

THE COLLECTOR:

*Magical  
Chances*

MECHELE  
ARMSTRONG

Loose Id

## Praise for the writing of Mechele Armstrong

### *Dinah's Dark Desire*

The relationship dynamics are fantastic here, the sensual scenes are ooh-la-la amazing, and the addition of two of the trio's exes (and a splash of danger) to the mix just added another mantle of plot to this tale... Five Angels and a Recommended Read!

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Just when I thought I had it all figured out I realized that I couldn't have been more wrong. *Dinah's Dark Desire* will definitely heat up your fantasies and leave you anticipating many more wonderful books from Ms. Armstrong.

-- Chrissy Dionne, *Romance Junkies*

Ms. Armstrong has given us more than just a ménage story, although the sex is very, very hot; she has given us a satisfying and fulfilling story about three people who are good friends and how they came together as lovers. *Dinah's Dark Desire* is a story I highly recommend for anyone who loves a good romance.

-- Jo, *Joyfully Reviewed*

Do NOT miss out on this one, which has appeal for almost all readers. The characterization is deep, the plot line is intriguing, and the sensuality is volcanic. Run out and get this one-immediately!

-- Frost, *Two Lips Reviews*

I really enjoyed this book as Ms. Armstrong more than proves her storytelling abilities. The plot was as intriguing as it was entertaining.

-- Jasmina Vallombrosa, *TCM Reviews*

*Dinah's Dark Desire* is now available from Loose Id.

# THE COLLECTOR 1: MAGICAL CHANCES

Mechele Armstrong

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and violence.

# The Collector 1: Magical Chances

Mechele Armstrong

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## Chapter One

“You’re fired, Ms. Richards.” The stern woman in the plain gray dress looked like a warden from a women’s prison. Too bad she was Chloe’s boss, although that did make her a kind of warden. “Clean out your desk.”

“Fine.” Chloe should have been begging for her job back, but she would never do that. Not even for the secretarial pool job that paid a miniscule wage, which she needed desperately. She grabbed her empty plastic trash can from under the cheap metal desk and began piling her stuff in it. Not that she had much. But the picture of her niece and the half-dead plant weren’t staying here.

“The trash can belongs to Morton and Saunders.” Mrs. Dannon sniffed huffily. She sniffed often around Chloe as though Chloe smelled bad. Maybe she should use cheap knock-off perfumes, too, to appease the other woman’s nose.

“Fine.” She pulled out the white trash bag and continued sliding her things into it while counting to twenty. Her ex-husband said her temper would get her into trouble one day. Getting charged with assault with a deadly weapon for stuffing the trash can over Mrs. Dannon’s head would be considered trouble.

“The bag is ours, too, Ms. Richards.”

Chloe looked at the bag and back at Mrs. Dannon. “Dock fifty cents from my last paycheck.”

Her boss let out a gasp, her hand over her flat chest. “Well, I never ...”

“Had sex? That much is obvious.” Chloe stuffed one last item into the bag and marched with as much dignity as she could on one broken heel to the elevators with her trash bag over her shoulder, much like Santa.

Only in the elevator did she permit herself to grin. It had been a cheap shot, but the look on Mrs. Dannon’s face had been well worth it. She’d put up with three months of that woman’s shitting on her. It had been two months and twenty-nine days too many.

She blew out a breath, the grin disappearing as she hit the button for the first floor. Of course, what was she going to do now?

The minimal salary had at least paid the bills. Fired women made little money. The job had allowed her to send money to her sister, who needed it even more than she did.

Of all the mornings for the bus to be late, even though, as Mrs. Dannon had pointed out, she’d been on the later bus because she’d already been running late. It wasn’t an uncommon thing for her. She repeated in her boss’s nasal undertone, “Jobs require one to make an effort to be there on time.” Like Chloe didn’t know that.

It hadn’t helped that she’d spilled coffee all down her yellow dress when the bus hit a pothole, that she had a run in her hose, and that her heel had broken off coming up the steps. The damn elevator had been broken again, had men working on it downstairs, but now that she wasn’t in a hurry, was working fine.

*You shouldn’t have gotten in here. It’s liable to break again. With your luck.*

It probably would. Fate was apparently targeting her today.

How quickly could she get another shitty job? Her shoulders sagged. She didn’t know. Joanne had come to depend on the money Chloe sent her every month. Fast food didn’t make the money this had. She’d do what she had to, but the idea of working for kids younger



than she was made her want to hurl. And waitressing, while it made good money, she wasn't that great at it. People didn't like wearing their food.

*You could always go to see ...*

No. That wasn't an option. Although, if she'd known things would go so far down with her niece, she might have bitten back her anger and taken money when she'd had a chance to. But she couldn't go back now.

The elevator doors opened.

An immaculately dressed woman stood in front of them. She pulled her glasses down her nose to peer inside at Chloe. "Chloe Richards?"

Oh, God. It must be company security come to arrest her for the damn trash bag. Mrs. Dannon worked fast. "What?" Chloe stepped out of the doors before they shut on her. Had the elevator been going anywhere else but up, she would have stayed on it, but the only exit to the building was on this floor.

The woman didn't smile. "Are you Chloe Richards?"

Taking a deep breath, she stammered out "Yes."

"I have a proposal to make to you, Ms. Richards. One that can benefit the man I work for and yourself."

"What is it? And who do you work for? And who are you?" Chloe suspiciously stepped back from the woman.

"My name is Audra Phelan. I work for the Collector. He asked me to bring you to him."

"Oh, no. I'm not going anywhere off with ... some woman I don't know to see some man called the Collector." She'd wind up with some trophy collected off her person and being a statistic on a crime desk. Turning to walk away, she stopped when the woman's hand grasped her arm. Chloe looked down at the hand, arching a brow.

The woman released her before her hawk-like eyes surveyed Chloe as if sizing her up for prey. "He has authorized me to make it worth your while to come and see him."

*Don't think about the money. Don't think about the money. Too late.* "How worth my while?" It would have to be good.

"Very. Five thousand dollars."

Oh, shit, it was good. "Just to come talk to him?" Chloe shifted her weight on her feet, muttering to herself. She probably could have bartered the price up. She'd missed the chance now, having shown her interest. But that much money simply to have a conversation? The man must be nuts.

Phelan nodded. "He has a business deal he'd like to discuss with you. An important one."

There was no way. "Look, lady ..."

Phelan held out a check. It was made out to Chloe for five thousand dollars. "Whoa." It was also unsigned. Drat it. It would be a while before she found another job. Perhaps a long while. Unemployment only lasted so long. Five thousand dollars would go a long way. And it didn't hurt anything to talk. "All right. But I'm going to notify a friend of who I'm with and when I should be back."

Was that a smirk? Chloe didn't care. "Fine. Phone a friend. It will take about an hour. Shall we walk to the car while you're telephoning?"

"Sure." She called her neighbor, giving her the name of the woman she was with and instructions on when she should be calling back. At least her back was looked after enough so Chloe felt more at ease and not like she was going to be eaten with some rice.

When Phelan stepped back, and Chloe saw the car at the curb, her lower jaw fell away, leaving her mouth open. The car was a huge black limousine. An oh-so-nice stretch limo. She hadn't ridden in one of those since ...

"You're not connected to Drake Marsters, are you?" Her eyes narrowed. She wouldn't put it past her ex to create an elaborate ruse to ... to what? Not like he'd want her to come see him. She wasn't sure what he'd want, but she wouldn't put it past the asshole to play her like

this. To get her hopes all up and then laugh from the sidelines. Her conscience prickled with the unfair thought, but Chloe ignored it. She needed to think of him as an asshole. Otherwise, she thought of him too damn much. And she wasn't going back to him.

"I assure you, Ms. Richards, I'm not in any way connected to Mr. Marsters. Please, the Collector is waiting for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting and waiting in the large room, which was bigger than her studio apartment, Chloe imagined what the Collector would be like. Probably young. Virile. A beefcake millionaire looking for that special someone to do a job for him.

*Oh, please, you're thinking this is a romance novel. This is your life, remember.*

"Hello, Ms. Richards. Enjoying looking at my rental house?"

The man walked slowly, deliberately, across the floor. She was almost tempted to get up and help him, but one look at his determined face, and she didn't.

"It's nice." If this was a rental, what kind of houses did he own?

No young virile man stood before her. It figured; it was her life, which had never been the stuff of romance novels. Well, except for a brief period when she'd thought she'd had it all. With Drake. No, couldn't think of him right now. Her eyes surveyed the man in front of her. Hair the color of ashes, cut to precision, rested on top of a regal head. He wore a suit the color of soot. His pasty skin and limping demeanor told her that not all was as well as he wanted her to believe. A life was burning down inside of him.

He sat down in a black leather desk chair behind a mahogany desk. "I am the Collector." His hands reached to the objects on his desk, forming a square with them.

Uh-huh. She'd expected a name now, not this title again. "O.K., Mr. Collector. Ms. Phelan said that you had a business proposition for me."

A kind smile drew up his lips, revealing dingy teeth. "I do. One I think will be most lucrative for both of us."

"What is it?"

The Collector slid a folder across the desk. "In there is everything you need to know. I'm looking for an artifact. A totem, if you will."

She flipped through the sparse pages in the file. They were all connected to an artifact with records on where it had last been seen. "I'm not an archeologist." She'd majored in history for one semester of college, but hadn't finished her degree.

"I know."

"Then why do you want me to find your treasure?" Her nose wrinkled. This man was wealthy. Her apartment would fit a few times inside this rental house. Why would he seek her out to find something for him?

"Call it a feeling. These items are not ... regular artifacts. It takes a special person to locate them." He folded gnarled hands in front of him.

The item must be something he couldn't get through regular channels. Wait, like she was so connected to the black market and had contacts that would help her? Why her? It didn't make sense.

The Collector leaned forward in his chair. "I assure you, Ms. Richards, this is on the ... how do you young folks say it? Up and up? You can procure this item for me. I'm sure of it." He handed her a small rectangular sheet of paper.

"Holy shit." She'd never seen so many zeroes on a bank draft before. Her eyes widened so much that they hurt.

He pressed another one into her hands, which didn't want to let go of the first to take it. "This is for coming to talk to me as agreed. And, it's now ready to go whether you accept the job for me or not. The first one I gave you will be yours upon delivery of the item."

The first bank draft wasn't signed, but the second one now was. Now really, who signed things "The Collector?" But, apparently with as much money as he had, he could do whatever he wanted. "I'll have expenses." Her back straightened. Was she taking this job? She didn't have anything else to do right now. That much money, and she would never worry about finances again. Nor would her sister, and that's what counted.

He reached into a drawer and handed her a square of plastic. "For expenses."

She tapped the cool credit card with her finger. "What's the limit?"

"There isn't one."

Stroking the unlimited card with her fingers, she scooted forward in her chair. This man was giving her a job that would earn her more money than she could make in a lifetime and a credit card where she could spend the moon. Maybe her life was looking up. No, there had to be a catch. This was her life.

The man eased back in his chair, grunting with the effort. "You're probably wondering why I'd give you something such as this card? I know that you won't take advantage of me, Ms. Richards. Call it another feeling."

"So, all I have to do is retrieve this artifact and bring it back to you? Nothing else?"

"That's all, Ms. Richards."

"And even if I fail, I keep the five thousand." It was repetitive, but dammit, she was going to be sure of things before she left him.

He nodded. His breath caught as he wheezed low and deep. The sound whistled in his throat. His face turned red with the effort. She rose to her feet, about to call someone. He waved a hand, coughing, until he regained control over his breathing. "Do we have a deal?" The words were hoarse and raspy, barely spoken.

"Yes. We have a deal." She sighed. Tempted by money, she couldn't resist.

"Good." The Collector held out his hand.

She grasped his smooth, cool one in hers to shake. A static spark pinged between them, almost as if it sealed the deal she'd made. A shiver ran along her spine, while her stomach curled up.

*Oh, my God, what did I just do?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake put his booted feet up on the coffee table in his den. A thought, and on came the television. His mind flicked through the channels, making the TV scan, spending a second on each one.

Chloe had hated it when he channel surfed. Not that she'd known he wasn't using the remote, but his magic. He'd become adept at convincing the world that he used ordinary means to get things done. It wasn't hard; people looked to the mundane much easier than the fantastical.

He shook his head, clearing it of the random thought.

Why had he suddenly thought of his ex-wife? He hadn't in longer than he cared to remember.

His body prickled, hairs standing on end, goosebumps erupting on his skin. The scent of vanilla invaded his nostrils.

He had the oddest desire to look over his shoulder and make sure she wasn't there. But she couldn't be, she wouldn't be. She'd walked away over four years ago, unable to handle the things he'd had to keep from her. But still, the niggling sensation ate at him until he turned his head to view the area behind the couch.

Nothing was there but the usuals, a wet bar along with shelves of books and treasures from his ancestors and his career. His ex-career.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he put his feet on the floor and pushed himself off the couch. Walking behind it, he went to the bar, opened a bottle of tequila and poured it into a shot glass.

He took the shot quickly, wincing as the burning flavor edged down his throat. Pouring another, he surveyed the things resting on the white wooden shelves. Haphazardly arranged, the objects were not covered in dust or grime only because of the maid who came in once a week to clean.

They displayed the man he'd been and the family he'd come from with a wide array of types from elegant to comical.

Who needed a Drake Marsters lunchbox?

The crystalline artifact drew his gaze as it often did, its rounded smoothness without angles a puzzle. It was one of the most curious artifacts in his parents' collection, which he had inherited but only brought to his estate two years ago.

This one item in particular caught his attention the most because of the low intermittent hum it made in the lower pitches of the hearing range. Not everyone could hear it. Somehow, he had a sense the artifact was important, though he didn't understand why. It was the least documented item in his collection, making its monetary value questionable.

Glass in one hand, his other reached out to stroke the artifact's phallic shape. Even with the obvious representation, his hands were always drawn to it. He couldn't be close and not touch it.

He'd had a few historians look at it once it had been in his possession a while. None of them could tell him exactly what mineral or crystal had been used to form it. He didn't know why it fascinated him so much, other than it was different. Like him.

Growing up magical in a world of nonmagic had set him apart, as it had his family for generations.

The artifact jiggled under his touch.

He pressed his fingers deeper into its smooth crevices.

Finishing his second drink, he set down the glass.

Maybe this thing, this crystal, was responsible for the abilities of his kin. He'd had the thought before, one reason why he couldn't let tests be run despite the historians' urgings. Suppose it stopped working. Then, he would stop working. But then again, he'd never been unable to do magic, even when it had been packed away in storage for so many years. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the magical ability passed through the males in his family.

There was something more to this object.

If only he knew what it was.

It vibrated strongly, the humming sound intensifying.

His eyes lazily drifted to the other memorabilia.

Small posters proclaimed, "The best magician in the world, Drake Marsters appearing here tonight, one show only Madison Square Gardens" and "World Famous Magician, Drake Marsters -- Get your tickets now" from his home town.

Only being the best and world famous hadn't stopped Chloe from leaving him, had it? She'd walked away, cutting off all contact. And he'd let her.

Even now he could see her doe eyes searing into his soul. He could still remember what it was like to feel her satin skin against his, what it had been like to slide into her glorious depths, where he lost himself in the bliss she provided.

His hand dropped away from large shelf, a sigh wrenching out from his lungs. If only ... what? If only he could have her back? She'd been the one to walk away.

No, he'd driven her away. His secrecy and his protectiveness of his magic had put a wedge in between them only the truth could push out. And he'd never told her the truth about himself.

The hum reached a tuneful pitch before stopping, as though it hadn't wanted to lose his touch.



He shook his head, picking up the tequila bottle to pour himself another drink.

It was wishful thinking, the only kind he did lately, all alone in the big house that he'd built before it had all gone to hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

The man held back the scream by biting his lip as the cinches tightened the cuffs on his arms, stretching his body out to painful extremes. But the hot poker applied to his boney foot brought about the reaction that his captor was looking for. More information amidst the screams of agony.

"I don't know what it was!" Aswell panted, trying to keep air in his lungs. He'd lasted longer than any of the others, a whole two days. Or maybe Gray was getting better at torture, rather than killing. Historians made good targets. They provided interesting objects from their own collections to do the deed with. The mace had been the most fun. But this session needed to be winding down. It had gone on too long. Someone was bound to look for the historian soon, even with email messages of excuses for missing work. And they'd start with Aswell's house, eventually looking in the garage.

"You couldn't identify it?" Rob Gray sat down cross-legged on the concrete floor in front of the studious man, who now was in great pain. Perhaps that would loosen up his tongue.

"I swear to you. I couldn't."

"But Marsters brought it to you for identification." Gray rubbed a finger across his chin. "What did he think it was? Did he have any idea?"

"I don't know."

Gray stood up.

Aswell shuddered at the motion, his body shaking, trying to pull away. "I don't know! Please. Please. No more."

Gray paced in front of the babbling, sweating professor as he mulled over what the significance of this was. “He thought it was important. He wanted it identified.” And that made it doubly important to Gray.

Aswell’s head nodded, barely lifting his chin.

Gray continued to pace, stretching out his legs as he did so. This interrogation job was hard work; he’d be sore tomorrow. “What did it look like?”

“It was ... four feet tall, maybe. Slender. Made of a crystal. A mineral of some type. Smooth.”

“What constituted the mineral? What was it made of?”

“We never found out. He wouldn’t let us do any tests on it.”

Gray cocked his head. “Interesting. You’ve told me more than either of the two others that Drake took the item to.”

A slight, hopeful smile perched on the man’s chapped lips. “So you’ll let me go now?”

Gray clucked his tongue. “I’m sorry. I can’t risk you warning Marsters.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You’d say you wouldn’t, but you would.”

Aswell didn’t see the sword coming as he begged for his life. Quick turns of the blade, and the man bled out.

Gray chucked down the weapon, pulling off his gloves. He’d been careful not to leave any trace evidence on the body or in the house. Nothing would tie him to the crime. And by the time they could, he’d have his own source of magic, and it wouldn’t matter.

## Chapter Two

Chloe shoved the books away in frustration, her eyes grimy with the grit of all the dust that had been in tomes that hadn't been opened in so many years.

Poring over book after book of excavations sites hadn't made one iota of difference. The little bit of information that the Collector had was enough to send her on several chases that hadn't gone anywhere, resulting in blocked paths. It looked like this was going to be another one.

Being an archaeologist or historian wasn't the glamorous life. These last two weeks, she'd spent more time in ancient libraries than she had in the outside world. How long would it be before the Collector pulled her off the job, saying he never should have hired her in the first place? Not long, she was afraid.

Granted, she'd have the five thousand, or what was left of it; a good chunk had gone to her sister already.

A slight smile came to her face, thinking about her last conversation with her sister right before she'd gone treasure hunting. Her phone had rung. She'd answered it on the second ring, and before she could even get "Hello" out, Joanne had started in.

"You didn't do anything illegal. Did you?"

She could picture the over-the-glasses look her older sister was giving. “No! No, of course not. I’ve been hired for a job. It was an ... advance.”

“What kind of job?” Joanne gasped. “Is it for sex?”

Chloe snorted. “Like anyone would pay me for sex.”

“You’re sure it’s nothing illegal.”

“I’m sure, Jo.”

Joanne sighed. “I do appreciate what you sent.”

“How is that niece of mine?” Chloe bit her lip, hating to ask the mother watching her child go through hell about just how far into hell the child had descended.

“She’s well. Little bit of throwing up with this new therapy. But that’s to be expected.”

Chloe closed her eyes. Flashes of orange light raced across them.

“She drew you a picture. I’ll send it in the mail.”

“Thanks, Jo. Give her a kiss from me. And a hug.” *And part of my life, if only I could.*

“I will. How are you doing, Chloe?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Always fine.”

“You know, talking about sex, you should get back out there. It’s been four years since you and Drake.”

Chloe rubbed her hand over her chin. Like she could get the man out of her mind long enough to get friendly with another man. He dominated her thoughts even when he shouldn’t. She’d had sex since Drake. But it always seemed to lack something, some spark that happened whenever she was around him. Hence, why she had avoided him since she’d called their marriage off. “I gotta run, Joanne. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Chloe, come on, I’m sorry. Don’t go. I’m just worried about you.”

Now that was the rub. Her sister, whose daughter was dying before her eyes, was worried about her. She bit back tears. “I know, Jo. But I gotta run. I’ll call soon.” She slipped

the phone back into the receiver. She had trips to plan that would hopefully find her niece the money for the ground-breaking medical treatment that might save her life.

Now she'd become obsessed with locating the artifact.

It was no longer about the money. Well, it was to a certain extent, but it had gone beyond that.

She had a chance to do this herself, to make someone proud of her, and with her brief interaction with the Collector, somehow that he believed in her, made that matter to her.

Maybe it would drop from an alien spaceship and land on her head. That seemed about as likely as finding it from the books she'd been examining.

She reread the papers that the Collector had given her. It wasn't huge, about four feet, had an oblong shape with no angles.

