced his unknown enemy. "Identify yourself at once."

The mist materialized into a small, blonde-haired girl. She wore a simple, cotton dress with sandals. Her wide, blue eyes blinked up at Jaxon with an air of innocence. "Who are you?"

"She's just a baby." Tess took a step toward her but Jaxon restrained her with a harsh, "Don't."

"She's only a child. She's not going to hurt us."

He held her fast. "She vaporized into the room. Think about it." He watched the doubt skate across her face. It gave him enough time to step back in front of her, putting his own body in the line of fire. "Identify yourself, little one."

The little girl twisted her dress with her hands and took a few shuffling steps backward, the picture of innocence. "My name is Shantay and I'm looking for my mother. They said she was here. Do you know her? Her name is Tess. She's very beautiful." The child lifted a finger and pointed over Jaxon's shoulder. "Like her."

"Oh my God." Tess covered her mouth with her hands. Jaxon caught her close to his side.

He leaned down until he was eye level with the small girl. "Your mother isn't here. Tell Athena her plan didn't work. Go back to the Coven and tell them if they attempt to enter our home again, I will come after them."

The child repeated her earlier question. "Who are you?"

"The witches will know me."

The girl opened her hand and held out a black onyx. "I wanted to give this to the pretty lady."

Tess took a step forward, extending her hand but Jaxon moved faster, his strike swift and hard as he hit the little girl's wrist, knocking the quartz to the floor. A bolt of lightning from his fingertips incinerated the onyx. With his hand, he secured his wife's wrist and tugged her back to his side. "Go home, Shantay. Give the Coven my message."

The child looked out the window once, directed her gaze back toward Jaxon. "The Coven will not allow you to keep a child of your own, Jaxon, and they always get what they want. They will come for the baby." The innocent eyes hardened into black, knowing orbs as they focused on Tess' face. "Any child you bear will be taken." Although the image of a child held, the voice was that of a woman. Athena.

Jaxon flung his hand out and the small body skyrocketed into the air. Guiding her, he walked toward the window. The child flew toward the open window with a smile on her face. And then she evaporated, streamed out into the darkness to join a cacophony of voices and laughter.

Tess stumbled against him and he spun around, catching her in his arms before she could collapse. "It's a mind trick, honey, nothing more. Athena was trying to get her point across. She knew she couldn't get inside the citadel so she used what means were available to her."

"Then how did her trick get inside?"

"Our walls are not designed to shut out innocent children. Athena disguised herself well. It was a new trick. She has been learning more but now that we know, we'll take the necessary precautions. It won't happen again."

"What was happening outside?"

"Athena created a distraction with the knives and fire. Falcon greeted the witches with his own battle warriors."

"That child." Tess shuddered and clung to him. "Her name was Shantay."

He cupped her face and forced her to meet his eyes "That child doesn't exist. She was just another one of Athena's creations, something to scare you."

"Did you know what she was when she came into the room?"

"Yes. Just as I knew she couldn't harm you. The girl was an illusion. Illusions can't touch you."

"She looked so real." She leaned her head against his chest. "Why did you destroy the onyx?"

"Witches use the quartz as a weakening device. It's coated with an antiquated spell that can drain a wizard's power. Athena wanted you to have it because, inevitably, I would have touched it. While it wouldn't completely remove my powers, it would significantly hinder my ability to protect you."

Tess sat down on the edge of the bed with a thump. "Witches, spells, stones and daggers. Is this nightmare ever going to end?"

Jaxon knelt in front of her, took her hands in both of his. "Listen to me. You're going to be okay. I know this is difficult for you to accept."

"Jaxon, please. Difficult isn't a strong enough word." She cupped his cheek to take the sting out of her words. "But, as you said earlier, my options are limited. I will persevere because I'm strong. Well, that and I'm beginning to learn a little of what you do, those abilities you talked about." She lay back against the mattress, flinging one arm over her eyes. "I figure I'll learn enough to kick your butt one day."

He slid up beside her on the bed and draped one arm across her abdomen. "It's nice to have goals, as long as they're not too lofty."

She inched her arm down to fix him with a steady look. "Are you trying to tell me something, Wizard?"

He grinned at her before creeping his hand up her side to curve around the fullness of her breast. "I just wouldn't want your dreams to get shattered. You know how fragile you are."

"Fragile?" Tess thumped his arm. "I'll have you know there are not too many human women who would've made it through all of this with their mind intact. I swear, as long as I live, I'll never understand you."

Jaxon moved his thumb over her nipple, watched her eyes darken with the heat of his touch. "You might want to learn to understand me, honey. Otherwise, you're going to have a very, very long life of confusion." He leaned in and nipped her neck.

Tess caught hold of his wrists. "Not as long as you. Just think, when I'm dead and gone, you'll be spending the next, oh, I don't know, five, six hundred years in mourning. It couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

He twisted his hands to break her hold on his wrists. Then, capturing her hands in one of his, he brought them high over her head. "It appears to me your memory isn't what it was when I married you." He dropped his head and licked the spot on her neck where her pulse jumped.

A soft sigh of pleasure escaped her lips. "My memory is fine. I wish I could say the same for Belinda's."

Jaxon raised his head and raked a look over her face. "Are we going to go back through that again?"

"Eventually but I don't think right this moment would be the best time to enter into that discussion...especially since your lips have started something your cock is going to have to finish."

He rolled, sheltered her body with his. "I'm more than capable of taking care of your desires."

She looked up at him, her eyes luminous in her pale face. "So what did you mean about the memory? Did you do something to me too?"

Jaxon stared down at her while the tension climbed up to sit on his shoulders. "Do you really think I would touch your memory without your consent?"

Tess closed her eyes for a brief moment then reopened them. He hadn't moved. "Sometimes you do things because you want to help me but in the long run those same things end up hurting me."

"So we are talking about your friends then." He released her and pushed himself to a sitting position. "I don't imagine you'll ever understand."

She climbed up behind him and locked her arms around his neck. "I understand more than you think. I understand you were only doing what you thought best. I understand it wasn't your intention to hurt me. What I don't understand is why things have to be this way. You lived in Charleston. Why is it necessary for us to live here now? Why couldn't we have lived our lives in South Carolina?" She kissed his cheek. "Is it so much for me to ask you to explain that to me?"

Jaxon held the hands circling his neck. "You doubt your love for me." Had he imagined the weariness he heard in his own voice?

"No, no," she reassured him, raining kisses along his jawline. "I could never doubt that. What I do doubt is my own strength, my ability to survive here."

His heart raced wildly, like the whip of the wind during a tornado. The thought of losing her turned the blood in his veins to ice. Turning, he took her into his arms. "If you'll let me help you, the transition will go smoother."

One perfectly plucked eyebrow lifted. "Help me? How?"

Jaxon smiled at the wariness. Not that he could blame her. He'd shaken her trust by removing the memories of those she loved. Now he'd have to earn that trust once more. He brushed the tangled hair away from her face, ran a finger down the bridge of her nose. "I'll work with you to help you learn our ways. I'll practice with you so you'll understand even more of what I do and how I do it. Together, we'll harness the power of nature and become what we are truly meant to be, one force."

"Do you have any idea of the power you hold simply with your voice?" Her body moved against him, a subtle blend of seduction and sensuality.

His cock began to throb, reminding him it had been too long since he'd made love to his wife. "Only with you."

"I suppose it couldn't hurt to see for myself what's going on in the other rooms around here."

"We'll start first thing in the morning." He grimaced at her wry expression. "Once you have had plenty of time to sleep."

"Perfect." Tess flopped back down, curled onto her side. "There is one small matter we need to clear up, something you brought up earlier."

Jaxon didn't need to be reminded. He flipped over, rested his head on the pillow beside her. "Actually it was you who brought it up." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh yes, I've missed the crude humor but that wasn't what I was talking about, mister. If you'll think with your brain instead of your," she dropped her eyes, "dick, I believe you'll recall what I was talking about."

He knew. He had just been debating whether or not to bring it up again. She'd taken the decision from his hands and he wouldn't back down from the subject. She needed to be reminded. "Eventually you will become pregnant. Don't you remember what I told you will happen after that?"

"Something about immortality, right?"

He breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe this was going to be easier than he thought. "Right."

"But we can be killed."

"Only by something or someone who wields more power than we do. An ordinary bullet wound or knife attack wouldn't kill us. We'd feel the pain of the injury but we would survive it."

Tess propped her elbow on the pillow, her head in her hand. "Something tells me this isn't a conversation I want to continue."

His hand trailed up and down her arm, causing goose bumps to leapfrog over her flesh. "Then I suggest we don't talk at all."

His thumb traced the corners of her mouth and a sticky warmth slipped out from between the lips of her pussy. Her body hummed from head to toe, the sensations lingering between her thighs.

Leaning in toward him, she inhaled the exotic scent of his cologne or maybe it was just his skin. Either way, the fragrance was intoxicating. Her fingers glided along his jawline and she saw his eyes close.

"You have something else in mind?" she whispered as she drew the tip of his finger into her mouth. Then she inched forward and touched her lips to his. How could something that looked so hard be so soft? She'd never figure that one out but then she didn't imagine it was important. His lips were pure velvet, warm and wet. Her hand curled around his neck, fingertips playing with the ends of his hair.

Jaxon hadn't moved but she felt the tension in his muscles. He took hold of her hand, pressing her palm to his. His skin grew warmer, the heat sinking into hers. She caught her breath and held it. His eyes started to glow and in his pupils, she could see herself. "What's happening?" The words almost stalled in her throat.

"Shhh." Jaxon linked his fingers with hers, drawing her hand down to his chest. The room seemed to shrink and the rhythm of his heart jumped against their combined hands, the sound a soothing thump. The only sound she could hear.

Tess felt the difference in the air, a strange thickening sensation that made it difficult to breathe. "Jaxon?" Panicking, she began to struggle but he released her fingers to wrap her tightly in his embrace.

"Look up," he said softly, guiding her head with two fingers under her chin.

As she obeyed, a transformation began to take shape as the bedroom walls gave way to glass. Rose petals filtered from the air and covered the lightweight comforter. The soft, soothing sounds of a waterfall drowned out the rapid beating of her heart. Candles illuminated the soft carpet and the ceiling seemed to drop from the sky, encasing them in a mystical kaleidoscope.

"It's so beautiful."

"This is your life now, Tess. Each day you will see things you've never imagined and feel this thing called magic. I want you to feel it now."

Dare she ask? "How?"

"Just relax. Let me show you my love for you."

"You've shown me that a hundred times in a hundred different ways." She kissed his chest to add emphasis to her words.

"Not this way." He touched his nose to hers. Before she could respond, Jaxon had moved, flipping their bodies so that he lay atop hers.

"Don't close your eyes. Just watch."

Tess tipped her head back as he moved away, giving her a complete view of the ceiling which now was within reach. She felt sleepy, her eyelids heavy in spite of Jaxon's command.

All around her she heard the whisper of the wind as if they were outside the walls of the fortress. Her senses began to whirl as the scent of fresh pine and spice assailed her nostrils. The bed became as soft as spun cotton, tickling her skin as she moved. Warmth embraced her and her body began to tingle, every nerve ending alive.

Jaxon took Tess' hands in his own and brought them high over her head. "Do you feel it?" he whispered. Little flashes of light whipped overhead and his muscles surged, embracing the energy flowing through his veins.

Her eyes huge in her face, she nodded. "I feel everything."

"It's magic." He held out his hand to demonstrate and she saw the slivers of electricity sliding down his arm.

Now she couldn't close her eyes even if she'd wanted to. Too much was happening and she wanted to take it all in. "It's incredible." The word didn't do the scene justice.

Blue and white sparks danced around their bodies, lightning whips of energy. The bed began to glow while the atmosphere snapped. The room took on an unearthly luminosity, reminding Tess of the sight of fire-riddled rocks in the pit of a volcano.

"Take the pleasure, Tess. Reach for it."

The guttural words confused her, excited her. "I'm not sure..."

"Clear your mind and think only of the rush of orgasm. Draw it to you with just your mind. Imagine your muscles contracting, feel the grip of climax, the sweet release."

Tess swallowed hard and focused on his words more than the instruction. Closing her eyes, she allowed the beauty of his voice to guide her. The faintest touch brushed over her skin, though Jaxon hadn't moved. Her muscles began to shake and anticipation turned her insides to a quivering mass. "God."

"That's it. Let it build."

Her body felt weightless as if she were aloft. A soft sigh escaped her lips as her toes started to tingle. The sensation climbed higher, covering every inch of her skin. She arched her back and pressed upward, inviting the pleasure just beyond her reach.

Jaxon's lips brushed over hers, so soft she could have imagined it. "Take it."

Tess cried out, her hips jutting upward as her muscles clenched and released. The orgasm rippled through her, both tormenting and tantalizing in its intensity. Wave after wave of a climax so exquisite it felt surreal rushed over her, wringing even more cries from her lips.

The sensations faded, allowing her to drift down from the highest peak. "That was—" She broke off.

Jaxon touched her face with his fingertips. "Powerful. And you did it all with your mind."

"You've been holding out on me," she whispered with a light laugh, too exhausted to do much more.

He tucked her close to his side. "Sometimes surprises can be good." He kissed the top of her head. "Now sleep."

She turned to face him, smoothing her thumb over the fullness of his lower lip. "There are some definite positives to this new way of life."

His chuckle warmed her. "Tomorrow you will begin to learn even more. As you do, keep in mind that not every lesson is so perfect."

"Is that a warning?" A yawn punctuated the words. Her head slipped to his chest, seeking the reassuring beat of his heart. She fell asleep before she heard Jaxon's response.

* * * * *

Tess' hand tingled and the numbness raced up her arm. The heavy sword weighed a hundred pounds in her hand, or at least it felt like it did. She felt each clang of steel against the blade of Jaxon's sword all the way down to her hips. But she didn't complain. She gritted her teeth, thrust and parried.

"Easy. You don't want to tire yourself out while your opponent is still fresh." She swore she heard the mocking sound of his laughter.

She tipped her head back, slung a lock of damp hair over her shoulder and glared at him. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Who? Me? I would never laugh at the woman I love. Perhaps we should take a break. You look like you could use something to drink." He placed his sword by an iron bench and opened his palms. Two frosty bottles of water materialized. "Here." He extended one bottle.

"Now that could be a handy trick to learn."

He grinned and indicated the bench with a sweep of his hand. "As a wizard, your thoughts can become reality. Which is why a wizard has to guard his thoughts carefully. When Braeden was still learning to control his powers, his thoughts carried him to a house of ill repute. Our father had to rescue him. Braeden said it was because he didn't know how to get out." The grins became chuckles. "My brother and I figured it was more that he didn't want to get out."

Tess favored him with an indulgent look. "I can't imagine why." She sat on the bench, allowing the coldness of the water to quench her thirst. "So what's the next stage of the learning process?" Her words echoed off the bare walls, bounced across the smooth, polished floors.

"We start with simple spells, maybe illusionary."

She heard the edginess in his voice and turned her head to look at him. "You want to tell me what's up that wizard sleeve of yours?"

"Illusions would be helpful in the event you are faced with another witch."

"So this is still all about my protection?"

"Did you expect it to be otherwise?"

She grimaced and took another sip of the water. "I don't know what I expected but it definitely wasn't practicing sword play. I don't see you using too many humanistic weapons when you're in a battle."

He sat beside her. "My weapons are of a different sort but they won't be available to you for quite some time."

She blew out a sharp breath that ruffled her bangs. Men could be irritating enough but wizards, well, she couldn't even begin to describe the ways they could annoy the hell out of a person. "How long is quite some time?"

"At least a century."

Her hand froze, the bottle of water halfway to her lips. "What are you talking about?"

"You can learn our ways, Tess. You can even gain some of our knowledge, power and ability but it takes time, at least a century to acquire those skills. Even then you won't have the strength of a wizard born into the Assembly."

"I thought wizards were made, not born."

Jaxon draped his arm along the back of the bench, his fingers resting close to the nape of her neck. "That's what most people think. There are groups of wizards all over

the universe who are trained such as you but their abilities are not the same as ours. They're limited in their capabilities. The Assembly knows no such limits."

She leaned back against his hand. His fingertips stirred the damp tendrils of hair that had escaped from the braid. "So if I become pregnant, our child will have these abilities?"

"When not if, and mostly, yes."

"Which means that he or she could be stronger than I am one day."

"True."

Her brow wrinkled. "Human kids are pretty good at outsmarting their parents, Jaxon. Have you ever thought what a child with the capabilities of a full-fledged wizard will be able to do?"

He chuckled and curled his fingers around her neck, squeezing gently. "By the time he knows how to use his powers, you'll have gained the power of discernment. Don't worry, honey. You will know where he is and what he's doing until he becomes a man."

The furrows in her brow grew. "But I thought you said it would take a hundred years for me to gain that knowledge."

"I did."

"Um, Jaxon?"

"Yes, baby?"

"How old does a wizard have to be before he's considered a man?"

His teeth flashed in a grin. "Two hundred."

"So I'm guessing puberty is a really tough time for you guys."

* * * * *

Falcon stood straight and tall, his long white hair flowing behind him like a snowy river. His feet barely touched the ground. He preferred to hover. It would enable greater speed should he need to make a hasty exit. His eyes were trained on Tess' small form in the arena below. "She learns fast."

Jaxon watched his wife proudly. "That she does." His eyes glinted with humor as she opened her palm and startled herself with the small, leaping flame, which nestled there. "And it is a good thing she does. Even now the witches are waging a battle with her."

"You can feel it as well." Falcon nodded. "It is good. Your own powers have grown. You will serve our people well."

"I wish you would not talk like that." Jaxon kept his eyes trained on his wife while his mother instructed her in another spell, a captivating spell. He frowned marginally. He wasn't so sure Tess needed to know how to captivate another man. "Mother, perhaps there are other spells which would be of more benefit to her."

Tess held up her hand. "You hush. I told your mother I wanted to learn the book. I'm learning the book."

Falcon and Jaxon exchanged long, steady looks. "The entire book will take quite some time, Tess." Falcon offered his opinion. "Jaxon is right to suggest other spells."

"Just ignore them, Charlemaine." Tess swept a hand up to close the door from Falcon and Jaxon's view.

The leader chuckled. "Yes, I do think she learns fast. All of this after only three months. I do not think we will need a century with your lovely wife, Jaxon."

"I have helped her." Jaxon broke his own promise to himself and braced himself for his mentor's wrath.

"What do you mean you have helped her?" There was no mistaking the ominous tone of Falcon's voice.

Jaxon moved out of his physical reach. "I know you do not approve but Athena cannot be trusted. Until Tess becomes pregnant, she is vulnerable to any move the witches make. I cannot be with her twenty-four hours of the day. I wanted to protect her."

"You shared your powers?" Falcon's voice vibrated with the richness of his fury.

"No, I only enhanced her ability to learn. I shared my strength and some of my knowledge."

"Does she know?"

"How could I tell her that while she was sleeping, I cast a spell which will accelerate the learning process? As it is, it is going to be difficult for her to accept her own abilities even as she learns what they are. No, it is better this way."

Falcon whirled around sending a shower of sparks dancing at his feet. "It is better if you let nature take its course! How many times do I have to tell you that we cannot upset the balance of nature? To accelerate time is to risk exposing your wife to even greater dangers. If she is not ready to accept all she is capable of, she could give in to the dark forces within her. Then you would have to destroy her."

How could he explain the power of his fear? The worry in the pit of his stomach that he wouldn't be able to protect her? "Then I will make sure she does accept them."

"By another spell? Will you listen to yourself? You are risking far more than just her life by manipulating nature and time. You are risking your own banishment. Should the other wizards discover what you have done, they will demand a tribunal."

"I know that."

Falcon shook his head in disbelief. "Then why did you tell me?"

"Because should something happen to me, I know you will protect her. You are the only one I trust enough to train her, to guide her in the proper path. As you did me."

For a long moment silence reigned. Then shuffling his feet, Falcon cleared his throat. "That was different. You were of the Assembly. Tess is not."

Jaxon whipped around, eyes flashing. His body held rigid with tension, he faced his mentor, the man who had saved him from his own treacherous mind. "You could still help her. Promise me you will, Falcon. Promise me if anything happens to me, you will watch out for Tess."

"What is all this talk about something happening to you? Have you had a vision?"

He broke eye contact, traversed the expanse of the hall outside the training room. *More nightmare than vision. So overpowering.* He shivered to even think of it. "Yes. I did not want to say anything because the vision was unclear."

"Tell me." The voice carried a command.

"I saw the death of a wizard and Tess grieving. I could not see the face or hear the name of the wizard. But why else would she grieve except if she were to lose the man she loves?"

Falcon clamped a hand on his protégé's shoulder. "You said the vision is unclear. Perhaps it is fragmented. It is possible the death of the wizard comes before or after what you saw with Tess. I will not release you, Jaxon. You have a destiny to assume my place, my rank in the Assembly. That was preordained before your birth. Preordination takes precedence over a vision." He shrugged. "You simply will not die."

"It is so like you to challenge the power of the vision."

"That I would. I will not allow anything to happen to you."

"Does the Assembly know—" Jaxon couldn't finish the question.

"That you will take my place? Of course. There is no dissension. Unlike you, your fellow wizards do not question destiny. Your mother knew before you were born you were meant to ascend to this place of responsibility. She accepted it before your father did. And he before you. I see you have great difficulty believing you are the chosen one."

"That cannot surprise you. Most of the other wizards have more knowledge and wisdom—"

"No, they do not. They have lived longer but the wealth of knowledge and wisdom you have acquired, the power, far exceeds theirs. It is the way it should be. Oldest does not always mean the wisest. Wisdom comes with experience. You have experienced more over the centuries, have learned more. You will lead well."

Jaxon wished he felt as confident as his mentor did. Emotions swirled within him, anger, resentment, pride, fear and even a trace of wonder. Wonder that he could be chosen above the others. Fear that he would fail them all. He shook his head to brush off the feelings. "But there is time, right? You are not passing the mantle as of yet?"

