



STONE ROSES

By
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Chapter One

Detective Luke Callahan looked up from his S. King horror novel just in time to see the car pull in front of the police station and park sideways. He sat up, letting his boots hit the floor with a thud. A 1958 Plymouth Fury, same color as the car he'd just been reading about. The license plate read *CRIS10, Christine*. He couldn't help the smirk that graced his lips. It was quickly erased when he caught a glimpse of who stepped out of the car.

Deputy Bradley's long, shrill whistle assaulted his ears. "Don't see many of them around here," he drawled. Bradley had been with the police department for three years, but he still had the same wide-eyed look of wonder on his face every time a city girl drove up in a fancy car.

Luke nodded. Right about that. The redhead looked as if she meant business. And she had trouble written all over her. He suppressed a groan as she approached. His ex, on the other hand, looked fresh as a daisy as she made her way to the front door of the police station.

The door of the police office flew open to the ringing of bells.

"Can I help you?" Bradley sprang into action.

Luke sucked in his stomach and arched his back. "I've got this one."

"Well," her hands flew to her hips, accenting the curve there. Luke knew how it felt to linger in that curve. He knew every intimate detail of that body. And he knew the viciousness of the woman who stood before him.

"Nice to see you, too, Crissy."

"Don't call me that," she hissed.

"What can I do for you today?"

"I'm here on business, I can assure you." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Then get to it." He tried to appear unshaken by her. The truth was he was shaking all the way down to his snakeskin boots. Ten years of divorced life had done her a world of good. Damn, he hadn't seen her in ten years, and damn, he didn't remember her looking this hot. "I'm here to talk to you about the murder."

He straightened. The murder had been hush-hush. Strictly on a need-to-know basis. How his ex-wife who lived three parishes away would know about it was beyond his understanding. "There wasn't no murder."

"Any. There wasn't *any*. And there sure as hell was."

He flinched when she looked down her ivy league at him. He knew the truth behind her façade. She could pretend to be all hoity-toity and high class, but he knew what a hellcat she was. "What business is it of yours?"

"I'm here to investigate."

"You're not a cop."

"No, I'm not. And I'm not here on any kind of reporting job either. I'm here to find out what's going on with the ghost." She pulled a badge from her jacket. "FBI. Special Investigations."

"What the hell?" he needed coffee. *She* was the special investigator sent in to work this case? When had she gone through training? How did she get clearance? Why hadn't someone told him about this? "What the hell kind of agency gave you a badge?"

"The kind that says you're out of your league."

"Crissy," he began.

"It's Christine, and don't use that sweet tone with me."

"Sweet, huh?" he smiled. At least there was that. In fact, if he could still read her, he would say there was a little bit of lust in her eyes.

"Go to hell."

"Sure, darlin'. You comin' with me?"

"Is there someone else I could speak to?" She turned her gaze to Bradley who had been watching the exchange with his arms folded. He flinched, tearing his gaze away from her long legs as soon as he realized she was talking to him.

"I'm it. I'm the head detective here." Luke folded his arms, satisfied with the frown on her otherwise pretty face. "Is that a new nose?" There. That did it. The frown turned to a look of loathing. Crissy had always hated her nose.

"Fuck off."

"I'd rather fuck something else," he growled, low enough for only her to hear him.

"The murder."

"The murder," he repeated.

"I want to see the reports from that night."

"You know, woman, you've got a hell of a lot of nerve. You come in here making demands. I don't even know what the hell you're doing. And you want me to hand over police records? How 'bout I just hand you my balls, too?" He heard Bradley snicker behind him.

"I have those already," she smiled. "Got them in the divorce settlement."

"She got you, man." Bradley better watch it or he'd have his balls in a sling. Luke shot a dirty look his direction.

"Let me see you to my office," he said as officially as he could manage before turning on his heel to lead the way.