Why did that sound so familiar? And why was it being so hard to locate?

She shifted in the wooden chair. It creaked under her, loud like a gunshot in the quietness. Something had been pecking at her brain since she'd begun this exercise. But it sat just out of reach. She couldn't quite bring it to the front of her mind.

She pounded lightly on the top of her skull, leaving her hands up there. *Come on. Remember.*

Stupid, because she didn't have anything to remember.

Her hands left her hair, grasping one of the books she hadn't looked at yet. It was on the excavation site that the Collector thought the object came from. It had writings from the original team who'd discovered the site.

*Why bother?*

A note caught her eye.

*Several objects were claimed by Wesley Rune. They were of no archaeological importance and weren't recorded.*

She read a lot more. This book had the most she'd found on the burial site so far. There was no mention of the object itself. The note she kept going back to was from a journal by one of the archaeologists who'd been the leader of the recovery team.

She tapped on it with a well-worn fingernail.

Maybe this was why she'd come to so many dead ends. If no one had officially documented the artifact she sought, and it had gone home with a private family, it made sense why she couldn't find it.

Why wouldn't they have jotted down what that family took? Marking off artifacts as unimportant seemed contrary to everything she knew about protocols at dig sites and archeology. Anything found could be important to history. And why were there no mentions of this event anywhere else but a private journal?

Who was Wesley Rune?

She thumped at her head again, laying it on the table.

"Are you all right, miss?" The elderly librarian had approached without her hearing it. He looked down at her, concerned. He must not get too many women beating themselves up in the library.

"I'm fine. Thank you, sir." She lifted her head, one hand going to her ponytail to see if it was straight. He turned to go. "Wait." He spun back on his heels. "Can I get a copy of this page, please?"

He smiled, a kind genuine one. "I'd be glad to, miss. That will be fifteen cents, please."

She dug around in her jeans pocket. Shit, she'd changed this morning from the pair she'd worn yesterday bearing pockets laden with change. "I don't suppose you take credit cards?" She pulled out a fleck of lint. *Nope. Not a quarter.*

"I'm sorry, miss, we sure don't." He shrugged his shoulders. "I can put that on hold for you until you come back."

A credit card with no freaking limit, and she couldn't take evidence with her because of fifteen cents.

She sighed, having intended on moving on tomorrow. It would mean a whole other day at this library, as they would be closed by the time she got back with the change.

A glint caught her eye from under the table. Pushing her chair back and cocking her head, she bent down to retrieve the shiny new quarter from where it lay on the grungy pea-green floor.

She'd been there for over four hours and hadn't noticed the coin lying under the table before. Well, she hadn't been looking, but still, a bit strange she'd notice it now, in her moment of need.

"Here you go." She placed it in his palm and waited for her copy. She had some genealogical records to search for.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, Chloe tapped her pencil against her cheek. She made another two notations on her legal pad.

She'd gone from excavation sites to genealogy. Now she was attempting to trace records to find living descendents of Rune's family. And it wasn't as easy as she'd thought to track down.

Leaning back in her chair, she thanked God for the free high-speed internet available in her hotel room. It had been after hours, and she'd decided to see what she could find online. Somehow, she'd visited all the right sites for information.

"Ha ha." She leaned forward again. She'd gotten to her grandparents' generation. It should be easy to track down the rest of the family, with modern record-keeping

Getting up, she walked to the well-stocked little mini-bar fridge and grabbed a soda. Her eyes took in the luxurious hotel suite with king-sized bed and living space. It was huge,

almost as big as her apartment, and with more furniture. The carpet begged for toes to sink down into it. She'd never stayed anywhere so posh.

Except when she was with Drake.

Her stomach skittered as it did whenever he came to mind.

She remembered a night from when they'd been young, newly married, in love. He'd had one of his first big magic shows as a headliner. They'd stayed in a hotel room, which had been as grand as anything she'd ever stepped foot into up to that point. They'd ordered champagne, caviar, and lobster tails. High on both the extravagance and each other, they'd eaten, drunk, and been merry, making love until dawn. He'd missed an interview at a local television station because they'd overslept. Hell, they'd slept past checkout time, too. When they woke up, they'd had sex yet again before dealing with the world.

God, those had been good times. Even when the bad times came, she hung on to times like that.

She hugged her arms around herself tightly, the chill sweeping into her bones. Her hand rubbed up and down. She couldn't get away from the cold that came from not weather, but memories.

Drake had been her first love and lover. She'd thought they'd be together forever.

Thoughts of his hands moving on her skin, or of his cock moving inside her, stopped her no matter what else she was doing. It was like her brain went on pause whenever he came to mind, so she could relive those moments.

*Enough of this trip down memory lane. Get to the fucking research.*

She located the latest find, the relative from not too long ago.

Caroline Rune.

Had she had dreams like Chloe did? Of course she did. Did someone stomp all over them, too? All she had was the woman's name, but she could picture her. Windswept blond hair, blue eyes, long, tall, and limber, looking nothing like Chloe with her dark mass of curls



going every which way. This woman had probably been a sophisticated young lady in her prime.

What had Drake called her when she left? Gauche and gaudy? This woman had probably been the exact opposite.

Shaking off her daydreams, she located a marriage certificate.

*I hope you never got divorced.*

Clicking on the link to the information, she paid the fee and brought the copy of the certificate up on her screen.

Carolyn had married Donald Marsters.

Chloe froze, staring at the little black lettering.

*Marsters?*

No. It couldn't be. Marsters was a common name. Just look at the guy who'd played Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He'd been James Marsters. Even fate wasn't that cruel, to play such a big joke on her.

Quickly, she sorted through the records, looking for birth certificates, finding two children, Daniel and Mary.

Her heart pounded, drumming out any other noises from her ears, her mouth drying out.

Coincidence. It had to be coincidence. So Drake's dad's name was Daniel, and he had an Aunt Mary. It didn't mean anything ... yet.

And Daniel Marsters had married Peggy Able.

Drake's mom's name was Peggy.

And Daniel and Peggy Marsters had had one child. A son.

Her head banged on the laptop keyboard. She did it a couple of times, as if the banging would make the truth go away.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Fate was that cruel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rushing into her apartment, tossing down her bags, Chloe dashed for the tiny piece of the floor she called a bedroom.

*Please, please, please, don't let it be.*

She'd spent the whole trip home begging things not to be. But that hadn't changed that Drake Marsters was a descendent of Wesley Rune. In fact, he was one of the only ones left. The line might die with him if he didn't have any heirs.

Waking up at two A.M., after going to bed after midnight last night, something had occurred to her. It wouldn't let go or let her sleep. She'd checked out before breakfast and been on a plane home an hour later.

She grabbed the pictures on her shelves and went through them. Where was it? Her muscles curled in knots as she looked.

And there it was.

She reached out a finger and tentatively touched the picture like she could feel it. The cool glass shook under her fingertips.

The blown up picture had once been of her and Drake. Drake had been edited out with scissors, but she'd always liked the shot of her so she had framed it. She'd done that before putting someone like Mel Gibson or Vin Diesel in place of the bastard, so she'd been good.

It had been at his parents' house before they'd passed away, so she'd been a lot younger and a bit thinner. She'd been what? Nineteen? That was ten years ago, she realized with a sigh.

In the background, resting behind her, sitting on a shelf, was a crystalline object, roughly in the shape of a phallus, smooth, no angles. It stood out. She'd always wondered what it was. She'd asked Drake once, but he hadn't known.

In that picture, her artifact sat on that shelf less than two feet away from her.

She fell backwards on her bed, photo pressed against her chest. Her eyes shut as she let the tiredness of not sleeping and of traveling seep into her consciousness.

This couldn't be happening.

Drake had inherited all his parents' things. And she held in her hands proof his parents had been in possession of it. So it stood to reason Drake now had the object, whether in storage or in his house.

She was never going to get the money.

She groaned. Never. Not in a million years would Drake hand that thing over to her. Good thing he hadn't been in possession of it when she'd left. A few things had been tossed his way during the argument that had preceded her leaving. She would have cried had she broken the item that had become her albatross.

Back then, she'd turned down every one of his attempts to fling money at her, taking nothing from him after the divorce, cutting off every little contact they might have had. She'd wanted a clean break with none of his money in her pockets, nor the illusion that they were friends. Friends didn't lie, and he'd done plenty of that during their marriage.

No, the artifact was lost to her now.

She reached for the phone, almost pulling it off the nightstand before securing the receiver.

It was answered on the first ring. "Phelan."

Her short, curt answer was exactly what Chloe expected. "It's Chloe. I need to talk to the Collector."

“Is there a problem, Ms. Richards?” Was that disappointment she detected in the other woman’s voice? Her shoulders went back into the bed. If Phelan wanted the thing so bad, she could go face the dragon named Drake.

“You could say that. I need to talk to your boss.”

“Very well.”

She heard the low mumble of voices, soft, as if they were talking into a trumpet on the other end.

“Ms. Richards. What can I do for you?”

“I can’t get your artifact, Mr. Collector.” She rubbed a hand over her face. Boy, that was an understatement.

Silence reigned. Finally, he said, “May I ask why not?”

“Because it’s with my ex-husband.”

More quiet. “And?”

“That’s all. It’s with my ex-husband.” She scooted her butt further up the bed so her head rested on the pillow. Damn, but she missed the hotel bed already. That one had springs, unlike this old thing.

“I fail to see how that precludes you getting from the item we discussed.”

Chloe stared into the phone, then made an obscene gesture at it.

The Collector continued in the same mellow tone, “I realize it increases the level of difficulty, perhaps.”

“Perhaps?” Now she sat up, sputtering into the phone. *Perhaps my ass.* “Perhaps? Try definitely.”

“Now, Ms. Richards ...”

“Mr. Collector, I don’t think you realize how things ended between Drake and me. It went bad. Bad fast. And ... well, the vase I aimed at his head didn’t help any sentiment he might have for me. It was a Ming.”

“He had good taste.”

“Oh, yes, he had all kinds of --” She shrugged, though the Collector couldn’t see her. “-- stuff.”

“I’m sure. Too bad he let one of them go.” He clucked his tongue. “The most important one of all.”

Hope sparked in her voice. “He doesn’t have the artifact? It’s somewhere else?” Maybe this had been a test, and the Collector knew where it had been the whole time. Now he’d tell her, and she’d go after it.

“No. Alas, I know even less than you about the artifact’s whereabouts, I’m afraid.” His breathing rasped a second.

Her shoulders slumped. So much for that hope. This was her life, so she should have expected nothing less. “So you see, I can’t get this for you. He’d never give it to me.” There, it was out. She’d failed. One more check in that column, which outweighed the success column by a mile.

“Ms. Richards, I have the utmost faith in your ability to get this for me. It’s why I hired you.”

She shook a foot back and forth on the bed. The view wasn’t as nice here, either, as at the hotel. It looked straight into a brick wall, which blocked most of the light from her rooms. “I can’t.” Whether it was facing Drake or retrieving the artifact, she’d never make it. It was impossible.

“You can. You’re the only one who can get this totem for me. The only one.”

His voice sounded so earnest, so hopeful. She frowned. Dammit, why this blind faith in her abilities? It warmed her from her tingling toes to the top of her head. This man believed, for whatever reason, she could do this. "I ..."

"Give it a try, Ms. Richards. You might surprise yourself. And your ex-husband as well."

Maybe it was the heady sensation of hearing someone believed in her. Maybe it was the thrill of seeing Drake again, even if merely to take something of his. Whatever it was, she took a deep breath, heart swelling. "Fine. I'll see what I can do. But I don't promise anything. We didn't part on good terms."

"Trying is all I can ask of you." Now she could hear the smile reflected in his voice. "Good luck, Ms. Richards."

Hanging up the phone, she closed her eyes, lying back on her pillows. How was she going to get this item away from Drake? He probably didn't even know it was there. It probably sat on a shelf somewhere collecting dust, or was in a box in storage. Neglected. Something he could say he had, but never touched. She'd be liberating it. At least the Collector cared about it. That much was evident from the lengths he'd gone to to retrieve it.

Now that she wasn't panicking, something smelled in her apartment. Her beta fish winked at her from her dresser. Guess the neighbor's kid had fed him after all, so it wasn't him. She'd probably forgotten to take out the trash in the kitchen.

Seeing Drake didn't mean they'd have sex.

She'd resist his charms this time. There'd be no second chances for them, no matter how much magic he worked on her.

Cocking her head, she realized the Collector had never told her what important artifact that Drake had given up. Not that it mattered. She must be as nuts as the Collector to even think about flying to Richmond, back to the man who'd stayed in her thoughts and daydreams for the last four years.



## Chapter Three

Drake finished up the telephone call before leaning back and placing his feet on his desk. He'd unpile a mound of paperwork for tomorrow morning. Mornings, he did business. Afternoons were for golf or other diversions. Evenings were for catch up on anything he hadn't done. He'd be turning in for the night in just a couple of hours. Before he got up and started a day of the same over again.

*You're boring.*

A regimented creature of habit, he'd always kept a schedule. Even when he'd toured, things had been set, and little got out of sync.

Except when Chloe was with him.

Chloe would knock Father Time off kilter. She ran on her own time schedule and clock.

Her favorite way to distract him had been to put her hand on his cock. Whatever they'd been talking or arguing about had been lost in the rush of blood. He couldn't think with both heads being engaged, and the smaller one won every time.

She'd known the power she had over him. So many times she would bite her lip seductively and flash him a come-hither grin. He always came hither. Usually a few times.



His doorbell rang, chiming all through his house.

Checking the time, he rose from his chair, tempted to check his scheduler. He didn't have any appointments now, though, he was sure of it.

He swung his front door open, and all the blood that had been activating his brain's cells pumped quickly down to a raging erection. The person who'd been driving his thoughts stood before him.

"Hi, Drake." Her throaty voice sounded even sweeter than he'd remembered, even more passionate. His ex-wife wore a tight black Lycra dress that covered the "ass" and "ets" in style. Her long legs stretched down from the thigh-length skirt in all their tanned glory. The little bit of weight she'd put on had rounded her curves, developing them to a rich fullness. She'd grown more beautiful in the time they'd been apart. Women weren't supposed to do that.

He tightened more. "Chloe?" Dumb question. It was her, all right. But what she was she doing on his stoop?

Her teeth poked out to bite her lip the same way he'd remembered her doing. One hand on his cock, and they'd be back to old times. "It's me."

"I see." He stared out into the late day sunshine, trying not to look at her, but failing. Her nipples poked through the thin material, plainly displayed. He'd loved to thumb and nip them. She'd gotten off on it, sometimes seemed about to come from mere breast play. She wasn't wearing a bra at the moment. She'd sometimes gone pantyless, too. His mouth wasn't sure whether to dry or drool at that thought. He scanned down her body, wondering if he could see pantyline or not.

As his gaze found her face again, her mouth pushed up in amusement. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Oh, shit ... yeah." He opened the door wider for her to walk beside him into his lair. How long had they stood outside? Seemed like a long time, but it must have been only

seconds. Her scent invaded his space, that same scent of vanilla she'd always worn. How he'd loved to wake up immersed in it. Immersed in her. Until she'd left him. That shook off his desire, but only partially. "What are you doing here, Chloe?"

She walked around the foyer with its high ceiling. Toying with a small green vase, her fingers caressed it, barely touching, swirling around the top. "Do I need a reason to see you, Drake?"

His cock jiggled, but he couldn't look away from her touching. Sweetness and light like this weren't her style. Her style was more like piss and vinegar. Was she up to something? "It's been four years; I'd say you do."

Her hands dropped from the vase and swung to her sides. "I know we didn't part on the best of terms."

Understating was one of those Chloe talents. "You threw things at me. A bunch of things." *Before you walked away.*

"I was ... upset."

"You were fucking pissed."

Her red glossy mouth tightened into a line before smoothing out. "You know why." A deep breath escaped her, moving her chest up and down, drawing his eyes. Lycra was made by his hero. "I didn't come here to talk about old times." She tittered. "Though I am sorry about the Ming."

His lips pursed. His Ming vase had barely missed his head. He should be thankful it wasn't his head that had shattered on the floor. He looked to the green vase sitting on the nearby table. At least it was smaller, in case her aim had gotten better like her beauty. "What did you come here for?"

"I wanted to see you." A flash of guilt marched across her face. She had a horrible time with poker because she couldn't lie worth shit. It looked like that hadn't changed. Why had she come here if she didn't want to see him? She'd made it clear that she hadn't wanted

anything more to do with him or his money when the divorce had become final. He'd respected her wishes, staying away and not offering any help even when he'd known about her niece, though he would have liked to.

"You've seen me." He waved his hand in front of him.

She tiptoed closer on strappy black high heels that clicked on the tile. "Maybe I want to *see* you. All of you."

She blew a light breath along his neck, the closest place she could reach. It tickled his skin, warping his thin hairs up on end. Her breath smelled of wintergreen, fresh and clear. He swallowed, the movement slow and deliberate.

Maybe he was being too suspicious. The woman had come here, peacefully, of her own free will. Maybe it had been to see him. He couldn't imagine what else it could be for, unless ...

"Do you need money?"

Her body stiffened so quickly, a joint popped. "What?"

"Do you need money? Is that why you're here? I heard about Kimberly."

Pain flashed into her eyes as if a flashbulb went off, reminding her of things she wanted to forget. *Smooth, Drake, real smooth. Why not kick her puppy while you're at it?*

"How did you ...? Ah, the old grapevine."

"With Aunt Mary as the top grape. She always liked you."

Her smile came wry and a bit raw. Pain on her affected him the same way it always had, slamming into his gut. "Even when you didn't."

"Hey, now, I always ..." He broke off, his gaze breaking off with hers. "Is that why you're here, though?"

"No," she snapped. "I'm not here because of Kimberly's cancer or her mother's money problems. I didn't want your money then, and I don't want it now."

Both the cancer and the money problems were extensive, so he'd heard. "Then, why are you here?" He leaned back against the railing to the steps. She'd always had a streak of damn pride a thousand miles wide, wanting to do things on her own, make it on her own. It was admirable, but foolish at times.

"Argghgh. You're still an insufferable asshole! Maybe I'm here because I wanted to see you again." She bit out her words in short bursts, sounding defensive. She flailed her hands. "I give up."

She strode to the door. The lock flipped into place before she could open it. "You have this place rigged? Show-off."

The things he couldn't tell her had torn them apart before, in their marriage. He could do magic, and after all these years, she still thought it was gimmicks and sleight of hand. Now that she was here, he didn't want her to leave. He refused to question why that was too deeply. But she couldn't leave yet.

*If you'd just told her ...*

*I couldn't.*

Promises had been made and kept. If only he could have told her, but he'd given his word to family who'd trusted him.

She blew out a deep breath. He expected the seams to pop in the dress. "We've gotten off wrong as usual. Let's try this again." Her face carried a high flush rising up her cheekbones and going under that dark tangled hair. She'd always been easy to anger, easy to arouse. He'd loved to wrap his hands in her hair when they'd been making love. She loved to be restrained. His hands tightened into fists, images flashing across his mind.

"All right." Bringing them up, he folded his hands in front of his chest, both still clenched. "Let's."

“Drake.” His name fell from her honeyed lips, and it transported him back to so many times they’d had together. Her face tipped up to his as she took a step closer. “I came to see you.”

His eyes searched hers. Like pools of dark water, they pulled him into their depths until he was drowning in them.

With a groan, he yielded, pulling her into his arms, wanting her, needing her as close to him as he could get her.

Her body trembled against his, the aroused shudders exciting him. She wasn’t pushing him away, but rubbing against his body.

“Chloe,” he whispered roughly.

He buried his hands into her thick hair, much like he’d thought of earlier, letting it thread through his fingers like strands of silk as his mouth found hers in a frenzied kiss that quickly turned from gentle reacquaintance into a passionate fusion.

Her lips parted under his, letting him in. She tasted of mint. He crushed her body against his, pushing backwards until her back rested against the wall.

Her hips blanketed him as he rubbed his straining cock against her middle. Whatever else they’d had problems with, this was where they had no trouble. That was something else that hadn’t changed.

His hands slid down the soft material to cup her ass, squeezing roughly. It had been far too long. Sliding under the material in the tight space against the wall, he was rewarded with bare skin.

No panties.

Arousal roared through him, his blood racing to swollen parts, rushing around his ears like a river.

He growled, two fingers giving her ass a soft pinch.

She jerked against him, body rocking, mouth straining against his. “What was that for?”

“General principles.”

She snorted, pushing at his shoulders. “Drake.”

He grasped her hands in his, holding them above her head against the wall. Her eyes glazed over. She still liked it. “Yeah.”

“We probably shouldn’t do this.” She bit her lip, teeth grinding against the lower one, eyes glittering. Her hesitant tone spoke more about what she wanted than the words did.

“Fuck that.” Like hell they shouldn’t.