Falcon squeezed his shoulder. "There is still some time. And even once you have assumed leadership over the Assembly, I will not be so far away that you cannot reach me."

The words gave Jaxon pause. "You will leave?"

"Eventually."

"I will not let you go."

The leader smiled. "Do not let your power go to your head, young Jaxon. Your abilities will never surpass mine. You cannot prevent me from leaving. It is our way."

"Now I know why Tess wanted to live as a human. It certainly seems less complicated."

Laughter rang out but it was more a sound of regret than humor. "You managed to hide from your responsibilities for a time but even during your time away from us, you knew, deep in your heart, eventually you would have to return."

The truth stared him in the face and Jaxon couldn't deny it. Though he'd enjoyed every second of his time on Earth, he'd known the Assembly would not allow him to disappear forever. A wizard always had a duty first to his people.

Jaxon stared hard at the door shielding the training room from his view. Behind the wood was the woman he loved, the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. With the vision came the knowledge he might not have that much time to spend. It saddened him to think the time he did have might be spent in battle with the Coven, that part of his duty that could very well make Tess a widow.

The door flew open and his heart slammed in his throat. Tess, her feet dangling, danced in the air, laughing gaily. The long, white robe she wore billowed around her, offering freedom of movement. Her silky, chestnut hair flowed around her shoulders while her eyes glittered. Perfect happiness. Jaxon felt it for a brief moment, allowed her happiness to envelop him. "Tess, come down from there."

"Let her be," Falcon instructed. "Perhaps she is dealing with her new abilities in the best way she knows how."

She glided toward the door, hand extended. "Jaxon, this feels incredible. I want to dance with you. I've never danced without the ground beneath my feet." Her laugh was infectious.

Jaxon stood rooted to the spot until Falcon nudged him forward. Only a slight nudge but it jarred him out of his trance. He took the hand she offered and ascended, his feet leaving the ground with an ease borne of years of experience. "I told you that you would taste life in a way you could have only imagined." He smiled into her upturned face.

Tess tossed back her head, continued to laugh. "This isn't tasting life. It's taking it for a ride." Her fingers tightened around his. "Let's get out of here." Before he could guess her next move, she tugged him with her, propelling them both out of the room and into the darkened corridors.

Chapter Twelve

Tess swept around a gilded chandelier, brought her arms together in a V-shape and shot toward the floor like an arrow. "I have an idea."

Jaxon sighed, swept low and caught her in his arms. He lifted her against his chest and tucked her head against his shoulder. "If you keep doing that, you're going to have one hell of a headache. Now why don't we sit down and have this conversation?"

She broke away from him and waggled one finger in mock admonition. "No way. I've just discovered this and I'm not interested in coming down anytime soon."

"Eventually you're going to get tired."

Her soft laughter brought back the memories of last night and the night before that. Would he ever get enough of her? Even now his hands itched to sink into her hair while his eyes lingered on her full, ripe breasts beneath the silky robe she wore.

"Hey, are you listening to me?"

The waspish tone of her voice brought a smile to his face. "I was doing more looking than listening."

"Well, stop. Now do you want to hear my idea or not?"

"From the sound of your voice, I can already tell I'm not going to like it."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Let's try to stay positive, shall we? If I understand what you've been telling me correctly," Tess took a break to lean against one wall of the corridor, her feet still several inches from the floor, "Athena has every intention of trying to take our baby the moment I become pregnant." Her teeth worried her lower lip. "That is if I become pregnant."

Jaxon scowled. "You will and did I mention I don't like this already?"

"Just listen." She hardened her voice and continued. "In the event that she manages to...put a spell on me or whatever in the hell it is that witches do—"

"That's not going to happen."

She ignored him. "In the event that it does happen, we need a plan."

Jaxon spiraled to her side, snatched her arm and brought her to the floor with a thump. "No plan is needed because Athena is not going to come anywhere near you again."

"Jaxon." She grabbed hold of the collar of his shirt and brought him up short. "You're not thinking realistically. Athena has outsmarted you once." One look at her husband's face told her she'd said the wrong thing. His jaw locked. His eyes narrowed and his body tensed. Anger rippled visibly through his muscles. But Tess didn't let his

displeasure dissuade her. "Now the way I see it, Athena might be able to pull the wool over our eyes again and in that instance, we have to have a backup plan."

He walked toward the door, towing her with him. "No plan. No more discussion about this. Athena is not going to get her hands on you."

"You're letting pride do the talking here." Tess knew she was goading him but pride wasn't going to save her skin should Athena manage to sneak past their protective spells.

He stopped to spin around and glare at her. "I said there will be no more discussion of this."

"You're refusing to listen to me because you're too busy beating your chest. I know you're a big, powerful wizard. I know you've bested Athena before, but guess what? This isn't before. It's now and we," she pressed a finger against the center of his chest then touched her own, "that's you and I need a plan. You can't snap your fingers and make all of this go away."

"I'm not going to talk about this with you."

She played her trump card. "I'll go to Falcon."

He took one step forward and backed her against the wall, his eyes becoming pools of fury. "Do not attempt to play Falcon against me. While he is the leader of the Assembly for now, I am your husband forever. He will not interfere between us."

She honed in on two words in Jaxon's warning. "What do you mean for now?"

"That isn't important. What is important is your accepting my decision."

"No."

His eyebrow arched. "No?"

"You heard me. No. I don't accept your decision any more than I accept your authority over me. God, Jaxon, when are you going to crawl into the twenty-first century? Women do not obey their husbands. Women do not bow and scrape while standing in awe of the meat provider." Palms open, she pushed against his shoulders and broke open a space wide enough for her to escape from the overpowering crush of his body against hers. "And you know what? I'm really not keen on your macho attitude either. When you want to hold a discussion that does not include grunting and pointing, look me up. Or I should say, look up." Her hips swayed as she sashayed away from him. Two feet away, she took to the air, her laughter trailing behind her.

* * * * *

Rane captured a handful of peanuts and tossed them into his mouth. "Grunting and pointing. I like that. She is good for you."

Jaxon had begun to regret his decision to vent to his brothers within the first five minutes of the conversation. Their supply of compassion was limited. Actually they had a lion's share of sympathy but only for his wife. "She is going to be the death of me."

Braeden slapped Jaxon on the shoulder and straddled a chair opposite him. "I know plenty of men who wished they were having your difficulties."

Jaxon's brows lowered. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Rane closed his fist around more peanuts and grinned. "We cannot spell it out for you, brother. As they say on Earth, it would lose its punch. Suffice it to say that Tess is an attractive woman."

The scowl intensified. "And she is my wife."

Braeden reached for the ceramic bowl of peanuts. "Then you are going to have to accept that she is not just an ordinary female you can order around. If that is what you wanted, you should have married another wizard. Tess has a mind of her own...unless you decide to control her like a puppet."

Jaxon shifted uncomfortably. "I would not do that to her."

Rane slapped the table and launched himself to his feet. "Then I suggest you learn how to deal with your wife and stop trying to change her into something she is not." He lifted his face to the air for a brief moment before favoring his brothers with a wry smile. "I should go. I have tolerated enough of this male bonding for one day. I am considering visiting this place you call Earth, Jaxon. It has some intriguing possibilities."

Braeden nudged Jaxon with his elbow. "Your trip was definitely worth it."

Jaxon debated that issue. While he loved Tess to distraction, she crawled under his skin, drove him mad and then loved him with a ferocity he couldn't match. Their nights together branded his memories and a simple thought, one word, could send him running back to their bedroom in hopes of an afternoon foray. When he should be concentrating on helping the Assembly, on preventing another invasion.

"I believe we have lost our brother in the conversation." Rane shook his head wryly. "Falcon is going to call a meeting at ten tonight. Make sure Jaxon knows he is to be there." He knocked once against the wood frame before exiting the room.

Braeden shifted and bumped Jaxon's chair with his foot. "Are you still with me?"

No. He'd been with Tess where he wanted to be right now. Jaxon shook his head, cleared his thoughts and returned to the conversation. "I am considering what to do about Tess. She is not going to let this subject drop."

"Maybe you should talk to Falcon, get the jump on her." Braeden broke off with a grin. "So to speak."

"I fight my own battles."

"I see. So are you winning?"

Jaxon scrambled to his feet. "Go to hell."

"You have spent way too much time with the humans. You have gotten soft."

Jaxon's eyes narrowed. His shoulders tensed. Maybe a good fight was exactly what he needed to work off some of his anger. "And maybe you are waiting for an ass-kicking."

Braeden looked up. "You mean an actual fist fight?" He laughed softly. "Is that the way they handle things down there, because if so, I am not impressed. I would suggest we focus our energies on a more challenging game." He stood and strolled toward the door. "Interested?"

Jaxon eyed his brother speculatively, wondering what his devious elder was up to. But what the hell? Whatever it was, he probably needed it. Maybe it would work some of the grunting out of his system.

* * * * *

Tess stood on the sidelines, watching the two brothers slide across the marble floors. Encased inside a dome-shaped glass, they sparred like two ancient warriors, testing their powers, working off frustrations unknown to Tess.

"Are they fighting?" She wondered aloud as her mother-in-law approached. She winced as a bolt of lightning bounced off the glass ceiling, ricocheted off the walls.

Charlemaine's face was wreathed with pride despite the grunts and groans emanating from below. "It is a game."

Tess shook her head. If she lived to be centuries old like her husband, she would never figure out this family. Two powerful wizards were fighting tooth and nail and their mother showed not only her approval but her pride as well. "Couldn't they hurt one another?"

"They would not allow their magic to hurt one another. It is simply a game, like tennis in your world."

"In tennis, we don't throw lightning bolts around and there's usually no blood."

Charlemaine smiled. "You must stop worrying so much. Except for rare instances, wizards are not allowed to use their magic against one another. Right now they are, for want of a better phrase, beating their chests."

Tess directed her gaze back toward the center of the room. Both wizards had taken up opposing sides, their bodies tensed. Fingers flexed at their sides but their faces wore identical grins.

With a shout that echoed outside the shrouded walls, Jaxon bounded forward with a leap that sent him toward the ceiling. His hand smacked the glass and he pushed off, whirling around the tightly enclosed interior until his body became a blur of motion. Tess squinted in an attempt to keep track of him while Braeden laughed in appreciation of his brother's abilities.

"They're idiots," she decided, placing a hand on Charlemaine's arm to soften her words. "With the witches plotting to infiltrate the Assembly and Athena making plans for our future baby, Jaxon is playing human ping-pong. God, I'll never understand him." She dropped her hand to her side and took a backward step.

"Sometimes our emotions run high and unless we take steps to bottle them, they will overtake us. We will make rash decisions or possibly hurt someone. It is better we work out our frustrations in such a way."

"I can't see you whirling around a glass room like that."

Charlemaine's eyes glittered with just a hint of deviousness. "Oh, I have other ways. Ways that involve my husband." She winked, hooked her arm through Tess' and guided her away from the battling wizards.

* * * * *

Jaxon didn't need to be told his wife was irritated. With her increasing powers, she expressed herself quite well. Almost too well. As he opened the door to the bedroom, she turned and hurled a pillow at his head. He caught the fluffy missile easily and tossed it to the floor. "Let me guess. You're upset."

She folded her arms. Narrowed her eyes. "I need to get out of here."

"We've already discussed this."

One hand went up in the air to halt further conversation. "I didn't mean I needed to go back to South Carolina. I think you took care of that quite effectively. I meant I need to get out of this house, this fortress or whatever in the hell you call it. I need some fresh air to breathe."

Jaxon inclined his head. "You had only to ask." He held out one hand, raising one eyebrow at Tess' immobility. "Well? You're the one who wants to breathe."

She floated across the floor to him and took his hand. "What are you getting me into now, Wizard?"

He gave her a wicked smile, winked and threaded his fingers through hers. "We're really going to have to work on your trust issues." The wall moved with a wave of his hand. Gray mist swirled around their feet, a vast outstretch of emptiness. Space dotted with stars and inky blackness rushed up to meet them as Jaxon stepped off the edge of the floor, taking his wife with him.

He captured her squeal of surprise with a kiss and wrapped his arms around her. With a simple command, the fog gave way to a chasm lined with fluffy, white clouds. He smiled into his wife's upturned face. "Come with me." He turned and crossed over onto a cloud.

Tess' breath ended on a gasp as her feet sank into the downy softness. For the first time, Jaxon saw the world he took for granted through someone else's eyes. He watched the awe steal over her face, the wonder take hold of her eyes. She turned slowly, her arms extended. Her face glowed in the light of the stars. And he could only hold his breath while the excitement blanketed her.

"It's beautiful."

"Want to see more?"

Her head whipped around. "There's more?"

"Much more." He dropped his hands to his sides, tilted his head. "Well? Do you want to see?"

She punched his shoulder lightly. "Stop teasing me. I want to see it all."

"All would take a lot more time than we have." At her vexed look, he amended, "But we definitely have time for more."

"I suppose that will have to do." She pushed her hands against his back. "So get moving. Time's a-wastin'."

Jaxon walked methodically, roaming from cloud to cloud. Each step bounced them to the next until finally, with the air thinning and the mist breaking away, they burst through the shadowy realms of space and into an explosion of vivid colors. Reds, violets, blues and greens swirled around them, a symphony of hues and vibrant shades.

"It's like walking on a rainbow," Tess whispered as if afraid to disturb the beauty.

Jaxon laughed and took her hand again. "Now comes the best part." He held her close, wrapped in his secure embrace and toppled off the rim of the cloud. Free-falling through space, Tess pressed tightly against his chest, he closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of her, took in the warmth of her body. Need slammed into him, dark and powerful. His hands fisted in her hair and lifted her head. He caught the look of shock on her face before his lips fastened to hers.

The rush of the wind pounded in his head while his blood poured rich and thick through his veins. Every nerve in his body jumping, he took what he needed, what he craved. With a blink, he discarded their clothes and with a slight nod of his head, he slowed their descent to a gentle float.

"Jaxon." Laughter coated Tess' voice. "I'm not so sure this is safe."

"Trust me. Just let go." His lips nuzzled her throat, lit a fiery path from breastbone to her belly. He felt her nails digging into his shoulders, heard the soft sound of her surrender while he lifted her legs to drape them over his shoulders.

They bounced in the air like two feathers on a breeze and the moment enveloped them. Her cunt was already wet, cream seeping from between pink lips. He tested her sensitivity with one finger and she jerked. His thumbs parted her flesh, exposing her swollen clit. For the space of a second, he waited, feeling Tess' anticipation, the trembling of her thighs.

"Maybe this isn't so safe, after all," he whispered, his breath blowing warm puffs of air over her heated pussy.

"You can't stop now." She cradled his head, knowing there was no way she'd let him stop now.

"No?"

Her head shook vehemently. "No!" God, the sweet sensations storming her soul tortured her. She'd never imagined spending her life with a man who could shatter her defenses with simply a look. And Jaxon could do so much more with a touch, a brush of his tongue.

Her eyes locked with his, his tongue circled her clit, testing its sweetness. Tess' gasp tugged at his cock. Craving her juices, he grasped her ass and pressed his face into her musky scent.

Sweet Jesus. Each lick was torture but it was the kind she'd die for. Raising her hands, she lightly tweaked her nipples, rolling them between her fingers in perfect rhythm with each stroke of his tongue.

Another lick made her squirm, her legs tightened around his face. The combined pressure of her thighs and sweet taste of her cunt threatened his own control. But her whimpered cries urged him on and he gave her what she demanded, plunging his tongue into her over and over. Breaking only long enough to suckle her clit, nibble the sensitive nubbin. Then returning to the heat of her channel, exploring as far as his tongue would allow.

Releasing her nipples, Tess tangled her fingers in Jaxon's hair, forcing his face against her pussy. Wicked sensations poured over her, feeding every nerve ending until her body responded with a savage release—an orgasm so powerful every muscle in her body contracted. She cried out and bucked against his face, embracing each spasm as it afforded her another pinpoint of pleasure.

Jaxon lowered her legs quickly and glided up her body, wrapped one leg around hers and spun around, moving so fast their bodies became a blur. Tess dug her fingernails into his shoulders while the air whipped around them, thrusting them into a kaleidoscope of shimmering colors.

With a slight twist of his hips, Jaxon flipped them over, angling their heads toward the ground. The blood rushed to her head but before she could complain, he thrust his cock deep into her velvety soft pussy. Over and over, he plunged into her. Hard. Fast.

Her lips parted with another gasp. Words couldn't describe what she was feeling. The magic surrounded her, engulfing her as Jaxon lifted their bodies once more and began a leisurely glide through the air while his cock stroked every inch of her channel.

"I love you." She thought the whisper was lost on the wind but his hands framed her face and he responded by deepening the thrusts, taking her with him to the end of the journey, holding her. And with the horizon rushing up to meet them, he poured his seed into her, matching her cries with his own.

Her head fell languidly against his shoulder. She kissed the salt from his skin and felt the muscles quiver beneath her lips. "Don't you think we should stop now?"

His arms tightened around her. "I thought we just did."

"Jaxon, I can see the ground." Ordinarily that knowledge would have scared her but at the precise moment she was too tired to care.

His lips fastened onto her earlobe. "Hmm?"

Tess pushed against his head. "The ground. I can see the ground." Her languidness faded as nerves rushed screaming to the forefront.

He continued his lazy exploration of her ear. "So stop us."

She twisted away from his lips and grasped hold of his shoulders to give him a slight shake. "I can't. How? I can't stop us! You have to help me. I don't know how."

"Sure you do. We're going to hit the ground if you don't."

"I'm not ready."

His hand cupped her breast. "You feel ready to me."

"What if I can't?"

"More than you need to trust me, you need to trust yourself. Just do it, Tess. You can stop us."

She held out one hand. It shook. She curled her fingers into fists and cursed below her breath. "If we die, I'm going to kill you." Squeezing her eyes shut, she held her hand level and issued a short, sharp command. "Stop."

Their bodies jerked, bounced, swirled and came to a sudden halt upside down. Jaxon grunted and righted them. "Okay, so it wasn't pretty but you did it."

She held her hand up in front of her and stared at it. "I did it! I stopped us!" Animation stamped across her face, she grasped hold of Jaxon's ears and planted a noisy kiss on his lips. "I stopped us!"

He winced and pried her fingers loose. "I noticed."

Suddenly she smacked the center of his chest with her open palm.

He rubbed the offended area. "What was that for?"

"Do you realize you could have killed us both with your tough lesson?"

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "Do you really think I would have let us hit ground?"

She tugged her hand away, considered his words. "You were just trying to scare me into performing?"

His lips twitched. "Something like that."

"And it worked." She peered down at the ground less than two feet away. "Hitting would have hurt."

"Undoubtedly."

Tess kissed him again. "Can we do this again?"

"Which part?"

"All of it."

"I think I've got a clear spot on my schedule tomorrow."

* * * * *

Athena's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "They know not of the child she carries. The spell has worked." Rubbing her hands together, she shimmied toward the cauldron, sniffing the contents appreciatively. "Once this spell is cast on the unbroken

womb, the child will be bound to me forever." She cackled then sobered, brushing her eyes over the congregation of witches.

With little coercion, she had convinced the witches of Ballhastra to join with them, to defeat the Assembly of the Wizards. Aguinar had been an unfortunate sacrifice but with the fall of their leader, the other witches had willingly pledged their covenant to Athena.

"With Hestra's blood, the wizards have a stronghold we did not anticipate but I believe my spells are strong enough to compel Jaxon's little bride to join us anyway." She strolled around the tower's main chamber, her fingers pressed together. "You all have your duties. You know where you're supposed to be and when you're supposed to be there. Are we together?" It was a rhetorical question. Athena didn't expect any dissent and would have been surprised had any of the witches dared to voice their disapproval.

* * * * *

Jaxon waved his hands atop the boiling pit, his face expressionless. He'd swept his mind clean of any worries or fears. Focused on his task, he closed his eyes and began the chant, a timeworn spell, rarely used in present day but as powerful as the day it had been created.

He didn't look up as his mentor materialized at his side—the bending of the air alerting him to his presence. The elderly wizard's hands moved simultaneously with his, combining power and strength.

The words flowed in Gaelic before rolling into Jaxon's native Nepalese. Lengthy and intense, the chant required much of the wizards' strength. Sweat poured over their bodies, raced down their faces in rivulets. And when the ground shifted beneath their feet and a vortex began to draw the oxygen from the enclosed cell, both wizards collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily.

Jaxon swiped the back of his hand across his brow and staggered to his feet. He cast one look into the calm waters of the pit. "It is done."

"They may still be able to draw Tess to them before the spell takes effect."

"I know but they will not be able to keep her for long." His eyes hardened. "If I could prevent her from having to see that place..."

Falcon touched his shoulder. "Your wife is rapidly becoming one of us. She will be forced to see things she does not want to see as she already has. She is learning to accept those things. Look at how she has embraced the aspects of our world that excite her. With the excitement comes the dimness of our existence. She will adapt."

His words rang true. Jaxon smiled. "She has adapted marvelously well actually. She does not speak of Charleston anymore."

"She will always miss her friends but this world has opened up possibilities to her. Even now she is with your mother, learning of the weapons of battle and —"

As Falcon's words slammed fear into the center of his heart, Jaxon snapped his fingers and disappeared only to reappear in front of his mother. "Why are you teaching her this?" His gaze landed on Tess' face before his mother could respond. "You do not need to learn about our weapons. I have taught you all you need to know with the sword." Jaxon gripped her arm and began to tow her toward the door. A flash of fire singed his palm and he released her with a muffled curse. "Stop that!"

She shared a smile with her mother-in-law and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "You know, I think human women could benefit from that little trick. There'd be a lot less domestic abuse."

"Tess, come with me now."

"No."

Charlemaine tried to intervene. "Jaxon, really."

"Charlemaine." Jensen shadowed his wife's side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "We do not come between a husband and his wife, even if one is our son. We should go." He whisked them away before she could fight him.