The office was right next to the entryway. It faced the parking lot, affording him a view of the illegally parked Plymouth--his dream car. It was the reason he had started dating Christine in the first place. That damned car. And it was the reason for the divorce, too, if he remembered correctly. Well, okay, the blonde in the backseat may have had something to do with it. But he was young. Stupid.

"I'm not here to chat." She took the offered seat with that arrogant grace of hers and then crossed her legs, giving him a nice view of creamy white thigh.

"Good. Cause I sure as hell don't have time to chat."

"You didn't look too busy to me. At least not for someone who should be investigating a murder."

That's it, Crissy, turn the knife. "What are you doing in Stone Rose?" Might as well get to the point.

"I'm here until this thing gets solved. I have my orders, and if you'll check your fax machine, I'm sure you'll see that you have them, too. I am in charge now, like it or not." Her smug smile was enough to make him shift in his seat. She was in charge, was she?

"You couldn't find enough people to fuck with in Baton Rouge?"

"I'm not in Baton Rouge anymore. I lived in Lafayette up until this morning. And now I'm here to uncover what it is you're hiding in this town."

She was relentless. Always had been. He cursed the smile spreading across his lips until he saw the fire in her eyes. Then his smile only widened. He could still get under her skin. "Back

in Stone Rose, huh?” He let the words linger on his lips, in the air between them, hoping to get a charge out of her.

“Look, Luke, let’s cut the crap.” This was her strictly business tone. “I need access to this information so I can solve this thing and get my promotion, move above solving so called ritualistic murders. If there is a ghost in this town this case will be landmark for many reasons. You haven’t been able to solve it using normal means.”

He stopped listening at the word “need.” When had Crissy ever needed anything from him? “I see.” He leaned back in his chair, rested his hands behind his head, and gave her another once over.

“Would you stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m on some damned menu. You and I are over.” He swore he heard a little waver in her voice, but it could have been his overactive imagination.

“As finished as the Civil War.”

He clicked his tongue. “So, you need my help.”

“I don’t need your help. I need your information.”

Yep. He still got to her. She hadn’t been this ornery in a while. “And what do I get in return?”

“You think this was a ritualistic murder?”

“I’ve seen the preliminary reports. You and I both know the only thing in this town related to witchcraft just pulled up in a red Plymouth Fury. But the boys with the big guns don’t see it that way. I’m the best, that’s why they sent me in. Now, let me do my job.”

“Back to my question. What do I get in return?”

“Go to hell.”

“Already been there, courtesy of said witch.”

“I will be back, and when I return, I want those files.”

She stood and headed for the door. Luke damned near fell out of his chair trying to catch her. He caught her by the arm and swung her around, trying to ignore the twinge of satisfaction awakening his cock when she glared up at him. “This is dangerous business,” he warned.

“Get your hands off me, Detective,” she sneered.

He let his hand drop and watched her walk away, focusing on the click-click-click of her shoes hitting the hard floor. The last thing he needed--the very last thing--was his ex-wife’s pretty new nose stuck where it didn’t belong. He didn’t even know what he was dealing with and sure as hell wasn’t about to open up files for her without the proper paperwork. Badge be damned. When he had requested FBI help, he didn’t think they would send his nemesis, the queen of his every wet dream and screaming nightmare.

He watched the Plymouth Fury speed away and cringed. She’d come close to wrecking that thing at least a thousand times. It would be a shame to see a car like that go to waste because the witch driving it was on permanent PMS.

Chapter Two

She hated Luke Callahan. Hated him. As she pushed the gas pedal to the floor and stirred up a cloud of smoke and dust, she wished she could ram the car into his arrogant face. Ten years of divorce hadn't done him a bit of good. He was still cocky as ever, thinking all he had to do was wink and grin to get his way. She was sure lesser women fell for that act everyday. Probably half the little sorority girls on campus and any single woman within spitting distance. Not her.