His mouth claimed hers again as he moved them to the little table, tossing the green vase to the floor where it bounced into the corner before shattering. He put her on top of the table, making sure it wasn’t going to break with her weight, and pushed her skirt up to her hips. Kneeling in front of her, he took in the sight of her. The glimpse of pink pussy he saw peeking made him moan.

“Tell me what you want, Chloe.” His fingers skimmed down the outside her thighs. The heavy scent of her arousal filled his nostrils. She’d be so wet, so ready for him. *Please don’t stop this.*

Her breathing picked up speed as she panted out, “I ...” Her eyes met his. “Dammit, I want you.”

His hands parted her thighs as he dove in and licked her up the middle of her pussy. His tongue licked and suckled, the taste of her, of the woman, driving him beyond sense. His teeth raked her clit, causing her body to jerk and a loud groan to escape her mouth. He pressed his tongue into the quivering mass of nerves.

Pressure from his tongue caused her to spasm, her hips bucking up and down as an orgasm gripped her. She was still easy to arouse.

The movement of her pelvis was too much for the table as one leg broke off. He’d tested for weight, not activity, and it tipped forward. Her sex came for him, her hands

grasping, trying to find something to give her purchase so that she didn't come down on top of him.

He grabbed her hips, bringing her down slowly, moving her to allow the table to collapse.

He rolled her up under him on the floor.

She chuckled, looking at him with a ferocious smile. "You always did like bringing down the house. You haven't changed."

"It was a table, not the house."

"So?" She kissed him fiercely, her tongue seeking his out to dance with it. She reached, sliding hands between their bodies to undo his pants and belt. God, Chloe warm and willing had always undone him.

The cool air on his skin did little against the fires burning inside him. Probably even the Antarctic wouldn't cool him down.

Pushing aside her dress once more, he readied himself to enter her.

She tapped him on the shoulder, whispering, "Condom."

He froze, his mind blown away by what he'd been about to do. Was he that far gone?

Getting up, he pulled one out of his wallet, which was in his jacket pocket that hung by the door. It should have slowed him down, made the fires in inside him bank, but all he could think of was the fucking he'd done of her with his mouth. It wasn't enough. He needed so much more.

He rolled the rubber up onto his cock before he pushed her back down on the floor, entering her. She was so tight around him even with the decreased sensation, it was a wonder he didn't come from that first sliding inside her. He'd always loved that moment. Her face creased in desire, just the way he remembered.

Slowly, he rocked back and forth against her, letting her pussy adjust to the penetration, each time gaining a little more ground, until he was fully inside her. He ground his hips down, shuddering at the slowness.

“Ohhh. Drake.”

Able to set a quick pace, he grasped both her arms, holding them down to the floor as they supported him as well. She bucked more frenetically under him. Her movements drove him over that close edge so that he burst inside her in one clear driving stroke.

Resting on top of her, he tried to regain his breath.

Next time, he'd take her nice and proper.

“Whoa, buddy, who says there will be a next time?” She pressed her palms against his shoulders.

Hell, had he said that out loud?

\* \* \* \* \*

In the dying sunlight, Rob leaned forward in the seat of the Cadillac, watching as the woman with long, curly black hair walked down Marsters's front walk in sexy heels. Her dress fit her like a glove. A magician's glove. She was probably some Marsters fan club member trying to have a quickie with the most famous magician in the world. He snorted.

Then she turned, and the stunning creation's identity became clear. He'd seen her in clippings and in video.

Chloe Marsters, Drake's ex-wife.

He'd heard she'd gone back to her maiden name, Richards, after the divorce.

How delicious she should show up now. Now that Rob had the key to Drake's magic. Soon, he'd claim it for himself. Maybe he'd claim the woman as well. Make it a double loss for Marsters.

The insolent fraud.



Marsters had been celebrated for years, touted as the greatest since Houdini, while he had been left to languish in tiny bars and clubs trying to eke out a living. Even as Rob's own star had risen, Marsters had stayed on top, the celebrated magician who could do feats beyond comprehension.

Rob had never understood how Marsters had pulled off some of the tricks he had. They'd seemed impossible. And then, to retire at the top of the entertainment field and fade so quickly from the spotlight.

Nothing had made sense.

Marsters hadn't allowed Rob to take that top spot from him, instead retiring before there had ever been a challenge issued. The bastard. Rob would always know that Marsters had left, that Rob hadn't truly won. The whole thing ate at him. He was the best. Marsters needed to know that.

Two years ago, Gray had hit upon the solution to solving the riddle of Marsters's magic. Marsters had found some way to imbue himself with it, having no real talent of his own.

It had all started with a certain magic circuit slut talking about Marsters downplaying his talent. She'd talked Marsters up and down until Rob had given her what she had coming. Then, before she'd expired, she'd tearfully told Rob of an encounter with Marsters where he'd been drunk after he'd retired, and he'd told her he had no magical talent, none whatsoever.

That wasn't the arrogant son-of-a-bitch Marsters that Rob knew. The one who laid claim to moving the sun backwards and making the moon spin faster. The one who'd raised ships from the Atlantic Ocean.

He'd quickly realized that Marsters hadn't said he had no magical *power*. A slight difference, which was ludicrous, unless you believed that magical power existed raw within the universe. And Rob had come to believe that. He'd studied with a shaman in New Orleans

who had taught him about natural magic. Something that Gray didn't have. Somehow, Drake had found a source and exploited it.

After all, how else could a no-account hack be better at the thing that Rob had spent so many years studying? Marsters had no training, no teachers. He should have stayed a magical nobody.

So Rob had investigated and researched what exactly Drake Marsters did with his time in retirement, trying to discover what could give him his power.

The odd object that Marsters had taken to be examined by several historians had intrigued him. What was so important to Marsters about this thing?

He'd read up on historical objects and found a line of study that said they could empower one with magical prowess.

And the key had fallen into the lock.

This thing was what gave Marsters his talent. He'd stolen it. Stolen talent that should never have been his.

It was why he'd beaten Rob at being a magician. The only reason why. And now Rob would take it, and claim what was rightfully his.

He patted the case sitting on the seat beside him.

In the process, he'd punish Marsters for daring to take away Rob's place. It was only fair that they both know who was the true best magician.

## Chapter Four

This was not the way things were supposed to go. Chloe ran a hand through her hair. Not even two steps into his house, and she'd wound up back to old habits. Sex. Yeah, they'd never ever had a problem there.

She'd made the right decision years ago when she'd cut off all contact with Drake. Had they kept in contact, she'd have kept doing things like this, no matter what her resolve was, no matter how many secrets he kept from her. To keep having sex after they'd broken up would have confused things too much between them, or rather too much for her. It didn't matter how good the sex was, or how much her pussy wept for him even as she'd cried over him, too.

Pulling her hand away from her hair, she huffed a breath. She should've worn underwear tonight. She'd wanted to distract him with flirting, not seduce him. *What did you think would happen when he figured it out?* And she'd known he'd figure it out. He knew her way too well in the sexual department. "We're not doing that again." Who did she tell? Him? Or herself?

Drake's shit-eating grin said he didn't see it that way. It said he knew they would be doing it again. The grin faded as she didn't return the look, but glared at him. "Why did you come here? We never made it to that subject."

Tittering but not talking, she straightened her clothes out, attempting to look like she hadn't had sex a few minutes ago, but not succeeding. Her clothes were rumpled. And she hadn't come up with a completely gelled cover story yet.

"I know why you came back."

She stopped breathing. He couldn't know the reason. Unless the Collector had set her up. "Why?" She followed him into the living room, which was ornate and fully furnished, though he'd never spent much time in there. The lack of butt impressions on the rose-colored couch told her he still didn't. She'd never understood him having all these rooms he didn't use. For him, it had been about keeping up appearances, acquiring things. Other than his growing up without a lot, she didn't quite understand his reasoning.

He turned his head away to look out some windows. They overlooked an immaculate garden with a huge fountain shooting water into the air. Did it still have fish in the bottom level? She'd liked to feed them. Yet another thing he'd said was gauche about her.

He said one word, still without looking at her. "Reconciliation."

"Drake." *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* It had never occurred to her he'd think that. Not after the way they'd left it. It had never occurred to her he might want her back. Did he? Nothing had changed between them. The secrets were still firmly in place. Surely he had to know what couldn't happen. They couldn't get back together. Not unless everything changed. And he didn't like change.

"Chloe." His back presented such a formidable front. Her mind remembered kissing down it naked, until she'd reached his balls to suck them in her ... She quickly shook her head. *I'm not.* Her traitorous body mewed. It had been good with Drake. And he'd said next time, he'd take her good and proper. Her thighs clenched together. She remembered what it

had been like with him when it was good and proper. Even hot and quick, sex with him was better than most.

*No, there won't be a next time, dammit.*

"I don't know why I'm here." Lord, she'd never been good at lying. He'd see through any elaborate story in a minute, probably a second. Best to keep it simple. "I needed to see you." That was true. She needed to see him and get the artifact.

He turned back around, his eyes casting out a hopeful glow. She winced. He thought she'd come to get back together. Her heart niggled at the romance of that, and dropped at the reality of what she intended to do. She was not going down relationship roads again with him. It had been too painful to leave last time. But if she didn't lie, if she didn't lead him on to think she would, it would get her in the front door. And closer to the artifact she'd come to find. It would be a fine line she walked. She only hoped she didn't fall off and hurt herself. Or him.

"Let's just get caught up. Do some talking." She let a shaky smile loose on her lips. "No more of what happened in the foyer." Her neck heated and she rubbed it. "For right now."

His gaze fell, looking a bit crestfallen. His eyes darted up to meet hers again. "You can stay here if you want. Tonight."

She arched a brow at him.

He laughed. "I have plenty of rooms. You don't have to stay in mine. But ... I know ..."

She didn't have the money for a hotel room. Well, she did with the Collector's slush fund, but he didn't know that. "Fine. I'll stay here tonight. My bag's in the car."

They both started for the door, then stopped. "What are you doing?"

"Going to get my bag."

"I'll get it for you. Make yourself at home. After all, it used to be yours."

She took a deep breath, hearing the door click shut behind him. While she was looking at a few pictures, Drake soon rattled back inside.

“What the hell is in here? Rocks?” He pushed her suitcase in front of him before leaving it in the foyer.

“A girl has to pack essentials.”

“And then some.” His eyes followed her as she checked out a painting he’d not had when she’d lived there. “Want some dinner?”

“Sure.”

She followed him to the kitchen where he made them a stir fry. The scent of onions and peppers soon filled the gigantic kitchen.

“You never used to cook. Retirement has changed you.”

“In some ways.” He dumped some sauce and spices in the pan, stirring frantically, keeping the veggies and meat racing around the pan before pulling the pan off. He loaded down their plates before sitting down himself.

“So how do you keep busy? Now that you’re not touring.”

“A little of this. A little of that.” He shrugged, his shoulders rolling. She’d loved to give him backrubs when they’d been together. Her finger clenched around her fork. It was the one time he’d let his guard down. Even during sex, he’d had shields up. But when her fingers had kneaded his neck, he’d always relaxed. He took another bite of peppers. “How’s Kimberly doing? And Joanne?”

“As well as can be expected. It’s bad.” She stabbed a piece of chicken. “And it’s hard to watch.” She almost choked on her tongue. Never had she talked to anyone about this. Somehow being with Drake had loosened her tongue.

“I can imagine.” He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead he asked, “So what else have you been up to the past four years?”

“Boring stuff. Not much.”

His eyes met hers over his glass of water. “I’d like to hear about it. Especially the boring stuff.”

Warmth infused her stomach and throat. “O.K. But you have to tell me about retirement.”

The smile took over his whole face. “Deal.”

Butterflies race around her whole body. God, she’d forgotten how handsome he was. How his eyes could melt her. But none of that mattered. She steeled herself as they finished dinner and the conversation. Because after he’d gone to bed, she’d creep down and find the artifact. He always kept things like that in his study. She’d take it and get the hell out of his life again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only she couldn’t do it.

Sneaking down the steps after she was sure Drake would be in bed, she dashed for his study. He always went to bed at the same time every night. She counted on him not changing his habits too much in the time they’d been separated.

She didn’t cut on the light, but let her eyes adjust to the darkness. The shelves where he kept his prized possessions were still full of knickknacks. Some things outlined in the shadows, she thought she recognized.

The artifact beckoned to her from its place on the shelf. It gleamed, saying, “Come and get me.”

Reaching to it, she wrapped both hands around it. It was cool, almost cold to the touch. Its smoothness tingled under fingertips. She rubbed her hands along it for a second, unable to resist.

*What are you doing? Get out. Before you get caught.*

Artifact in hand, she crept for the front door.

Her other hand reached for the door handle. She had it grasped in her hand. She was home free. Pressing down on the handle would compress it to get outside the house. Deliver this item, and money would never be an issue again.

One thing stopped her.

She'd enjoyed spending time with him earlier.

She and Drake had talked for a couple of hours, sharing things that had happened while they'd been apart. She still couldn't believe he'd retired. Listening to him tell her everything about his life, only not the things she wanted to know, she'd sat there plotting. Planning to get the artifact she'd come for. Regardless of the things neither of them brought up, it had been nice to talk to him again without jumping his bones or throwing objects at his person. It reminded her they'd used to be friendly. Not just lover friendly but friendship friendly.

And she'd missed that part, too.

She blew out a breath.

*Just do it.*

She couldn't.

Much as she wanted to take off with the totem, deliver it, and collect her money, it would be stealing it from Drake. No amount of persuasion could convince her that wasn't the case. And she couldn't do that to him. They'd had their problems, but she didn't hate him. And last night, she'd seen more of the man she'd fallen in love with than she had when she'd left. He still hadn't opened up fully. But things had been better last night. Better than good, they'd been great.

*Chloe, you're an idiot.*

At least she'd be an honest idiot. It was rather hypocritical of her to take Drake to task for secrets, then do a doozy of a clandestine move of her own, taking what was his without asking.



Trudging back to the study, she hefted the artifact back in place. Her fingers rubbed over it. It almost seemed to shiver with her touch. Did she imagine a wiggle in the material it was made of? What was it made of?

“So this is why you’re here.”

She swung around to confront the familiar voice in the dark. Drake’s. She was so busted.

\* \* \* \* \*

After flipping on the light, Drake watched the myriad of emotions parade across her face.

“You’re still up.”

“Yep.” He leaned back on the couch, sitting in the shadows unlit by the small lamp. He’d watched her sneak in, take the artifact and book off with it without a look back. His heart hammered in his chest even as the couch squeaked under his weight. She hated him that much, she’d take something of his.

“I ... I was bringing it back.” She pushed her hands down in front of her. Her voice sounded upset, but not near tears. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. What had possessed her? And why the fuck did he, even as angry as he was now, want to throw her to the floor, strip off her clothes and make love to her endlessly? His cock rested rock hard despite everything that had happened.

“After you took it.”

She stepped closer, where he could see the hands wringing in front of her, a sure sign she was upset, and repeated the words slowly, as though he hadn’t heard. “I brought it back.”

“But you did take it.”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

His honest Chloe. Course if he couldn't lie without his face showing it, he'd stick with the truth too. His fingernails bit into his palms. His anger wasn't only directed at her but at himself. "Sit down, Chloe."

She teetered, her body swaying. "Drake."

"Sit down." He gritted the words through tightly clenched teeth to keep from raising his voice.

Her eyes widened -- she'd picked up on his mood -- and down she sat. "Do not overreact."

"Oh, that's rich. You stole from me."

"I brought it back."

"So you keep saying. But that was after you stole it, dammit. Why? Why did you come back here to steal from me?" His pulse beat a rhythm in his throat. He could feel it, along with his throat constricting. "Who are you stealing it for?" Who the hell wanted this thing so bad they'd use Chloe to get to him?

"Drake." She pursed her lips together before parting them to speak. "A man offered me money to procure that thing." She pointed a thumb in that thing's direction. "A lot of money."

"Did he tell you to steal it?"

"No. I was supposed to find it and get it, but ..." She hesitated. "He never said to steal it." She cringed at the latter.

So she'd come up with that part on her own? "Then why? Why steal it? Why didn't you ask me for it?"

She blinked her eyes several times before running a hand through her hair. Her look plainly said she thought he was nuts for even considering that. "Would you have given it to me?"

“If I knew it was important to you, yes.” He would have. He’d have given her anything she needed. Including the damn artifact. All she’d had to do was ask. Damn Chloe and her pride. It got her into so much trouble. Why didn’t she trust him enough to come to him? His gut ached from the thought of how much she must not trust him. Why did this hurt so much?

*He still loved her.*

The knowledge that smacked him over the head wasn’t a shock. He’d realized last night how much he’d missed her when they’d been talking. He missed talking to her, hearing that lilting laugh, missed seeing those brown eyes of hers twinkle. Seeing her brought all the old feelings up again. Not that they’d ever completely been buried. Or at least not as buried as he wanted them to be.

“You would?” She sounded surprised.

Her question cut him in half. She did doubt him that much. His voice dropped to more baritone. “You think I wouldn’t have given it over had you asked for it? Needed it?”

The truth reflected on her honest face. She didn’t have to say a word to answer. She thought him enough of a bastard that he wouldn’t give her something of his that she asked for. Something she needed. No wonder she’d cut off all contact from him for so long. How had they gotten to this place?

The totem hummed, casting an eerie echo around the room.

*He’d caused her mistrust with his secrets.*

Why on earth would he give her that thing, when he’d not told her everything about himself, not opened up to her? He wanted to argue, to tell himself it wasn’t true, it wasn’t his fault. But it was, at least partially. That was how she saw it. How he could see this deep into her, he didn’t know. Magic had no mind-reading abilities, but he knew deep inside the correctness of his assumptions.

“I’ll give you the artifact.”

Her full lips curved up into a smile, showing her white even teeth. “You will?” Incredulity filled her voice and face. Relief laced her voice along with happiness. “You’ll give it to me?”

He nodded. She jumped into his arms, giving him a full wrap-around hug. Her breasts pushed into his chest as he inhaled the spring scent of her hair. His blood surged to his cock, making it turgid. He clamped down on his lust. They’d done this already. It wasn’t enough to get him what he wanted, now that he knew what that was.

*He wanted her back.*

And he’d do anything to get it.

He patted her shoulder, stroking with his fingers. Her bare skin would feel so good right now. He clamped down on that. He’d get that chance this weekend. Somehow he’d see to it. “There is a catch.”

She froze, stilling in his arms. “What catch?”

“You give me a second chance. Spend the weekend with me. Let us start over. Regardless of whether we make it or not, the totem’s yours as long as you stay the whole weekend.”

Chloe leaned back, looking into Drake’s serious face. He tightened his hands on her back to keep her body in contact with his. “What?” He had to be a lunatic. No doubt about it. “You want me to what?” He couldn’t be serious about this.

He repeated it so slowly she wanted to punch his fast forward button. If only men came with those. “Give us a second chance. Spend the weekend with me.”

“And you’ll give me the artifact?”

He nodded.

“You’re sure?”

He cocked his head to the side, and his voice grew gruff. "I'm sure. You spend the weekend with me, I'll give you the damn thing."

A weekend. Alone with Drake. Who wanted her to give him a second chance. A shiver raced through her. Could she stay strong against his methods of persuasion? He didn't intend for them to play tiddlywinks all weekend, that was for sure. "Do you expect us ... to have sex?"

"Your taking the artifact isn't dependent on you having sex with me." He grinned at her, almost leering. "But you will."

Dammit, he was probably right. But just because they had sex didn't mean she was getting back together with him. She'd have to keep her heart uninvolved. Out of it. Yeah, she could do that. Have some fun sex, collect the item, and run far away from Drake before he broke her heart again. She'd have to. "I'll do it." His grin widened. "The weekend! The weekend, not the ... er ... sex." She pushed a hand through her hair. "But I want it clear. I don't intend to get back together with you."

"All I ask is that you listen."

"And you'll give me the totem if I stay the whole time." She nodded so he'd nod, too, agreeing with her. "Even if I don't get back with you. Or have sex with you."

He followed her lead, his head bobbing up and down. "I will. As soon as the weekend is over, it's yours."

"Are we going somewhere or staying here?"

He licked his lips, the look that always made her want to capture his tongue and play tag with it. "The cabin."

She gulped. "I had no idea you still had it."

"Of course I do." He sounded affronted she'd even consider such a thing as him giving it up.

They'd spent a lot of time in the tiny cabin in the foothills of Virginia. It was isolated, simple, but comfortable. They'd honeymooned there. It was a place where they'd made memories. Lots of good, fun, sweet memories. They were the kind that had made her doubt her decision to walk away.

"The artifact will go with us."

"No. It can stay here. We'll get it when we get back."

"Drake ..."

"It'll be fine here. It's been here for years. We'll collect it after the weekend is over, and you can deliver to the man who wants it." His teeth poked through his grin. "Just give me a chance."

*He's going to pull out all the stops.*

They could have this romantic weekend full of fucking and fun. But he still hadn't told her his secrets. And unless he did, fucking was all it would ever be.