Tess blinked at the empty space. "How did he make her go with him?"

Jaxon lifted one eyebrow, snagged her wrist and blinked. When she opened her eyes, she was standing in the middle of their bedroom.

"I guess that's a case of the eye being quicker than the hand." She sat on the edge of the mattress and patted the spot next to her. "Jaxon, stop staring at me like you want to spank me. I'm not a child and I have every right to know everything about the Assembly since I'm now part of them."

He prowled the width of the room in an attempt to rein in his temper. "You're going to be the death of me."

"I believe you've said that once before or maybe it was that I'm going to drive you crazy."

"For a wizard, I'm not sure which one would be worse."

She gave a little laugh. "You didn't really expect me to be the obedient little wife, did you?"

A long, studied glance was his only response but Tess could practically see the wheels turning in his head.

"What are you thinking?"

"Do you really want to see magic?"

Anticipation began to build in the pit of her stomach. "What did you have in mind?"

He crooked his index finger. "Come here."

She shook her head. "You come to me."

With a low, sexy laugh, he opened his palm and curled his fingers. Tess' body moved without her permission, gliding across the floor to meet him.

"That wasn't fair." The protest was lost against his lips.

"Haven't you learned anything about equality since I brought you here?" One hand slipped low to cup her ass.

"So where is this magic you wanted to show me?" She shifted her hips, silently urging his hand to move around to the front of her body. As with every time he was near, her pussy tingled and desire erased all other thoughts. Was it natural to crave a man this much? She never had before but then she hadn't done a lot of things before she met Jaxon.

He kissed her again. And again. Slow, languorous sweeps of his tongue against hers until her body practically melted against his. She clung to him in sweet surrender, giving him what he wanted before he asked.

He whisked their clothes away with one hand, ascending into the air. "Join me."

She obeyed the command. Their legs dangled before entwining. Naked flesh pressed to naked flesh, lips to lips.

"Each time we're together, I only want you more," he whispered.

The words sent a dart of pleasure to her heart and she cupped his face. "I love you. More than I ever thought I could love a man."

"And what about a wizard?"

She licked the corners of his mouth. "Yeah, I love him too."

He kissed her again, drawing her so close that his air became hers. Holding her tight against him, he allowed his body to fade into hers until they became nothing more than droplets of moisture that dripped to the floor.

This was more than making love. It was a mystical union, a connection of body, spirit and soul. Tess felt Jaxon everywhere, all throughout her body. He touched her mind, learned her thoughts and caressed every inch of her skin until her body throbbed with restrained desire.

Then, when she thought she couldn't take more, he began a delicious assault with his tongue. She couldn't see him, couldn't see herself for that matter but she could feel him. The slick wetness of his tongue lapped over her skin like a warm summer's rain.

"Jaxon." She couldn't think of what else to say. Hovering on the brink of orgasm, she reached for him in the mist, surprised to feel the solid strength of his shoulders. Then the climax unraveled her, sending her spiraling into perfect oblivion where only she and Jaxon existed.

Their own flawless world.

* * * * *

Charlemaine greeted her at the door to the Serenity Chamber. "It seems you have my son securely wrapped around your finger."

"He's such a worrywart." And an amazing lover. She kept that part to herself. Tess smiled, then sobered. "I do think he has every reason to be worried about the witches."

"And the more I think about this, the more I think we should share our plan with Falcon."

"No." Tess' fingers bit into the older woman's arms. "Falcon would tell Jaxon and Jaxon has already given me his opinion on my taking any action myself."

"Perhaps it is for the best that you allow him to take care of this."

"I can't just sit on the sidelines. I could never do that in my other life and I can't do it now. Please understand, Charlemaine. Please help me."

A sigh escaped the wizard's lips. "As I promised so shall I do but remember what I told you. Should I feel your life is in jeopardy or should I be questioned by my husband, I will have no choice but to tell the truth. I cannot lie to him."

"And I wouldn't expect you to. Now show me how to do this spell again."

Charlemaine led her to the chamber's exit. "The power lies in your heart. As the spell expands, you need to focus all of your energies on your heart's desire. As evil binds so shall good cast away the chains."

Tess shivered. "You make it sound so...intense."

Knowing eyes probed her face. "Intensity scares you?"

"It did at first. But living with Jaxon, I had to get used to it."

Charlemaine's bare feet slapped against the marble floors. "Do not say I did not warn you about that one. Once we reach the stairs, you will need to follow every command I give you. If Jaxon or Falcon were to find either one of us in the cell, well, to put it in the terminology of your people, there would be hell to pay."

"Don't worry. For tonight, I'm obedience personified."

Chapter Thirteen

Jaxon's temper spiked the moment he materialized in the center of the cell. His eyes glittered like silver diamonds and his chest heaved in response to the furious blood roiling through his veins. He watched the two wide-eyed women turn to face him as they realized they'd been caught red-handed.

"Tess, get away from the pit." His voice whipped across the floor, arced like the bite of an adder. He didn't give her the opportunity to obey. He lifted his hand, curled his fingers and propelled her to his side.

She tried to dig in her heels but her strength couldn't match his. "Jaxon, if you will let me explain what I'm doing—"

"Silence!" He cut into her words, turning his attention toward his mother. "Do you have any idea what you have done here?"

Charlemaine lifted her chin, preparing to square off against her son. "I have done what I felt was right. Your wife needs to be able to protect herself in the unlikely event that you are not available. Should the witches manage to make it past your protective boundaries, Tess will be in their tower, under their control. This way, she is not without means to save herself."

"You can excuse your actions even though they could put her life at risk?"

"I can excuse my actions because this is what Tess wanted and had you bothered to listen to her, you would have known that. She cannot remain under your thumb, no matter how much you want her to be there."

Jaxon pushed Tess back behind him, sheltering her. "The Assembly will demand a tribunal for this insurrection."

Charlemaine stood straight and tall. "They will not banish me for attempting to give your wife the ability to escape the witches should they capture her. Even they will see the wisdom behind my actions."

Tess came around his body and tapped on his chest to gain his attention. "Jaxon, you can't call a tribunal against your mother. This wasn't her idea. It was mine."

He looked down at her, feeling the frustration and fear warring within his abdomen. "You do not know what you have done."

"Yes, I do. I've taken steps to protect myself."

"You have touched magic and power you cannot control. You are not strong enough or wise enough to handle a spell of this magnitude."

"Then show me how!" She shot back, matching him fury for fury.

"I will not."

In the thick silence that followed, the foundations shook, the ground rattled beneath their feet and immediately the cell collapsed, giving way to the Assembly room. The remaining wizards had all gathered, hands folded, robes gleaming in the brightness of the lights overhead.

Falcon got to his feet and glided a hand over three empty chairs. "Please take your seats. It would appear we have something of great magnitude to discuss."

Jaxon remained standing, his rage guiding his thoughts, darkened with an edge of violence. "My wife has violated a direct covenant of the Assembly. She has touched that which she cannot control. Her lack of knowledge could endanger us all." When he turned to look at Tess' shocked face, an invisible hand punched his stomach. He hurt her with his words but his fear for her life held greater importance than her feelings at the moment.

"You might be surprised at her knowledge," Charlemaine inserted as Jensen wrapped a restraining hand around her wrist.

Jaxon leveled a look at his mother. "I never would have expected you to betray me."

"All of you, sit." Falcon flicked his fingers toward the three individuals and at once they sat, controlled by the magic of his fingers. "Now perhaps we can discuss this with the wisdom of our years." He held up one hand. "Right now it would be best if you remained silent, Charlemaine. We know your opinion on the topic. We should let Tess tell us her side of the story."

"Her side is not what is important," Jaxon intervened.

Falcon singed a look across the distance. "It is your wife's turn to speak."

Every fiber of his being protested at the unspoken command but Jaxon fell silent, clamping his lips together.

"Well, Tess?"

She laced her fingers together atop the table and swept a look around. "It's true I disobeyed Jaxon but all of you know that two of the witches have managed to get close to me in person, at least once or maybe twice in my dreams. All of this was without Jaxon's knowledge. He can't always be there to protect me no matter how much he wants to be. And I can't just sit on the sidelines and wait for whatever is going to happen. I wanted to be prepared as well. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten Charlemaine involved but she was the only person I trusted. If you have to punish someone, punish me, not her. She was only trying to help me. And she didn't know Jaxon had forbid it if that is how you choose to look at it."

"I knew." Charlemaine's quiet words brought a collective gasp from the wizards. "Jaxon is my son. I am not under his control. Yet."

Jaxon shot a look toward his mother to silence her. "Yet you encouraged my wife to disobey me."

Tess smacked the table and lunged to her feet with so much force she staggered. Jaxon's hand shot out to steady her but she shook it off, glaring down at him. "I've had just about enough of this obedience talk. I'm not a trained seal. I don't perform on command and I certainly don't obey. When are you going to understand that I don't have to obey you, Jaxon? Marriage is a partnership, not a dictatorship. I didn't marry you with the understanding that I would be subject to your control. I believe that part was left out of the vows."

Rane coughed. Braeden cleared his throat while Nexon and Jensen's chairs creaked as they leaned back with their arms folded.

Andion voiced his opinion. "You are out of line, Tess. It is common sense that you be under the control of your husband. It is apparent you do not know how to handle yourself otherwise. Your actions were foolhardy and rash. As such, you should be punished."

"Wait just a minute." Jaxon pushed his chair back and stood beside her. "We are not here to talk about punishment. My wife and I will discuss her actions ourselves. We are here because it is the decree of the Assembly that any unauthorized use of the cell be brought before a tribunal."

Andion flexed his fingers and looked down the bridge of his nose. "You were the one who was up in arms about her breaking a covenant."

Jaxon helped Tess back into her chair and placed his hand on her arm, more to keep her there than for comfort. "Maybe I was hasty in making that assumption. She was not aware of the rules."

"Tess is still in the room." Tess drummed her fingers on the table. "And getting more and more irritated with this nonsense. So I broke a cardinal rule. Sue me. But I would do it again." She tipped her face back to see his. "I wanted to use the spell because I didn't want to put myself in a position of vulnerability again. I wanted to be able to defend myself and even you've told me that my powers are no match for Athena or the other witches. But with this spell, I have a better chance at keeping out of harm's way, at least until the rest of you get there to do your jobs."

Rane chuckled, which earned him a dark look from Jaxon. "Sorry. Something in my throat."

"Might I add that Tess has been increasingly irresponsible since she became your wife?" Andion's voice rang with an air of superiority that grated on Jaxon's nerves.

He shot the aged wizard a blazing look. "No, you cannot add. Just be quiet." He turned to face the leader of the Assembly. "Why don't we let Falcon speak and give us his opinion?"

Falcon rose, adjusted his robes and floated toward the center of the room. "Excellent idea. Jaxon, please take your seat once more. This problem can be resolved with a simple reversal spell, provided Tess has no objection." He lifted one eyebrow, directed his eyes toward Tess and fell silent.

Her words brought a snort of derision from Andion. "I do have an objection."

The elder wizard climbed to his feet, swept a glance around the room before ending with his gaze on Tess' face. "Now there is a big surprise. We can reverse the spell from her without her consent."

Jaxon's chair fell back against the floor as he leaped to his feet. "No, we cannot. We are not even sure which one she used."

Tess folded her arms. "Exactly. And I have no intentions of sharing it with you."

Falcon sighed. "It would be a simple matter to surmise the spell, Tess."

Jaxon rounded Tess' chair and stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. "But to reverse it without her consent could cause damage we cannot even know. I will not take that chance."

Andion shoved himself back from the table and muttered a Gaelic curse under his breath before he spoke. "So what do you propose? That we allow her to attempt to control a dangerous spell? As we do not know which one she chose, we will not be prepared to help her."

Jaxon cupped Tess' elbow and helped her to her feet. "I will be prepared to help her. I will supply her with the extra power she needs to control the spell, should that become necessary." The words made it clear that he had no intention of allowing Tess to be taken captive.

Andion circled the table and came face-to-face with Jaxon. "What are you suggesting? That you enable a human with the benefit of your power, your abilities? Do you realize what could happen? A human is not accustomed to the depth of our magic. She may know a few spells now and she can levitate and propel herself around the room. She may even be able to create a few fire balls but to give her what took you years to obtain could be detrimental to all of us!"

Jaxon's eyes narrowed. "I do not like what you are implying."

"I am stating facts. A human is an emotional, unstable creature without the capability of bridling the wizardry you seek to bestow upon her. Why, a simple bout of anger could destroy the nations below us, killing innocent people. This woman," the words carried a wealth of disgust, "is no more able to handle your ability than a child."

"For someone who can't control herself, I'm doing amazingly well right now." Tess glided toward the door. "Because at this moment I would like nothing more than to knock you on your holier-than-thou ass but, out of respect for my husband and his family, I am restraining myself."

Andion's face contorted into a mask of rage. "It would appear your husband has been sadly lacking in certain areas, not the least of which is respect for those who wield far more power than you could ever hope to attain. Perhaps I will make it my duty to correct this oversight." Before Jaxon could anticipate the wizard's move Andion's eyes brightened to an unnatural glow and a burst of flame shot from the pupils.

Tess turned, flung up her arms and the flames bounced harmlessly off the protective shield encircling her. The wizards, now all standing, stared in stunned silence, exchanging glances.

Jaxon touched his hand to the solid presence, a note of admiration in his voice. "You used a protective spell—a shield. Can you lower it?"

She gave him a look of pure annoyance. "Of course I can lower it." Her arms dropped to her sides and took the shield with them. "If any of you had bothered to treat me with a measure of respect, I would've gladly told you I didn't choose a spell I knew I couldn't control. A shield seemed to be the simplest way to protect myself from the witches and according to Charlemaine," she turned a smile upon her mother-in-law, "it will take them some time to disable it, time enough for the rest of you to get your collective asses to the tower."

Charlemaine bestowed a look of pride upon her daughter-in-law. "Well done, Tess."

Jaxon's shoulders sagged with relief. "Do you have any idea what we were thinking, the manner of spells that are in that cell? Most of them require extraordinary control which is why only few of us are allowed within the walls."

"Uh-huh." Tess clearly wasn't impressed. "Well, next time, before you show up like an avenging angel, perhaps you would take the time to ask me what I'd done. I would've told you...because I trust you." She let the words hang in the air.

Jaxon didn't need to hear that he hadn't trusted her enough. The weight of his guilt settled around his shoulders and he reached out for her. But she backed away, her hands extended.

"Don't. I need to be alone right now. Maybe you could expend your excess energies on him." She pointed toward Andion and when Jaxon focused his attention on the elder wizard, he heard the whoosh of air signaling Tess' departure.

Jaxon pivoted slowly. Flames licked at his fingertips as he curled his hands into fists. "I could kill you for what you did just then. Actually I should. You turned on one of your own."

Andion sniffed. "She is not one of ours. She is a hybrid, part human and part wizard. She will never fully be one of us."

"There is one way." Jaxon's voice vibrated with fury.

Falcon slid between the two wizards. "And we all know that is not something we are going to consider. Andion knows what he did was wrong and at the appropriate time, he will rectify the situation. Am I correct?" Without waiting for a response, he continued as if assured his orders would be obeyed. "As for you, Jaxon, I believe you have a wife to contend with. Being that with the exception of your father, we are all single wizards, I am afraid you are very much on your own with this one."

Jaxon darted a glance toward the door. "I think it has been that way since the day I met her."

"I can only wish you well." Falcon patted him on the back and ushered him toward the door. "You may leave us now."

Jaxon hesitated. "Mother, I did not mean..."

Charlemaine's laughter interrupted his words. "Do not trouble yourself with an apology, Son. I have long ago accepted your temper and your tenuous hold on self-control."

"It seems to have gotten feebler since I married."

"Welcome to my world," Jensen replied with a wink, slinging his arm across the back of the chair his wife occupied to soften his words.

Jaxon started to disintegrate but a firm clamp of Falcon's hand stopped him.

"You should erase the desire to retaliate against Andion from your thoughts." Though the words were soft, barely discernible, the warning held clear.

Jaxon's eyes frosted. "Easier said than done."

"I do not care if it is the hardest thing you have ever done in your life. To take the life of a wizard is to suffer banishment and make no mistake about it you would be banished, regardless of your destiny."

The younger wizard sighed and lowered his head. "So I am supposed to endure while he threatens Tess and enjoys himself at her expense?"

"No. You are supposed to let me take care of it. That is what I do. For now."

"His death would open the door for another wizard to take his power," Jaxon reminded his mentor as he lifted his head, thrust out his chin. It was an age-old gesture of defiance, easily recognized by the older wizard who knew him well.

Falcon's brows furrowed. "I will hear no more of this. What good would become of Andion's death if Tess were to attain his powers and yet lose her husband in the balance? Let this go."

"It seems I have no choice."

"For once, we are both in agreement. Go then."

* * * * *

She watched him walk toward her and knew his intent. She wanted to resist but giving in to the gentle magic of Jaxon's embrace just seemed right. Tess rested her head on his shoulder, breathed in the scent of him and wondered when life would ever feel normal again.

"I'm sorry." The words were heartfelt and poured from Jaxon with the pain of his guilt.

"For what exactly? Because from where I stand, you've a lot to apologize for."

Jaxon stroked her back. "For assuming the worst instead of trusting you. For yelling at you. For subjecting you to the tribunal. I should have let you speak."

She didn't give an inch. "Yes, you should have."

He kissed the top of her head. "It's not within my nature to —"

"Please, don't." Tess interrupted him. "I know all about your nature." Hell, she'd been a witness to it for long enough now to know him almost as well as he knew

himself. She recognized his moods, knew when he was deep in thought, worried or scared. And though he'd been angry with her, she'd known all along the basis was fear. She couldn't fault him for that. "How can you live like this? Always watching behind your shoulder, wondering when the witches will strike next?" Her hand curled against his chest. "It's like someone's put a hit out on you."

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "This is our life, Tess. It's what we've always known."

"Can we ever return to your house on the mountain?"

"Occasionally, yes."

"That's a qualified response if I ever heard one. Look, I know there's something going on that you're not telling me and I think it has something to do with Falcon." Her eyes fastened on his face. She saw the shifting in his eyes, the way he veiled his gaze in an attempt to prevent her from seeing something he didn't want her to see. She caught hold of his chin and forcefully turned his head. "I want to know, Jaxon. You can't keep hiding the truth from me because you want to protect me. How many times do I have to tell you we're in this together?"

He managed a smile that she knew he didn't mean. "Falcon will step down soon."

Her eyebrows lifted, eyes widened. "As the leader?"

"Yes."

"So who will take his pl—oh! Ohmigod! You're supposed to take his place. You're going to be the new leader. That's why Charlemaine said she wasn't under your power yet and you said something earlier, I can't quite remember what it was but I knew you were trying to tell me something. Or maybe you weren't trying to tell me. Why didn't you want me to know?" She took a step away from him to see his face better.

Jaxon tucked her hair behind her ears, rubbed his thumbs along her cheeks. "Because Falcon's position is a powerful one. If you think being the wife of a wizard is difficult, you cannot imagine what you will face as the wife of the leader."

She didn't want to imagine. "Did you know before we married?"

She felt the tension spring to life inside him, watched him pull away from her.

"Does it matter?"

"You could have told me."

"Yes, I suppose I could have."

She stood on tiptoe and looked into his eyes. "But you were scared I wouldn't want to marry you."

"The knowledge would have been too much for you, Tess. You had enough to adjust to without worrying about what the future held. Falcon hasn't stepped down yet. I don't know when it will happen." Yanking the bottom of his shirt up, he pulled it over his head and tossed it aside.

For a moment the sight of his gleaming muscles distracted her. "But you think it will be soon."

He walked across the room and tugged open the closet door, doing things an ordinary man would do, when Tess knew it was all for her benefit. "Unfortunately yes."

"For God's sake, Jaxon, just change clothes the way you want to. You don't need to pretend you're human any longer."

The snap in her tone brought his head around. "No, I don't imagine I do." With a nod of his head, he clothed himself and began to circle the room with slow measured footsteps.

The bitterness of his voice told her more than he wanted her to know. "You don't want to take Falcon's place."

"No one can take Falcon's place." Now wearing faded blue jeans and a blue cotton shirt, he looked ruggedly handsome. A perfectly ordinary man...who just happened to have magical abilities.

She cleared her throat for focus. "Why not?"

"He's a force of nature. For as long as I've been alive, he's been here, in charge, keeping us together. I'm not sure I can be what he has been."

Coming to stand in front of him, she put a halt to his pacing. "So don't."

"I don't have the option to deny my rightful place in the Assembly."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Don't concentrate on being what Falcon has been or trying to become what he is. Just be yourself. I don't think you were chosen for this role because of your ability to emulate your leader. It's apparent Fate or whatever it is that does this choosing sees something in you that maybe you can't see yourself." She reached out for him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I know I believe in you."

Jaxon's arms banded around her and held her close. "It's not going to be easy to watch him walk away."

"He will leave the Assembly altogether?"

"Yes."

Tess touched her fingertips to his cheek. "Where will he go?"

"He won't tell anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because he will need to clear all thoughts of the Assembly from his mind. He can't have us knowing where he is because he will think about us. Those thoughts could jeopardize the Assembly."

"How? It's not like humans could climb up here, Jaxon. You worry too much about the Assembly."

He smiled at the simplicity of her words. "That's something only a human would say."

She tried to pull herself out of his arms but he held her fast. "I wish you'd stop thinking of me as just a human and start thinking of me as your partner."

"I'm trying. It's not easy to change five hundred years of habit."

She accepted the veracity of his words. "Look, Falcon is your friend. I've seen you with him. You care a great deal for him."

"Yes, I do."

"Then don't let him leave."

Jaxon looked down into her upturned face before tweaking her nose. "I wish it was that simple, my love. But the choice isn't mine to make."

"Will he leave immediately after he steps down?"

"I'm not sure."