Falling victim to Luke was not in her plans. In fact, she figured she was completely immune to the man, having been married to him for three years. In that time, what had he done for her other than cheat on her, lie to her, and break her heart? Not much of anything. And now he thought he could just turn on the charm and she'd listen to whatever he said. Well, he was wrong! He was ... damn. A red light. Shit.

She sped up, hoping there wasn't a cop anywhere around. The last thing she wanted was to get pulled over in Stone Rose and have somebody find out she was back. The first thing they'd do would be to call Luke. *Yeah, I got your, uh, wife over here and uh, claims she's FBI ...* she could hear them now.

The damndest thing about it all was Luke still made her weak in the knees. She would have bolted from his office anyway, even if he hadn't been sitting there looking at her as if she were the noon delight. She remembered every inch of that body. And, God, the inches that were there!

She gave herself a mental shake as she approached the next stoplight. She was here on business not to rekindle anything with her ex husband.

According to her research, this town, particularly the college campus, was haunted. And the ghost was somehow tied to the murder. Luke had not been able to solve it and had requested a special investigator be sent in. Unfortunately for him, he had no idea his ex-wife was the one and only paranormal investigator in the area. Her purpose here, though, was not to prove that the town was haunted. It was to prove that there was no ritualistic element involved in the murder. This was not the work of a small town cult. Case closed. At least her part of it. What they did from there was up to the powers in charge.

* * * *

Luke watched the sun set from his perch high above the campus. He came up here to the bell tower every evening for two reasons. One was for peace and quiet. The other was to remind him of the promise he'd made so long ago. A promise that, until he and Crissy divorced, he hadn't given much thought. He'd turned thirty that year and everything had changed, bringing him face-to-face with a past he didn't think he'd ever have to confront. There was a ghost in this town. Several, in fact. But there was a lot more going on than ghost stories. He knew from his research that there had only been a few cases in the history of the United States that could be directly linked to the supernatural. Everything else had been solved. He also knew that the supernatural lived and breathed in this town because he was part of the paranormal world.

The orange ball slowly sank into the horizon, resting just below the spread of pine trees. The eerie feeling crept up his back, resting where his hair touched his neck.

"You here?" he asked the emptiness behind him.

The light touch on his shoulder was the only answer he needed. He didn't turn to face the phantom. Instead, he stared straight ahead, waiting for her to materialize. He'd only seen her once as a ghost and that time it scared the shit out of him. Since then, he waited for her to come into full view before looking at her. It was easier that way.

"She has returned." The voice carried an ancient accent and reverberated through the bell tower with haunting results.

"That she has," he agreed, feeling the hand regain its substance. He turned to look into Isabella's sad face.

"And she will help you break the spell?"

"Crissy? No. Too much bad blood there."

"I see." She dropped her hand and then sank down next to him. "Then who? Do you know another?"

No. He didn't know another. Hadn't known another since the day Crissy walked out on him.

"She bears the mark."

"It's a scar." He shrugged, remembering how she'd gotten that tiny scar over her left eyebrow.

"Ask her. It's no scar. It was there long before you."

"What am I supposed to do? Tell her our story?" He bit his tongue. Isabella's face was already wrought with guilt and pain. He was only adding to it by being an asshole about his ex-wife.

"She will never believe our story, Luke. You must find another way."

"The dark moon is almost here. By the week's end. Are you prepared for the change?"

No. He was never prepared for the change. Especially since the murder a few months back. It was no ordinary murder, if murder could ever be thought of as ordinary. He knew this to be a fact. Isabella had seen the whole thing, described it to him in detail. The girl was being controlled by forces outside of her body, forces Luke should have been able to control, would have been able to had he not been turned to stone.

"I read your thoughts, Luke."

"I know." He stared silently ahead. He felt Max's power growing and hoped this moon would not result in another death. And now that his ex-wife was in town, things had the potential to get ugly.