## Chapter Five

Rob watched Mr. and the ex-Mrs. Masters pack the tan SUV. Marsters got in the driver's side with her in the passenger side and off they went.

*Hmmm.* Where were they going? And together? Perhaps a reconciliation was in the works? It wouldn't last long. Not if he had his way.

His eyes centered on the house. That left the house unoccupied. Without even knowing it, Drake had given him the perfect opportunity. He rubbed his hands on the steering wheel.

Getting out of his car, he sauntered to the side of the house, disabled the security system, then dashed to the front door, casting a few furtive looks around before he jimmied the lock. Locks and security systems were nothing to true magicians who'd done their research thoroughly. He quickly stepped inside, shutting the door quietly behind him. No alarm bells went off.

Marsters's lair.

Now, where did he keep the object? From the descriptions, Rob would know it when he saw it.

He explored the house, taking his time looking around. What an ostentatious bastard Marsters was. Every gadget that had been made the last twenty years sat in the kitchen. It didn't look much had ever been used, even the cappuccino maker.

He opened the door to what looked like a study. His eyes flickered to the huge desk. He picked up an envelope. Freaking fan mail. Rolling his eyes, he tossed it back down. What a bunch of idiots if they thought Marsters was anything special.

Various Marsters paraphernalia sat on a shelf. Gray's heart beat faster. What the fuck? Marsters collected stuff about himself?

"Argghh." He picked up item after item, crashing it to the floor as violently as he could. Several things broke. The lunchbox didn't until he stomped his booted foot down on the center of it, crushing in the top. "Damn him." He growled, knocking more things to the floor, clearing off the shelves. He grabbed a vase and tossed it to the wall, shattering it into a million shards.

He panted, surveying what he'd done. Broken items, books, and papers lay strewn across the study floor.

*Stupid.*

It had made lots of noise, which might attract unwanted attention. And the act had brought him no closer to netting him the object he sought. He couldn't get caught, not now, when things were so close. It had to be here.

He swept one more thing to the floor, trying to calm down his breathing and work through his pique.

And that's when he saw it.

The object rested by itself on a bottom shelf he hadn't cleared. He hadn't even noticed it before now. Why that was he didn't know.

It matched the description of the item. Perfectly.

This had to be it. The source of Marsters's magic.



He reached out to stroke the coolness of the material. What was it made of? It was so smooth, so cool to the touch. It quivered under his fingers.

Yes, this thing had power. It had to be the reason Marsters had magic.

And he now had it within his grasp.

He'd find its secrets and bring the mighty Marsters down from his lofty perch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe folded her hands in her lap as they winded up the curvy road to the cabin. It was an "Oh, shit" road because the slightest mishap, and one would wind up falling back down the mountain the quick way. So far it had been a quiet hour and a half ride in Drake's big-assed SUV. She'd heard so many, including Drake, say that they needed four-wheel drives in case of bad weather. Why he needed a golden SUV when there were grocery stores and drugstores on every other street, and they never got that much snow, she'd never understand. It was another thing about Drake that seemed to be about keeping up appearances.

Some said that men with big vehicles were compensating. He was definitely not; she'd had the evidence. Many times. Her eyes glanced down to his bulge, then quickly darted up before he caught her. Nope, no compensation there. Her neck heated, and she rubbed it. Oh, the things he could ... She shook off the thoughts. This trip wasn't about sex.

It was peaceful except for Drake humming a merry tune. She didn't recognize it but at least he wasn't singing. He couldn't sing worth a damn. The man was way too happy. He'd goosed her getting in to the car.

She frowned. Yeah, way too damn happy for her tastes.

*He thinks he's getting laid again.*

It wasn't going to happen.

*Uh huh. Two minutes after all the memories and romance of this place hit, then try and say that.*

She sighed in resignation. She hadn't lasted two minutes back at his house. She didn't have high hopes for this place where there had only been good times. Of course, what would be wrong with having sex with him? It had always been good between them. They were both consenting adults. What was the harm? Just because she had sex didn't mean she was getting back together with him. But would he see it that way?

"You know, even if we have sex, it doesn't mean I'm getting back together with you. Because I'm not getting back together with you." There. She'd put out it out. He could do with it what he wanted. She wasn't leading him on. She'd told him the score a few times now. If he got his hopes up, it was his own damn fault.

"What?" He kept his eyes on the road. He sounded surprised she'd spoken. Probably because she hadn't since she'd yelped at his hand on her rear.

*Breaking the silence with sex talk. Way to play it cool, Chloe.*

"I'm just saying ..."

Before she could repeat it, he interrupted, "I heard what you said. Should I turn the vehicle around now?"

She blinked at him. "Would I still get the artifact?"

"No. A deal is a deal. It's for the whole weekend."

Bastard. Getting her hopes up and then, letting them down. "No turning around. I will spend the weekend with you. Because of our deal."

"K. I was just checking." He shrugged his shoulders, looking a little smug. They rode a little longer in silence. "You know, we won't just be having sex. We have some things to talk about."

"Who said we're having sex?" She crossed her legs primly, glad to be wearing jeans instead of the tight, sinful dress she'd gone to Drake's in. She wore both underwear and a bra,

too. She'd have worn armor had she thought it would keep her from letting Drake under it. With her luck, she'd get stuck in it, though. And have to get blowtorched out. Maybe she should have gotten a chastity belt.

"You did."

"I did not!" She'd said no such thing.

"You said when we had sex, it wouldn't mean we were getting back together."

She gaped at him before closing her mouth. "I said no such thing. I said *if*. *If* we had sex." A classic case of a man hearing what he wanted to hear. Damn male. Yeah, she should have gone for the belt.

"Same difference."

"It is not. *When* is not *if*." He wouldn't look at her glare. Surveying the road ahead, a sign had many snaky curves on it. Fine, she'd glare at him at the cabin where he could see her without crashing them.

"O.K."

She huffed and a few seconds of silence ensued. "What do we have to talk about?" She didn't see where they had anything to discuss. Crossing her arms over her chest, she refused to look his way.

He said it so quietly, she almost didn't hear him. "Magic."

Snorting, she turned to look out her window at a drop-off to the valley below. They were nearing the cabin. "What, the magic of romance? Of being at the cabin? It's not going to work, Drake. I'm not getting back together with you." Maybe if she kept saying this, he'd get it through his head. Plus, she wouldn't feel guilty when she grabbed the artifact and ran after the weekend.

She glanced back to him. He shook his head. "No. We're going to talk about my magic."

Her heart did a tango. That was what had broken them apart. Her heart didn't slow down until they pulled into the long drive to the cabin. The trees lined the curvy ascent,

almost like they were closing in behind them. They were here. There was no escape now. Would she get the knowledge she'd always wanted about Drake's secrets? And what was she going to do with it after she got it?

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake carried the bags and groceries into the cabin. It looked much like it had the last time he'd been here, which had been years ago. He hadn't come up much without Chloe. A neighbor from the next mountain over checked on the place once a week to make sure no bears or drifters broke in, and kept watch on the hot tub. His friend would have cleaned it before they'd come up, but this had been spur of the moment.

The rustic cabin was small, only one story, with a full front porch and a deck off the back where the hot tub was. It had always reminded him of what he thought a log cabin would look like, with red wood siding. A pile of cut wood sat next to the front steps. He'd have to buy his friend some champagne for doing that. Especially if he got what he wanted.

Chloe walked around the living room, stirring up a little bit of dust. "*Kershoo*." She sneezed, shaking her head to clear it. She walked around some more, and his eyes followed the sway of her hips. Damn, she had a nice ass. He shifted his weight, absorbed in watching her. A drone clued him in that she was talking.

"... put those bags down. This place needs serious cleaning." She brushed a spider web away, continuing to rant about the state of the cabin.

He sighed. So much for things starting out romantic. So his friend wasn't the cleanliest of sorts. At least there'd been no bears. He stalked to the bedroom, putting down the two suitcases on the floor by the queen-sized bed. It had a red coverlet. He didn't remember that. Now the headboard, which had slats, that he remembered. Nothing like a good place to tie his Chloe to.

A snuffle came from the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting down the bags."

She arched a brow. "In here?"

He looked around the room. "It is the bedroom. But if you'd like them in the kitchen ..."

She made a noise that sounded much like a growl. "I know it's the bedroom. Why are both bags in here?"

Putting a dumb look on his face, he chuckled. "It's the only bedroom."

"I know that, but I'm not sharing a bed with you. That's not part of the deal." She folded her arms across her chest. It brought attention to those lovely breasts. Her nipples showed through the shirt and bra, or at least their state of hardness did. They always tasted wonderful. Her arms tightened, pushing up her cleavage. Her foot tapped impatiently on the floor. With effort, he managed to make his eyes move up. "And look at my face when I'm talking to you."

"Not sharing a bed isn't part of the deal, either."

"Drake."

"Look, you don't want to share a room, that's fine. But I'm sleeping in here."

"In the only bed in the house." Her eyes cut to the bed and then to him.

"There's a perfectly comfortable couch."

"It's lumpy."

"Then, sleep in the bed." He turned his suitcase over to lay flat on the floor, but didn't open it. He'd brought a few toys, hoping to use them before the weekend was out. Chloe saw those, and she'd go ballistic.

"You'll let me?"

"Sure. It's big enough for two." He waggled his brows. "I do get cold a lot, though. Might need an extra body to keep me warm." He could think of a few ways to keep them both warm when the fire went out.

She humphed out a loud breath. "I'm not sleeping with you."

"Well, I'm sleeping in here."

"It's the only bed."

"We've established that. And the couch is lumpy. But I'm still sleeping in here." He watched her figure out the circular argument they'd gotten into.

"A real man would let me sleep in the bed." She flounced out of the room, tossing her long hair back over her shoulder as she did.

He snorted. No man he knew would sleep on the couch with such a delectable woman within his grasp in this situation. He'd never take advantage of her, but he intended to exploit the circumstances. It wasn't like they hadn't shared a bed before. And besides, he did get cold. She had a small furnace in her body, enough to keep them both warm. How he'd enjoyed spooning against her body, waking up against her. They'd always put that morning hard-on to good use.

They both stayed on their sides of the cabin for a while, cleaning off some of the light dust and cobwebs. Drake started a fire to take off the chill, getting a nice flame glowing. Turning around, he found a sight that took his breath away.

Chloe stood on the small stepladder, reaching up into a cabinet for something. Her body stretched out as far as it would go, revealing skin where the clothes didn't meet. Her t-shirt had pulled up from her pants revealing creamy skin, her breasts playing peek-a-boo under the shirt. Her tongue crooked out one corner as she concentrated on fetching something. Shakespeare had been wrong. Summer's day lovely didn't even begin to compare to her. His cock came back to life, hardening.

How on earth had he ever let her walk away?

This time she wouldn't. He was going to break promises he'd made to his Dad when he'd first found out about his magic and then reiterated before his father had passed away. It

was tradition. Every man in his family made the promises to keep the family secret. That was why he'd kept silent all those years.

Fuck tradition.

He wasn't going to lose her again. And if that meant revealing something he'd never told another person, well, he'd do it.

On tiptoe, she stretched a little too far. He saw what was going to happen next and acted, snapping out of his thoughts. Stepping forward, he caught her in his arms as she slipped off the stepstool. As she pitched forward, her momentum propelled him downwards. He landed with a soft "oomph" on the hardwood floor. At the same time as her gasp, Chloe's curves pressed up tight against him.

"You know, if you want to be on top, all you have to do is ask." He wiggled underneath her as they both caught their breath. His cock strained against her. She had to feel it between them.

"You're incorrigible." She shook her head, bristling down at him. Her voice softened. "Thank you for catching me, though."

"It was nothing." He gently pushed her wayward curls back from her face. She had a scattering of freckles across her cheeks, resting below long lashes that fluttered down to cover her expressive eyes. He traced the angular line of her face before he placed a hand at the nape of her neck, stroking with his thumb. Her warm skin was like satin. He found a pressure point at the top of her spine, and he swirled his finger around the knob.

"Uhhhh." The throaty sound was involuntary. Her eyes shot open, wide with panic. She pushed against him with both hands. "Let me up."

"Chloe." He didn't remove his hands, nor did he give. "Enjoy my touch. I won't go any further than you want me to."

Her laugh sounded hysterical. "I can't." She broke free of him and bustled to the kitchen, rambling about finishing cleaning up and fixing dinner.

Closing his eyes, he lay there a second. He whispered, "You can." And somehow he'd see to it that she did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dinner was some chicken they reheated in the microwave, and a tossed salad. Chloe picked at hers, stealing furtive looks at Drake. He kept looking like he had something to say, but never got it out, whatever it was.

They'd stayed away from each other after she fell. She'd fixed dinner, he'd fiddled with the fire.

Her stomach sparked as much as his fire did, as she thought about the hard erection that had pressed into her belly. Yeah, he'd been aroused, up close and personal like that. And she'd come close to giving in and riding him like a bucking bronco at a country western bar. Her resolve had meant nothing. He'd looked like he'd been about to kiss her. And once those masterful warm lips touched hers, she'd have been gone.

Maybe she should give in. Give in and fuck him all weekend like she'd thought in the car. Come Monday, she'd gather the artifact and skip the hell out of Dodge. Maybe that would get him out of her system. How many times had she thought about him the last four years? Fantasized about him with her vibrator in hand? Too damn many to count.

But she couldn't separate her heart. The night she'd left him, she'd flat out told him the secrets were not anything she could put up with. She'd asked him to tell her everything. He'd told her, "I can't."

"You're thinking about the night you left me." Drake took a bite of chicken, tossing the statement out as casually as she'd tossed the salad.

"How did you know that?"

"You scrunched up your nose like something smelled bad. You always do that when you're upset."



She leaned back in her chair. “That doesn’t explain how you know. How did you know what I was thinking about?”

He shrugged. “I know you.”

He did. Too damn well sometimes. “You saved that girl.”

There had been so many extraordinary events the last year they’d been together. He’d done magic acts no one thought possible. She’d always laughed when people asked how he’d done them, saying he wouldn’t even tell her. They’d get amused, but it was true. It had started to wear at her. Why wouldn’t he share that part of himself with the woman he professed to love? They’d had lots of arguments.

The last night, he’d saved a girl from getting hit by a car. No one had seen it besides her. He’d asked her to lie, say he pushed the child out of the way. She’d done it, but didn’t understand why because he’d been nowhere near the girl. There wouldn’t have been trick wires or anything else in that street. No way anyone could have anticipated what happened. The child had described being picked up by arms. So her story had clicked with their stories, their lies.

Afterwards, she’d asked him what had happened. He’d blown her off, refused to tell her. It had been the final straw. She’d asked him so many times what he kept from her. And still he wouldn’t talk. He’d gotten angry, her temper had flared, and next thing she’d known, she’d marched out.

“I did save her.”

He’d never admitted it that night, only asked her to lie and never told her why. That comment threw her. So she went further. “How?”

“It’s a long story.” He leaned back in his chair. “Join me in the hot tub, and I’ll tell you about it.” He got up, grasping her hand in his.

“You’ll tell me? This isn’t some lure to get me in the hot tub so you can seduce me?” She slowly rose to her feet. This better not be something just to get her on her back. *He said*

*you could be on top.* Her face tightened. No, this better be for real. Or she'd give up the weekend and totem.

"I'll tell you. Keep an open mind. And follow me."

## Chapter Six

Drake hesitated only a moment before shucking off his clothes and stepping into the hot tub. He heard her gasps of indignation. He tossed back over his shoulder, “I forgot my suit.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I did.” He turned to face her. “Come on in.”

“Drake.”

“I promise we’ll talk.”

She shook her head, flouncing back inside the cabin. “I didn’t forget *my* suit.” He leaned his head back as he waited, looking at the blue sky and puffy white clouds floating across it.

Strutting back out, looking too pleased with herself, Chloe brought two fluffy white towels and sported a black one-piece. It wasn’t cut high or low in the right spots. He let out a deep sigh. He’d have to discuss her choice in swimwear with her later. Her legs stretched out from under it causing his mouth to water. Maybe he’d enjoy getting her out of it more than seeing her in it.

“So talk.” She pulled up on the side of the hot tub before sliding into the water. “Ahhhhhh.” A look of pleasure drifted across her face. God, he’d loved the way her face looked when she was about to come. It scrunched up. And honest Chloe, her face always showed whatever emotion she felt intensely.

“I kept secrets from you during our marriage.” So he could understate, too, just like her.

“That you sure did.” She ran a hand over the surface of the water, skimming it. Her fingers curled around to cup some water. His cock twitched, seeking some attention.

“What I’m going to tell you will sound ludicrous. But it’s the truth.” He looked her in the eyes, making sure he didn’t look away. “I need you to listen with an open mind.” She wouldn’t believe him at first. But after his evidence, she’d have to believe.

“O.K.”

“I have no magical talent.”

“Drake. I know that’s a lie. I’ve seen you perform.” She pushed to get up. “If that’s all you’re going to tell me ...”

“Stop. That’s not all.”

She slowly settled back down.

“I have no talent. What I do have is ability. I have magical ability.” Since he’d never told anyone about his being able to do magic, he had no idea how to express it, so starting simple seemed the best plan.

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I can do magic, Chloe. I don’t do tricks. I do actual magic.”

Her eyes narrowed down to slits. “You’re telling me you can do magic. Real magic.”

He nodded. “That’s what I’m telling you.”

“You’re crazy.” She shook her head. He saw the tears form in her eyes. “I thought you were going to open up. To actually tell me something. Instead, you ... you come up with this bullshit.” A tear broke free and ran down her cheek. “I never should have come here.”

It would have to come down to this. “Chloe. Watch.” He put his hand above the water and slowly raised the water, funneling it upward to his fingers. “See.”

“No. No. That’s not possible.” Her hand came up to cover her mouth.

He slowly turned colors off and on in the water, making it like a fountain. “It is.” He watched her face slowly grow from disbelief to realization.

Even so, she still tried to deny what she saw. “You have something out there to do this.”

He shook his head. “No. No. I don’t. You tell me something to do. I’ll do it. Whatever it is.”

Her mouth opened quickly. “Levitate that chair.” She looked at him boldly like there was no way he could do it. Like he couldn’t. He’d done stuff like that since he was a child. Lifting the hot tub might have been a challenge because of all the cords. This was nothing.

He lifted the chair in the air and twirled it for good measure.

“You could still have it rigged. Braid my hair.”

“What?”

“You heard me. It’s the one thing I take with me wherever I go. You couldn’t have rigged it. Braid my hair.”

He didn’t even watch, simply pushed out his magic. Her breath sucked in with a whistle to let him know she felt her hair braiding behind her.

“Take it down.” Her voice was strained, hoarse.

He turned to her, watching as his magic took out the plaits it had put in her hair. “There you go.”

“Oh, my God. All your ... acts. Your tricks. That girl. You were doing *real* magic.” Her eyes stared wide open at him.

He nodded, so glad it was out in the open. Until she tossed water at him, hitting him in the chest. “Why didn’t you ever tell me, you son of a bitch?” Her eyes flashed anger burning hotter than any rocket fuel.

So much for coming clean with her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe tossed water at him, hitting him in the chest. It was better than hitting him, which she wanted to do. He hadn’t trusted her. All the vows they’d taken, promises they’d made, love they’d shared, and he hadn’t trusted her with such vital information. At first, she hadn’t believed it, but what else could she believe? Her ex-husband could do real magic. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

She tried not to think about the body of perfection under the water, which, even as pissed as she was, set her body on fire. She’d been so proud going to get her bathing suit and ignoring his body, while what she wanted to do was take a nip from that rear when he’d gotten into the hot tub in front of her. She could have put her hand on that delectable hard cock and played. But she’d resisted.

Drake grabbed her hands, presumably so she wouldn’t splash again or hit him. “There was more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?” What more could there be? Totem or no totem, she was out of here. Her throat ached from trying not to cry. She’d known he kept secrets. But she hadn’t known when he told her, it would hurt so much what he’d kept from her.

“The gift or genetic component of whatever this is only affects men. And the men decided generations ago never to tell the women in their lives.” He kept hold of her hands, but his hold wasn’t tight. She didn’t resist. Somehow it didn’t seem important. Her stomach

did a flip-flop at the way he held her, so gently yet firmly. He wasn't out to restrain her, just to keep his hands on her.

"You mean because Great Grand-Daddy decided not to tell his wife, no one has?" She stared at him, incredulous. How unfair.

Drake murmured an agreement. "And it was a few more "greats" back than that." She drew out a snort, unconcerned at who the man was who'd started the tradition. All she cared about was Drake and how this had affected them.

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Because one stupid male in your family decided to be an ass, the rest of you have to be?"

He released her hands, his color rising. "The stupid male watched his brother be proclaimed a witch by his so-called wife and put to death. So, I don't think he was out of line."