Tess stepped out of his embrace and made her way to the bed. "I can see Falcon is just as big on sharing as the rest of you are. This family needs to work on its communication skills."

He joined her back at the bed, sitting close enough for his shoulder to rest against hers. "Do you really trust me?"

"I think I've trusted you since you stopped that hurricane to save my life. I knew you wouldn't hurt me. All of this," she shrugged, "has been daunting to say the least." She took hold of his hand. "By the way, thanks for standing up for me with Andion."

Jaxon frowned. "Why wouldn't I stand up for you? You're my wife. Andion stepped over the line."

She didn't know why she felt the need to defend the wizard. "Maybe he didn't know the line was there."

"He knew."

"Get that look off your face. You know you can't kill him." She nuzzled against his side. "Maybe just maim him a little."

Jaxon looked startled for a second, then laughter bubbled up inside his chest and spilled forth. "You could get us both into a lot of trouble with thoughts like that."

Tess giggled and lowered her head to the beat of his heart. "This entire place could use a little levity. Most of those guys in here wouldn't know how to laugh if they had a manual. Except for Rane. He tends to laugh a lot – mostly at your expense."

He lifted her head, dipped in for a quick kiss. "Even in our world, little brothers are a pain in the ass. Now enough about my family. I think there's something much more important we could be doing with our time rather than talking, don't you?"

With an impish grin, she pulled back and looked up at him. "You can't possibly be thinking about sex, can you?"

His own grin matched hers. "Every second of every hour of every day."

* * * * *

In the valley below Mystique, the sisters of the Coven of Allesandra joined hands and began to chant. The time was right.

Athena's breaths fogged in the crispness of the air but she didn't notice the cold. The spell had worked and she could barely contain her anticipation. "Tonight, Tess will come to us."

"And you are sure she knows nothing of her pregnancy?"

The leader of the Coven smiled. "Not even the masterful wizards know."

"You have not tried the second spell, Athena. Suppose it doesn't work?"

Athena's eyes fixed on Hestra's pale face as she relinquished the hands of her sister witches. "Must I continually reassure you?" Her voice snapped in the night. "Once I place my hand upon her womb, the child will unite with us. Though Tess will carry it to term, once it is born, the babe will belong to us." She rubbed her hands together. "The spell cannot fail."

The witches shifted nervously in spite of their leader's confidence. "How can you be so sure no one knows?"

Skin tingling, Athena ran her hands up and down her arms. "I just know." Though she felt a twinge of regret for using Braeden's connection with her, she had to do what was right for the Coven. Were she not to protect it, the wizards could one day destroy them all.

Braeden wouldn't forgive her but keeping her sisters safe had to come first.

No matter how much she loved him.

She would lose him. Nothing could prevent that but her memories would have to sustain her until she was victorious over the Assembly. And what perfect memories they were.

Her mind drifted, taking her back to a time, less than a month ago, when she and Braeden had shared one of their last moments together alone. It had been here, at the tower, in her chamber. At least it had started here...

* * * * *

"You shouldn't be here." Athena sensed him even before she heard his footsteps.

His hands settled on her shoulders. "Where else would I be?" He leaned in and she heard the inhalation as he drew the scent of her hair into his lungs.

"We can't keep doing this!" She sharpened her voice, desperately needing him to fight against this overwhelming desire too. Breaking away from his grip, she whirled around to face him. "We don't belong together, Braeden."

One eyebrow lifted and for a long moment he simply stood there, watching her, assessing her words. When he spoke, his voice rang with fury. "Do you think I haven't thought about that every second of every hour of every day? Do you think I'm proud of sleeping with a witch, our enemy?"

Her nostrils flared. He knew exactly which buttons to push. "If I'm so distasteful to you, then why have you come back?"

In a move so sudden she felt the wind whip past her, Braeden shot to her side, taking a handful of her hair and giving it a sharp tug. "Because I can't stay away any more than you want me to."

Breath hissing out of her lungs, Athena stared up into his dark eyes, her teeth gritted. "Let go of me."

He only tightened his grip. "That's not what you want me to do." Instead he yanked her forward, dragging her against his chest. "Look at me. Tell me what you want me to do."

In reflex, she snapped her hand up and slapped his cheek, leaving the imprint of her palm against his flesh. "I want you to let me go."

The smack didn't seem to register nor did it make him release her. "Yeah?" Loosening his hold long enough to clasp the back of her neck, he lowered his head and captured her lips in a bruising kiss, a stamp of possession.

Athena tasted his desperation, his regret and his anger and she gave back as much, parting her lips to invite the invasion of his tongue. Her nails dug into his shoulders, scoring his flesh, and using the weight of her body and the power of her magic, she pushed him against the farthest wall. His back slammed against the concrete but if it was painful, he didn't acknowledge it.

He ripped at her white silk dress, laying her skin bare to the heat of his gaze. "God, you make me so hard."

She tipped her head back as his lips found her neck, nibbling at the tender skin. *Fight, Athena, fight.* But the words fell on a deaf conscience. She tried to push away but Braeden held her so tightly she could barely breathe.

"Don't." The one word seemed to come from the depths of his soul.

"I have to," she whispered furiously.

Wrapping his arms tightly around her, he forced her backward, spinning her across the floor, whipping and whirling until their bodies blurred as one. The fury of the storm melded their breaths, making them cling to one another, hold on in a desperate need to remain aloft.

Athena's shoulder bumped into a portrait on the wall, making it crash down onto the stone floor. The glass covering shattered into hundreds of ragged pieces. She gasped and held on tightly, the thrill of the raw power seeping into her veins, feeding her own wild side.

She hooked one leg behind his and arched the lower half of her body, grinding her pussy into his thigh. The roughness of the jeans he wore chafed her nether lips. The sensation was savagely erotic.

"Don't let go," he instructed, his hands gripping her hips.

"Why?" She loved the guttural sound of his voice, the sexy inflection of each word.

"Stop asking questions." The thickness of his cock pressing against the front of his jeans branded her thigh. "And just hold on."

The air spun around them, giving way to a vortex of pure energy. Braeden pulled her toward it though Athena protested. His strength overwhelmed her and soon they faded into the rectangular box of pure gold.

Heat penetrated every pore of her body, centering mostly between her thighs. She felt incredibly alive. Aware. "God, Braeden, what are you doing to me?" His face glowed in the light and the smile he gave her caused her heart to leap within her breast.

"Taking you somewhere you can be as unrestrained as you want to be."

"Why should I trust you?"

His hands cupped her ass. "Do you think I planned for things to go this far between the two of us?"

"I haven't seen you trying to stop it."

He laughed and pushed her head to his chest. "Just relax and enjoy the ride."

The clean, fresh scent of pine and damp soil surrounded her and as Athena's feet sank into the warm earth, she tipped her head back to see nothing but a canopy of trees overhead. Their connecting leaves and branches barely allowed a sliver of light to filter through and the air was moist, smelling of rain.

"The forest? This is where we can be alone? Have you forgotten that wizards can track witches? What makes you so sure your friends and family won't find us?"

Braeden took hold of her hand and guided her deeper within the security of the trees. "Relax. I've taken the necessary precautions."

"Think you can save us from the other wizards then?"

He backed her against the trunk of the nearest tree and the bark scraped her skin through the flimsy material of her dress. "Do you think that just once you could stop worrying about my family?"

"Sure. They certainly can't do me any harm."

"And you're so sure I won't protect you?"

"Would you?"

"I'm here, aren't I? Taking the risk right along with you."

He had a point. A very good one. Hooking her fingertips in the pockets of his jeans, she drew him closer until his body seemed to melt into hers. "Do you want to know what I want to do right now?"

"If it's the same thing I'm thinking, I'm going to be a very happy man."

Her fingers went to the top button of his jeans. "When's the last time you had a blowjob out in the open?"

A long silence followed, long enough for Athena to wonder if he'd heard her. "Braeden?"

He held up one hand. "Wait a second. The blood's no longer in my brain."

"Ah." Giving a low, sultry purr, she reversed their bodies with a quick turn, slamming him against the tree. A quick spell opened his jeans without the touch of her hands. "Thank the goddess for magic."

"I second that."

Reaching inside the opening, she curled her fingers around the thick, warm length of his cock. "No underwear. I like that."

"You'll like this even better." With a wave of his hand, he discarded his jeans altogether, allowing his cock to stand free.

Athena slid her hand up and down the silken shaft, tightening her fingers with each stroke. As his eyelashes began to flutter, she smiled a purely wicked smile. Though only two weeks had passed since their last coupling, it was too long in her opinion. So she planned on taking full advantage of this moment. This time they had together.

Raising her hand, she spoke a few words and Braeden began to rise, his feet coming off the ground. Instead of protesting, he took over the levitation, going higher and higher until his cock was just below her chin, giving her ample room to play.

"Perfect." She displayed her approval more with her actions than with the word. Her palms caressed his thighs. The muscles bunched and she smiled. Long fingernails danced their way over his skin, lightly tickling his balls.

Braeden's aerial hold slipped and he dropped lower to the ground before catching himself. He closed his eyes and brought his body back up, level with her mouth. Her hot breath warmed his cock, stroking him like a hot palm.

"There you are," Athena purred, leaning forward for a lick from the base of his cock to the head. "You taste as good as I remembered."

Reaching behind him, Braeden grabbed hold of the tree trunk to hold himself aloft. His gaze dropped and the sight of Athena's painted lips so close to his cock head created a tight knot in the pit of his stomach. He thrust his hips forward. "Take me in your mouth, Witch."

"And miss all the fun of torturing you? No, I don't think so." Her tongue slipped lower, caressing the thin line bisecting his balls. She spent an inordinate amount of time laving the small space of skin just below his cock, gently sucking on the taut skin until Braeden let loose with a stream of expletives.

Raising her head, Athena watched the raw emotions crossing his face and for a brief moment she hesitated. What she saw scared her. He couldn't love her. He wasn't supposed to love her.

"Athena?"

She managed a smile. "Don't interrupt me." Lowering her head, she moved her cheek alongside his cock. His skin was so soft, yet she knew how hard he was. The thickness of his shaft prevented her fingers from meeting as her hand closed around him. She slid her hand up and down with several short strokes before guiding her hand to the base and squeezing.

"Fuck," Braeden muttered, his head slamming back against the tree.

Athena chuckled and licked her lips. She dipped her tongue in the salty moisture seeping from the head of his cock. Murmuring her own pleasure, she drew her lips over her teeth and took his length into her mouth.

Braeden let loose with a groan, his hips jutting forward to push himself further into the damp cavern sucking him. "Ah, that's good. So good."

Athena cupped his balls with her free hand and massaged with gentle fingertips while she increased the pressure, sucking him energetically. The tip of his cock slid to the back of her throat and thanks to her magic, she took him in even deeper until the crisp hairs curling around the base tickled her lips.

He looked down, watching her dark head move up and down, twisting and sucking his shaft with perfect precision. His thoughts jumbled, he released the tree and began to sink to the ground.

Athena simply followed him, dropping to her knees to continue sucking him. His hands fisted in her hair, his fingers so tight her scalp tingled. She drew back enough to tantalize the tip of his cock with flicks of her tongue. The dance between tongue and flesh became wild as she gave in to the dangerous side of her nature.

Her fingernails sank into the backs of his thighs, digging deep, and she sucked harder and harder until Braeden's groans became louder and more frantic. She pushed him back against the tree with the force of her body. Pulling his cock out of her mouth, she tipped her head back to meet his gaze, letting him see the darkness in her eyes.

Braeden looked past the ferocity and cupped her face, drawing his thumb across her lower lip. "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer. Instead she took hold of him again and began to suck, her strokes becoming more and more powerful until he gasped from the pressure.

His balls drew up tight and his breaths grew shorter. Returning his hands to her hair, he held her head in place, thrusting in time with the pull of her mouth.

The orgasm built slowly, growing stronger with each sweep of Athena's clever tongue. When it finally overtook him, Braeden cried out so loudly the sound echoed throughout the forest. He jerked and moaned while she licked up the rest of his cum, draining him of every ounce of fluid, of energy, until he could only sag back against the tree.

Athena got to her feet, came close to him, cupped his face and kissed him. "This can't keep happening."

Those were the last words she spoke before she disappeared.

* * * * *

Athena shook herself out of the past, her breaths jerky. As she walked toward the tower window, the dampness between her thighs made her moan. She touched a hand to the glass pane and shivered.

As much as she had to do what was right for the Coven, a part of her, that part which no one would ever see, would always crave Braeden.

That was a secret she would keep to herself.

Chapter Fourteen

The night winds called to her, whispering her name in the darkness. Tess left the bed silently, her footsteps soft against the carpet. In a matter of seconds, she'd dressed. The whispers grew louder, drawing her to places beyond the safety of the citadel. She didn't try to resist the urge even though she knew the witches were summoning her. Her powers would be ineffectual against the strength behind the Coven. And the spell had been cast. It ensnared her, washed over her. She had no choice but to follow.

Her body shimmered in the gray mist outside the window, flowed across the skies and into realms unknown. As she materialized into the glowing light surrounding the tower, Tess looked up, drew her coat closer around her and waited silently. The minutes ticked by and still she waited, keeping her eyes trained on the window of the tower.

Lightning flashed, sparking the ground at her feet but she didn't move. Thunder rumbled in the distance and on the strike of the next bolt, Athena swept down to the ground, her eyes glowing, teeth gleaming in the darkness. "Tess, how nice of you to join us. But there's no need for you to stand out here in the storm. Please come in."

Tess gave her captor a disdainful glance before sweeping past her to enter the tower. "Why have you brought me here?"

"I see spending time with the wizards has allowed you to forget your manners." The witch floated up the steps leading to the main chamber. Her long, black hair swept out behind her, creating a curtain of silk. Beneath the white linen dress she wore, her shapely body moved with perfect seduction. Her every movement was a complement to her power.

"Extending courtesy to you would be an acceptance of your intrusion upon my life."

The tart words made Athena's eyebrows lower for a second before she relaxed. "No matter then. We have much to discuss."

"I have nothing to say to you." Her feet slapped against the concrete as Tess climbed, the power of the spell still guiding her. Doubting her own abilities against the powerful witch behind her, she placed one hand against her stomach to quell the tide of nausea.

"Fine then. You can listen while I talk. After all, you're going to be here for quite some time. I do want you to be comfortable. In fact please make yourself at home."

Tess shot a glance over her shoulder as she reached the top step. "No, thanks. I won't be staying."

Athena reached around Tess' waist and turned the porcelain knob on the oak door. It creaked open before bumping against the wall. The musty smell of old papers combined with the odor of incense and the nausea in Tess' stomach intensified.

Athena laughed, a perfectly musical sound. "I can assure you, the spell is quite strong. Not easily broken."

"Neither is my husband's will. He will want me back and he will get me back. I pity the person who tries to stand in his way." Tess' voice carried the warning to the witch's ears but Athena didn't seem concerned. "But then I would imagine you would know all about what my husband is capable of."

"That's true. Jaxon and I have been battling it out for years. And we're both still alive and well. He has tasted my powers and he no longer considers me a weak adversary. He made that mistake before." She swept a hand straight ahead. "Please. As you can see, there is no danger awaiting you. This is one of my favorite places in our tower. From here, I can see the world below and even catch a glimpse of Mystique when the clouds move."

Tess didn't allow the witch's words to relax her. She glided past her and into the chamber. "You said Jaxon made a mistake before. Was that when I stabbed your sister witch?" She ran her hands along the concrete wall, touching the glass globes holding books of ancient spells. Behind her, Athena's anger was almost palpable. She'd struck a nerve. "Oh, I'm sorry. I do hope she wasn't in too much pain." *That's it, Tess. Stay calm. Don't let her see your fear.*

Athena bared her teeth in a poor semblance of a smile. With just a nod of her head, she dragged a chair from the darkened corner of the room. "Sit down. My sisters are otherwise occupied or they would have been here to greet you as well."

Tess ignored the chair and allowed the mystical calm she'd gleaned from the Serenity Chamber to encompass her soul. It kept her unruffled in the face of danger. The spell she carried with her demanded complete tranquility. To attempt to use the power behind the spell otherwise could endanger her life. "Really? I should think you would not be so eager to meet my husband again. Wasn't Arista your sister?" She shook her head, a perfect imitation of compassion. "I can only imagine the pain you're going through. I was an only child but to lose a sister, well, even the thought is horrible."

Athena's jaw clenched and Tess heard a sound, like a slow hiss. Another strike. "One would think you wouldn't be so smug considering where you are." The witch strolled around the room, her hips rolling with each step.

"Do you think the wizards hadn't anticipated you would make such a move?"

The question gave Athena pause before she gave her captive a pitying smile. "Oh, I believe I still have a few things up my sleeve of which you are not aware." She waved a hand toward the chair and this time Tess had no choice but to sit.

Athena stooped and leaned in closer, her eyes gleaming. "And since you are so sure your husband and his," she waved a hand in apparent disregard, "family will join us soon I'll just save the little announcement until their arrival."

"I doubt anything you say will interest him."

"You think not?" Athena straightened and circled the room. "You don't think he'll be surprised to learn of your pregnancy here?" As Tess gasped, the witch continued, "Yes, my dear, you are pregnant and my sisters and I have effectively protected that information. Your husband knows nothing about this but I'll make sure to tell him once he arrives...if he arrives in time."

Tess couldn't think. *Pregnant?* No, it was impossible. She would know. Jaxon would know. He knew everything, didn't he? He'd known the hurricane was coming. He had to know this. Panicking, she grasped her hands together in her lap and swallowed several times.

A chilling laugh rent the air. "I can see I've rendered you speechless." The dress swished around her ankles as she twirled around the room. "Poor Jaxon will learn of his baby's impending arrival just as I bind the child to me."

Protective hands covering her belly, Tess tried to stand but her legs refused to obey her. "Even if I believed you, I would never let you take my child away from me."

Athena smiled. "You don't have any choice, love. Do allow me to explain. The child you carry will only know me as its mother. That has already been assured. Once the baby grows inside your womb, it will strive for unity with its new family. As the months pass, you will begin to feel the loss. Your placenta will tear away from the wall of your body. The pain will be excruciating and death won't come quickly." She straightened and sailed around the room. "But once it does, I shall have a new child and providing he shall survive, Jaxon will have a dead wife to bury."

From neck to spine, shivers raked Tess' body. The self-talk wasn't working. Fear had taken root but she still managed to reply in a semi-normal voice. "It won't work. Jaxon knows of your plan."

"I doubt that."

Remain calm. The refrain beat inside her head like a bass drum. Time to pull out another ace. "Have you ever faced Jaxon one-on-one? I mean since he has gained full use of his powers. I've heard you faced him a few years back and lost that battle. He wasn't quite as strong then as he is now. Do you have any idea what he's going to do to you?"

Athena continued to smile while leaning one hip against the wall. "I'm not concerned about your husband. Braeden will never let him hurt me."

Tess considered the information, played it around in her mind before she spoke. "It must be difficult to be in love with a wizard – the one person you can never have."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I? I saw your eyes when you mentioned his name. They were practically glowing."

"That's only my magic you see. What I allow you to see." Athena bit out the words, proving Tess had hit a sore spot.

"I don't believe you. You're in love with Jaxon's brother." Tess scooted to the edge of the chair and leaned forward. "And he's in love with you. It makes perfect sense now. That's why Braeden saved you the night Arista was killed. He couldn't let his brother kill the woman he loves. Under ordinary circumstances, I guess you could call it romantic but I don't think Jaxon will see it that way."

Athena's face shuttered. "I've heard enough of this drivel. You must sleep. Dawn will be upon us soon and that will be a very special time for all of us."

Tess rubbed her abdomen. Though she wasn't sure she believed Athena's declaration, she wasn't taking any chances in the event she was pregnant. She managed to stand and walked to the window overlooking the valley, ignoring the witch's pointed finger. "I'm not tired and I have no intention of closing my eyes when you're in the same universe, much less when you're in the same room."

Athena swirled forward and planted herself at Tess' side. "I must say you are an amazing actress. As much as you'd like me to think my words didn't frighten you, I see the fear in your eyes. You're wondering exactly what is going to happen at dawn, aren't you?"

"I'm wondering what this place is going to look like when Jaxon gets done with it...and your sisters."

Lips thinning, the witch dug her fingers into Tess' arm. "That doesn't matter. All that matters now is what the life inside of you will do for the Coven."

"Jaxon will be here before dawn." Did her voice sound as shaky as she felt?

"And what makes you so sure he'll wait that long?"

"Because he'll wait for the right time." Tess had the pleasure of seeing a flicker of fear in the witch's eyes.

"Jaxon had no knowledge of my drawing spell. More than likely, he isn't even aware of your departure."

Tess peeled Athena's hand away from her bare arm, shivering at the coldness of the witch's fingers. "I wouldn't bet on that. Incidentally, in case you're not aware of this, the wizards have killed from a distance, you know. Even now you could be in harm's way."

Athena took a step back, uttered a quick command and shuttered the window. "Sleep now. You're in for a long day tomorrow."

"I'm sure we both are."

* * * * *

Jaxon's eyes flew open. His heart slammed against his chest and he catapulted from the bed, fully clothed with a sweep of his hand. Rage wrestled with mind-numbing fear as he projected himself into the main Assembly room. His voice was a loud roar when he summoned the others.

"Athena has taken Tess."

The wizards wasted no time in arriving. In seconds, the room filled. Charlemaine went to her son instantly, placing her arms around him. "I'm so sorry."

He held her at arm's length. Sympathy would make him crumble. He needed strength now more than ever. Dropping his hands, he drew in a deep, steadying breath. Knowledge punched him in the stomach and he lifted his gaze, sweeping it around the room at his family. "My God."

Falcon stepped forward. "What is it?"

"Tess is pregnant." Jaxon shook his head almost violently. "This is impossible. Athena couldn't have prevented me from knowing that."

Silence fell for a brief moment before Falcon responded. "There is one spell but it would be almost impossible for a witch to obtain all the necessary ingredients she would need."