* * * *

Three hours of leg work had produced enough information to know that Luke wasn't in town when the murder took place. He had taken what his deputy called his 'monthly time' out at the lake fishing or something. The man had shrugged, saying he really didn't know what Luke was up to but insinuated it might have something to do with a woman. Christine's stomach turned at the thought.

She shuffled through her notes. Local legend said that the ghosts in town, especially those on campus, were able to manipulate objects, turning televisions on and off, changing the temperature of the water in the showers and moving things. Rumors of bloody handprints also circulated. *Especially active during storms*, one of her notes said.

She slammed her book closed. These same rumors circulated on campuses around the country. What she needed was some proof. She needed to know if anyone saw a bloody handprint that night, if the footprints near the body were as strange as her informants claimed. And she needed to know where Luke was and why it had taken him three days to respond to a

murder on his campus.

Luke. God, she'd like to say he didn't still drive her crazy. Of course, that was a lie. Just looking at him was enough to make any girl go weak in the knees. But she knew how those rough hands felt on her skin. She knew the crazy look he got in his eyes when he was about to come. And worse, she knew how bad it hurt to be betrayed by him, something she swore would never happen again.

But damn, he looked good. He had always been Stetson cool, nothing GQ about him. He was like the Marlboro man come to life and wrapped up with every fantasy she'd ever had with his damned cowboy hat cocked over his blue eyes and his sexy-as-sin lips just begging to be kissed. Then there was the rest of him, like a pin-up or cover model. He was made for sin, built for lust. Too bad she had shared that fantasy with half the town before she realized what a lying, cheating SOB he was. And she was not still attracted to his crooked grin and smooth country drawl.

Not much, anyway.

She rubbed her eyes and stretched, allowing the movement to go all the way down her back. There had been a time when Luke could turn her on with just a smile. Not anymore. She was older and wiser and determined not to let him come between her and her career. She had worked too hard to put him in the past where he belonged. There was no way she'd let him come back into her life and stir things up. She was happy and had everything she could possibly want. So she told herself anyway.

The truth was, she didn't know what the hell she was doing back in Stone Rose. Sure, she was the FBI's primary paranormal and occult investigator, all *X Files* jokes aside. And she was well within the cover of her badge to be here. Why hadn't she just flashed the silver and demanded the records? It would have been easier that way.

Something had called her back here, and it had nothing to do with her ex-husband. Well, at first it had nothing to do with him. Now, she wasn't so sure. Her dreams had been more vivid in the past few weeks, and the feeling that something was watching her only grew as her trip to Stone Rose grew nearer. After she had learned about the murder, her dreams had started.

A shiver ran up her back as she recalled the eyes she had only glimpsed once in her dream. The creature had been sitting on the edge of her bed. She still wasn't sure if she had been asleep or awake. Its red skin was so beautiful, so soft, she wanted to reach out and touch it, but her hand was frozen. Only when she realized she shouldn't be staring at it did it turn and shine its yellow eyes on her. For a second, their gazes locked, and she knew it was not there to pay a friendly visit. She had shaken herself awake by force of will. Sleep had refused her for the rest of that night.

Now, sitting in the looming sunset in this ancient creaky cabin in Stone Rose, she realized all that she had to fear from the demonic presence. Her hand reached for the phone, the desire to call Luke outweighing her sanity at the moment. No, she wouldn't do it. This was her first night alone in this town, and she'd be damned if she went running to him every time she got a little spooked. This was an old town, settled in 1720. There were demons and other restless spirits hanging around, but there was no occult activity. Nothing to warrant a sudden murder.

The only problem was one of the spirits was growing even more restless, and this had resulted in a murder. Every instinct told her she was right about this.

Then there was Luke. How did he fit into this, anyway? His monthly disappearances were odd, to say the least. He might be a good ol' Southern boy, but in all the time she'd known him he hadn't been much of a fisherman. Maybe he had taken up the hobby after the divorce. God

knew she was a different person now than she had been when they were married.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this," she announced to the empty room, still unable to shake that weird being-watched feeling.