Ouch. Now that must have put the man off women. But dammit, she'd never have turned Drake into the witch hunters. Her hands clenched under the water as more tears threatened. "But I'd never have done that to you. You couldn't find it in you to trust me? To tell me something so deep about yourself?" She leaned forward in the little seat, trying not to fall off of it. That was what stung. Drake hadn't trusted her.

"I promised my father. And ... it was something he strongly believed was for the good of the Marsters' line. He made me promise when he told me, when we were married, and again when he died that I'd never tell you."

"Oh, my God. Had we had a male child, he would have had the power?" She put her hand over her mouth at Drake's nod. "He'd have kept it from me, too. I'd never have known about him or you."

"If we had a male child, he wouldn't get his powers until long after puberty, usually around eighteen or so. And yes, he would have been told to keep it from any woman in his life."

Two men in her life would have kept something so important to them from her. Her head ached now.

“Don’t you want to know why I’m telling you now?” He shifted around, leaning back his head on the side.

“Why?” She rubbed her temples with a damp hand.

“Because I don’t want to lose you again. I don’t want you to walk away.”

Her heart skipped a beat. Now, that put fluttering butterflies in her stomach. “But you didn’t tell me before when I was walking away.” And God knows, she’d given him ample opportunity to tell her. She’d loved him so much. What had changed, what had upped the ante for him? Who knows? But at least, now, she knew. But what did that mean for them? He had opened up, let her into his world. If only he’d done that so much earlier. Her stomach clenched.

“I know. But I’m telling you now. Because I want you in my life. Life without you just isn’t worth living. No matter how much I have in my life, it isn’t you, Chloe.” He rubbed a hand through his hair. “And I can’t keep my magic from you if you’re with me. Not anymore.”

“I don’t know if I can trust you, Drake. This was big, not telling me this.” Trust was never easy; she’d never been more betrayed. She glanced up into the tree to the sky. It seemed so close and yet, like it went on forever. At one time in her younger days, she’d thought their love would be endless like that sky. A part of her wanted it to be.

“Give it a chance.”

Could she? Her eyes closed as her mind mulled. She’d never stopped loving him, even when she’d wanted to. And he had told her the big secret he’d been guarding for so long. Her throat closing up, she managed to get out, “I’ll give it a chance. But I’m not guaranteeing anything. Let’s take the rest of the weekend one step at a time.”



He let out a whoop and pulled her over against him. "That's all I could hope for." His hand caressed her back.

She rested against his naked body. His cock pushed into her like an exclamation point. Her whole body broke out in goosebumps as he stroked her shoulder with careful fingertips. "Chilly?"

Was he kidding? Her whole body was having a hot flash. Heat seemed to be everywhere and hotter than the dang hot tub. His body against hers did that. "No."

"Good." She almost didn't hear the word. He repeated, "Good," as if he knew that. Then his lips swept in to claim hers. He quested, testing her reactions and deepening the kiss. Her mouth opened under his warm one. He tasted like cinnamon, the sharp flavor yummy when mixed with that of the man.

His hand ran up and down her throat, caressing gently, before reaching down to probe into the top of her swimsuit. Now if only she'd worn one of the lower-cut ones, it would be easier for him to get her out of. At the time she'd packed, she hadn't wanted temptation for her or him. Now she wanted the dang thing off. But he found his way into the top, his fingers lightly dancing over her breast. She arched her chest more into his hand, falling into the sensual spell that was always Drake.

Her senses jangled with the possibilities. He'd come clean with her, told her what he'd kept from her for so long. Her return kisses became frenzied and frantic. Maybe it could work this time.

His hand massaged and cupped her breast, pulling out the bathing suit as much as he could to access her breast. She'd remembered his rough hands all too well. They touched gentle and masterful where she wanted it. Needed it. They needed to run down her body all over. Heat engulfed her even more.

She moaned into his mouth. He captured the sound, not releasing her mouth even a quarter. His tongue danced a quick dance with hers, rolling around it, making hers come to his.

They were both panting in time with the other when he pulled away with a growl. "Inside. Now."

"O.K." Yes, he needed to be inside her. God, she couldn't wait. Last time, it had been quick and furious. This time would be that, too, but there'd be more. So much more. She'd wake up beside him. It had been too damn long since that had happened. Her hand reached the top of her swimsuit to bring it the rest of the way down, strip bare before him much like he'd stripped down his life earlier.

But he leapt from the hot tub in one quick jump.

Her eyes wrinkled before she comprehended. "Oh." He meant inside the cabin, not inside her. So she was eager, he wouldn't care. He'd never minded that side of her. In fact, he'd encouraged it to come out more often.

He winked at her, realizing where her thoughts had gone. "That, too. Inside."

"It's a beautiful day outside, you know?" She shot him a look, which he regarded impassively. He had his mind made up they were going inside. Sighing in resignation, she moved to get out of the tub.

She yelped slightly as he slung her over his shoulder without so much as a warning. Her head hung halfway down his back. "What are you doing?" Her eyes took in the dime-sized freckle that rested part way down his spine. She'd always liked to kiss that thing on her way down to his ass. It was like a point on a roadmap.

"Going inside. Like I told you."

Dangling her arms down, she smacked him on his bare ass. That stopped him for a second, before he pushed open the back door to the cabin. "You're going to pay for that one, missy." Amusement laced his voice.

“I was hoping so.” She smacked him again lightly with a grin. Served him right to put her up there like he was some Neanderthal. Yes, this was how things had been when they’d been good between her and Drake. They’d been playful, loving to tease and seduce. She’d missed that part of their relationship most of all.

Inside the house, he plopped her down, standing her on bare feet on the living room floor. She dug her toes into the soft squishy carpet.

“I can’t believe you spanked me.” A lazy grin tugged the corners of his mouth up, compromising the stern tone he used.

“It seemed like a good thing to do at the time.” She waggled her brows at him. “You can return the favor later.”

“Minx.” He sidled closer to her.

“You know it ...” She didn’t finish because his lips claimed her mouth savagely, taking her into a kiss that was a branding. His tongue explored her, dipping in to sway against hers, probing in and out.

Her body burned with wants and needs. Her pussy pulsed in time with her heart. Damn, she’d had him the day before. But her desire hadn’t ebbed in the slightest. In fact, she wanted him more than ever.

She stroked at his broad shoulders, loving the feel of them. His muscles flexed and stretched under her fingertips. She loved the play. Her nose tickled with chlorine and some type of spicy aftershave, which somehow he made work for him. His skin would taste of salt and chlorine, too. She couldn’t wait to get her mouth on him. She’d kiss him everywhere.

One of his hands came up to caress the nape of her neck, sliding in up under her mass of hair to the skin underneath, stroking gently before moving to her shoulder to slide one strap of her bathing suit down. All the fine hairs on her skin prickled up and a shudder shook her as she anticipated his next move. His mouth moved from hers to her neck, trailing down to follow the strap as it moved further down her arm. He nipped her collarbone as his other

hand pulled down the second strap. His tongue traced a path where the straps had come down.

The top gaped away from her breasts as the straps went completely down her arms to her elbows. "You have such beautiful breasts." He skimmed kisses over their tops. The feel of his tongue was soft, yet a little raspy as it slid over the sensitized skin.

"Hrmph." Not the intelligible noise she'd intended. She urged his mouth lower by shifting her body, and with her hands. And apparently he could read minds. Because not only did his hands slide down the top, freeing her from any bindings, his mouth eagerly drew in a nipple, sucking it into fiery wet depths. Her neck arched back. Moisture slickened her willing pussy. His tongue circled the nipple, going outwards in ever-increasing circular swipes.

When he reached her other nipple, her whole body melted into a gooey puddle. Only his hands strategically placed on her ass kept her from sinking to the floor. As it was, she put more weight onto him. He knew her so well, knew how much she liked this and couldn't handle standing whenever he did it.

Releasing her nipple, he looked up into her face. His eyes glowed like sapphires, blazing out a passion that captured her in its wake. "Like, sweetheart?" He nipped the side of her breast. Then laved his tongue across to sooth the skin he'd teased.

"Yes. Yes, I like." She swallowed, trying to slow down her breathing. Her eyes surveyed the room, looking for the perfect place to continue this. A green easy chair rested by the fireplace and a set of windows. Yes, that would do nicely.

He'd promised her on top, and she was taking advantage of the promise.

She pushed at his head, getting lost from her goal as her fingers touched his hair. So thick and silky, it slid softly through her fingers. She ruffled it before guiding him to the chair.

“What are we doing?” She put one finger on his chest and pushed again. The back of his knees reached the chair’s front.

“Sit down.”

“Got plans for me, do you?”

She licked her lips. “Oh, yeah.” She let the suit slip down the rest of her body, making her as naked as he was. His eyes seemed to drink her in.

He sat down, spreading his legs apart. His cock stood out at attention between his muscular thighs.

*Yum.*

She ran a hand down his chest, playing with the crisp hairs before circling his flat nipple. It was only a shade darker than his brown skin. Her fingernail flicked it. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough to bring around a jump from Drake.

“Hey, now.”

“Hush, you big baby.” She leaned in and fastened her mouth on his nipple, swirling her tongue over before sucking. He leaned back more in the chair. It made a creak. Surely the chair was strong enough to hold them both. She didn’t want a repeat of the table. This chair was just old and noisy. The latter was what she was going to make Drake.

His hand came up to cup her breast, gently squeezing. She slightly rocked back. “Ah, ah. None of that.”

“I don’t get to touch you?” His lips fanned out into a mock pout. She ran her fingers over them. When she withdrew her fingers, he moved his jaw back and forth, probably because of the tickle.

“Later.” There’d be many rounds of getting reacquainted. “But for now, it’s my turn. Don’t make me tie you up.”

He chuckled from deep in his chest. The sound rumbled out. “Later, I’m going to tie you up.”

Shivers radiated out from the inside. God, she loved that. It had been too damn long. The bed here was perfect for it. And no one did it like Drake.

She leaned down to treat his other nipple to the fun fest the first had had. Racing her tongue back and forth across it, she caressed his neck and shoulders with her hand. Slowly, she kissed downwards, planting big wet kisses down his six-pack abs. "You still work out." He'd stayed fit for being on stage and in front of the camera.

He shrugged. "I'm used to it."

She tickled along his belly button, before sliding her body lower, her head level with his cock. It twitched before her eyes. A little bit of pre-come rested in the tip. She clutched his cock in one hand, drawing it out, swirling her pointer finger in the wetness. She lifted her hand as his cock rose with it. Stroking her thumb slowly down the velvety skin, she wrapped her hand around it again. He caught his breath.

Leaning forward, she dabbled her tongue on its tip. While it was still wet, she blew softly onto his cock. His body broke out into goosebumps, the hairs rising. He splayed out his thighs a bit more.

Lowering her head, she sucked in slightly, enveloping his tip. She blew softly again. His breathing hitched, and his hands clutched at the sides of his chair.

This time she took him in partway down his length, laving her tongue around the bottom. She pulled back to blow softly.

"God. What are you doing?"

Her lips pulled back into a grin. "Giving you a blow job."

He groaned deep in his throat at her joke. And she went down, taking all of him into her mouth at once. His hips bucked slightly. Slowly, up and down his length she went from top to bottom and up again. She treated his cock like it was a candy cane at Christmas, slowly suckling. Only he didn't get any smaller like the candy would, only harder.

Opening her mouth as far as she could to take him in, she heard his rough swallow as she went down to the base. Her hand reached under his bottom to fondle his balls. His hips jerked up in the air. Another groan escaped his lips. She quickened her pace, up and down, up and down. Coming up to the tip, she swirled around it while suctioning.

Raising her head, she looked down at his cock. He was stretched out completely, swollen. Turned on. She moved her tongue around the outside of her lips, tasting a little bit of salty aftertaste from the pre-come that had smeared there.

The man who sat before her spread out in the chair, taking up all the room. His tanned skin and dark hair contrasted with his green eyes. Damn, what a man. *Her man*. Biting her lip, she let out a sigh. She'd never felt about anyone the way she did about him and in the time they'd been apart, had developed doubts she ever would. No man made her feel like he did when he touched her. It wasn't even worth trying. It was like they were made for each other.

She pushed herself up so she was above him.

His eyes followed her movement. His voice sounded deep and throaty, rumbling in his throat. "You on top, huh?"

"You know it."

His eyes suddenly shot open, his body tensing. "Condom. Shit." He pulled as far away from her as he could get.

She patted his shoulder, fingers stroking over the smooth skin. "Don't worry, I'm on the pill."

He relaxed a smidgeon, but stayed flexed, ready to move. "If you're wondering, I'm clean."

"Me, too." Only two others since Drake, both in the first year, and there had been protection used. Oddly enough, she trusted his comment on this issue. If he said he was

clean, that was enough for her. He was a fanatic enough about his health to be sure he was clean.

He put one hand on either side of her hips and helped to lower her down around him. He'd conceded the top position to her, not something he did often. His eyes rolled back in his head as her pussy slowly sucked him in, stretching to accommodate him. Yes, that first moment always set her on fire as her thick wetness engulfed his head.

He relaxed the rest of the way as she moved further down on him, taking more of him into her pussy. Lifting her hips up, she began a rhythm of up and down, up and down much like she'd done with her mouth earlier.

He clutched at her hips with tightening fingers. Each pass down onto his thick length pushed him more into her and made nerve endings she didn't even know she had fire off. Her walls tightened around him on the descent. This time she made them further indent around him.

"Ohhhhhh." The eyes rolled back again. His hips pushed against her.

So he liked that. He'd tortured her enough with things she liked.

He wanted to speed up the pace. But she was in control. She bit her lip, liking the motion and mastery she had.

She rose up higher, coming back down fast and doing the same move, clenching her pussy even more around him

"Ohhhhh boy." He managed to strangle out the words past a growl, but only barely.

He lifted his hands from her hips as if remembering they were there, and lifted them up to palm her breasts.

"Drake," she warned. This was her turn, and she planned on taking it. Her back arched, pushing her more into his questing hands. So it was good. Didn't mean she was ready to give up control.

"Come on. Let me." His hands stoked with the delicacy and finesse they'd always had.



*Zing.* After cupping her breasts and kneading the mounds, he squeezed her nipples between both thumb and forefinger on each hand.

“Ohhhhh.” She couldn’t stop the moan from passing through her lips.

“Oh, yeah.” He sounded pleased, but it wasn’t something she could dwell on. Not with hands there and his cock up there.

She went down on a stroke, grinding into him, tightening her muscles around him as much as she could. *Take that.*

He rewarded her with a lengthy growl, his fingertips tightening around her buds until it merged pleasure with pain.

His hips jerked up, as he tried to plant himself as far into her as he could get. She couldn’t get him close enough, rocking against him, getting him as deep as he would go. His whole body broke out into a sweat and shuddered. One shout of her name, and he came, pumping his seed up into her as she came around him. His orgasm she’d seen coming. Hers was a shock. She’d been close for a while, but hadn’t expected to go over the edge. Her pussy milked him for each little drop, taking it all in. Her thigh muscles quivered.

She came down to rest on top of him. Her pants slowly began to resemble normal breathing again. But her heart pounded like a racehorse on the track.

It had never been better between her and Drake. And as good as it had been in the past, that was scary. Protecting her heart wouldn’t be easy, nor would trusting him. But this was a step in the right direction.

## Chapter Seven

Drake looked up at the spent woman still spread out on top of him. He wrapped his fingers in her hair, sliding them through the soft, velvety strands. His breathing slowly began to calm down, and he came back to earth after spending some time in the heavens.

She let out a long soft sigh. She curled up in his lap, against his chest. Shoving his hands under her, he picked her up.

She opened one eye at him. "What ... are you doing?"

"Taking this party to the bedroom." Where he planned to do everything and more to her. They weren't getting out of the cabin this trip. Maybe next time they'd enjoy the mountains and scenery. The only peaks he'd be climbing were hers.

She snuggled into his neck. "O.K." Her lips tickled the side, causing a line of shivers to run down his body like waves.

Depositing her on the bed, he lunged up beside her to stretch out. "I missed you." There, he'd said it; it was out. His stroked his hand along her arm. Her skin was so soft and touchable.

"I missed you, too, Drake." Her voice was so throaty, deep, and sexy, saying the words he'd wanted to hear.

“Good.” He moved in to kiss her, slowly and gently, possessing her mouth.

Her half-lidded eyes regarded him as she took his chin in her hands. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

He cock sprung up to say it had had enough recovery time. Leaning in, he kissed her again, his tongue dancing against her before he pulled away.

She watched him, languishing on the bed, while he went to his bag. Opening the zipper, he dug around, moving stuff out of his way. Where were they? He had packed them. *Ah ha*. He pulled out the magician’s scarves.

There were two sets. Both of them colored alike, like a banded rainbow. They were extra long for pulling out of a hat. He’d never needed them for that, but they’d worked great to give Chloe a little kink in her sex.

“I guess you didn’t need those. When you performed.”

“No. I didn’t. Never used them in my acts.”

Her eyes grew distant. “You never needed them with me, either.”

The truth was, he could restrain her with magic. He could do anything to her with magic, from providing a vibrating sensation on her clit without the vibrator to creating the sensation of a thousand tongues licking or hands touching her. “I like using the real thing.” They’d seemed to fit her.

Her lip quirked up, still wet from his kisses. “One day, you’ll have to show me what magic can do with sex.”

His breath caught in his throat. “One day?” God, he’d never dreamed she’d accept him enough to talk about him using magic to make love to her. That she hadn’t booted him out yet was about all he’d secretly hoped for if he ever told her.

“One day.” She propped her head up on her arm to look at him. “Not today. I’m still getting used to the fact you have magic.”

“One day, I’ll show you what magic can do. But for today, I’m going to show you what *I* can do.”

She shivered, watching him stretch out the scarves. “I can’t wait. For both.” The words warmed him away from any doubts.

He grinned, wrapping the scarves over and over his hands. He didn’t miss the way her eyes were drawn to the restraints he held or the way they lightened. She’d always loved being tied down while he had his way with her. It had been an accidental discovery when he’d realized how much she’d liked him holding down her arms. Her orgasms always seemed more vivid then. That had led to him trying out scarves, a magical evening even with no real magic being used. “Good. Roll over on your stomach.”

She swallowed, the sound audible in the quiet room. Flipping over, she put her arms above her head in the right position for him to get started. She must want this as bad as he did.

His hand stroked up one arm to her hand. Her arm was cotton candy smooth and from experience, her skin tasted sweeter. “Looking for something?”

“You know it.” A flush ran over her body, before settling in her cheeks, which pinkened up nicely.

*Don’t be embarrassed.* He never was. He tied the scarf loosely around one wrist. Looping the other end through the slats, he then secured it to her other wrist. He yanked on the scarf to make sure it was tight before checking her wrists to make sure it wasn’t too tight and biting into her skin. It was loose enough that she could flip over.

He ran his hands palm side down over her back before making swirls down the sides. She wriggled from his touch. Getting up, he walked away from the bed. His cock was already like a rock and weeping. But damn, he wanted this to last.

He saw Chloe crane her neck to see what he was doing, but she couldn’t get a good view because of how she was tied. She lowered her head, hunkering down before her hands pulled slightly on the bonds. Freedom was possible, but not her intent by any means. If it

was, he'd never tie her up. Her breathing slowed down. She always went into a place all her own when she was restrained, but said it was a good one.

He walked back over to her, dumping some massage oil in his hands, and warming it up. The sweet flowery scent filled the room. She startled when his hands touched her back. "You all right?" He always checked before they got going.

"I am. What's on your hand?"

"Warming massage oil." He intended to run his hands all over her body, leaving no spot untouched.

"Boy, you came prepared."

"Boy Scout training."

She snorted, which turned into an *ahhh* as he pressed on a pressure point at the end of her spine. He smiled at the simpering sounds she made. To think he'd almost lost this. Lost her. Never again. He'd do whatever it took to keep her. "How about magician's training?"

She didn't answer as he pressed fingers into her spine all the way up, then back down her spine. His hands rubbed, gently kneading the muscles, the oil making them glide across her skin.

"Ummmmmm."

After his hands had traveled her back many times over, pressing into every pressure point, he rubbed her ass, pressing into the globes with his thumbs.

Her breathing quickened.

"Chloe?"

"Ummmm."

"I still owe you." He brought his hand down, smacking her bottom lightly.

"Drake!" She wiggled, trying to get away from him.

He smacked her softly again. "I told you I'd pay you back."

“Beast.” She wiggled more, her ass shaking with her efforts.

He placed one hand at the center of her back. “Now that you’ve been repaid, I’ll continue.” He massaged her muscles, leaning down to sooth where he’d smacked with kisses and a bit of tongue.

She relaxed, her body slowly stilling as he administered more massages and kisses until it was time to move on to more parts of her. “Turn over.”

She hesitated before testing the bonds and doing what he said. His eyes feasted on her breasts. How he loved those rosy peaks, which were pebbled. Yeah, sex with her was better than any mountain sightseeing. He squirted more of the oil from the little bottle onto his hands, before starting at her collarbone and working his way slowly down her torso.