"We're talking about Athena here," Rane shouldered his way forward to take a protective stance beside his brother.

Charlemaine gasped. "If Athena has access to that spell, she'll be —"

Jensen broke in with a loud cough. "What's the best course of action?"

All eyes turned to Falcon but this time the leader stepped back, sweeping one hand toward Jaxon. "This one is your call."

Jaxon struggled to collect his thoughts, to process the information. "The protective spell—it will keep Tess safe until we can get to her." Even though his voice rang with assurance, his eyes were blanketed with apprehension. "By now Athena will be expecting us. If she knows the exact moment of our arrival, she'll be able to prevent our entrance into the tower, at least until we can reverse the shielding spell."

"She could possibly have a shield in place now," Braeden ventured to guess.

Falcon shook his head. "It wouldn't hold. Athena needs it to be at its strongest. She would wait until she knows of our arrival."

"Which is why we should go on the wind," Andion suggested, for once appearing concerned.

Jaxon shook his head. "Too easy. Athena will be prepared for that." He turned toward the window, directed his cold eyes toward the sky. Instantly the heavens began to swirl, twist in the fury of the created storm, in harmony with the turmoil of his emotions. "We will go with the elements." He lowered his gaze from the window and recited a quick spell. "Athena will be focused on me and Falcon, looking for us. All of you stay out of sight until I give the signal." In quick bursts of breaths, he detailed the rest of the plan, explaining every aspect, taking into consideration each threat.

"Take care to shield yourselves. Athena will expect all of us but she doesn't know how we'll get in." Jaxon waved the wizards toward the window.

As they disappeared into tiny raindrops, Falcon remained behind to press a reassuring hand against Jaxon's shoulder. "You handled yourself well. You will make a good leader and we will get Tess back. Have no doubts."

Jaxon's eyes flashed. "I do not doubt." His face hardened into a tight, inscrutable mask. As the sky below them streaked with lightning, he contorted his body, shot toward the spark of electricity and joined it, sizzling across the sky.

* * * * *

Where are you, Jaxon? Tess reached out to him, anxious to feel him. He'd touched her before. So why not now? Why couldn't she feel him?

"I know you're trying to unnerve me."

The sound of Athena's voice snapped Tess back into focus. "Is it working?" A sharp inhalation told her Athena was more than a little disturbed.

"Your husband does not frighten me."

"I'm sure that's what you were saying when he had his hand around your throat."

With a muttered oath, Athena flung herself toward the door. "Though I commend your efforts to convince me your savior will come, I must be off. There is much to accomplish before the rising of the sun."

A soft whisper of wind grazed her cheek and Tess released an audible sigh that had Athena turning back around. She gauged the tension in the witch's body, saw by the nervous shifting of her legs that she was aware of Jaxon's approach.

The knowledge comforted Tess. She felt the brush of his love, heard the whisper of his voice reassuring her. He was projecting himself, alerting her to his imminent arrival.

Though she felt relief now, she wondered how much relief she would be feeling once the wizards swarmed the tower. The final battle would be ugly. There would be no preventing that. And she didn't have to be a wizard to know the witches wouldn't stand a chance in the face of her husband's rage.

As if to regain the upper hand, Athena sailed toward the fireplace and held her hand over the open flame. The fire licked at her fingertips but she didn't flinch. "The spell I've cast won't wear off. You will not be able to leave no matter what happens." Tess searched her memory and tried to recall the discussion she'd had with Charlemaine. There were no unbreakable spells, at least not where the wizards were concerned. Their combined energies could topple cities, destroy nations and level a coven. "Then it will be broken."

"Not without harm to your child."

Calling the witch's bluff, Tess glared across the distance. "You wouldn't risk harming the child you want so desperately."

Athena paled a little and turned her attention back toward the fire. "Ah, good. My sisters have arrived. A little earlier than we had planned but I thought it would be best to move things along since you seem so positive Jaxon will arrive sooner rather than later."

* * * * *

A thin witch with straggly brown hair moved into position beside Athena. "We must wait until dawn."

Athena's breath hissed out—a sound of unparalleled fury. The mousy witch backed away. The leader of the Coven removed her hand from the fire. It glowed an angry red. Slowly she approached Tess, her face an expressionless mask. "I do believe I have had enough of this conversation. It's time to rest now and when you awake, all will be settled." As she walked, she began a rhythmic chant. Soon her sisters joined in, their voices uniting in the dim light of the fire's glow.

Her breath caught somewhere between her breastbone and her throat, Tess waited. The witches were close now, close enough for her to see the blackness of their eyes, the combination of delight and intensity on their faces. Athena reached out. Immediately Tess swept her hands up and shrouded her body with the protective shield.

Athena's hand bumped against the unseen safeguard. Energy crackled and sizzled and the witch shrieked, stumbling backward. The scrawny witch caught her and pressed her back to a standing position. "What have you done?" Athena demanded, her eyes glittering like ebony diamonds.

Tess managed a shaky smile, careful to keep her focus on the spell. "Did you think my husband was the only one with the power?"

"I'll take you apart piece by piece!"

Another witch, a darker version of Athena, placed a restraining hand on her sister's arm. "The spell can't last for long. She hasn't got the strength to hold it."

"It might be long enough for the Assembly to get through our little surprises," Athena snapped, whirling around. "Stay here and watch her. The second the shield drops, make sure she doesn't have any more tricks up her sleeve and bring her to me."

Her eyes became bitter pools of black as she looked over her shoulder. "I will have that child, Tess." Her voice rang with confidence.

Tess lifted her eyes and connected her gaze with the witch's. "If I really am pregnant, do you actually think Jaxon will let you get anywhere near the child? Do you think I will?"

The threat was quickly dismissed with a scathing laugh. "Your powers are insufficient against my magic. What you have now you have learned through hours of lessons. My magic is inherited, passed down through the ages. I am a witch of old. My coven has lasted centuries and it will still be standing the day you cease to breathe. Which might be sooner than you think. Our dear Jaxon will be so heartbroken to lose his heart's desire and his child in the same day. How will he endure the pain?"

How close are you, Jaxon? "You won't be around to see his pain. He will extinguish your life as easily as you snuff out the light of a match."

"A brave statement for someone who faces her own mortality. The instant that shield is down, you are mine."

Jaxon was with her again. Perhaps he'd never left but either way, Tess felt the strength flowing from her body, instinctively knew the touch of his magic. Somehow he was helping her, keeping the shield aloft to protect her. "You're relying on the mistaken belief the shield will fall."

"Your strength will not hold for long."

Tess' lips curled in a knowing smile. "Perhaps it isn't my strength alone which holds this protection in place."

Athena and her sisters exchanged worried glances. "Jaxon would not be so stupid as to provide you with magic of his own. You aren't capable of controlling such power." One by one the witches inched closer to the shield.

"My husband trusts me. He knows my abilities better than you. Ask yourself why the shield is intact. Surely an ordinary human would have dropped it by now. Or at the very least lost her focus long enough to allow one of you to slip through. Why don't you try to touch me again, Athena? That scream of yours alerted the others to the pain you must have felt." Tess' voice was soft but acrimonious.

Athena raged with her fury, storming closer to the bubble of protection. Common sense brought her up short and while Tess smiled, the witch twisted with hatred. "You will die at my hand."

Thunder rattled the walls, boomed against the floor as lightning struck the ceiling and danced along the wiring. "And you will die at mine." The deep voice resonated throughout the chamber, startling the witches. With stares of fear, they turned as one, staring in horrified splendor at the wizard who'd materialized just over Athena's right shoulder.

Athena turned in slow motion, her face blank and emotionless. "Jaxon, how wonderful to see you again. Your little wife told me you would be coming. Her savior. And Falcon. I'm not surprised you joined our little party. How utterly predictable. Would the two of you like to have a seat? Perhaps we could discuss this over a pot of tea."

As Jaxon trained his blazing eyes on Athena, Falcon sealed the exits with a blast of his breath, ensuring no one could exit or enter the tower.

"What I want is a coffin with your body in it and my wife safe at home." Jaxon's voice was a guttural rasp filled with rage.

"Now we really should discuss this like rational adults. After all, in her condition, Tess shouldn't be upset."

Jaxon's gaze seared a streak across the concrete floor, the tip of the bolt lancing scant inches short of Athena's foot. "I'm not here to play games or waste time. Let's be done with this here. Now."

Athena chortled and sailed across the room to the large portrait of an angry, storm-tossed sea. "Have you seen this picture? Hand painted by a fellow witch, it has hung in this tower for centuries." She ran her hand across the textured canvas.

Jaxon's eyes narrowed. "I am not interested in the artwork." From a distance, Tess saw the tautness of his muscles, the way they bunched beneath the indigo robe, which swirled about his massive frame. He looked larger than life, big, powerful. Unrelenting. And destructive.

Athena's fingers curled against the paint and she blew softly, her eyes gleaming as she spun around. "Oh, but you should be interested in this picture. It has a special ability."

The roar of the water heightened the tension as the portrait came to life. Tess watched in horror as the picture levitated off the wall and merged into a rushing cascade of green and blue water.

Athena crossed her arms over her chest. "In a matter of seconds, this room will be filled with water. Of course, you know you won't be able to save your darling wife unless she lowers the shield. She can't protect herself against the water as long as it's intact." She lifted her shoulders, directed her gaze toward the water with a light laugh. "What a conundrum this must be for you. All I need is one slip of that shield." One long fingernail approached the invisible force. "One small opening is all I need to get to your wife."

"Jaxon, get out of here! Take the others. I'll be fine," Tess called out.

He turned his head, met her eyes. "No." He gave her a look that silenced her. Calmed her. "Have you forgotten, Athena, that I did not come alone?"

"Of course not. I can see that Falcon is with you and besides that, you wizards always travel in clusters because you don't have the courage to face us one-on-one."

"No?" Jaxon strolled toward her and stopped within a hair's breadth of her face. "Then perhaps we should test your statement. Just you and me. One-on-one. Outside. I can guarantee no one will interfere." He held his hands up, palms extended. "How about it? We could end this before the break of dawn."

"Athena, don't!" Another witch called out, desperation in her voice. "You don't know what's out there!"

Athena tapped one finger against her chin. "Perhaps Hestra is right. I don't see the rest of your family. They could have a trap set outside. I don't trust you, Wizard."

"Any more than I trust you, Witch. But look around you. My family is already here."

Athena pivoted in time to see Rane and Braeden emerge from the bastion of water she'd constructed. She took a shaky step forward, her face contorted with disbelief. "How... That's not possible! That picture has been on this wall the entire time. They couldn't have gotten into it unless—" she broke off, turned again. "Unless they were there inside it before I released the spell."

Jaxon lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "You should always be prepared for the impossible, Athena. Has battling with the Assembly these last twenty years taught you nothing? Now, while my brothers take care of this trickle of water, you and I are going to take this outside. In fact we shall all adjourn to the fresh air of the great outdoors."

"You don't want me close to my potions," Athena noted.

He laughed harshly. "Your potions do not frighten me. In fact very little you do frightens me." His feet left the ground for a brief moment before settling back against the concrete. All eyes were on him. The witches continued to stare in stunned disbelief. "But if it makes you feel more secure, I give you leave to take whatever bottles of magic you desire."

Jaxon lifted his hands and pushed against the wall closest to Tess' side. The concrete rumbled and swayed before it gave in to the force of the power moving it. The wind and rain poured in, drenching the floor and his robes. He turned, angled one hand toward the open air and swept it wide. The floor began to oscillate, spinning the gathered wizards and witches into empty space.

Screams penetrated the air as the slab of concrete hovered several feet above the ground while Jaxon smiled.

"Jaxon," Tess called him out of his enjoyment.

He came to her side, lowering the shield. Gathering her in his arms, he held her, tightly, safely. "You are safe. You are going to be okay now." Stepping out into the air, he drifted gently to the ground, keeping her tight in his embrace.

Her insides knotted with panic. "The shield. It's gone. Athena—"

"No." Brushing her hair away from her face, he lowered his voice to soothe her. "I'm with you. Remember, as long as I'm with you, no one can harm you. Athena can't touch you." His voice was a whisper, meant for Tess' ears alone. "Anyway, right now she's a little busy staying aloft. Look." He pointed toward a flying section of cement that held Athena's dancing form. "She has never liked flying. She will not chance using her magic against you now. She is too focused on keeping the concrete in the air because she hasn't figured out I am still controlling it. Now I want to get you out of here. Mother will go back home with you and—"

"I'm not leaving you here."

Jaxon's demeanor changed once more. His voice became stilted, forceful. "You do not need to be here."

"I'm not going to pace the floors at home while I worry about you."

"You cannot help me, Tess," Jaxon pointed out with more harshness than was needed.

She touched his face with her fingertips, her eyes filling with tears. "Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I know what I have to give won't help you at all? Maybe this isn't about my helping you. Maybe it's about you helping me."

Jaxon touched his forehead to hers. "I am helping you, baby. That's why I need to know you're safe." He lowered one hand, sliding it across her abdomen. Closing his eyes for a second, he whispered words to Tess' ears. "You are protected. Nothing can hurt you...or the baby."

Tess' gaze flew to his eyes. "I'm really pregnant then?"

He nodded. "Yes. That is another reason why I need to know you are out of Athena's reach."

Tess stood her ground, determined to fight her husband's decision no matter what. "I'm not leaving you, Jaxon."

"I'll watch over her."

The voice had both of them spinning around. Jaxon shoved Tess behind him and turned to face his fellow wizard. "Andion." Eyes narrowed with distrust, he approached. "Why would you offer to help my wife?"

The elder wizard smiled. "Perhaps it is because I will not be the one fighting Athena today. That is your duty. If my protection of your wife makes your task easier, then we all benefit. I will take care of her. As you know, none of the witches can touch her as long as one of us is with her. Do not worry." Andion approached, holding out one gnarled hand, which Tess didn't take. Instead she stared at him with a mixture of suspicion and disbelief.

Keeping her behind him, Jaxon took another step toward the older wizard. "You tell me now I should trust you when you have tried to end her life?"

Andion dipped his head. "Would you rather risk putting her in further danger by sending her home? None of us knows if Athena has prepared for such a move on your part. She could have one of the witches waiting as before."

Jaxon and Tess exchanged glances. "It's true. We haven't considered that."

Jaxon glowered at her. "You just want to stay."

"Yes, I do. I want to make sure you're safe."

"I am perfectly safe. I am more than capable of taking care of myself."

Andion agreed readily. "He is perfectly capable, Tess. Now shall we go?" This time, the wizard took her arm without her consent and began to guide her toward the open wall. "May the Fates be with you, Jaxon." He held out his hand in a gesture of comradery.

Jaxon took it but Tess saw the lack of conviction on his face. He still didn't know whether Andion was a wizard to be trusted. To that end, she would keep her own guard up. "Protect her with your own life."

The warning behind the words rang clear. "As she will be the wife of our leader, I can do nothing else."

Jaxon's fingers closed around the wizard's hand. "I am putting my heart in your hands."

Andion inclined his head. "My knowledge is not feeble. I know this already." He pulled his hand away and cupped Tess' elbow. "Shall we go?" He guided her away across the sodden grass before she could argue. Once they'd reached an area he considered safe, they stopped. "We shall stay here."

She tipped her head back to see Andion's face and studied the flowing white beard, the long, silky strands of snowy hair. "Why did you really volunteer to protect me?"

Any conversation was better than allowing her thoughts to focus on the upcoming battle.

"Because I am afraid of the witches," Andion returned in a dry tone of voice.

"You know, I think there's hope for you yet." Suddenly Tess' heart lurched in her chest. Charged with energy, the air thickened around her and made breathing difficult. The darkness reached out for her, a signal to a powerful evil. "Andion, this isn't right. Something's going to happen, something we can't control."

The elderly wizard looked down into her upturned face and for once, she thought she saw a flash of understanding, compassion even. "There are many things we cannot control. We have to accept them as well as the changes they bring."

"Are there going to be changes today?"

He looked away. "Many."

Tess didn't like the sound of that. "You've seen something, haven't you? You can see things."

Andion tossed her a glance before returning his eyes toward the concrete rapidly approaching the ground. "I can but I cannot share them. These visions are not given to me to change the outcome. They are given to me to prepare the Assembly for the changes which will take place."

"So you've told Falcon then?" Silence greeted her question. "Jaxon at least?" Her fingers bit into his arm. "You've at least told Jaxon, haven't you? Is he walking into a trap?" Her voice grew hushed. "Andion, you have to tell me if my husband is walking into a trap."

Shocking them both, he covered her hand with his. "The trap is not for him, my dear. That is why I offered to protect you. With Jaxon occupied, you would be vulnerable."

Her breath escaped on a sigh that was half relief and half terror. "So Athena has a Plan B."

Andion frowned. "I know nothing of this Plan B. I simply know she is not willing to relinquish her chance at overthrowing the Assembly."

"Will she succeed?"

"The visions did not tell me that."

She wanted to smack him, kick him, anything to pull the secret out of him. Why couldn't he understand that she needed to know what would happen? For her own sanity. "So what did they tell you?"

"Only that she will try."

"She's been trying for twenty years. I think you got an old vision."

Andion squeezed her fingers before he released her hand. "Athena has tried before, yes, but this time she is much closer. Her magic is stronger and with the added reinforcements of the other coven, she will be a forceful opponent."

Tess tugged on the arm of his robe until he looked down at her. "You're scaring me. Is Jaxon in trouble?"

His face softened for the first time since she'd met him. "Unfortunately we are all in trouble."

A wave of dizziness made her sway. "Can't you see that to keep this knowledge to yourself could mean the destruction of the Assembly?"

Andion shook his head. "The visions have allowed me to make certain preparations."

"Certain preparations? You mean you've created your own Plan B?"

"Again, I am not familiar with this Plan B."

"Do you have an idea which might save the Assembly's collective asses?" Tess snarled the words.

He didn't look taken aback at her tone. He merely sighed. "Perhaps it would be better if you were to pay attention. I believe we are about to witness history. This is the first time a wizard and a witch with the abilities of these two have locked horns in quite some time. It should be an interesting battle."

Unable to resist, she shoved him. Andion stumbled back and stared at her. "You're nuts. My husband's life could be in jeopardy and you're talking about interesting battles. Jaxon should never have agreed to let you protect me." She took a step away from him and came up against an invisible wall. "What's going on?"

"I cannot allow you to leave my side, Tess. You could be hurt."

"You'll be the one getting hurt once Jaxon finds out about this."

"He wanted me to ensure your safety. I have done so."

"Please lower the field. I won't go anywhere. I just don't want to feel trapped."

Andion flicked a glance down at her before relenting with a wave of his hand. "If you move away from me, I will have no choice but to reconstruct the field."

"Is Jaxon going to die?" Her voice was a whisper of fear.

"I cannot tell you that."

"But you think a wizard is going to die today?"

The wizard's silence was the only answer she needed. Tears filled her eyes and she tried to pray but the words wouldn't come. Fear clenched its fist around her heart while her breath staggered in her lungs. Andion believed his silence would reassure her but the panic intensified as Jaxon readied himself to face Athena.

And Tess could only watch in horror.

Chapter Fifteen

Athena and Jaxon circled one another, two sparring partners dancing around a makeshift ring. Eyes locked, they didn't flinch, didn't retreat. Jaxon could hear the beating of Tess' heart, knew panic gripped her but he couldn't take the time to offer encouragement. To look away from Athena would give her the advantage. He had to make the first move and he had to do it when she least expected it.

The witch's feet lightly touched the ground as she darted back and forth in front of the wizard. "Are we going to dance all morning?"

"I'm not much for dancing actually. I think I'd rather..." He dipped, rotated and touched the sky with a curl of electricity from one finger. Sparks rained down and showered Athena with glowing coals.

The witch extinguished the tiny flames with a wisp of her breath and blinked at her adversary. "Please tell me that's not all you have because if so..." she touched her palm to her mouth as if covering a yawn, "this is going to be a quick battle."

Jaxon's eyes narrowed. He'd waited for the moment, that brief arc of time when Athena would lower her own guard. And now it was here. "We cannot have that, can we?"

The whirlwind approached rapidly, ensnaring the trees and grasses surrounding them. A violent circle of wind and force, it tore across the land, the squall of its descent deafening. Just as he expected, Athena looked up, prepared to deflect the tornado. Arms swept wide, Jaxon began the spell.

"May the Fates recall the words spoken a fortnight ago in Wizards' cell. I call upon you now at last to release this ancient spell."

"No!" Athena stumbled forward one step before dropping to her knees. She could only watch while Jaxon's rumbling voice continued.

"Bind the witches' evil hearts and capture the magic they hold. Free them from the darkness and give them light once more." The whirlwind increased in intensity, circling over the gathered witches who cowered in terror.

He closed his eyes, drew in a heavy breath and finished the spell. "Give them back the lives they lost when magic first entered their own. Erase the darkness coating their souls and send these witches home." He clapped and the earsplitting screams of horrified women rent the air. The Coven of Allesandra, together with the Coven of Ballhastra, fell to their knees, hands clasped over their ears as they writhed on the ground.

Tess gasped, tried to pull away from the clamp of Andion's hand on her arm but he held her fast. "Andion, they're in pain."

"You cannot help them now. The spell has been cast."

Hestra's voice rose above the others, a plea for mercy as golden daggers stabbed at her skin, opening wounds. Mists of black poured out of her flesh, twisted into a braid before spiraling toward the damp sky. "Athena, please make it stop."

At once, in unison, the wizards turned, all eyes on Athena's wooden form. "Athena?" Falcon was the only one to speak, taking a step forward.

"What's the matter?" Tess whispered.

Andion didn't look at her when he responded. "The spell. It has not touched Athena. That is impossible. This spell was created by two of the strongest wizards in the Assembly. Falcon and Jaxon's magic is stronger than the magic of any witch."

Athena lifted her hand and dipped it inside the collar of her dress. Her fingers curled around a solid stone amulet. She extracted it and brought it into full view. "I believe I forgot to mention I had this, Jaxon." She dangled the chain with a chortle of glee.