The sun finally retreated in the sky, casting an eerie orange glow across the white rug before it said good night. Her heart caught in her throat for a second as the yellow eyes from her dream seemed to glow through the window.

"You're being silly," she said as she pushed away from the desk, determined to get away from the feeling threatening to choke the breath from her body. It was as if an invisible force had entered the room with her, had wrapped its unseen hands around her throat and intended to cut off her air supply. She stumbled into the wall as she slowly made her way up the stairs.

What she needed was a shower. That would clear her mind.

Undressing slowly, she threw a towel over the mirror, her superstitious nature taking over. The last thing she cared to see tonight was ghost writing in the fog on the mirror. She turned the radio on loud enough to be heard over the water before stepping into the heated embrace of the shower. Closing her eyes, she imagined a time when all it took to feel safe was to roll over and feel Luke sleeping next to her. He had managed to curb her nightmares more times than she could count. Well, he wasn't around now, and she didn't need him, she thought as the water slid over her body, imitating a lover's caress as it teased her breasts.

Chapter Three

Luke sat bolt upright in the chair where he had apparently fallen asleep. He heard water in the background just before he woke. Water and something else, some sound that shouldn't be there. The first thought that entered his mind was of Crissy. She was in danger. The image of her snaked up his spine and forced his heart to pound. Something wasn't right with her.

Grabbing his guns, he headed for the door. Climbing into the squad car, he put on his siren. Crissy might think she was the only witch in town, but Luke knew a thing or two about intuition. Something told him she was in danger. And, damn Crissy, if she hadn't chosen the old Miller cabin to hole up in for her stay in Stone Rose. Didn't she realize the damned place was built just on the edge of the old convent, the place where Isabella lost her life? He had befriended the ghost years ago, and he knew her history. Isabella was locked in eternal battle with Max, a demon whose powers were growing stronger by the minute.

"Where you headed?" Bradley called on the CB radio.

"Out to the old Miller place."

"You got a call out there?"

"No. Just call it a hunch. I won't be gone long." He hoped. Surely they wouldn't strike tonight. Then he realized, no, they wouldn't strike tonight. They'd wait until he was defenseless, and then they'd unleash their terror on Crissy. Hell, he would do anything to stop this damned transformation. What he really needed to do, though, was convince his meddling ex to go back to Lafayette or wherever it was she had been since the divorce.

The screen door blew back and forth, screaming out the injustice of being knocked off its hinges. The place looked deserted save for the red car parked on the front lawn, something that was enough to cause old man Miller to return from the grave and seek justice for all the years of weeding and yard work to get that luscious green. A light also burned in one of the upper windows. But there was something else there, too.

Not a single cricket chirped in the night. The birds didn't stir and the wind refused to blow around the old house. The silence reminded him of the seconds before a tornado had hit Stone Rose a few years ago. The whole world seemed to stand still in the moments before she was ripped from her tethers. It had taken years to recover the damage, but thankfully, no lives were lost.

He hoped to be as lucky tonight. If something happened to Crissy because of him, he'd never forgive himself.

Pulling his gun from its holster, knowing it would have no effect on Max or his creatures, he pushed open the door and called out her name. There was no answer.

He crept up the stairs, heading toward the light, hoping Christine was okay. He would feel it if she weren't, he was sure.

He pushed open the bathroom door just in time to see her step from the shower and hear her blood-piercing scream.

"Luke Callahan, get the hell out!" She grabbed a towel and covered herself before launching a bar of soap at his head.

"Crissy, thank God." He didn't wait for an invitation before pushing his way through the

door, ducking the soap as he moved. "Are you alone?"

"What the hell do you want, Luke?"

"Police business," he flashed his badge before replacing his gun.

"What are you doing?"

He turned on his heels, ordered her to be quiet with a finger pressed to his lips and began his silent maneuvering through her house. She trailed after him, dripping water along the way. Well, at least she was quiet.