He paid particular attention to her breasts, kneading them, rubbing in the oil ever so slowly. His thumbs brushed across her nipples, causing her to jerk. He squeezed them tightly in his fingers, wringing them back and forth.

He skipped the center of her body, going low to her legs and caressing them, before beginning his massage. She let out a deep sigh.

He reached her calves, doing a slow thorough massage of her toes and feet. He slowly dragged his thumbs up her heels and arches, sliding in between toes before starting back up her leg. He used his thumbs to squeeze on the sides of her legs. When he reached her upper legs, he slid his hands over to her inner thighs.

She straightened with a gulp, trying to spread out her quivering limbs. His hands kneaded her legs, squeezing gently, but not touching her innermost parts. A musky scent reigned in the air, telling him how much she’d been enjoying this. It told him how wet she’d be. His fingers itched to play but he kept them away.

His thumbs met in her center, grazing downwards across her sensitive skin but only slightly, little to no pressure applied, nor did he get near to her sweet pussy. Her breath stopped before starting to wheeze.

He went back to her inner thighs, massaging, still leaving alone her pussy and clit. He didn't have long before her protest.

"Drake." She tried to twist her hips to put his hand nearer to her center. He moved away but she followed as much as she could.

He placed one hand on her stomach. "Stop." He was at the limits of his control. All he could think of was being inside her. And he wanted this to last a while longer. He needed to find some measure of willpower to get him through the moment. That wouldn't be found inside her sumptuous pussy. The only thing he'd find there was pleasure. Not a bad deal, but dammit, he wanted more. He wanted it all, her pleasure, his pleasure. Her love.

"But ..."

He continued his torture of her and himself. After a minute, when he'd gained some control of his libido, his fingers began a game of going closer and closer to where she wanted them, then pulling back. He would almost touch her clit, then back off, usually to her grunt or keen of protest.

Her hands had clenched into tight fists by the time his thumb pressed in to stroke her. Her whole body rocked to the sensations in rhythm to his touch. He increased the pressure, sliding one of his fingers into her channel. Her pussy clutched at him, drawing him into her wetness. He'd never witnessed her so eager, and it drove his own hunger. He wanted to drive her mad, as mad as she drove him without even trying. Soon her hips lifted with a wild bucking motion, the orgasm sweeping over her.

He kept his fingers with her until her cries settled down, then swooped up her body to give her a lingering kiss.

Gasping for breath, she kissed him back with fervor. "You better have a great place to hide the body."

"Body?" He gently kissed along her collar. His cock rubbed between them, thrusting against her stomach.

“Yeah. I saw stars. I think you killed me.”

He chuckled softly. “I’ll be sure and do that again.” She groaned, her body wracked by a shiver. He rubbed one hand up her arm. “Flip back over.”

With a contented sigh, she did just that, her bound hands in front of her. He ran his hands all over her back. She shifted up to get on her knees. Yes, she knew what was coming. With a grin, he planted himself in back of her. His hands lingered on her hips before testing her willing pussy, which was more than wet, more than open. She was ready for him. His cock jerked, more than ready for her.

Widening his knees, he reached down to help aim and thrust into her. He gently urged her forward more. She shuddered as he popped fully inside her. Her sheath was so tight around him, stretched over him. There was so much wetness surrounding him.

His legs trembled with the force of his passion. He wouldn’t last long. He thrust his hips as his balls swung forward. She moved her bottom back against him, taking him as deeply as she possibly could. Four thrusts, and he came, with a loud groan rocking his body along with the words, “I love you.” He rocked against her several more times, his orgasm pouring out of him.

Huffing a breath, he pulled out, lying down beside her. She immediately snuggled into him as much as she could, like a cat seeking a nuzzle.

He’d never felt about anyone the way he did Chloe. The words he’d said a few minutes ago, the love ones, he meant wholeheartedly. They weren’t simply a byproduct of a great orgasm. Had Chloe heard them? And what would she do if she had?

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe zoned in the place that only a super great orgasm could provide. Her hands were still bound, her pussy was all juicy and stretched. She blew out a small breath. Yes, this had been just what she needed.



She'd needed it, wanted it, with Drake. No one else would do.

As he untangled the knotted scarves holding her to the bed, she lay in the stillness of the room. A bird chirped right outside the window, breaking the silence. He wrapped his arms around her, threaded his legs through hers. Yet another thing she'd missed about being with Drake was the time after the loving. She'd lie there in his arms, as safe and secure as could be. He'd drift off after only a few minutes. She'd hear the moment when sleep claimed him and fall asleep herself to his soft little snores. It was her favorite way to achieve slumber. God, she'd missed it.

In the throes of his orgasm, he'd said the love words. Not something he'd often said out loud to her during their marriage. It had probably been the orgasm glow that had prompted it. Had he meant it?

"I meant it." His words were muffled against her hair.

Her eyes drifted closed to shade her eyes. He knew her so well to know what she was thinking about. Either that or he'd lied and magicians could read minds.

She shoved that thought back where it came from, clenching her fists by her side. But it was the root of a more serious problem.

*She still didn't trust him.*

He'd lied to her for so long about something huge. It would take time for any amount of trust to build up in her again. If it ever did. Hopefully, it would.

Until then everything he said would be put to a litmus test of truth. She wouldn't like living that way. He wouldn't like it either. But it couldn't be helped.

Opening her eyes, she responded, "I know." His body sagged down. It wasn't the response he'd wanted, that much was obvious. She bit her lip, snuggling into his warm chest. Silence took over the room, both of them lying there in it not daring to speak until she took a deep breath. She had to be honest with him. It was only fair. "One day at a time." Maybe, sometime soon she'd be able to say it, but not right now. Yes, she loved him, but love hadn't

been enough once. And it seemed so binding, so final to say it back. She stroked his washboard stomach, her fingers gently rubbing across the ridges.

“That’s O.K. We’ve got time.” He swallowed harshly. His action moved muscles underneath her. It wasn’t O.K. but he was doing his best act to reassure her. He was good at acting, at a performance, but she knew him too well. He’d hoped she’d say it back to him. She smiled, warm mushy feelings invading her and pooling down low in her stomach. He’d done so much to win her back today. And it did count, it just wasn’t enough yet for her to go all the way. He swallowed again, stroking up her forearm. “Say it when you’re ready.”

Now that she would do. “I’ll do that. I promise.”

They’d started taking some of those baby steps to getting back their relationship. It would be a long road to walk, but each step would take them closer to being together fully, closer to her being able to say words of love back to him.

And that’s when Drake’s cell phone rang.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hello.”

The female voice that answered on the other end of the phone threw him for a moment. Rob had expected to get Marsters, not the ex-Mrs.

“Helloooo?” she said again with exaggerated emphasis. That spurred him to speak. She was probably about ready to hang up, thinking it was a wrong number.

“Hello, Mrs. Marsters.” Dammit, the woman probably didn’t know how to work the artifact. He’d been messing with the damn thing for hours. He was no closer to knowing how it gave Drake magic than when he’d started. He’d wanted to contact Drake infused with Drake’s own magic to show off, but it hadn’t happened that way.

Instead, he was going to have to make Marsters tell him how to make the magic work. He’d had a helluva of a time finding another number for Marsters before stumbling on the

second listing under his name, a cell phone. *Gotta love the internet.* He'd even found a second address for Drake, and a handy mapping program would tell him the fastest route to get there. Not that he intended to go to him, assuming that's where he'd gone. No, Marsters would come to him. He'd see to that.

Maybe he could use her. Yes, he could use her to get what he wanted. They hadn't gone up to a mountain cabin hideaway to hike and explore the mountains. That wasn't Marsters's style. No, they'd gone up there to fuck. To get their rocks off each other, not the mountainsides. He'd talk to her, not Drake this round. He'd make Drake nervous by telling him exactly what Gray had taken. That would make Drake crazy.

Her voice caught in her throat. He heard the fear in her voice. She didn't know what fear was yet, but before it was over, she would. He'd find her after it was over, show her the way to Gray. "Who is this?"

"My name is Rob Gray. I know that he's sitting there right beside you." They'd probably finished fucking and Marsters was sleeping. Stupid bastard. Doing a woman and sleeping while the source of his magic was being stolen. Seems like something would have clued him in when Rob had taken it. But Drake was probably too simple to even notice any signs that would have told him his magic power had been stolen. Yet another indicator Drake wasn't worthy. But Rob was.

"Do you want to talk to ..."

"No. No, you can pass this message on to him. He's ... a friend of mine, see." More like an enemy, but he was finessing this. The whore wouldn't know who Drake's friends were and weren't. She'd been out of his life for four years. "You might remember me. I'm a magician, too."

"Ummm. Rob Gray, you said? That name doesn't ring a bell." His fists clenched so tightly his nails bit into his hands. *Bitch.* After he showed her magic, she'd remember his

fucking name. “O.K. I’ll pass any message along.” He heard Drake’s voice drone softly in the background and the murmured “Shhhh” from Chloe.

“Tell him I have the object.” He sought for a better description. “The crystalline phallic one.”

“What?” Her voice became infused with ice. Before it had been suspicious; this was downright cold. “What object?” What had prompted the change in tone?

“The smooth one. The one he’s been having checked out by historians. He’ll know which one I’m talking about. It sat in his study.”

More ice tumbled from her lips like a glacier tumbling free in the Arctic. “You have *my* artifact.”

So Marsters had promised his ex-wife the source of his magic, probably for a good fucking. He shook his head. *Idiot*. He’d been led around by his balls instead of his head, like most men were.

But he could use this. The woman sounded like rage was bubbling up after the ice. Suppose she thought that Gray had taken it for Drake, even though he’d promised it to her. That would cause a lot of mischief between the loving couple. “Just tell him I secured it like he wanted me to. I’ll be in contact later to give him more information on where to get it.” A stroke of genius hit. “I made it look like someone had broken in.”

“You bastard. You never intended to give me the damn totem.”

That wasn’t directed at Rob. He heard Drake’s protest and “give me that.” Rob clicked off hurriedly, though he’d have enjoyed hearing the reaming that Drake would get from the Mrs. He’d let Drake sweat for a little while. It was only fair for the man who’d stolen Gray’s rightful position.

## Chapter Eight

Drake watched sparks fly off of Chloe as she stood there holding his cell phone in one hand. It was a cliché, but he swore he saw them flicking from her. “What?” he asked, still trying to get the phone from her hand. What the hell was Rob Gray up to? What had ironed Chloe’s flame up so high?

“Hello? Hello?” She clicked off the phone, tossing it on the floor. “Gray hung up.” She smacked his shoulder with the nearest hand. “You never intended me to get it. You rat fink asshole.” She continued to rail against him, questioning his parents’ marriage and tossing out several insults about his manhood. He looked around, making sure there was nothing to throw at him. He’d seen her mad, but never quite this angry.

His hands captured hers, pulling her closer to him in an attempt to calm her down. “What? Talk to me. What did Rob Gray say?” He hadn’t thought of Gray in years. Rob had been on the junior circuit and seemed to take it so much more seriously than other magicians. After he’d retired, Rob had come to him, trying to bring him out for a magician’s duel. Not that Drake would have done it; he’d been ready to step out of the limelight and hadn’t wanted to go back. Gray had seemed fixated on them competing as if they’d win some

crown or something for being the best. And that was nothing Drake needed, even if it would happen.

She stopped struggling in his arms, going limp as though the fight was out of her. Her eyes had teared up, the underneath suspiciously damp. “He said he got the item. He’ll contact you later on where to get it.” Her lip trembled, eyes now overflowing with tears. “You lied. You never intended to give me it.”

“Chloe, I don’t know what he’s talking about. What item?”

“My totem. He stole my artifact, the one you promised to me. No wonder you didn’t want it to come with us. You set it up. Me up. He described it, Drake. In detail. And said he’d secured it for you.” Her shoulder shook along with her whole body as if she were a plate of jello. “Like you told him to.”

“He didn’t take anything for me. Why would I want him to steal it? I promised it to you.”

“Bullshit. You got him to take it so I couldn’t have it. To make it look like it was stolen. So you wouldn’t have to give it to me.”

Shit and shinola. This was going downhill quickly. He did know the importance, how vital it was for her to secure the item beyond even the money she thought that she’d needed. He’d sensed how important it was to her to collect it. “I never told Gray to take anything, much less the totem.” He released her hands, trying to look her in the eyes. “You have to believe me. I intended to give it to you.” So she could deliver it as she’d promised. And they could live happily for the rest of their lives. So much for that happening. He let out a growl.

“Like you told me everything about you? Huh? When we were married?” She turned from him, refusing to meet his eyes, wrapping her arms tight around her middle. He managed to keep himself from reaching back for her to comfort her. She didn’t want that. Didn’t want him right now. “Like you told me you could do real magic instead of parlor tricks?”

“That’s different.” He rubbed his face with his hand, scrubbing the slight beard growth. “I’d never steal from you. Never.”

“Is it?” Her laughter was as brittle as her voice. It sounded as if she were breaking. And it cut him down to know he was the cause. “You stole years from us, Drake. Years you could have come clean and didn’t.”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. I have money ...”

“It does matter! I don’t want your damn money. I’m not your whore, and you can’t buy me. Get back what you stole from me so I can do it on my own.”

“I didn’t get Gray to steal that thing so I didn’t have to give it to you.” He clenched his hands tightly together. His irritation rose. “If I hadn’t wanted to give it to you, I wouldn’t have made the offer.”

“Then why’d he say that to me?” She rubbed away some tears, then pressed her arms tightly back where they were. “Why’d he say he took it for you if he didn’t? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t know why.” She was right. It didn’t make sense. Why would Gray tell Chloe this mess of lies, making it seem like there was some convoluted plot? Gray hadn’t liked him, but this was downright dirty. He’d have to find out, but the only one who could tell him was Gray.

“I wish I could believe you.” She looked at him, cheeks streaked with new tears. He ached to wipe them away, to start this thing over. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. They had been getting their love back. He was losing her all over again and didn’t know how to stop it. And this time, he was man enough to admit what he would lose, his most important thing. Of all the things he’d amassed, it didn’t mean squat when compared with Chloe. Only he’d realized that a little too late for them last time.

“You’d trust a man you don’t know over me?” Surely she wouldn’t. He’d screwed up in the past. But she didn’t know Gray at all. Surely knowing him for so many years would count for something.

“I don’t know he’s lied to me yet.” She blew out a shaky breath. “I do know, you have before.”

Drake’s stomach rolled with the implication. It was as if he’d been sucker punched to the gut. “I’m not lying.” He had no way to convince her. And it frustrated him beyond anything. Anger rose up in him, making his stomach burn.

“I wish I could believe you,” she repeated. Her head moved back and forth, her crying slowing down.

“Then do.” She had to. He was her husband. Yes, ex, but that could be easily rectified. And he loved her.

Her eyes were stark with pain as she stared him down. He wanted to look away, but couldn’t. Her eyes trapped him, keeping him in their gaze, no matter how much it tore him up to look in them. “I can’t. I won’t let you hurt me again.”

So there it was. The final curtain coming down on the last act of the performance. He’d lost, been booed out by the crowd. Drake pushed his hair back before swinging his legs over the bed to get up. He had to get out of here.

“What are you doing?” She still sat with her legs pulled under her, her arms wrapped tightly around her middle. And he wanted to envelop her in his arms and hide from the world that was pulling them apart. But he’d lost that chance. And it was for good this time. No second chances or getting her back. God, nothing had ever hurt so much as this. Knowing what he was losing made it all that much worse.

“I’m going to find out what the hell is going on. I’m going to find Rob Gray.” He didn’t know how, but somehow he’d find the son-of-a-bitch. Gray would have the answers to what was going on. That is, if Drake let him speak before he pummeled him. He was in a



pummeling mood right now, not in a listening one. To think, Chloe had had the worst temper when they'd been married. Right now, his would trump hers in her worst fit.

"And, you'll get the totem back. Back for yourself, that is." Her voice slipped into sounding like a steel trap. He'd heard the tone before. She was angry. That was O.K.; he was angrier. But her anger was toward him; his was toward Rob Gray. And that made all the difference. If only she believed him. Maybe he had some temper directed to her, too. Because she should have believed him.

He pulled a pair of pants over his legs. "I'll get it back and get it to *you*. As soon as I can." Grabbing a shirt, he put it on and buttoned it. Such normalcy in the face of things falling apart. Gray better be easy to find.

"Don't bother." She drew her legs further up underneath her as if she were cold. "Don't even bother. If the damn thing means so much to you, you'd have someone steal it for you."

"Dammit. I promised this to you. And I'll deliver it *to you*. Even if it kills me." He sat down on the bed to put on his boots, his body turned away from her. Even if he couldn't have Chloe, he'd see the Collector get the artifact, and she got the money. He'd make her take it. She would for her sister and her niece, if nothing else. "Promise me you won't leave here for twenty-four hours after I go. I'll get it back to you."

"Drake ..."

"Promise. Please."

She let out a soft sigh. "Fine."

Stalking out, he headed for his car. He was a man of his word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake left in a taxi, leaving Chloe alone at the mountain house. He'd had to pay an exorbitant amount to get the thing to come up in the mountains to get him. But that left

Chloe with a car to leave when she wanted. She hadn't talked to him after their initial confrontation. Merely nodded with a sad look to indicate she heard whatever he said to her.

He arrived home to find the house, mainly his study, in shambles. The security system had been disabled.

Someone had strewn stuff around, knocking it off the shelves. It was the Drake Marsters memorabilia which had suffered the biggest hit. It looked like someone had stomped all over it. Such anger had been displayed against him.

And he could guess the motivation behind all this now for Rob Gray.

Jealousy.

Gray was jealous of Drake's success. That much was obvious looking at the study. All the wealth and things he'd amassed from his magic act, the stuff that now meant so little, that was what had helped to cost him Chloe. If he hadn't been so successful at being a magician, at employing his real magic, then Gray would have left him alone. His abilities had cost him the woman he loved twice now.

Slumping, he plopped down in his arm chair, his throat closing up amid the squeak of protest from the springs.

The telephone rang, the sound echoing in the empty house. The house would always be empty now. Just him and his stuff.

He stared at it a moment before slowly picking it up. "Yeah?" His hope briefly rose. Maybe it was Chloe.

But he had no such luck. "Hello, Drake." Gray's snotty, snooty voice came over the receiver.

"You son-of-a-bitch. I'm going to make you pay." Drake growled. The man had cost him too much.

"Now now, Drake." Gray tsked. "Don't let that temper get the better of you. We have much to discuss."

“So start talking.” Drake’s hand tightened on the receiver, his knuckles white against the black as he put Gray on speaker phone and hung it up. “You told Chloe I told you to take the artifact.”

“Chloe? Oh, you mean the ex-Mrs. Yes, that seemed to light a fire under her, didn’t it? Especially as you promised it to her. What a dumb dick you are. Thinking with that little head again.”

Drake surveyed the destroyed objects as he fought down the urge to punch the phone, as Gray wasn’t there to provide his smug head. Only one thing was missing. That he was sure of. The totem. Why was that? There was so much stuff here, and Gray had walked out with only one thing. Not that a cheaply made, mass-produced Drake Marsters tarot card deck would have been worthwhile, but why nothing else? “Why did you take it?”

“You think you’re so damn smart. So ... worthy. You aren’t worthy. You’re nothing but a bullshitting, fraudulent hack. You’re less than scum.” The malice in Gray’s voice set Drake’s teeth on edge.

“You hate me.” Drake stated the obvious. He was trying to keep Gray on the phone. He wanted this conversation to complete and not leave him hanging like it had last time when Gray had talked to Chloe. One way or the other, he wanted to know what Gray wanted and where all this was going, instead of waiting for yet another call.

“I more than hate you. You took what’s rightfully mine. Mine!” Drake was almost tempted to check for spit on the phone, so emphatic was Gray’s spouting. Boy, Drake had pissed him off without even knowing it or even trying.

“And what was that? What did I take from you? Your position as a world-famous magician?” He chose the dig carefully to push this conversation along. Gray had always been midlevel talent at best. He’d never gone to the heights Drake had in his career. Of course, he hadn’t had Drake’s edge. Unfair, but so was life.

Rob hissed, the sound harsh across the phone, echoing in the messed-up room.

“Yesssssss.”

“But why take the artifact? What does that have to do with me taking your position? Were you just stealing from me?” It didn’t seem to be random, his taking of that particular thing. Drake was trying to puzzle out what was going on. He needed to somehow get the totem back for Chloe.

“You think I don’t know anything, but I do. I know plenty.”

“So tell me what you think you know.” Drake propped his feet up on his desk. He might as well get comfortable for the rest of the conversation. “And why you took the artifact. Tell me everything.”

“It’s the source of your magic.” Rob let loose a triumphant cackle that vibrated over the phone lines.