"The Amulet of Xeros. Where did you get that?" Jaxon's voice pulsed with a blend of vehemence and amazement. "It has been locked inside the Serenity Chamber inside the citadel for years. You could not have had access to it."

She rubbed the stone, a serene expression on her face. "Oh, I have my ways. Of course, you understand that I can't reveal my source." Her gaze included the witches still kneeling on the ground. "They are of no use to me now. With their powers depleted, they are mere mortals again."

Falcon stepped in front of the witches to shield them from Athena's wrath. "They will be returned to the homes they knew before magic ensnared them."

She laughed. "Do you really think I would waste my energies incinerating a few helpless women? I have much larger potions to brew."

Hestra stood, her face drained of all color. "What happened?"

"You happened, you idiot," Athena snapped. "Because you let the human stab you, the wizards were able to gain access to your blood, a witch's blood. I told you they would use it against us. Or you, rather. I, on the other hand, made other preparations." She wagged the amulet in front of her chest. "Oh, don't look so downtrodden, Hestra. At least you'll go back to that pathetic existence you had before I made you a witch. Think about poor me. I'm going to have to start all over, build the Coven once more." She tilted her head, her long, black hair falling to her waist. "I think this time around I'll be a little more selective in my apprentices."

Hestra opened her mouth to speak but no words came. Her body began to shimmer, to fade into nothingness. Her eyes wide with terror, she could only wait as the ground shifted beneath her until she disappeared.

Tess clutched Andion's arm. "Where did she go?"

Andion peeled her fingers off his arm and lowered her hand to her side. "As the spell said, she has been returned to her home. Do not ask me where that is. Just know

that she is fully human once again as are the others. They will resume their lives and be wiser for what they have known here. I do not believe they will be tempted again by the call of magic." He directed a hand toward Jaxon. "Now you must be quiet. We await Athena's next move."

"Her next move? Doesn't this defeat her? She has no backup."

"It causes us some concern that she was prepared for this, that she has stolen the amulet."

"How did she get the amulet?"

Athena tapped one fingernail against her chin, tilted her head as if considering her options. "You wonder what I'll do now that my sister witches have been disposed of." She hummed low in her throat. "I can assure you the fun's only beginning. I'm alive and well and," she threw a wink at Jaxon, "ready to play." Stopping, she clapped her hands in mock applause. "Kudos for your abilities, Jaxon. Many years ago, that spell would have been out of the realm of your powers. I must say, you've come a long way."

Tess stood on tiptoe to hiss into Andion's ear. "Why is she just talking?"

"Be quiet," the wizard growled in response.

Athena laughed musically, enjoying center stage. "Yes, I see all of you are trying to anticipate my next step. Falcon, you look tense. Do you think you can read my mind? Do you think you will know when I will strike next? Perhaps I won't strike at all today. Perhaps I shall just evaporate this morning to return when I have rebuilt the Coven."

"You have always said you do not need them, Athena." Jaxon's voice was softly enticing. "This was supposed to be between you and me."

"But you changed the rules, didn't you?"

"I ensured the battle would be between the two of us and only the two of us." He folded his hands together, allowed a small smile to play about his lips. "You really did not expect me to trust you, did you?"

Athena swept a gaze at the gathered wizards. "And I'm supposed to trust that your wizard friends won't jump in to protect you?"

Jaxon's eyes glittered. Beneath the silk of his robe, his muscles bunched. "Wizards have honor, something you witches sadly lack. No one will interfere should you choose to make a move against me. In fact I look forward to it." He held his arms away from his sides, opening himself up to the witch's attack. She wouldn't kill him with the first strike and he only needed one. The amulet was the only thing standing between Athena and life as a mortal. Once he broke the chain, he could kill her.

Tess' shriek clogged in her throat. "What is he doing?"

"You have an open target," Jaxon goaded.

Athena's eyes narrowed. "Do you think me so stupid I would attempt to kill you now? No, I have another idea. A better one." Her smile created a cold knot in the pit of Tess' stomach.

The rumble of conversation to Tess' right drew her gaze to where Jaxon's brothers stood, arms folded, staring straight ahead as if they were about to watch a football game. Was this entire family crazy?

"I wish she would show us what it is instead of talking about it," Rane noted from the sidelines.

Braeden nudged his brother with his elbow. "Perhaps we do not want to know her plans."

Rane returned the nudge. "Speak for yourself."

"Look at her eyes."

Rane sneered. "I do not really see as much in her eyes as you do, my dear brother. After all, you have been closer to her than any other wizard. Maybe there is something you could tell Jaxon to help him out. An Achilles heel, maybe?"

"Shut up, Rane." Braeden walked forward and came to stand at Jaxon's side. "Athena, think about what you are doing. You are risking far more than your magical abilities. You are risking your life."

She placed a hand over her heart. "Your concern for my welfare is heartening. In fact it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Maybe after this is all over, we can discuss our feelings." Her eyes hardened. "Oh yes, I'd forgotten you have no real feelings for me. Isn't that the last thing you said when you left me?"

"What is she talking about?" Falcon growled, his stance threatening.

Athena clapped a hand over her mouth. "Whoops. You mean they still don't know about our little dalliance? Braeden, you didn't crack under the pressure of so much snowy white morality? Perhaps I should extend the kudos to you as well as your brother." She shook her head, a picture of sadness and regret. "Poor ignorant wizards. They didn't know that one of their own was dipping his wand into a witch's cauldron. And you call yourselves wise." Her fingers brushed the amulet once more. "Do you still want to know how I got the amulet, Jaxon?"

Charlemaine entered the conversation. "You can't mean..."

Athena's eyes found Charlemaine's face. "Oh good, a female wizard. Now here's someone I can have a conversation with. Yes, my dear Charlemaine, I mean your son and I were lovers. Heavily involved. This was his gift to me." She brought the amulet up to her lips and kissed the stone. "It's possible he wasn't aware of its powers but then," she shrugged, "it's a far greater possibility he was so enamored with me he would do anything I asked of him."

Braeden's teeth gnashed. "That's enough. My family has heard enough from you."

Athena's face twisted in bitterness. "Oh, they must be eager to hear more." She scanned the wizards' faces. "Aren't you?"

Jaxon called Athena's attention back to where it should be. "Your fight is with me, not my brother."

Her eyes flashed. "My fight is with whoever I choose it to be. And right now I choose, well, you shall soon see." With a snap of her fingers, she was gone.

"Damn!" Jaxon whirled, searching the sky, the ground and scanning the tower for any lingering traces of the witch. "Braeden, do you want to tell me how she got the fucking amulet?"

"Now is not the time," Charlemaine interrupted.

"I beg to differ, Mother. Now is the perfect time to know why my brother turned against his own family."

Before Braeden could respond, a loud gasp cut through the tension and all eyes turned. Athena had materialized behind Tess. The witch wrapped one hand around her throat and gave a gurgle of laughter.

Jaxon leaped across the distance and landed inches away from his wife's shaking body. "Let her go."

"Uh-uh-huh." Athena lifted a finger, wagged it at him. "No one moves. In case you were wondering, I choose Tess. My fight is with her." She leaned her head to whisper in her ear. "Sorry, dear, but I never liked you very much." Her fingers clenched around Tess' neck. "If anyone takes one step or bats an eye, I'll crush her windpipe and she'll die a painfully horrid death."

Jaxon's control couldn't combat the rage whirling inside him. He would kill Athena for this and consequences be damned. Once she was dead, the Coven of Allesandra would be finished forever. And Tess would be safe. "You will not live beyond this day, Athena, so enjoy your moment of power." His voice was an acrid burn.

"We will combine our powers and—" Andion began.

"No!" Jaxon whipped his head around, fixed his glowing eyes on the wizard's face. "You were going to protect her. You failed. Were it within my authority to end your miserable existence, I would do so."

Falcon lashed out. "Jaxon. Focus."

"Boys, come now. Let's not fight over one measly little human woman. What can she give you that a witch whose cogent abilities you clearly see cannot?" As Tess began to squirm, Athena's hand tightened even more. "But never mind. Right now I'm incredibly bored. Let's do something to liven things up a bit, shall we?" She tipped her head back, inhaled deeply and, with her fingers secured around Tess' throat, began to speak in a low, magnetic whisper.

"This human woman in the midst, let the fire now surround her, fed by the darkness of this heart and the spikes that have bound her. A sacrifice of a wizard's heart is required to break this spell or may she join with her true love in the burning depths of hell."

Athena's hand dropped to her side and she leaped back as the fiery darts blasted through the dirt, shooting toward the sky. Encasing Tess in a burning prison, the spikes licked at her skin, forcing her to shrink back toward the center of the flames.

The witch backed away, out of Jaxon's reach. "Oh, isn't this exciting? Now I must tell you that in a matter of minutes, your little wife, Jaxon, is going to be a charcoal briquette unless you do the noble thing and save her." She trailed a look around at the wizards' faces. Equal parts of horror and shock. "I'm sure the universe will not mourn the loss of one more wizard. So come now. What will it be? Your wife's life and the life of your unborn child? Or your life?"

She strolled around the burning prison. "You do believe she's pregnant, don't you? Surely your wizardly powers have told you that by now." Her lips parted in a gleaming grin before she shook her head. "Though it pains me to lose this child, I'll start again. Eventually one of your horny brothers is bound to step across that line into immorality."

A gust of wind increased the flames and Jaxon took several steps forward.

"Jaxon, no. Don't even consider it." Tears raced down Tess' cheeks. The look on Jaxon's face told her more than words ever could.

He held up his hand, hovered it in the air near hers. "I cannot let you die, Tess, not if it's within my power to stop it. Our child will need its mother."

Jensen took a step toward his son. "Jaxon."

Falcon held up one hand. "No. Let him handle this."

"She could die," Charlemaine protested.

"This is wonderful," Athena crowed. "I've never been around so much caring and compassion." She touched her fingertip to the corner of her eye. "I do believe I'm getting misty-eyed."

Tess focused on Jaxon's face. "I won't let you do this."

He smiled at her, a sad smile, but inside the fires of retribution still burned. In the end, his death would be avenged. Athena would not walk away from her own plot. "You cannot stop me."

"I will walk into the flames, Jaxon."

He saw the reality of the threat in her eyes.

"My heart can't stand much more of these grandiose expressions of undying love." Athena clamped a hand over her heart and stepped backward, keeping one eye trained on the remaining wizards. She continued to dab at her eyes melodramatically.

"Listen to me. You have a destiny. You can't walk away from that." Tess was practically begging now.

The pain crippled him, making him weak. "And you expect me to walk away from you? I cannot let you sacrifice yourself for me." He closed his eyes and drew on his own strength to take a step closer to the flames.

"Ticktock, lovers," Athena singsonged.

"No!" Tess' scream became a wail of despair.

Jaxon's intent to merge with the fire snapped abruptly. He felt the impact of an unseen hand and his body flew into the air. He caught himself before he could tumble to the ground. Swiveling, he caught a glimpse of Andion's white hair as the elderly wizard dove toward the flames.

The fires hissed and snapped, blending with Andion's agonized screams.

Jaxon crawled across the ground as the flames receded, smoldered into ashes. The wizard's ancient body impaled on the spikes and Jaxon and the others could only watch as he bent and twisted in a feeble attempt to free himself from the painful spears. Climbing to his feet, Jaxon lifted Andion's broken body away from the fiery daggers and placed him carefully on the ground. Andion closed his eyes, one hand clutching his heart.

Tess fell to her knees and cradled Andion's head in her lap. For a moment Athena was forgotten and all circled around the older wizard as his life slowly faded.

"Can you save him?" Tess' question was more of a plea. She swept a look around the wizards. "Please. Save him."

"They...cannot," Andion whispered. His hand crept up to cover one of hers. "Even...their...magic...cannot...prevent this. Do not...blame...them." He struggled to breathe, his face contorted with agony. A long, sharp spike protruded from the center of his chest, its aim true.

Jaxon clutched at the wizard's arm. "Why? Why would you do this?"

"You think I hate you but I do not." Andion's voice weakened along with his body. "I have never hated you, my boy. I have envied you. Your life. Your wife. And now you will take possession of the Assembly." Weakly, he lifted a hand, patted Jaxon's cheek. "You will make a good leader."

"You should not have done this."

Andion tried to sit, cried out as the pain overtook him. He fell limply back against Tess' lap. "I could not let you die. You have a wife and a baby to care for. And you must take care of the...magic."

"Forget the magic. This is what the magic did to you." Tess sobbed, leaning down to press a kiss against the elder wizard's forehead. "I will never forget you. I knew there had to be something more to you than what you presented to us. You've always cared."

"Yes." Andion speared Jaxon with a look. "But you cannot forget the magic."

Jaxon accepted the man's words with a painful nod. "I know."

Andion's eyes closed, his head rolled to one side. "I must...rest...now. May the Fates be with you all." As the breath left his body, a streak of purple vapor arrowed from his lips.

Jaxon whirled in time to see the malevolent gleam in Athena's eyes as the mist jetted toward the sky. He bounded to his feet, took a running leap into the air and closed his fist around the tail end of the purple-hued fog. As it settled into the palm of his hand, forming a golden globe, Athena bumped into his shoulder, seeking to

dislodge the precious item. But he held tight and touched his feet to the ground once more.

Athena moved swiftly, her nails reaching out with intent to rake a long, angry line down the wizard's cheek. "That is mine! I shall have what rightfully belongs to me."

Braeden caught hold of her wrist and prevented the damage. "You will not touch my brother."

She twisted her arm but was unable to break free of the wizard's grasp. "Release me."

"I don't understand any of this." Tess continued to rub her palms across Andion's hair.

Jaxon knelt down beside her, covertly passing the globe into Falcon's outstretched hand. "I know."

"This is time for my exit," Athena snapped.

"You're not going anywhere." Braeden held on tight.

Tess lifted her head. "He didn't have to die, Jaxon." The tears began to leak down her cheeks. "Why did he save me? Why would he place your happiness above his own? None of this makes sense."

He caught a ribbon of hair between his fingers, tugging lightly. "Weren't you the one who said most of this didn't make sense?"

Tess dropped her hands to Andion's shoulders. "Why am I the only one crying? Is anyone else here not grieving?"

He cupped the back of her neck, dragged her in closer to him. "We grieve differently, my love. I can't explain it here."

Her gaze circled the gathered wizards, sifting through the arc of magic until her eyes fell on Braeden's prisoner. She climbed to her feet, needing her height to strengthen her. "In my world, we practice an eye for an eye."

Athena smiled, more a sarcastic slant of wine-colored lips. "If that's the case, then consider this an eye for Arista."

"Andion didn't kill Arista," Tess pointed out in an emotionless voice.

Athena shrugged. "If you kill a wizard, you maim the whole lot of them. There's no one to take his place now. They're one wizard short, which, in my book, makes them even easier to defeat."

Tess' eyes glowed. "I think you need a recount." She lifted her arm, curled her fist and hurled a fiery red ball directly at the center of Athena's chest. The witch barely had enough time to jump back before the swirling mass of flames reached the spot she'd stood seconds before.

All eyes turned in Tess' direction but Jaxon was the first to speak. "Tess, let me handle this. I can take care of Athena."

"She doesn't deserve to live." Tess didn't understand the fury that swirled inside her nor her thirst for revenge. Darkness clouded reason and she wanted to strike out, to inflict the same amount of pain Andion had endured on the woman responsible.

Athena brushed a hand down the front of her dress and lifted her shoulders. "That was a close call. Good thing for you my reflexes are so quick. Now if I could just have that globe, Jaxon, I'll be on my way."

Jaxon snatched Tess' arm and shoved her back behind him. "The magic belonged to Andion and with his demise it belongs in the hands of another wizard." He took a threatening step forward and Braeden matched his stance. "Do you seek to protect the witch who killed one of our own, brother?"

Braeden's defense rang weak. "She is powerless against you."

All tenderness had disappeared from Jaxon's eyes. It would be difficult to reason with the powerful side of his nature. "That has not seemed to stop her today," Jaxon said.

Braeden's muscles flexed, his face hardened and though Tess didn't know him well, she recognized the light of battle. She'd seen it one too many times in Jaxon's eyes. "Your anger runs strong through you. No one will be able to best you today. How is killing Athena going to make you feel any better?" Braeden's demand made Jaxon's eyes narrow.

Tess stepped forward and touched Jaxon's arm. "He will intervene, Jaxon. He won't allow you to kill her. He loves her." Her words settled around the wizards like a dark, ominous fog. No one breathed. No one dared to speak as an impossible love pitted brother against brother.

"Does my wife speak the truth?" Jaxon demanded.

"It is none of your business," Braeden returned, shoving Athena a few steps back behind him and raising his hands. "I will not let you harm her. Your grief will not be appeased by taking her life."

"You speak of my grief, and what of your own? Do you not grieve for Andion as well?"

"I grieve in my own way but the spikes were not meant for him. His sacrifice was his own."

"Andion ended his life to save Tess'. Do you not believe I should seek retribution against this witch?" Jaxon's lips curled into a sneer. "Love has made you soft."

"And it has made you blind."

"Stop this!" Tess lunged forward to step in between the two men. "What's this going to solve? Athena is the one to blame, not either one of you. You both know the rules. And if I understand them right, you can't harm one another. So pocket your egos and focus the blame where it really belongs."

Braeden looked down and Tess felt the brush of ice from his gaze. The wizard didn't approve of her words but he wouldn't challenge them. She saw the swift upturn of his lips seconds before he backed off.

"Your wife is wise to remind us of our duties to the Assembly. We will solve nothing by turning our anger toward one another."

"I agree. My anger is not with you." Jaxon advanced forward, feinted to the left before arching back toward the right, arm extended. A laser-sharp claw descended from his palm and connected with Athena's throat. Talons dug into her tender skin as he dragged her forward.

"Release her!" Braeden roared. He ran toward his brother, head lowered but Jaxon was too quick. He leaped out of the way, shot into the air with Athena dangling from his hand. "You're going to kill her." Rage simmered in Braeden's voice.

Jaxon lifted one eyebrow. "That was always my intention."

"Jaxon, please." Tess reached up for her husband with her soft, insistent voice. "Don't do this," she pleaded, praying Jaxon would relinquish his hold on the witch long enough for Braeden to act. Though she cared little for the witch's safety, she felt the rage emanating from her husband and knew it could destroy him if he allowed it.

"I wish I could grant you this wish but I cannot. I must avenge Andion's death. That is my duty." The inflection in Jaxon's voice saddened her.

She stood tall. "He didn't ask for vengeance."

Jaxon met her gaze and held it for a long second. "He does not have to ask for it. It is ours to seek. He was one of us."

Tess glared up at her husband. "And he died for me. Don't I get a say in all of this?"

Athena gurgled. "Do you mind my asking why you're trying to save my life?" Her voice was a raspy whisper.

Tess shot a disgusted look up at her. "I'm not trying to save your life. I'm trying to save his. Ours. I don't want your blood on my husband's hands."

Athena's face lit up. "For once, we agree on something. Well, I guess that settles it then, Jaxon, old boy. If you kill me, things aren't going to be happy on the home front. So if you want to keep the little woman happy —"

Jaxon switched hands on her neck and sheathed the talons. "Shut up."

Braeden's breath came out in a loud, long growl. "I am not asking you to release her, Jaxon. I am telling you. Release her now." He singed the ground at his brother's feet with fire from his fingertips.

Jaxon didn't even blink from the threat. "Your magic does not impress me, brother. You are limited in what you can do."

Braeden circled the air, his feet inches from the ground. "As you can see, Tess, Jaxon is not going to listen. His mind hears only the sound of his angry heart. He will kill Athena."

The witch's feet kicked the air. "And he'll take his sweet time about it."

Jaxon's eyes were rimmed with hatred. "Give me one good reason why I should not kill her, Braeden. You should want her dead as well as I do. She has killed Andion."

Braeden contradicted his brother. "No, she did not. Andion chose to sacrifice himself."

"Andion died because he felt he had no choice. He knew I would have done the same to save Tess."

Braeden's hard eyes flicked once toward Tess before spinning back to his brother. "And would you still make that same choice if faced with it again?"

"I am not facing that choice. Tess is safe."

Braeden took a step backward and caught Tess around the waist, hauling her against his chest. "I would not be too sure of that." His hand circled her neck, an exact duplication of Jaxon's hold on Athena.

"Braeden!" Charlemaine's voice was a horrified whisper while the male wizards roared their disapproval.

"You will release her at once." Jaxon's fury snarled the clouds into a bitter twist. Blackness shrouded the magical remnants of the Assembly as the rage boiled over, spilled onto the ground at their feet. Thunder rolled in the distance and flashes of lightning illuminated the circle of wizards.

"Of course I will release her." Braeden's voice held no concern for his own safety. "The exact moment you release Athena."

"You weak, simple-minded fool." Jaxon's voice rose above the rumble of the winds. "You would risk your own life for the life of a witch, one who has done nothing but endanger our lives and the lives of those we love."

"Unfortunately I can do no other. Release her."

Jaxon kept his hard stare on his brother's face as his hand slowly opened. "You will pay for this, my brother."

"Of that, I have no doubt."

Chapter Sixteen

Athena fell to the ground, her hands clasping her throat as she gasped for breath. Her face blue from lack of oxygen, she struggled to expand her lungs.

Braeden lifted her in his arms and cradled her against his chest. "You almost killed her."

Jaxon secured Tess by his side, assuring himself that she was safe. "I would have killed her had you not stood behind the body of my wife. Do not make the mistake of believing this is over. I will come for her. I will come for you both."

Braeden's lips twisted with wry humor. "You cannot use your magic against me."

"You might want to recheck those rules, Braeden. Should a wizard turn against one of his own, it is the duty of the higher wizard to ensure the safety of the Assembly. You have turned against me. As of this day, you are banished from the guild."

Gasps drowned out Charlemaine's outcry of fear. Falcon lifted a hand for silence. "No. I will not allow this."