"What do you want?" She kept her voice low this time, which frightened him more than he'd like to say. Crissy had never been known to be quiet unless she was scared to death.

"Stay behind me," he whispered.

She obeyed, which was again unusual, especially considering the way he had barged in on her. He'd like to have a moment to think about how good she had looked standing there in her birthday suit, but he was too scared right now. He'd think about that later, lying in bed tonight, wishing he could hold her just one more time. God, he'd do anything to take back what he had done to her. He had been young and stupid and totally didn't deserve her.

"It's all clear," he finally said after having gone through all five rooms of the tiny house.

"Of course it is."

"Whatever was here is gone."

"What do you mean, whatever was here?" The old Crissy was back, hands on towel covered hips, glaring at him.

"I don't know how to tell you this, Crissy, so I'm going to level with you."

"Don't call me Crissy." Yep. She was back.

"Get dressed. I'll wait outside the bedroom. Then we can talk."

She glared at him once more before she lowered her crossed arms and then retreated into the bedroom. Something was off with her. She should be much more argumentative than she was. Whatever had been here tonight, she had felt it too. And now she was spooked.

* * * *

Of all the goddamned things for him to do, Luke Callahan had to show up in her bathroom, gun drawn, looking for trouble! And he had damn near found it. She didn't know what the hell was going on, but there had been something else in here with her, something that meant to scare her. Instinct told her it wouldn't hurt her, not tonight anyway, but whatever had been here was meant to be a warning, one she didn't take lightly.

Her superstitious grandma had passed on the spooky genes to her, and she had a healthy respect for all forms of the supernatural. That included invisible forces that appeared at sundown to cast their eerie yellow eyes on the carpet and then proceeded to follow you up the stairs.

She shoved on her jeans and t-shirt as quickly as she could, the feeling of being watched still too fresh on her mind. For the first time in a long time, she could admit that she was glad to see Luke.

Slowly, she stepped from the bedroom, sucking in her breath as she moved, hoping the worry was gone from her face. It wouldn't do for him to know just how spooked she had been. He looked up as soon as she stepped into the hallway and their eyes locked. It was then that she noticed the lines on his face. He was worried about her. Scared, even. The usual glint in his eyes had been replaced by stone coldness. He held his mouth in a firm line, giving no indication of humor. Every muscle in his neck was tense and his breathing was erratic.

She bit her bottom lip, thinking he looked like some mad, driven wild man about to pounce. The badge and the gun might be symbols of authority, but he was clearly a man who had

been driven to the edge tonight. By what, she didn't know. And didn't have time to ask before he crossed the room and took her roughly into his arms.

"I was worried about you tonight."

She didn't resist the embrace, but she also tried not to melt into it. He still smelled like cowboy cologne and leather, two things that drove her wild. She remembered the first time she ever set eyes on him and how good he had smelled then, fresh from the rodeo, dirt still covering his jeans. She had to mentally shake herself to remove the image.

"I'm fine, as you can see." She straightened, trying to appear unshaken.

"I know, but you almost weren't."

"It wouldn't have hurt me," she said before she could stop herself.

He pulled away from her, his hands gripping her shoulders. "What do you mean, it? Did you feel something here tonight?"

"Luke, don't be silly. This is an old house. You know, full of creaky sounds and everything." She shoved a hand into her wet hair, hoping to look casual instead of scared shitless. "I've seen worse, remember? This is what I do."

"When does a creaky sound make you agreeable to anything I say?"

"Who says I'm agreeable to anything?"

"You didn't argue when I told you to stay behind me."

He had her there. "Fine. So I was a little shaken tonight. It's no big deal. My first night in a new place, you know."

"I don't want you to stay here alone."

"Why not?"

"Because of things you can't understand. Please, go back home."

"I'm not leaving, and I understand more than you know. In my years with the FBI, I've seen worse."