The source of his magic? Drake had often wondered it, but he had no idea if that was the case. He had no proof other than it had been in his family for several generations. If the thing was the source of his magic, then it would seem like he wouldn’t be able to do magic when it left his possession, but that had never been the case. Every time he’d sent it away, he’d tested it. He’d always been able to do magic. “Is it now?” Drake made the lights blink off and on and shut the study door before opening it again. He could still do magic even though Gray had the artifact. Maybe the artifact couldn’t be transferred? No, it was special, he knew that by its hum and tingle, yet somehow, he also knew, it wasn’t the source of his magic.

“Quit the bullshit. I know it’s the source of everything you do. It’s why you were successful. A successful fraud.”

“So you took the source of my success. Why tell Chloe the lies, though? You already had what you wanted.” He’d destroyed Drake’s one shot at happiness. When Drake caught up with him, he intended to make Gray pay. First, he had to find out where Gray was, arrange a meeting somehow.

“It won’t work! The damn thing won’t work.” The frustration cut Rob’s voice like a knife.

“Ahhhh.” So now Gray thought he needed Drake. That was good for arranging a meeting and maybe even getting it back for Chloe. “So you need me to show you how to work the artifact?” Drake moved in the chair, making it squeak.

“Yes, dammit. You either come show me or ... I’ll destroy it. If I can’t have it, neither can you. Or your Mrs.”

Drake had to save it for Chloe. She needed it. “Rob, listen to me. It’s not the source of my magic.”

“Bullshit. You’re trying to pull one over on me. You think you’re so damn smart. You’re nothing.”

“It’s not the source, Rob.”

Rob sputtered a few more loud, vitriolic protests. Drake let him rant a minute before trying to speak. He’d had his parentage questioned several times in one day. It must be a record.

“I’ll show you the source. I’ll give you my magic. You can have it. All you have to do is send the item to Chloe.” He offered up what would tempt Rob. *Come on, take the offer.* Rob had to. Chloe’s retrieval of the totem depended on this.

Rob hesitated. “You’ll show me the source of your magic? You’ll give it to me?” He sounded doubtful.

“Yes. Trust me, it’s not that thing.” Drake yawned. He hadn’t gotten much sleep. He clamped down on the thoughts about why, even as his cock hardened to remind him. There was no need to think about Chloe and the loving they’d shared, no matter how spectacular it had been. Because it would never happen again.

“Then why did you have so many people looking at it? Why did you send it to so many historians? And wouldn’t allow any testing?”

Drake blinked, staring into the phone before sitting up straight. *Damn*. Rob had been tracking him, checking up on him for a long time.

This went way beyond a spur of the moment jealousy attack. This was outright obsession.

Drake would have to proceed carefully if he was to get out of this after going to Gray. “I was curious about it. It’s an old family heirloom. But it’s not anything to do with my magic.” The magic must be in the genes of the family somehow. Which left Rob completely out of luck unless there was a Marsters bastard somewhere back in his line. But Gray didn’t know that. “As soon as I come to you, I want you to send the object to Chloe at my mountain house. I’ll pay for its delivery and supply a deliveryman. Once I know it’s off safely to her, I’ll tell you how to collect my magic.”

“Agreed. When do you want to meet?”

Chloe would get her artifact. Not the completion he’d wanted, but at least that would happen. And the sooner he got the artifact to her, the better. He wasn’t sure he trusted her promise to stay at the cabin. “Now. I want this over with.” For good.

## Chapter Nine

Drake drove up to the farmhouse in a county just outside of Richmond. Cutting the engine, he looked around.

The Cape Cod had a sagging front porch and black stains on the roof. White with green trim and roof, it looked like any other house in the country. The only odd thing about the place was the knee-high grass in the front yard. Guess Rob had been too busy ruining Drake's life to mow.

He waited a few minutes in his own car until the delivery van showed up.

The courier company would deliver the item to Chloe. He'd had to pay the value of Fort Knox to secure a truck to meet him and go up into the mountains to her. But it was all set. And it was well worth it. Chloe would at least get the totem.

He got out, meeting the driver in the driveway. "Hello, I'm Drake Marsters. The item for pickup should be in here." The gravel cracked and popped along with their footsteps as they fell in side by side.

"Yes, sir."

They walked up to the house's front porch along the crooked, cracked walk, and Drake rang the doorbell.

Rob Gray opened the door.

Drake fought back any reaction. "We're here."

The delivery driver backed up a step or two from the apparition that stood in the doorway.

This was a Gray Drake had never seen before. He looked like he hadn't slept for days. His hair was long, ratty, and uneven. His clothes had stains and were wrinkled. He had at least three days' worth of beard. His eyes glowed red from being bloodshot. And from the smell, he hadn't showered in a while.

"Good. Good." Rob waved a hand, grinning maniacally. "Here's the artifact." He let out a mad cackle.

It sat in a living room that had trash and papers strewn all over it. It looked as if a trash bag had exploded in there.

The delivery man curled his lip up, wrinkling his nose. "This is what I'm supposed to take?"

"Yes." Drake nodded. "I gave the address and directions for the delivery. Deliver it to Chloe Mar... Richards." After the divorce, she'd gone back to her maiden name. He swallowed. Now it would stay Richards forever.

His gaze sought out Gray, whose eyes flicked back and forth. Somehow he'd imagined a much angrier confrontation. Not this politeness. But when the man looked like this, Drake couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. It would pass. Especially once the driver left, and whatever Gray had in mind failed.

The driver picked up the totem, hefted it up, and headed out the front door with it. "Thank you, Mr. Marsters."

Gray growled before slamming the door behind the delivery driver, making a wham sound. After clicking the lock into place, he turned to face Drake with a vile sneer. "Now let's get down to magic, shall we?"



\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe blew out a deep sigh. The sound hung heavy in the empty room. A bird chattered in the distance. Or maybe it was a squirrel.

Looking around the cabin, she lovingly patted the couch she rested on, feet slung up on the coffee table. Her last time here. Tears threatened much as they had been doing since Rob Gray's twisted little phone call.

Flicking them back by blinking, she reminded herself of her promise not to cry anymore. Not over Drake. She'd lost too many tears over the man the last few years. She refused to lose anymore.

Her packed bags sat by the front door along with her sneakers.

He'd asked her to stay for twenty-four hours, but after a few hours, the romance of the place, the importance of it to her and Drake's relationship, had begun wearing at her nerves, which were strung taut like a stretched string anyway. Why she'd agreed to the twenty-four hours thing, she didn't know. But he'd lied, so she had no guilt about breaking her word.

She'd gone to pack her bags an hour ago and found something she'd forgotten.

Etched into the wooden bed was a heart that had "DM and CM forever" in the center. Drake had done it right after they'd bought this place.

She'd traced the carving with a shaking finger, remembering watching Drake put it there. He'd tried to do it before she woke up as a surprise, but she'd caught him. She'd sat behind him, legs pulled up under her, stark naked, and watched her husband carve their initials into a bed. She'd barely let him finish before she'd attacked him to celebrate the moment.

Had she had a pocket knife she would have gouged it out from the wood. But she didn't have anything to remove it, so she had to leave it intact.

She'd hadn't been able to see much after that and had tossed stuff in her suitcase, not caring what went where.

So now she was packed and ready to go. All she had to do was walk out.

Only making herself leave was proving harder than she thought. She'd been sitting on the couch ever since. Something wouldn't let her get up and make the few steps to his car, which he'd told her she could leave at the airport. Little he'd said had registered the first time so he'd repeated everything until she'd nodded at him.

Once she walked out that door, it was goodbye. She'd be leaving the cabin behind forever. And she'd be leaving Drake behind. For good this time.

There'd be no second chances. No magical chances would emerge out of the shadows for them.

This was it.

A few dozen shed tears, a broken heart, but with much more wisdom, and she'd drive away from this life.

With no money.

But somehow that had lost its importance. Even though it meant she and her sister would still have to struggle to pay the medical bills for her niece. Maybe she'd move closer to her sister. Hell, there was nothing tying her to her old life. Nor was there anything tying her to Virginia. Not anymore.

She patted the old couch again, her hand slowly running over the soft faded fabric. The fineness of it tickled her hands.

The first couch that had been at the cabin, she and Drake had popped a spring or two. It had been no small feat, but they'd had a lot of fun doing it. Her face heated as she remembered the fun they'd had, seeing how quickly they could pop one out.

Her head hung low, going down into her hands. She lightly tapped her forehead with her fingertips.

This was stupid.

She sat here pining over a life she didn't have anymore, nor would she ever have again. It wasn't something that would change.

Drake was out of her life.

It was time to leave this place. Time to leave the memories, the love, and betrayal behind.

She'd have to go disappoint the Collector, tell him that she'd failed in her mission. Her throat constricted. He'd seemed to believe in her, too, despite knowing everything there was to know about her. That had become more important than the money.

"Damn you, Drake Marsters."

If only she hadn't gotten her hopes up after he'd told her about his magic. It would have been easier if that had never happened. She'd begun to believe they might have a chance at reconciliation. It would take a long while to nurse this wound. Probably forever. But somehow, she'd find a way to get on her feet again.

Yes, she'd move closer to her sister and niece.

Hopping to her feet, filled with a plan, she took a deep breath, and strode to the front door. She could go and leave the place behind. Maybe she wouldn't even look back. Much.

She opened it wide, then did a loud startled scream and jumped back a step. "Who the hell are you?"

Lowering his raised hand, the man in khakis and a polo shirt did a move back of his own. He'd been about to knock on the door. "Are you Chloe Richards?"

She blinked, taking a further step back into the cabin so she could slam the door if need be. Surely a serial killer wouldn't come up here to find victims, would he? "Who wants to know?" Damn, she'd been so immersed in self-pity, she hadn't heard the vehicle approach. The birds weren't that loud.

“I have a delivery for her. Is that you? I got lost on the way up, but this looks like the right address.” The delivery man looked expectantly at her. Now she noticed the logo above his pocket.

“I’m Chloe.” She sighed deeply. Did Drake think flowers were going to fix this? It would take more than a few beautiful blossom and sweet fragrances to fix everything that had gone wrong with them.

“Sign here.” He held out a clipboard she hadn’t noticed before. He fumbled with the other hand, yanking out an ink pen.

Though tempted to refuse the delivery, she signed by the X on the line. It wasn’t the delivery driver’s fault. She’d be nice to him. Before she scattered every bloom to the mountain winds. “Here you go.”

“I’ll go get it. I wanted to make sure I had the right house before I unloaded it.” He hurried back down to the truck parked in the drive.

*Shit.* If it had been a small vase, there would have been no worry about unloading it. Drake had probably sent dozens of flowers. *Men.* Sucking up now wasn’t going to fix what had gone wrong.

She watched the man struggle, pulling something out of the back of his delivery van. He turned, walking back toward the cabin where she could see him and what he had. She slumped on the door jamb for support.

*What in the hell?*

He hefted the item up onto the porch. “Here you go.”

She looked down as though it might bite. The artifact now rested on the porch beside her foot. The humming sound that she’d noticed the first time she’d encountered it buzzed in her ears. She reached out to touch the cool, smooth crystalline composition. “Where did you get this?”

“Some farmhouse. A man named Drake Masters paid to deliver it up here to you. Thanks a lot.”

Her head spun as she continued to finger the thing she'd been seeking. It hummed louder.

Drake had delivered it to her.

*He'd delivered it to her!*

It wasn't a fake. It was the real deal.

And Drake had sent it to her as he said that he would. She'd never thought he was serious.

He'd kept his promise.

Emotion swelled in her breast. Warmth poured into her stomach.

Her head swiveled around, looking beyond the totem for the first time in many seconds for the man who'd brought her this thing.

The delivery man was at his vehicle. *He was the only one with knowledge as to where Drake was right now.*

“No! Shit. Don't leave yet.”

He'd reached for his door and kept the handle in his hand, looking warily at her as she came running up to him. Now he was probably thinking about serial killers. Unless he refused to help her, he didn't have to worry. “What?”

She bounced around him like a kangaroo on crack, unable to help herself. “Drake Marsters. The one who hired you. Where was he? At his house?” Would he be home by now? She'd try calling after she got the information from this delivery driver.

“It wasn't at his residential address. I met him at some farm.” The man looked puzzled, his hand still on the handle.

A farm? What was he doing at a farm? “Where was this farm? Did he meet Rob Gray there?”

Drake had to have secured this from Gray. But how? Why? It didn’t make sense to have someone steal an object and then give it to the person you’d stolen it to get it away from. Unless Drake had been telling the truth, and he had no idea why Gray had said what he did. Why would Gray lie? But if that was true, how had he gotten the totem from Gray?

“I don’t know who Gray is. Some dude was there at the house. Looked a little crazy. He stunk.” The driver wrinkled his nose.

“Look ... whatever your name is ...”

“Tim. Tim Gaines.”

“Tim. I have to find Drake. Can you find that farm again?” Too many questions needed answering, and she needed Drake to get them answered. She’d given up on him too soon. She knew that now.

“I ... guess I could. But I’m on duty.” He took his hand off the door handle. Perhaps he’d decided she wasn’t crazy. Ha, little did he know.

She waved a hand. “Long as you can find it.”

“No, I have one more delivery to make, ma’am. Mr. Marsters expedited this one so I’d come on up here. But I got work to do.” He cocked his head. “Sorry.”

“No. You don’t understand. I have to find Drake. It’s important.” Love was always important. She should have trusted him, though he’d given her no reason to. Dammit, she’d been wrong. Loving someone did mean trusting them. She had to find Drake and tell him that. Not to mention, help him with Gray, because she’d started to think Gray was a few socks short of a full load. And she owed Gray a tap or two for lying to her about Drake.

*I should have believed you, Drake.*

The temper that Drake had always said would get her into trouble, had. She'd been so mad that Drake would cheat her after lying to her for so long. Only he hadn't tried to get the totem away from her.

There was only one way to make it right.

Find him.

She could only hope she wasn't too late.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't."

"Hold it right there. Don't you go anywhere yet." She dashed back to the cabin, flying in the front door. Fumbling with her purse, she darted back out. Pulling out her wallet, she showed him the credit card.

"The Collector?" Tim squinted at it.

"It's his card. But I can use it. I have authorization. You take me back to Drake, I'll get you a cash advance. I'll make it worth your time."

"How much?" The man's eyes gleamed with greed, his eyes never leaving the credit card.

"A thousand."

"How do I know you're telling the truth about it being yours?" The man folded his arms in front of him.

"We'll go to a bank in the first town we come to. I'll get two hundred to show you I'm telling the truth. If I can't, you can put me out in the town." She bit her lip, silently pleading with him to agree.

He hesitated.

"Come on. You have to go that way anyway to get back to your regular deliveries." Or at least, that was her hope. "I'll up the ante." She dangled as much temptation in front of him as she could. He could give her the address, but it would take too much time for her to find it on a map. And he knew exactly where it was.

“How much will you up it?”

“Three thousand once you take me to find Drake.” The card was for emergencies. This sure as hell was an emergency, so she didn’t feel too badly using it. She’d pay the Collector back somehow even if she didn’t get him the totem. This was for love. She had to find Drake and tell him how she felt. Somehow, their magical chance had come alive again.

The totem hummed so loud on the porch, she could hear it. Maybe it was agreeing. No, it was probably just a cricket or cicada.

“Make it five thousand once you find Drake.” He grinned at her. “And I’ll even hurry.”

“Deal.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake yawned as he strained against the handcuffs that Gray had put on him. He could break them at any time. His feet had been tied. He could unravel the knots. God, he was bored. Gray had on the TV but had it on some cartoon. The TV was by the fireplace, which had been well stocked with firewood.

Gray had secured him after his arrival. He’d gone to the kitchen to make a potion. He’d been stirring for an hour at the stove. Drake could just get a glimpse of him. Gray had said something about a magic inhibitor that would make it easier for Drake to transfer the magic to him.

Drake had been biding his time. He wanted the artifact almost back to Chloe before he began his escape, just in case. He checked the living room clock. Surely the driver had had enough time to get close to the mountain cabin. He stretched out his fingers. It was time to get things rolling.

Gray came in and began dripping liquid in all the corners of the room.

“What are you doing?” The scents of cinnamon, nutmeg, and something fouler drifted to Drake’s nose.



“This will help to facilitate the magical changeover. What is the source of your power? How are you going to give it to me?” Gray had covered all four corners and dripped some in the center of the carpet. Drake yawned again. Rob better have a steam cleaner to get all those stains out.

“I’m not.”

Gray’s head came up. “What?”

Marsters grinned. “I’m not.”

“But ... but ... you said you would.”

“I lied, Gray. I do owe you something. I owe you many things, in fact. But you will never get my power.”

Gray’s face wildly contorted into that of the madman he was. “Bastard. I’m going to fix you.”

Drake went to pop open the cuffs and unravel the knots. Only he couldn’t. His eyes widened as he tried to push out with his magic. Nothing. Nothing came from him. That had never happened before. *What the fuck?* “What was in that potion?”

Gray slapped him hard across the face. “Mushrooms. A shaman I met once upon a time said they would constrict magic with their scent.”

Shaman had been right. Dammit. Drake strained against the bond that held him. He couldn’t do magic at the moment, nor could he physically break what held him. How long before the effects of the potion wore off?

This wasn’t good. His hands clenched around the cuffs.

Gray hit him again. “You will give me your power before you leave this room. Or the only way you’ll leave is in a body bag.” He pulled out several knives from a case by the door.

Sweat rolled off Drake. He was in a heap of trouble.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe peeked into a window on the side of the house. She whispered, "Quit moving around, I can't see."

Tim grunted "Ooff." He straightened. "Quit squirming up there, and I will. You're heavy."

She lightly tapped his head. "Never tell a woman that." She was trying to see into the farm house what was going on. First, they had to make sure Drake was in there and hadn't left. She'd dialed his cell phone and home number umpteen times on the way down from the mountains and gotten no answer. Somehow, she'd known she wouldn't find him, and that he was with Gray.

Peering in, she saw Drake was in trouble.

He was bound. And he looked like Gray had been doing *things* to him. She swallowed, bile rising up in her throat. Drake had been hit a few times, and cut.

Like hell that would continue.

"Let me down."

Tim helped her off his shoulders. They quickly ran back to the van. Gray was probably too busy torturing Drake to see them, but she couldn't be too careful.

Tim whispered, "Was he there?"

"Yeah. Gray is hurting him," she whispered back before shaking her head. They didn't need to whisper. Why hadn't Drake used his magic to get free by now, especially before Gray started hurting him? Only one answer came to mind about that. Somehow Gray had disabled it. Shit. Which meant Drake was in deep trouble.

Tim paled. "What do we do now?"

Chloe scratched her head. What was she going to do now? She slung her cell phone at Tim. "Call the police. Get them here." She hadn't called them before now because it was only a feeling. Damn, she should have listened to it.

But police would take a while to get there. Drake might not have that much time. She had to stall Gray somehow. She dashed around and opened the van door. She hefted up the totem into her arms.

“Where are you going with that?” Tim made a move as if to help her.

She waved him off. “To distract Gray. You just get the police here.” They were words of bravado that she wasn’t sure she had in her. She quietly eased up each step, cursing every creak. She crept to the front door, crouching. Fiddling with the lock, she discovered Gray was a much too trusting soul.

Taking a deep breath, without much of a plan, she opened the door and stepped into the farmhouse carrying the artifact.

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake swallowed convulsively, finding his center.

“Tell me the source of your magic.” Gray paced in front of him, snarling. The wounds he’d made so far were superficial. Nothing that would end this anytime soon. Dammit, how long did the effects of the potion last? He tried to shoot out magic again and failed. He couldn’t even make Gray think he’d handed over the magic so he could get free.

A noise at the door had them both swinging around.

Chloe stood in the doorway, totem in hand.

Drake blinked his eyes, trying to make her disappear. She had to be an apparition. A fantasy caused by the pain. Only she didn’t disappear.

“Well, well, the ex-Mrs. Marsters. How nice of you to join us.”

“Chloe, no. Run.” Drake managed to get it out before Gray hit him across one of the cuts he’d made. Drake sucked in a breath.

She winced before putting a sexy expression on her face. “Hello, Drake. Hello, Mr. Gray. Nice to meet you in person.” She sat the totem on the floor.

What was she up to? And why the hell was she here? Drake swallowed through his dried-out mouth. He tasted the coppery hint of blood.

"It's a pleasure. What are you doing here? With that?" Gray waved his hand at the object she held.

"Oh, this? Well, I told Drake he shouldn't lie to you. But does he ever listen to me?" She shook her head, hair flying every which way. Her voice had a vapid tone Drake had never heard before. "Never."

Rob looked at Drake with a glare. "He lied to me?"

"Oh, yes. He told me you wanted the source of his magic." She patted the totem, making a slight thwacking sound. "This is it."

Gray's eyes grew greedy. "It is? I knew it. I knew it had to be the source."

"It is. I told Drake, 'you shouldn't lie to this guy.' But he said it would be a little joke." She pursed her lips. "I didn't think it was funny."

For the first time, Drake watched Chloe lie and get away with it. He could tell she was lying, but only because he knew her. She was doing a hell of a job. And it was fooling Gray.