Jaxon spun, pushing Tess to a safe distance behind him. "You do not get a say in this, Falcon. It is my decision."

One bushy, white eyebrow arched. "I do not get a say? Very humorous, Jaxon, but I am still the leader of the Assembly. As such, my word is still law." His voice hardened on the final syllable, leaving no doubt in the minds of those around him he meant business.

Jaxon felt the challenge. It crawled over him, swept him back to a time three hundred years in the past when Falcon had made the same type of challenge. He'd backed down then. He'd been younger, hadn't trusted his powers enough to know the outcome of a battle with such a phenomenal wizard. Now he knew. His strength was as much a part of him as was Tess. He would protect her at all costs and to do so he had to cast his brother out of the Assembly, even if it meant incurring Falcon's wrath.

He positioned his body directly in front of Falcon, planted his feet firmly apart, hands clenched into fists at his sides. "Why do you protect my brother knowing what he has done?"

Falcon appeared the picture of calm. His hands dangled at his sides, his posture relaxed but Jaxon knew the leader's poise was deceptive. "I would protect any wizard who is a member of this Assembly. Braeden is still a member."

Jaxon took a daring step forward. "I say he is not."

Charlemaine attempted to intervene. "Jaxon, Braeden was only doing what he thought was right."

Jaxon didn't take his eyes off Falcon's face. "He was wrong. And I say he does not belong here anymore."

Falcon raised one finger and scratched his nose. "You would challenge me? Here? Now? In front of your family?"

Jaxon knew what his mentor was asking. Was he willing to accept the chances of defeat in front of his family? Pride warred with his thirst for vengeance, retribution against the one man who'd threatened the woman he loved. He raised his head, thrust out his chest as his eyes blazed with fury. "I would, even though my fight is not with you. My brother could have killed Tess. For that, he is not welcome in my home. No one here should welcome him."

"You are asking us to choose between our sons." Charlemaine's voice was thick with tears.

Jaxon's anger coursed through his veins, leaving little room for reason. "I am asking you to choose between right and wrong."

Nexon offered his view of the situation, startling the others. The wizard wasn't known for his outspokenness, often choosing to remain silent in the face of danger or dissension. "There is no right and wrong here. Both of you were faced with impossible choices."

Jaxon swung his gaze around to rest on the thin wizard's face. "Braeden was not faced with anything. Athena had not tried to kill his wife."

Nexon took a step forward, held out one hand. "But you were trying to kill the woman he loves. Prolonging this will only serve to continue the pain both of you must feel. Two brothers should not be on opposite sides."

Disgust coated Braeden's voice. "My brother does not have a reasonable bone in his body. Everything is black and white to him, right or wrong. No gray areas, right, brother?"

Jaxon felt a small hand brush against his forearm even as his muscles tensed in the face of his brother's disdain. He looked down into Tess' tearful, blue eyes.

"Please don't do this. We've been through enough today. Let's just go home." Her voice was soft with the plea.

He covered her hand with his. "And what of my brother? Where should he go? Should we allow him to join us in the citadel like nothing has happened here today?"

"He wouldn't have harmed me."

"You do not know that." The words shot out of him, wrapped in fury.

Tess reached up and placed her palms on his cheeks. "I do know that. I was the one he was holding. His hand was gentle at my throat. He was only trying to save the life of the woman he loves. You would have done no differently had the tables been turned. Listen to me. Please."

"She speaks the truth, Jaxon. I would never have hurt her," Braeden ground out.

"And I'm supposed to believe you now simply because you didn't harm her?"

Falcon inserted his authority once more. "It does not matter what you believe. I am telling you this ends here and now. As long as I am the leader of this Assembly, you will abide by my rules."

Jaxon didn't bother to hide his contempt. "I was not aware you had made any rules before now. Is this a new one?"

"The ice is getting thinner under your feet." The warning in the elderly wizard's voice came through loud and clear. Falcon would only tolerate so much. He was reaching his limit.

Tess' hand made an imprint on her husband's arm. "Don't make this worse by challenging Falcon." She lowered her voice, her words meant for his ears only. "You've told me yourself his magic is extraordinary."

Jaxon squeezed her fingers, acknowledging the truth. Falcon's abilities far outweighed his. To challenge him would be to invite his own downfall. He drew in a deep breath, felt the pull of Tess' gaze. He smiled down into her upturned face. "You are right, my love. My anger spoke louder than my common sense. Please allow my mother to take you back to the citadel now."

She shook off Charlemaine's hand even as the female wizard attempted to steer her away. "I'm not going anywhere without you. Stop trying to get rid of me."

He made a derogatory comment about stubborn women and focused his attention on his mentor once more. "I will not challenge you, Falcon, but I will not reside in the same house with my brother as long as his heart beats for this woman. As such, I can see only one solution." He opened his palm, dancing a fireball against his fingertips. "Did you really think I would let her live, Braeden?" His voice was a tempest, a maelstrom of violent emotions. With a hard, sharp toss of his hand, he shot the compact circle of flames directly toward the stunned witch.

Athena shrieked with agony as the conflagration enveloped her. Cursing and virulent shouting dipped into the melee and as the air sparked with a combination of the witch's draining energy and Braeden's distress, a vortex swirled, a product of a desperate wizard's attempt to save the woman he loved. Gathering Athena into his arms, Braeden looked back over his shoulder before stepping through the whirling mass and into the unknown.

A hush fell over the wizards as shared glances segued into shared fears.

"Is she...is she dead?" Tess wondered aloud.

"No," Jaxon bit out.

"Where did he take her?"

"No one knows the destination of a vortex," Falcon offered, sliding an arm around her shoulder. "Unfortunately not even the wizard who creates it."

Tess' eyes widened. "You mean they could end up somewhere more dangerous than here?"

Jaxon's jaw clenched. "Braeden knew the ramifications of such a decision." His eyes sparked. "Foolish wizard."

Rane came to stand behind his brother. "You did not give him too many choices."

Jaxon rounded. "Is that a criticism?"

Rane shrugged. "Take it however you would like, brother." He held his hands out in front of him. "But know this first. I would have done no differently. Braeden forced your hand by using your wife. I am amazed you did not include him in the fireball."

"Rane!" Charlemaine censured her youngest son. "Talking of such serves no useful purpose."

"I have to agree with your mother." Jensen took her arm in his. "Perhaps we should adjourn and regroup once we have all had the opportunity to compose ourselves."

"What about Andion?" Tess squatted down beside the wizard and pressed her hand against his forehead. She shivered as his skin cooled her palm. "Shouldn't we bury him?"

Jaxon caught her around the waist and lifted her. "Wizards belong to the elements, Tess. When we die, we return to nature, that which has given us our magic."

"You're just going to leave him here?"

He comforted her with a kiss. "No. His body will leave once we are gone."

She blinked, looked over her shoulder even as they began to walk away. "His body is going to get up?"

"Disintegrate," Rane replied shortly.

She winced. "Thanks for the vivid picture."

Rane arched an eyebrow. "I am not a coddler."

"I noticed."

Jaxon shielded her from Rane's brusqueness and led her farther away from the scorched earth where Athena had stood. "Come. We will go home as my father suggested."

Tess rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't know that I want to go back there, Jaxon. Not yet."

He kissed the crown of her head. "I know. Trust me."

* * * * *

Tess awoke to the sun streaming in through the polished windows. The welcome warmth bathed her face and she rolled to her back, slinging one arm over her eyes. It was nice to wake with the sun once more. Her thoughts made her arm slip. One eye cracked open. Definitely sunlight. The other eye joined the first to search her surroundings. Now she remembered. Jaxon had brought her back to his home in Nepal, not the citadel.

With a sigh of pure relief, she pulled herself to her feet, captured the robe from the foot of the bed and shrugged it over her shoulders before walking to the window. Pressing her hand against the pane, she reveled in the feel of the heat against her skin though she knew the warmth would be deceiving. Outside, the temperature would hover in the mid-thirties for this time of the year but it didn't matter. She was below the Milky Way. In a real house. She could walk on real streets and see people who weren't wizards. She felt alive again.

The bedroom door thumped against the wall, causing her to look over her shoulder. Jaxon carried a wicker tray laden with a silver coffee carafe and scones. "I thought you might like a light snack. You've been sleeping for a while."

She turned to welcome him. "Thank you." The huskiness of her voice spilled out her gratitude.

He placed the tray on the bedside table and joined her at the window. "You're welcome." Taking her in his arms, he held her tightly. "I wasn't sure if you would want to see me right now."

She inhaled the scent of his skin, a tangy musk of warm sun and pure male. Her senses began to whirl. "I'm not angry with you. Just the situation. Does anyone know what happened to Athena to make her so bitter?"

His hand dropped low and slid along her hip. "Greed happened. She saw the power wizards had and she wanted it. Coveted it. Unfortunately witches can't achieve our type of magic without help."

Tess placed her palm against his heart, needing the reassuring thump. "Will she come back?"

"I don't know. Braeden will stay with her for a while." His fingers massaged her skin through the silky material of the robe.

What was it she was going to ask him again? "And then what? What will he do? He can't return here." She paused, testing the waters. "Can he?"

Jaxon let out a long breath and his hand stilled. "I suppose. One day. When the anger has receded."

She tipped her head up to see his face. "Will that be before or after you assume the role of leader of the Assembly?"

His brows drew together. "What difference does that make?"

"If you take over as leader while you are still angry with your brother, you can deny him entrance to the Assembly."

"Why is it so important to you that he returns?"

"Because he's your brother. And where else would he go? He's a wizard."

Jaxon smiled and tweaked a lock of her hair. "Wizards are everywhere. There are more of us than you think."

"Then why is the Assembly alone?"

One hand cupped her chin before he lowered his lips to touch her cheek. "It's dangerous for wizards from different guilds to gather together." Another kiss graced her nose. "We would leave an energy that can be tracked by all in the magical realm." He parted her robe and slipped a hand inside to caress the fullness of her breasts. "But enough conversation. Isn't there something else you'd rather be doing?"

Her tongue moistened her lips. "What did you have in mind? Or should I guess?"

"I'll leave it to your imagination."

She gave him a primitive smile, full of promise and carnal thoughts. "Well, you know, I've always had a vivid imagination." She captured the waistband of his boxers and tugged them down with a yank. His cock sprang out, heavy and full, the tip engorged with blood.

The silkiness of his member glided over her palm and Jaxon groaned low in his throat. She slipped her hand up and down his shaft while watching his face, the way his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. Still holding him, Tess dropped to her knees. She grazed her lips over his abdomen and felt the muscles knot. Pressing her cheek against the hot skin of his cock, she grew still, simply relishing the feel of his heat and steel.

"Do you know how good you feel?" She framed her hands at the base of his shaft, running her wet, hot tongue down the length.

"Tell me." The hoarse demand had her smiling.

"Why don't I just show you?" A small gurgle of sound was his only response as she took him in her mouth. His hands tangled in her hair, wrapping the strands around his fingers.

Her tongue laved circles around the tip of his cock as her teeth grazed the taut skin. Her mind registered the harsh sounds of his breath, the way one of his hands dropped to tighten on her shoulder. She increased the pace, pulling back until just her lips touched him. His stomach quivered beneath the light touch of her fingertips. She caressed his balls, the clenched muscles of his thighs and the tight skin below his sac.

"Sweet Jesus," he moaned, his hips flexing forward.

Angling upward, Tess took him in deeper, allowing the tip of his cock to touch the back of her throat. He was so thick her jaws ached, her lips going numb as she rode him with her mouth, twisting and turning her head like a corkscrew.

Jaxon's hands clasped each side of her face. "Ah God. Yes, yes."

She pulled back to raise her head. "Do you want to come in my mouth or in me?"

His response was action only. He hooked his hands around her arms and hauled her up the length of his body.

She shed the robe instantly, standing before him naked and flushed. His eyes raked her over from head to toe, lingering on the pert tip of her nipples before dropping lower to feast on the tight curls between her legs. He held out his hand.

"Where are we going?" When had her voice gotten so husky? She shivered and slipped her hand into his palm.

He pressed a finger against her lips. "Just follow me."

Tess didn't speak again as she fell into step beside him. Their bare feet slapped against the hardwood floor as he led the way to a gold-lined glass door at the end of the hall. Glowing light spilled out onto the polished wood and soft strains of classical music filtered out into the hallway as Jaxon pushed open the door.

The rich opulence of the room drew her in. A warm fire pierced the dusk and the flames licked high in the fireplace, offering warmth and romantic ambiance. Richly paneled walls surrounded a baby grand piano and a three-tiered chandelier, domed with pleated satin, hung low from the center of the ceiling. Tess felt like she was walking on air when the carpet sank beneath her feet.

"What is this place?"

"It's a special room created just for you." Confident in his nudity, Jaxon strode forward and swept open the dual-pane Gothic windows. The sounds of rushing water united with the soft music and Tess felt her muscles undulate.

"When?" As she finished speaking, he walked around behind her, brushing his lips over the back of her neck.

"Just this instant. That's what we can do, Tess. That's what the magic can do." He rained kisses over her skin, sliding his hands down her arms to raise them over her head. "It's been too long." He guided her forward until her abdomen bumped the row of piano keys.

"You're going to... Oh!" She gasped as his long, nimble fingers slipped inside her pussy. Her feet stepped apart and she braced her hands on top of the gleaming mahogany. From over her left shoulder, she could hear the gurgling water. She could feel the warm glow of the fire on her face but most of all she felt Jaxon stretching her, pressing deep into the moist recesses of her sheath. Her head fell forward and she moaned.

His knee bumped the bench behind her and the hard tip of his cock replaced his fingers. "Ease back, my sweet. Let me fill you."

She backed up as instructed, exhaling sharply when thick skin impaled her. She held still, not daring to move. It had been too long and even though this wouldn't be their last time together, she would claim it like it was, enjoy every second of this time and just as soon as it was over, she would crave him again. That was how strong their connection was.

He kissed her back, licking her spine until she shivered with delight. "Talk to me, Tess. Let me hear you."

She felt him begin to move within her. "What do you want me to say?" She whispered with urgency as the pace increased. His hand went around her waist and dipped low, brushing over her muff before he parted the lips of her pussy. The second he caught her clit, she jerked. "Oh God."

"Just like that," he responded. "I want to know how you feel. How I make you feel."

He rolled her flesh between his fingers and her breaths quickened. How could he expect her to talk when his very actions were stealing her ability to think? "That's it. Right there. Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"Never. I'll never stop. You belong to me." He held on to her, forcing her against the piano. The keys resounded with sharp notes as he began to pound into her.

"Yes, yes, yes," she chanted. Between the strokes of his cock and fingers, the orgasm crept closer. Her knees went weak and the muscles in her thighs began to clench. Heat poured over her from the top of her head to the soles of her feet, glorious waves of intense pleasure.

He fisted his hand in her hair and tugged her head back. "Does this feel good?" He already knew the answer to the question but he needed to hear the deliciously wicked words wrapped in the softness of her voice.

"Yes! Fuck me. Fuck me hard."

His balls drew tighter, threatening to burst. His fingers ground into her clit and she jerked so hard, her ass pushed against his hips. "That's what I want to hear." He kissed her neck before licking a spot just below her ear.

Tess screamed as she came, her hands slamming against the ivories. As the discordant tune played, Jaxon pumped harder, short, quick thrusts into her quivering channel.

Warmth flooded his body, bathing him in a soft flush. His abdomen twisted into a knot as the muscles tightened and for a brief moment all sound receded as the blood rushed to his ears.

One more clench of her pussy was all it took to push him into orgasm. The release was so violent, his fingers dug into her hips with enough pressure to leave bruises. His knees bumped the piano bench and he cried out over and over until his muscles gave way and he collapsed on top of her.

"God," he whispered.

"Mmm," Tess responded, so replete she didn't want to move. "This was perfect."

His cock began to grow hard again. "What do you mean was? We've only got started."

As the sheets tangled around their legs hours after they'd made their way back to the bedroom, Tess snuggled against Jaxon's chest, the thrum of his heart a strong reassurance. "Jaxon?"

"Hmm?"

"Are we safe?"

He curved his fingers over her abdomen. "For now. It will be some time before Athena is able to restore the Coven, if, in fact, she ever can."

"And if she does?"

He rubbed his face into her hair. "Then we'll fight her again."

"She never learns, does she?"

Jaxon chuckled. "She's a lot like my wife."

Tess pinched his arm. "That's not nice. I was only trying to protect you."

"While it's a sweet notion, I don't need your protection. I'm well equipped to take care of myself and my family. But," he turned her in his arms and ran a finger down the bridge of her nose, "I don't mind having you with me, keeping you in my sight."

"So you can keep an eye on me?"

He cupped her face. "So I can see you. Just seeing you gives me strength."

"Here comes that wizardly charm of yours." Her insides began to melt. Had it only been thirty minutes since they'd last made love? Each time she was with him, she wanted him more. Was it the magic?

He shook his head. "This isn't the wizard talking. It's the man."

"I thought they were one and the same."

"Well, you couldn't be expected to know the difference. Things are still new to you."

"I've lived with you long enough for the newness to wear off."

His words were muffled by the thickness of her hair. "You might be surprised."

"Is there something coming you're not telling me about?"

He raised his head and winked at her before pressing her head back against his chest. "That would ruin the surprise."

She inhaled him, felt the warmth of his skin beneath her cheek. "I might start to dislike your surprises. Sometimes you scare me."

He stroked her hair, tangled his fingers in the wealth of it. "Sometimes I scare myself."

"Stop trying to laugh it off. I've never been so close to someone."

"That's because you've never loved this way."

She wondered if he was reading her mind. With a sigh, she trailed her fingers along his arm. "Have you? Ever loved this way, I mean?"

His forehead touched hers. "Never, but it was worth the wait." He dipped his head, stole a kiss and her breath. She allowed herself the luxury of running her fingers through his hair, sifting the silky strands. He had beautiful hair, thick, luxurious. But then there was nothing about the man that didn't captivate her.

She succumbed to the ancient charm. "You have a silver tongue."

"And don't you like what I can do with it?" Jaxon's laughter stopped abruptly and his head lifted, tilted toward the ceiling.

Chimes rang around them, resounding against the windowpanes. "Are we being summoned?"

"You heard that?"

"Wasn't I supposed to?"

Jaxon swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, leaning down to take her hands in his. "I'm not sure. We'd better find out."

Tess gripped his fingers. "Do we have to go right this minute?"

He blinked down at her. "What did you want to do first?"

"I want to go outside. I want to stand on the mountain and just look. Can we do that for a moment? Just a few minutes?"

He cupped the back of her neck. "Of course we can. The Assembly will wait."

"You know, when you're in charge you should really think about getting rid of that gong thing. It could become quite annoying."

"It's rarely used. Most times, the wizards are within shouting distance."

"I've never heard any of the wizards shout for a gathering."

"That's because you've missed some of the old times. Now hold tight."

"No." She pressed her hand over his mouth.

He peeled her fingers away. "I thought you wanted to go outside."

"I do, but couldn't we just walk outside? I mean the front door is just around the corner. Would it be so difficult to walk?"

He frowned. "If that's what you want. It seems like a complete waste of energy now that you're capable of so much more." He shrugged shoulders roped with muscle.

"I'm not yet ready to attempt your mode of transportation on my own."

He smiled secretively. "You will be. Possibly sooner than you think."

Epilogue

Two months later

"Falcon wants to see us."

Tess gripped the edge of the comforter. "Do you think it's time?"

He closed his eyes, nodded slightly. "I don't think he's willing to wait much longer."

"Is there anything you can do to stop him?"

Shifting, he settled her back against his chest. "He wouldn't allow it, Tess. We've had this conversation before. He believes his path is different. He has to follow the Fates."

The urge to roll her eyes was almost too strong to resist. "He's a wizard, for Pete's sake. You can't tell me he can't control his own destiny."

"We make our own destiny but we cannot control the Fates. Our choices are what makes our destiny."

She kissed the tip of his nose. "Ah, the riddles again. Have I told you how much I've missed those?" The smile slipped from her lips as uneasiness climbed a notch. "I wonder how the others will take your being the leader. Oh, I know they know about this but once you actually become the leader it might be a different story. They've followed Falcon for so long. I mean he's a force of nature."

Jaxon rolled off the bed to his feet. "If you're trying to reassure me, you could use some pointers on the encouragement process."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. I'm just saying there's going to be a void here."

His eyes were smoldering when he looked at her. "Not as big a void as you might think."

Tess huffed out a breath and tipped her head to one side. "We should go. It sounds like Falcon's in a fine temper."

Jaxon pulled her to her feet. "In a temper? Why?"

"I can't really hear. Just a feeling I get but I'm sure it has something to do with Braeden."

Jaxon muttered something Tess couldn't hear but she nudged him anyway. "He is still your brother," she reprimanded him with a bite to her voice.

"Yes, you keep pointing that out to me."

"I shouldn't have to point it out to you. Oh wait, my clothes." Tess tried to pull her hand free from Jaxon's but he sighed, blinked and clothed her, whisking her to the Assembly room.

* * * * *

"Good. Now that we are all here, we can begin." Falcon didn't waste time with preambles. "I have just discovered the vortex Braeden created was a portal to an alternate dimension. He and Athena are trapped on the opposite side." He folded his hands atop the table. "It will be up to us to conjure the proper spell to get them out of there. Or I should say, up to the rest of you." He pushed himself to his feet but didn't move around the table. "The time has come for me to step down as leader of the Assembly." Silence followed the announcement. No one moved. Even breaths ceased. He nodded. "Good. I have your attention. That will make things decidedly easier. I know this seems to come at a bad time with Andion's untimely death and Braeden's ill-timed departure but I feel the Fates are leading me away."

Falcon smiled a little and walked around the table then but only as far as the chair Jaxon occupied. "As you all know, they have informed me Jaxon is to assume my rank and position. I am sure no one here has issue with his new role. No? Marvelous. There are one or two small matters which need to be taken care of before I take my leave." He moved away, glided across the room to an ancient mariner's trunk squatting in the corner. He removed the lock with a touch of his finger and dipped his hands inside.