"You have to go, Crissy. If you stay, I may not be responsible."

"May not be responsible for what?"

"This."

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It wasn't supposed to happen like this, but it was the only thing he could think to do. Maybe if she thought he was going to spend his time pursuing her, she would high-tail it out of town. No such luck. God, if she did anything, she responded to him like a woman needing water after a spell in the Sahara. When his mouth closed over hers it was as if she had anticipated it, as if she had lived her entire life for this moment. She melted into him, and God, it drove him insane.

He had never known a woman who could kiss quite like she could. Her mouth was all innocence while her body writhed against him like a madwoman's. He knew then as if time had never passed. He loved her to the bottom of his soul and always would. And he would give his life to save hers if he must. But first, she had to get the hell out of Stone Rose.

He pushed her away, hoping the hardened look in his eyes was convincing.

"I can't promise you I can keep my hands off you."

"You don't have a choice. If you ever do that again, I'll kick you in the balls." Her eyes were dead serious, but her chest heaved like a woman lit on fire by desire. Yep, she still wanted him.

"Fine. I'll buy an iron cup. But if you stay in town, it will happen again. And you'll love it just as much as you did then. Tell me, Crissy, do you wiggle against all the men you kiss?"

"I didn't wiggle, and I didn't like it. Now get the hell out."

"I wish I could, but you and I have the little matter of what happened here tonight to discuss."

"Nothing happened here." This time, she turned on her heels and stalked down the hall, making her way to the stairs.

"What did it look like, Crissy?" he called behind her. "Did it have soft red skin and glowing yellow eyes?"

She stopped dead in her tracks for half a second and then continued the descent. "I must have told you that before," she muttered.

"Does it haunt you in your dreams? Does it keep you awake at night and make you wonder if it's real or a figment of your imagination?"

"Stop it!" she turned and screamed. "Stop it right now! You have no right to use my secrets against me."

"You never told me anything about this. I know because I see it, too." He met her on the stairs.

"Go to hell, Luke."

"You don't know hell, woman." He hauled her against him before he could stop himself. "Hell is living every damned day knowing there are forces out there that I can't control, forces that no amount of good can overturn. Do you know hell, Crissy? Do you understand how it feels to think that the one person you love more than life could be in danger?"

"Stop it, Luke." Her voice shook as she fell back against the wall. His arms were around her no matter how she tried to pull away.

"Stop what? Stop telling you the truth? You came here for an adventure, a mystery, right? Well, you sure as hell picked the right place cause this town is swarming with evil. I'm part of it, and it has chosen you to take revenge on me."

He had gone too far. Tears spilled down her face, and this was a woman who never cried. Not even when they split up had he ever known her to shed a single tear. Now, she turned on the waterworks and sobbed uncontrollably.

"It'll be okay," he managed, even though he knew the words he spoke might not be the truth. He had no damned idea how to make everything okay.

"Leave me alone, Luke. Everything was fine until you"

"Until I what?" He smoothed her wet hair.

"Until you betrayed me. Now, leave." She tried to push him away, but he stood firm.

"I'm not leaving you here tonight. It wants me and will use you to get to me. You have to go somewhere where you'll be safe."

"And where's that?"

He swallowed hard and resisted the urge to reach out to her again. "Home," he managed, "with me."

"You have to tell me everything."

"I'll tell you everything tomorrow. Come on, get your stuff. I'll let you have my bed and I'll take the couch."

She gave him a wary look before turning to go back up the stairs. "Just this one night," she called.

"Sure. Just this one night." *Not if I can help it.*

Chapter Four

Christine slid into Luke's patrol car with one or two inhibitions. She didn't like this one bit, but the truth was, she was scared. So she hadn't actually *seen* anything. It didn't really matter to her. She had seen way too many movies where women played the naïve victims and had seen too much in her time with the FBI. Never had she been the intended victim. Her woman's instinct told her there was a lot more going on here than she could handle alone. Having an ally wouldn't be so bad. Even if he did wear his jeans too tight and his t-shirts practically molded to his chest.