"It's not." Gray growled, pulling the butcher knife out. "Sit down, Mrs. Marsters."

Chloe's gaze never wavered, she stared straight at Gray. "My name is Richards. Put down that knife. You're scaring me." Her voice sounded quite tremulous as she sat down in a chair across from them by the totem. She shuddered, cowering.

Drake's eyes narrowed as he tested his bonds again. She wasn't as scared as she was pretending to be. Damn, she was going to deserve an Emmy after all this. He'd never seen her do so well at having a poker face.

"I'm going to be scaring you more as the day goes on, I'm afraid." Rob looked mock apologetic as he tossed her cuffs. "Put those on. You were already a part of my revenge plans. Just now Marsters will get a chance to see it." She put them around her wrists but there was no click to indicate they'd locked. Gray didn't check them. "After he gives me the key to

unlock his magical powers.” He turned back to Drake without securing Chloe any further.

“Tell me how to use it.”

Chloe mouthed behind Gray as she slid off the cuffs. “Keep him talking.”

Drake tried to lick his lips. *Oh, yeah, keep Gray talking.* He blew out a breath. “It’s complicated.” That was true. As it wasn’t the totem, and it was genetics, it was complicated. Drake began to drone on about magic and stuff he didn’t know what he was saying. He shook his head to clear it. It was heavy. *Must rest it.* No, he had to get through this first.

His eyes had kept from seeking out Chloe. So he was as surprised as Gray when the something bashed down on Gray’s head. Gray went down to his knees, she hit him again, and down he went to the floor.

“Oh, Drake.” She tossed down the piece of wood that had rested by the fireplace and dashed to his side. “I’m so sorry. I was wrong. I love you.”

The sweetest words he’d heard in a while were surrounded by distant sirens. He attempted to make his mouth form words, but the blackness claimed him before anything came out. *I love you, too, Chloe.*

## Chapter Ten

A few days later, Drake batted away her hands as Chloe attempted to help him in the car. “Cut it out. I’m not an invalid.”

She rolled her eyes, then walked around and slid in the driver’s side. “Quit being such a baby.”

He growled. “I’m not a baby. I’m fine. Quit mothering me. As soon as we deliver the artifact, I’m so going to show you how fine I am.”

Her mind went slack with all those possibilities before she started the car. Flutters indicated a half dozen butterflies seeking to get out of her tummy. Anticipation. It was a lovely thing. Her blood surged, her pussy moistening. “We’ll see if you’re up for it.”

His lecherous smile alerted her to her word choice. “Oh, I’m more than up for it. I’m hard for it.”

Her face heating, she put the car into gear and left the airport.

Drake had gotten out of the hospital the day before. She’d probably been a little too attentive. But damn, he’d been cut and smacked around. Having almost lost him through her wrong assessment and a fit of temper, she didn’t intend to lose him again.

Ever.

The police had arrived right after she'd cracked Gray over the head. Gray had a severe head injury. He was in the hospital under police guard. The papers reported there had been a couple of murders they wanted to discuss with him when the doctors released him. Not to mention he was already under arrest for what he'd done to Drake.

The totem that had helped to reunite her and Drake rested in the back seat of the rental car. They'd flown out of Richmond this morning to head for the Collector even though Chloe had wanted Drake to take more time to recuperate. Stubborn man. Afterwards, they were going to take a mini-vacation and get reacquainted.

Her eyes drifted from the road to glance at Drake's profile. God, if she'd lost him ... Thankfully, she hadn't. Their magical chance had brought them back together.

The totem hummed softly.

They pulled into the driveway of the Collector's rental house and parked. Drake got out and opened the door to the back.

"What are you doing? I can get that."

"I'm getting the artifact so you can deliver it." He reached to pick it up. A wince twisted his face.

"Hold it right there, buster. I'm carrying it inside."

"Dammit, Chloe, I'm not an invalid." But he pulled his arm back, moving aside to let her do it. His wounds hurt him more than he let on. Not to mention, whatever Gray had given him still had his magic weakened with no clues as to when it would come back. Or if.

"I know, I know." She reached in and picked it up. "I'd rather you save your strength for later." She winked, picking up the totem. Drake followed her as she walked.

Phelan answered the door and let them in. "Come in. The Collector's been waiting for you."

They were ushered into the same study where he'd hired Chloe. She set the totem at her feet and sat down in the same chair.

Drake sat in the chair beside her. He put an arm on the back. "So what's this Collector like?"

She shrugged. "A guy in search of this totem. Are you sure you don't mind giving it to him? I know it's been in your family for years."

"I don't mind. You agreed to get it for him, you should follow through. Though, you don't need his money now." His hand slid down to her neck to rub.

She placed her hand on his knee. "I don't?" She'd worked hard for that money. And her sister still needed gobs of it.

Drake shook his head as the Collector entered the room. His gait was a tiny bit slower than last time. He was maybe a bit more wan. "Hello, Ms. Richards. I see you brought Mr. Marsters with you." He offered a trembling hand to Drake to shake.

Drake took it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Collector."

The Collector reached down and touched the totem, running his hand over the top. "You brought me my item. Thank you."

"It was nothing." She fumbled around in her purse. "Here's your card back, sir." She handed over the credit card.

He smiled, taking it in hand. "You've done well, Ms. Richards."

Warmth rushed over her. She heard the pride in his voice. She'd made him proud. His belief in her when he'd hired her had made an impact. So did his emotion for her now.

Happiness infused her as well. It had all worked out so nicely. She had Drake back. The Collector had his item.

"Let me finish that bank draft." He reached to his desk for a checkbook lying on the other side. His leg seemed to almost buckle but he caught himself on the desk, managing to stay upright. Chloe bit her lip.

"No." She blinked, surprised at her outburst. He stopped reaching at her words. "No. I don't want it."



“You earned it, Ms. Richards.”

She shook her head. “I’ve already gotten my payment.” Getting Drake back was priceless. She couldn’t put a dollar amount on it.

Drake squeezed her neck, his thumb rubbing.

“Are you sure?” The Collector’s smile was huge and infectious.

“I’m sure.” Then, she bit her lip. “But I do need to tell you about some charges to your card. They weren’t for the totem.” She pursed her mouth up as she talked, hoping he’d understand.

“Oh?”

“I’ll pay you back. Every cent. But there are charges for cash advances.” She wobbled her body back and forth. “I’m sorry about using it for things other than securing the totem. But I will pay you back.”

“What were they for?”

“I paid a courier driver to take me to find Drake.”

Drake nodded, his body relaxing. “Such an enterprising woman.” He gave her neck a gentle stroke.

“That was when you rescued him from Rob Gray?” The Collector lowered into his chair. His breath came deep and regular.

“Yes ...” Chloe froze. “How did you know about that?”

The Collector pointed to the trash. “The paper.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t known they’d made any papers out of Virginia. Sometimes she forgot how well-known Drake was. “Yes, it was when I tracked Drake to where Rob Gray had him.” Where he shouldn’t have been. He should have been with her. Her hand squeezed Drake’s knee.

"You're refusing to accept payment for the services rendered?" The Collector picked up his checkbook and waved it around. "The draft I showed you is tucked in here. You're sure?"

"I am." Somehow she'd help her sister without the Collector's money. Drake had already said once she didn't need it, but that would just have to be seen.

"Then, you owe me nothing for the courier's charges."

Her mouth opened before snapping shut. "Really?"

"Really. You rescued your husband. A most auspicious use for that money." The Collector appraised Drake. "Remember to treasure what is most precious to you this time."

Drake's eyes warmly regarded her before shooting back to the Collector. "I certainly intend to."

Chloe got to her feet. "We must be going, but ..." She crossed the few steps to his desk. "Thank you." She leaned down and kissed his weathered cheek. Not anything she usually did, but it seemed right. "For everything."

"No, Ms. Richards, thank you. You made the magic happen."

Phelan showed them out.

As they walked to the car, Chloe looked over at Drake. "Has your magic come back from what Gray did to you?" She'd not asked him yesterday or this morning.

Drake opened the passenger door without answering. Chloe got in her side. She looked at Drake expectantly.

He huffed out a tired sigh. "Let's go find our hotel room."

Chloe's hands clenched on the steering wheel. It must not have come back. What if it didn't come back? Could Drake live with that? A million unanswered questions rattled her mind as they headed for their hotel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake woke from a short nap he'd taken on the hotel couch. Not his intention; he'd laid down for a second watching TV while Chloe called her sister. But his brain must have had other ideas.

He rubbed his face, struggling to wake up, smacking his lips. Had Chloe finished her call?

"Hello, Sleeping Beauty." Chloe's warble shimmied his way. He lifted his head to see her sitting in the chair by the balcony. She had her feet propped up and was looking out the window without a phone so the call must have finished.

"How long was I out?" He yawned, struggling to sit up. "And how's your sister and Kimberly?"

"You snoozed for about an hour." She let out a yawn herself. "They're both fine. How are you feeling?"

"You shouldn't have let me sleep so long." He stretched out his arms. "I'm good." He did feel better after the nap. Things had been out of focus since he'd woken up in the hospital. Things now seemed clearer, sharper. Even with the sleepy cobwebs in his head, he was more alive than he'd been since before Gray's potion. Every nerve jangled with awareness.

"I figured you needed it. I wasn't going to wake you. I did take the liberty of doing something, though. While you were sleeping." She smiled a kittenish smile.

"Oh?"

"I ordered room service for dinner." She pointed to the table where several brochures were laid out. "Hope you don't mind."

"Did you now?" He grinned. "You want to keep me here and have your way with me instead of sharing me with the world. Admit it."

She chuckled. "I figured you were still tired. And you needed to stay in and rest."

“Ruin a man’s reputation, why don’t you?” He rubbed his face again. “I do feel better after the nap.”

“Ah ha, so you haven’t been feeling well. I knew it.” She fixed him with triumphant eyes.

He waved a hand. “Just a little bad. Nothing to worry about.”

Her voice softened. “But I do worry. That’s my job.” She got up and traveled to the couch, plopping softly by him. Her hand reached out to caress his cheek, gently stroking down it.

He nuzzled into her hand before placing a kiss on her palm. He looked up into those beautiful eyes and got lost.

The spell was broken by a knock at the door.

“Dinner.” She bounced over to the door to greet the waiter and take in their food, which gave him time to go get something he needed. Coming back into the room, Drake saw Chloe had set their dinner on the table.

“Hope you like chicken. I figured it was better than steak.” She began opening up the containers. There was a bottle of champagne, too. Good. They should have even more to celebrate. *I hope.*

Dinner had almost finished, when she asked, “Are you going to pop the cork on that champagne?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. Now was the time. “I thought I might wait until we had one more thing to celebrate.”

“Oh, what’s that?” She took a bite, chewing quickly.

He stood up, patting his pocket. He sauntered two steps to stand in front of her. Then, he dropped to one knee.

She gasped, her eyes growing wide. “Drake.”

He pulled out the little black box. “Chloe. I didn’t do this the first time. I didn’t even have a ring. This time, I’m doing it right. Would you marry me?” He opened the box to show her the pear-shaped diamond ring he’d managed to get ordered and picked up without her knowing.

Her breathing increased to the point he worried about her hyperventilating. Tears sprang out from her eyes like little raindrops. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” She launched herself at him, tackling him to the floor and smothering him with big kisses all over his face. “Yes. Yes. Yes!”

Laughing, he laid back, letting her get all the exhilaration out.

“Oh, I can’t believe this. Put it on my finger. Now. It’s so big. Oh, my God, how did you get this?”

“Hang on, I dropped it.” He pushed her up, searching for the box. “I snuck out before we flew to here this morning and got it.”

“You dropped *my* ring.” She stared aghast at him.

“You tackled me.” He located it and opened it up again. “That made me drop it.”

She peeked into the box, putting her hand to her chest. “It’s beautiful. Good thing your game was magic and not football.” She tossed him a cheesy smile.

“Hush, wife.”

“Not your wife yet.” She patted his arm, holding out her other hand for him to put the ring on. “But soon.”

“How about tomorrow?” He slipped the ring on her finger. He closed his eyes a second, emotion bathing him in its wake.

“Are you O.K?” she asked him, a worried note to her voice.

He opened his eyes. “I’m fine. I just never thought I’d be doing this again. I thought I’d lost you.”

“Me either. I thought I’d lost you for good.” She slipped into his lap. “And tomorrow is fine.”

“Once we’re married, your sister is my family.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Your sister will be my family. My money will be yours. I want to help Kimberly. I would have helped you before, but you made it clear you didn’t want anything to do with me. I didn’t want you to think I was trying to buy your affection. Like you did when you thought I’d stolen the totem.” He stroked her arm down to the elbow and back up to her wrist. “But now, I need to help our family. I want that clear.”

“Oh, Drake.” Her eyes filled with misty tears as she hugged him tightly.

Chloe was his again. Nothing could be better with the world. Or righter. God, how he loved her.

He lowered his lips to thoroughly claim her mouth until she was breathless. “Come on. Let’s move this celebration into the bedroom.” He pushed on her bottom to make her get up. Not that he wanted her out of his touch, but he wanted this time to be special. This romp would be in the bed. They had plenty of time here to break in the hotel suite. He eyed the table. Just how sturdy was hotel furniture?

Sliding out of his lap, she hesitated, biting her lip. “Are you sure you’re up to this? You’ve been through a lot.” She patted his leg, not getting up. “We can wait a while if you need to.”

“I’m fine, Chloe.” He took her hand, tugging her up, before leading her to the suite’s bedroom. The covers were turned down on a massive queen-sized bed with a flowered comforter, which would be in the floor before morning.

“Long as you’re sure.” He pulled her against him, loving the soft curves that plastered to his body.

“More than sure.” He kissed her again, his hands running slowly up and down her back. Her silken shirt tickled his hands. It was time for skin. He couldn’t wait to get her naked.

The lights dimmed.

“Wow, did you see that? Did the lights just dim?” She glanced around, checking all around the room. “Maybe the hotel didn’t pay the power bill.”

“No, Chloe. I did it.”

“No way. You were standing here with me, far away from the light switch ...” Comprehension dawned in her eyes. “Your magic’s back.”

“After the nap. I was starting to worry the herbs might never leave my system. But my powers are back.”

She ran a hand over his chest in small circles that made him want his own shirt off. “I love you with or without magic. You know that, right?”

He swooped in to fiercely kiss her until she moaned against his lips. “Come to bed with me, baby.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe inched toward the bed. Drake continued to kiss her as though he didn’t want to let her go anytime soon. Not that that was a problem. His mouth plundered hers with an abandon that made her breath come faster and faster. He tasted fresh and clean with a hint of hazelnut from the coffee they’d drunk this morning.

Maybe the floor would serve them nicely for a first time here. But, soon, her knees were touching the edge of the bed. So they’d made it without tearing off any clothes.

Breaking the kiss, he tugged on the bottom of her shirt. She helped him yank it over her head. She reached around, fumbling with her bra, releasing her breasts.

He let out a deep breath, his hands sliding up to cup them. “God, Chloe, you’re so beautiful.” His hands worshipped her, emphasizing his hoarse words.

She smiled before tugging on the bottom of his shirt. “Off now.”

Reluctantly, his hands left her breasts to slide it off. Before she could request more off, he shucked off his pants, too. Now it was her turn to breathe in admiration as his cock sprang free. Her hand glided across his length, taking on some of her pre-come from the tip, swirling it between her fingertips. “Ohhhh.”

He took the hem to her pants in his hands and slipped those down with her underwear. He leaped onto the bed with a wicked glint in his eye. She followed him, and he quickly rolled her under him. His weight pressed her down as his hands stroked down her body, slowly sliding over the sensitized skin. Inhaling his spicy scent, she wiggled around under him, liking his cock slapping against her stomach, and his touch.

“Chloe?”

“Ummmm?” The sensual spell had wrapped around her enough she almost didn’t hear him say her name.

He nipped at her throat. “Would you like me to use magic?”

Her heart sped up from an easy trot to a full gallop. “Do ...” She licked her lips. “Do you want to?”

He stroked along her side with his open hand, tickling. “I want to do what you want me to do.”

She shivered at his touch and the sincere note in his voice. “Do your magic.” Her stomach clenched as did her pussy. Permissions had been given for something she wasn’t quite sure what it would involve. How would he love her with magic?

“Flip over.” He straightened up, making a motion for her to turn over on her stomach. She flipped, her heart pounding with machine gun fire. “You want to stop me, just say elephant.”



She glanced back over her shoulder at him. "Elephant?"

"I wanted something you absolutely wouldn't say normally during sex."

"That's for sure." She shook her head. A rope twisted across her wrist, pulling tight. The tickle of it was real. But it wasn't there. There was nothing across her wrist when she looked. But the sensation was there. It drew taut, pulling on her arm.

Another rope tickled her other wrist. She watched her arm move across the bed from the motion. It was odd, experiencing this, but not seeing anything to cause the touches on her skin.

"You O.K.?" Drake's hand ran across her back slowly, knuckles down.

"I'm lovely."

After flipping over, his hand began to massage her back, kneading softly.

A rope tickled her ankle. She didn't have to look to know nothing would be there. It drew tight before sensations ran around her other ankle, making her present a more spread-eagled posture.

His hands reached her ass, and massaged the globes. The bed shifted under his weight and his mouth nipped where his hands had been. He stroked her gently with his tongue before moving down. When his tongue shot in stroking across her pussy, she whimpered. And suddenly tongues were stroking across her. Multiple ones. At least two in her pussy and one on each nipple. One flitted across her stomach.

She writhed, the sensations so intense she couldn't stand them, yet didn't want them to leave. Drake's real tongue continued to prime her pussy along with the other two. It was hard to tell where his was from the magical ones. One slipped inside her to flick in and out at a rapid pace. Another toyed with her clit. The third ran circles around her folds.

It was too much. Her orgasm drove her hips into the air, her entire body clenching to focus on it as it slammed across her.

Only he didn't break off anything. Instead, the pace picked up of all the tongues. The ones on her nipples flicked across them before a mouth drew them in, suctioning them.

She'd never imagined anything quite like this.

The second orgasm ripped her into a thousand pieces before it ended.

Still he didn't stop, but instead picked up the pace of his ministrations again.

Her third orgasm left her gasping for air like a fish, her heart racing, body dripping sweat and juices. "Drake."

His head lifted, mouth shiny in the light. "Yes?"

"Can't. Take. More." Her body was limp. She could hardly move. And another orgasm this way might kill her.

"You sure?"

"Oh, yeah." The tongues slowly withdrew, each of them getting in one more grand sweeping gesture that elicited multiple gasps from her.

He pushed on her hips with his hand, lifting her up. Her knees shook with the effort to get onto them. Something raised her, keeping her steady. It was as if she rested on a table or something sturdy to hold her up.

His cock glided past her swollen lips to push into her.

She moaned, the full sensations so wonderful.

The bonds released, setting her arms and legs free.

He sat back on his butt, taking her with him. She now sat on his lap, her back to his face, his cock resting inside of her.

"Oh." This was new. Something quite different. Her channel stretched as it surrounded his cock. She stayed that way for a second, enjoying the feel of him inside her this way.

His hands gripped her hips again to help raise and lower her onto his cock. But not just his hands. Magical hands helped to raise and lift her body up and down on top of his.

A finger flicked her clit.

Drake's hands were already on her, supporting her weight. It didn't belong to him, though in a way, it did, it just wasn't attached to his person.

Up and down, she moved. All the way down, she ground against him, tightly moving her ass to wiggle his cock inside of her.

It was his turn to moan.

Faster and faster, she rose up and sat down, until his shout of her name split the air. He thrust his hips up into her, pumping.

He was panting when his hands stopped her from moving. "God, woman."

"You're telling me."

Gently, he helped her to lie down beside him. Her whole body vibrated coming down from the intense love making.

"So you like magic?" He nuzzled her head, snuggling into her.

"Uh-huh." She smiled, stroking her hand across his chest. "I like magic. But I love you." His contented grunt told her he was drifting off to sleep. After a while, she did the same, knowing she'd wake up with him tomorrow and forever, thankful for their magical chances.

 THE END 

## **Mechele Armstrong**

Have you ever wondered, "What if crayons have a kingdom?" Mechele Armstrong did at age five. Now, turning the imagination of a wide-eyed child into intense spellbinding stories for adults, she is winning over new fans every day.

Writing stories and poetry as a hobby, she graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in Religious Studies and Social Welfare. Although there were challenges with work and family, the need to write and be published, to share her passion for books was always there.

During a rainy weekend at the beach reading several romance novels she fell in love, not with the hero, but with the genre again. So began a two-year adventure of doing what she loved most, creating worlds with strong heroines and enchanting heroes that will keep you turning pages until the end.

Using the Internet and the local Romance Writer's Association, she learned and refined her craft. Living in Virginia with a husband, kids, dog, and fish, she finds time to share her vivid imagination and ability to tell stories of adventure, love, lust, and everything in between.

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