Falcon carried the globe to the table and set it in the center. It rocked against a wooden slat before settling down against the knotty pine "As you know Andion's magic has been locked away since his death. You also know if we do not use his magic before the mantle of my leadership is passed, it shall be lost to us forever. Andion was a powerful wizard. It would be a shame to let his knowledge and wisdom go to waste. Which is why I have decided to pass his gifts to Tess."

Tess' eyes widened, her mouth gaped open slightly. "Wh-what? What are you talking about?"

Falcon beamed at her as if he were preparing to bestow a treasure upon her he was sure she would cherish for all time. "This is the only way you will truly become one of us."

She didn't move. "I'm not sure I want it."

"What do you mean you do not want it?" Jensen snapped his disapproval. "How could you not want such a gift?"

She flicked him a glare. "Because I have seen what your 'gifts' cost. You aren't able to lead normal lives. You must constantly be on your guard, waiting for the next coven to attempt to overtake you. Your children grow up to be wizards who fight the same battles you yourselves have been unable to win. Why would I want to subject my child, my future children to such a life?"

Jaxon covered her hands with one of his. "It is true we do not lead lives your people would call normal, Tess, but with the acceptance of Andion's magic, you will be better prepared to protect our children, our future. You will have far more independence than you have been given so far, and is that not what you wanted? With this power," he gestured toward the globe, "you will be equal with the wizards around this table, capable of such magic and spells as they. And you will have an equal say in what goes on inside this room."

Tess felt the psychological tangle and knew he was playing on her emotions, her sense of duty as well as her need for independence. She supposed she should be irritated with him but she knew Falcon's gift was a great honor. Just as she knew she was going to have a hell of a time getting used to being a wizard. And here she'd just gotten used to being the wife of a wizard. She eyed the globe, tilted her head and cast a glance at Falcon. "So what's involved here?"

"Nothing painful if that eases your mind."

"Tremendously."

"Then you accept the gift?"

Her teeth worried her lower lip. She looked at Jaxon who nodded in encouragement and gave her answer. "Yes, I do."

"Stand in the center of the room." Falcon's voice became businesslike, clipped, emotionless. His hands curled around the globe and as her shaky legs carried her toward the edge of the table, he began to murmur in a low, hypnotic tone.

A hush fell over the room, so thick and oppressive she felt the need to draw in a deep, restorative breath. The foundation began to rattle in time with her teeth. She clenched her jaw to still the chatter. The light disintegrated and darkness swept over the room. Tess couldn't see more than an inch in front of her nose.

A glass shattered and an eerie violet light flowed up from the center of the table, arced in the air over her head. She closed her eyes and clenched her hands into fists at her sides. "For your sake, you better have told me the truth about this being painless," she muttered.

"Just relax." She recognized the deep timbre of Jaxon's voice, reassuring, comforting.

How many times had she heard that from him? And how many times had it made her feel better? She smiled a little, felt the heaviness of her hair lift away from her neck. She sucked in a breath as deep purple fog swirled at her feet, cascaded up her legs, enveloped her. Her skin tingled. Warmth stole over her body, a pleasant, calming heat. The mist gathered over her head, forming a perfect triangle of light and energy.

The wizards' voices united in a symbolic chant, words that would change her life forever. Sparks ignited the air, sizzled, nose-dived toward her feet and she was floating, gently, her feet inches from the floor. The Assembly stood in a perfect circle, hands joined, arms upraised. And then the heat died, the electricity waned and she was standing back on the ground, hands at her sides, her breaths coming in short, uneven

gasps. She wasn't sure what to do next. The lights blinked on and still she stood, blinking and staring first at Falcon then at Jaxon.

Jaxon moved first and reached for her hand. "Are you okay?"

She managed a step before stopping to look down at her feet. She didn't know what she had expected to see. They still looked normal. "I seem to be. Is that it? Is it over?"

He guided her back to the table. "It is over."

"So what happens now?"

Jaxon smiled and tweaked her chin. "You tell us. Feel any differently?"

She frowned, lifted her shoulders. "Not really." She curled her hand, opened it. Her breath hitched in her throat as a tiny lightning bolt bounced against her skin. "I just thought about lightning." She watched in awe as the bolt grew in size, lengthening to extend over the width of her palm. She curled her fingers around the shaft of power and raised it. "This is amazing."

"This is only the beginning but remember what I told you. A wizard's thoughts can be dangerous."

"Then I suppose you'd better be careful from here on." Her words served to break the silence as all the wizards united in laughter. "So what else can I do?"

Jaxon leaned in to kiss her. "Honey, it would be easier to tell you what you cannot do because your impossibilities just became possibilities."

Falcon cleared his throat to draw their attention back to him. "Now that we have settled that, Jaxon, I believe it is your turn in the circle."

Jaxon helped Tess to her chair and spoke directly to Falcon. "No."

An eyebrow peaked as Falcon considered his protégé. "No? You are refusing to accept your position?"

He came to stand beside his mentor. "No, but if the mantle must be passed, we will do it without ceremony. This is not a happy occasion for us. No one here wants you to leave."

Turning slightly, Falcon gripped his shoulder. "But leave I must and the ceremony is a requirement."

"Then change it."

"You are challenging our way."

Jaxon stood his ground. "You can pass the role another way."

"Son, if the ceremony is necessary," Jensen began.

Jaxon held up one hand. "No, this is difficult enough. A ceremony will only prolong the agony of what we cannot prevent." He looked Falcon squarely in the eyes. "I am asking you as your friend. Please forgo the passage ritual. We can exchange places with a simple handshake." He grinned a little although Tess knew he was close to tears. "I have been reading."

"So it would seem. Very well. If no one has any objections, we will proceed in a different manner." Falcon extended his hand. "As it was first handed to me by my father in years past so shall I now hand you the place of honor. May you lead wisely, protect your people and ensure the continuation of the Assembly at all costs."

Jaxon placed his palm against Falcon's and a burst of light, so bright it made sight an impossibility, flashed. Thunder rumbled as lightning danced across the table, pricked the walls and touched the joined hands.

His back arched as the energy raced along his arm and down his spine.

Falcon's voice was low, meant for his ears only. "May the Fates guide you."

Jaxon's hand dropped to his side. "And you. You will be missed."

The moment ended. "You will have much to do to take your mind off my leaving."

"My first order of business will be to drag my brother's sorry ass out of the alternate dimension." Disgust laced Jaxon's voice.

The wizards chuckled.

Falcon's hand fell to Jaxon's shoulder. "You must always remember that with this role comes the burden of equality. You must strive to be fair, to lead with your head and not with your heart. But, most importantly, at this moment you must remember that no matter what any member of this Assembly does, short of taking the life of another wizard, their place is here."

Irritation gnawed at Jaxon's insides. "You are telling me in your subtle way to accept my brother back into the Assembly."

Falcon grinned. It was the first time Jaxon could remember seeing his mentor look so carefree. "I was not aware I was being subtle."

Tess came to stand beside her husband. "I've been telling him all along that he can't turn his back on his brother."

"He will do the right thing when next he faces his brother." Falcon's voice rang with confidence.

"Well, I think we'll just leave the two of you alone." She reached forward, hesitated. "Is it okay to touch you now?"

The elderly wizard turned toward her, opened his arms. "I was actually hoping for a hug this time."

Startled, she stepped into his embrace. "I will miss you."

Falcon cleared his throat. "And I you. Take good care of this husband of yours. Our people need him." He didn't need to add how he felt about Jaxon. It was written across his face, in the dampness of his eyes.

The wizards rose as one and preceded her out the door. Tess closed the door behind her to afford the two remaining wizards the privacy they needed to say goodbye.

Jaxon walked to the window, his heart a heavy fist within his chest. "I do not know if I can do this."

"You have no choice." Resignation colored Falcon's voice. "The Fates have chosen."

An angry rush of air exploded from Jaxon's lips. "When do we get to decide?" He slammed his fist into his palm. "Dammit! It just does not seem right that you are not going to be here. For as long as I can remember, I have always had you near. When I could not figure something out on my own, when I needed someone to talk to..."

"For the past few months, you have been making the decisions. I have been standing in the background and following your lead. The day we fought Athena, you gave the orders, you led us as any leader would. You were born for this position and you will be what you need to be in order to protect the Assembly. The Fates could not have chosen a better leader."

"I do not understand why we needed another leader. We had you."

Falcon leaned one shoulder against the window frame and for the first time, Jaxon noticed the tired look on the wizard's face, the droop of his shoulders. "The Fates did not decide the Assembly needed another leader. I asked them."

Jaxon whirled around. "What are you talking about?"

"I need a rest. I have been leading these wizards for centuries and I am tired. It is time to let someone younger take control. I know you can handle it."

"You could have told me."

"So you could attempt to talk me out of my decision? I did not make a mistake, Jaxon. I knew exactly what I was doing. I still do."

"You are choosing to leave the only family you have ever known."

"I am choosing to start another life," Falcon corrected.

"Will I ever see you again?"

Falcon turned toward him and placed both hands on Jaxon's broad shoulders. "I will only be as far away as your memories. And you are perfectly capable of opening a window anytime you want to see me."

The words brought a frown. "We cannot track one another."

One hand dropped away, delved inside the folds of his robe. "Here."

The gem glistened in Jaxon's hand, a dark onyx.

"Use this whenever you feel the need to find me. I would ask you to exercise a little common sense." Falcon grinned slightly. "Who knows? Maybe I will find my own Tess in this universe."

Jaxon considered the words. "You are going to look for a wife."

The wizard shook his head, almost vehemently. "No. I would not look for what the Fates do not wish me to find. They will let me know if that is the course I am supposed to take."

"We make our own destinies. You could choose to settle down, become an old married man."

Falcon's brows beetled. "You are having fun at my expense."

Jaxon laughed then sobered. "Seeing you is well and good but will I ever talk to you again?"

"If we meet again, then that will be our destiny."

"Now I understand what Tess was saying about the riddles."

"Excuse me?"

Jaxon waved a hand. "Never mind. When do you leave?"

"Tonight."

"But the others..."

Falcon took a step back, stretched out his arms. "I have already said my goodbyes. There is no way to tell you how much I shall miss you. You have been the son I have never had, closer to me than any kin. Be well, Jaxon."

"Wait." Jaxon strode forward, tears stinging his eyes. He grabbed the lapels of Falcon's robe and dragged him into a tight embrace. "Be safe." When he pulled away, the moisture was running in rivulets down his cheeks. His chest tightened. "Falcon, I..."

Falcon smiled, lifted one hand to silence him. "I know."

* * * * *

Tess met Jaxon at the bedroom door and embraced him. He clung tightly to her, burying his face in the intoxicating scent of her hair. His shoulders shook with unrestrained emotion and she just held him. He was grateful she didn't speak, didn't ask him to explain what he was feeling inside. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone someone else. He'd just said goodbye to the one man in his life who understood him. And now he was facing life at the top without a net.

"You're not alone," she whispered, stroking his back, his shoulders, letting him feel her assurance.

His arms tightened, secured her against his body. "I'm trying to remember that." The dizzying scent of her skin cocooned him, reminding him of what he held in his arms. Could he love her any more than at this moment?

She melted into him, pressing her breasts against his chest. "You love him. It's hard to let him go."

He kissed her hair, her cheek, before drifting down to her lips. "It means a lot to me that you understand."

She touched his cheek, ran her thumb along his lower lip. "I understand you so well I amaze myself." She caught hold of his arm and guided him toward the window. "Will you really help Braeden?"

He laughed a little, momentarily distracted by the sway of her hips as she moved across the floor. "I don't imagine I'll have much of a choice. He is still one of us." He bumped her shoulder with his and her fragrance embraced him once more. He'd grown hard the moment he'd touched her but now his cock ached.

She pressed a kiss against the silkiness of the robe covering his biceps. "But you'll help him because you love him. I never thought for one moment you really intended to ban him from the Assembly."

He melted beneath her warm gaze. "Oh yeah? Why not?" He couldn't remember another time before Tess when one look had the power to move him. She touched him, knew him and had successfully wrapped a powerful wizard around her little finger. He wouldn't tell her that. Her power over him was strong enough. There was no need to pass along any more ammunition.

"Because I know you. I know that while you feel justified in your anger against Braeden, you're starting to understand the reasons behind his actions. I know you'll never understand his relationship with Athena but we don't choose who we fall in love with, do we? I mean, would you have chosen to fall in love with me?"

Turning, he moved her fully into his embrace, wanting her to feel his erection. "I *did* choose to fall in love with you."

Tess' eyes widened with approval as she laid her hand over his heart. "We don't choose who we fall in love with, Jaxon. That's why it's called falling." She shifted her leg, brushing her thigh over his cock, letting him know she was fully aware of his arousal.

Jaxon's eyes narrowed as her leg moved back and forth, simulating a stroke. Lungs constricting, he strove for a calm tone. He doubted he succeeded. "That's assuming I actually fell."

Her leg stopped moving. "What are you talking about?"

He brushed the worry lines off her forehead. "I knew exactly what I was doing. There was no falling. I was walking. I knew the moment you climbed up onto that stage I would love you and that you would be mine."

She slipped her hand down to cup him through the thin fabric. "Is that why you came on so strong?"

His eyelids drifted shut. "I wasn't aware I came on strong." She'd begun to massage him with just enough pressure to send electrical shocks up his spine.

"My mistake. I guess that's your ordinary manner." Tess laughed in a sinfully sexy way.

He captured her wrist, stilling its motion. "Do you remember that night we walked along the beach outside your house?"

The memories returned, as welcome as a warm summer rain. She smiled, her body tingling as the scent of sand tickled her nostrils. "Nice touch, but how could I forget it?"

You scared me but beyond that, you intrigued me. I wanted to know more about you. I wanted to know everything."

"And now you do." His fingers released the top button of her cotton shirt, exposing the barest hint of lace. Not enough. Another button popped free.

"I think you might still have a few secrets you're not so willing to share." Tess chuckled and brushed his hands aside, her smile broadening at Jaxon's frown. Apparently he'd tired of the conversation and was ready to move on to much more pleasant alternatives. "Do you know what I want to do?"

"No, but if it's the same thing I want to do, I'm going to be a very happy man."

Feeling mischievous, Tess shook her head. "I'll please the man in you later. For now I want to please the wizard in me."

His grin was rakish. "I believe that was my intention but I can be flexible. What did you have in mind?"

She snatched his hand. "I want to find out what I can do." With a wave of her hand, their clothes fell away. Jaxon looked at her with one eyebrow lifted.

"I can do that!" She laughed and spun around the room.

"Tess, you can do anything and now that you've taken the initiative, I want to find out what I can do." The husky tone of his voice made Tess' smile widen.

"Jaxon, you can do anything."

In one quick movement, he lifted her and carried her to the bed. Placing her against the mattress, he stood back to look at her. "You're beautiful."

She chuckled when he covered her body with his. "And you're prejudiced. I hate to be the one to tell you this but I don't have any more uncharted territory."

His hand slid along her thigh, his fingers dancing against her skin, brushing over her tingling pussy. She jumped, sighed a little. "I wouldn't be too sure about that." His thumb pressed into her clit, massaging her, knowing the right way to touch her, hold her, kiss her. And he could never get enough of her.

Her body melted into the mattress. "Are you ever wrong?"

"I try not to make a habit of it." The weight of his body pinned her beneath him. "But I'm sure if that time ever comes, you'll be there to point it out."

She grinned up at him. "I try to keep you on your toes."

"I'd prefer a more horizontal position."

Her legs rubbed against his. "Thank you."

He pushed himself up on his elbows. "For what?"

"For walking through a hurricane to save my life. For bringing me here. For falling in love with me. Or walking. For everything."

Jaxon stared at her for a long, silent moment, his heart slowing to a thud. *Finally.* The love she felt for him had given way to a complete acceptance of whom and what he

was. Of his life. Of their life together. She was his. Forever. Completely. "I saved you for selfish reasons, you know."

She hid her face in his shoulder, touched her lips to his heated skin. "And I'm so glad you did."

"In that case," his voice was thick in his throat, "you're very welcome." He shifted, the heaviness of his erection pressing against her thigh. Need slammed into him, rocked him.

Lowering his body, he kissed her knee, the smooth expanse of her thigh, the heat of his breath hovering mere millimeters away from her damp pussy. She didn't know what to do with her hands so she clenched them at her sides.

His knuckles brushed over her mound. She could come any minute. Just by his touch. She squirmed atop the mattress. Was this the way it would be for eternity? Would the feelings between them remain just as strong?

The lick startled her, making her lift her back off the bed. He'd barely touched her, just a simple flick of his tongue. "I love the way you smell." The words sent a rush of heat straight to her core.

"Jaxon," she groaned, desperately needing to feel his tongue against her again.

Restarting with long, slow strokes of his tongue up the inside of her thigh, he spent an inordinate amount of time just tracing her skin, leaving wet, heated patches. Her body started burning under his touch and she squirmed, unable to control herself any longer.

Like an expert painter, Jaxon used his tongue to caress the sensitive flesh beneath her navel, leaving no nerve ending untouched. Tess held her breath, waiting for his next move, already feeling the perfection.

Once he'd completely bathed her skin, the sensual invasion began. His long tongue slipped between her swollen lips, lightly tickling until she pushed her hips against his face. She wanted more of him and he would give it to her. With just the tiniest flick of his tongue, he touched her clit and hundreds of sensations skated down her spine.

His teeth nibbled at that pleasure bud with enough pressure to make her hands fist at her sides. Then he pursed his lips and suckled while his tongue rubbed back and forth across her nubbin. The pressure mounted as he moved back and forth along the slick valley created by her cream.

Tess moaned and thrashed atop the bed. His tongue went deep, pushing into her until she could feel it in her womb. He began a circling motion, leaving no spot inside her channel without caress. His hands cupped her ass to lift her closer. He growled, indicating his own pleasure as he moved his tongue in and out of her moist gate, mimicking a slow, leisurely fuck.

She thrust her hips upward, giving him better access. He captured her clit again, raking his tongue back and forth, up and down, with more pressure at every stroke. The suckling, nibbling and licking was so powerful she could barely breathe.

Then, with a move so sudden Tess swore it didn't happen, he rolled, lying on his back. He lifted her as if she weighed little more than a china doll, allowing her knees to straddle each side of his face.

Now the ride was in her hands. He'd given her control, or at least the appearance of it. She set the pace, sliding back and forth over his tongue while he sucked every ounce of juice from between her thighs. His thumbs parted the lips of her pussy, thrusting her clit forward. Tess cried aloud as the strokes intensified. She rocked her hips, praying for release, sensing it building, spiraling out from the bottom of her stomach.

Her muscles clenched and he stroked her ass, running his fingers all across her flesh while his tongue seared her. One more suck, one more nibble. More gentle licks, enough to tantalize, to tease.

Then she exploded.

She forgot to breathe, just as she did each time he touched her. The world around her stopped and all that mattered was how he loved her and worshipped her body.

She lost count of the number of times she came before Jaxon switched their positions and got to his knees. He pushed her back against the stack of pillows and yanked her lower on the bed. "I need to be inside you." He held his cock in one hand, the swollen veins turning the head to a light purple.

Tess sucked her finger into her mouth and then lowered it to the head of his shaft, lightly circling the tip. He made an animalistic growl in the back of his throat that only encouraged her. She crooked her finger and motioned him forward. His eyes glittering, he obeyed the command.

With heavy lids, she peeked up at him. "I think it's only fair that I have a taste now." She didn't give him a chance to respond before she took him in her mouth. The muscles in his thighs jumped and he fisted his hands in her hair.

Stroking him with infinite care, Tess drove him to the edge of reason. Her short, manicured nails massaged his balls while her mouth worked up and down his cock. She heard his moans, his pleas, before finally he pulled back, releasing his cock from the pleasure of her mouth. He slid back down her body and for a long moment their gazes met, held. Energy sparked and snapped, audible and vibrant.

Her hands gripping his ass cheeks, Tess leaned up and captured his lips, nibbling and sucking the wet flesh. Her thighs fell open in blatant invitation, allowing the head of his cock to probe the slick lips of her pussy and when he pushed deep inside her, their sighs blended in unison.

"Ah God. Have I told you how perfect you are?"

"Talk later. Fuck me now," she commanded.

His hips moved and he pounded into her with a ferocity that was both delirious and frightening.

"Come for me, Tess. I want to hear you scream my name as your pussy clenches around my cock."

The erotic words stoked a fire within her and her breathing became labored. "I'm close."

He dipped his hand between their bodies and found her clit with two fingers. As he rolled the tiny nub between calluses, she bucked beneath him. "Oh God, oh God," she cried.

"Yes, that's it," he soothed, bumping his forehead against hers.

She clenched the tight muscles of her sheath, holding him as the spasms began. Warm, delicious waves of release swept over her and she moaned low and long, burying her face in his neck, tasting the salty texture of his skin.

His fingers dug deep into the flesh of her hips and his body went rigid. She contracted her muscles again and Jaxon stiffened before her name burst from his lips.

She kissed his shoulder, his chest before whispering, "I love you."

He paused, a fraction of a second. "I love you." And as he moved again, taking their joined bodies into the air, the magic began. Magic that would last for an eternity.

About the Author

Don't you hate having to find something clever to say about yourself? As a writer, you'd think words would come easy to me. Not when it comes to touting my own abilities. So a short and sweet bio would be, well, um, give me a minute. See, my problem is I never do anything short. And as for sweet, well, that'd be telling. But I'll give it a shot. I'm long-winded, aggressive, outgoing, charming as hell and have a BS degree. I like to take long walks down by the shore, listen to country music, drink wine—no, wait. That's the personal ad I'm writing. See? I told you I'm no good when it comes to talking about me. If you want to know more, what little there is to know, you can visit my website. Happy Reading!

Rachel welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Rachel Carrington

Choices

Her Lover's World

In This Life

Long Hard Winter

Sin's Touch



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com