Looking out the window, she watched as Main Street came into view. God, this town was small. Not more than three minutes from her place at the edge of town to Luke's little house in the center, near the police department. Still, three minutes was of little comfort when she thought of what could be out there after her.

Her head hurt. She ran her fingers along the scar above her eye. It was one thing the damned plastic surgeon couldn't remove. He said the scar was too old, ran too deep. His x-rays showed that even her skull bore the mark from that summer night. That had been the last night she and Luke had really been a couple. Sure, she'd had a little birthmark there before, but the knock on her head had really sealed the deal. The details of that night were fuzzy, but something had been after her then. It had chased her into the old cemetery and threw her to the ground. All she remembered before everything went black was a set of piercing red eyes. When she woke up, Luke was standing over her, but there was something different about him. He was distracted, as if he were listening for some unheard sound. They had never talked about it. She had never told him about the creature that had come after her, and he had never asked. After that night, nothing was the same for them. Not two weeks after she had been released from the hospital she found him in the arms of some bottle blonde.

The pain from the scar might have faded, but the pain of betrayal was taking its own sweet time. She stole a glance at Luke, whose face was a hard mask. His jaw was held tightly, as if his mind was somewhere else. All the tension radiating from him melted into the seat and made its way up her back. It had always been that way with her and Luke. Why should things be different now that they were no longer legally bound? It didn't stop that soul bond she knew they shared. If only things were as easy as sign a paper, lose your soul mate.

Nope. Not in this lifetime.

"What are you thinking?" Guys hated that question, didn't they? It really meant, *are you thinking about me?* But she meant it. She really wanted to know what was on his mind.

"I'm thinking you need to leave town."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You will once I tell you what I have to tell you." The words were muttered, but she heard them and felt their weight. This thing he was dealing with was bigger than she had imagined. Dreams of glory and books fled from her mind. Whatever was going on in Stone Rose could not be made public knowledge. She got that much from the tightness in his shoulders, the etched severity on his face.

"Luke, I want to help you." Before she realized it, her hand was on his arm, feeling his

warmth seep into her system.

"You don't know what you're talking about." He pulled into his driveway and turned the key, signaling an end to the ride and probably hoping to end this line of questioning.

"I don't care what's going on. I want to help you. You know, you and I once meant something to each other. I don't want to see you hurt."

He finally turned to look at her. Only then did she realize how her fingers were digging in to his arm. "You still mean something to me. That's why you have to go. You are my weakness."

"I want to be your strength."

"Crissy"

"Luke, please. You know I know stuff. You know I can do things." He knew what she was talking about. They'd had the conversation more than enough times. She was a witch, plain and simple. Born and bred in Salem, raised to worship the old gods. Though she considered herself to be very modern, she had never left behind her upbringing. And Luke knew this.

"I know, Crissy. That makes you dangerous to yourself and to me."

"How?"

"What if they find out? Hell, what if they already know? Then what? You think these creatures will leave you alone when they find out you're trained as a Cabot witch? No, they won't."

"So we are talking creatures."

"Yes. Ghosts, demons, hell, I don't really know what all is at work here. All I know is that I am powerless for"

"For one weekend a month," she finished the sentiment. Everything was beginning to make sense now. His monthly hiatus. His strange behavior those last weeks of their married life.

He swallowed hard and audibly before taking her hand into his. "Let it go, Crissy. You'll be safe if you leave."

"What about you? Will you be safe without me?"

"I will manage the way I've been managing ever since you walked out on me."

She licked her lips, not concentrating on his words but on the way he said them. He still wanted her. He had teased about it earlier, but the knowledge came rushing forth all of a sudden. If she had been standing, she would have gone weak in the knees at the softness in his blue eyes. Instead, she just pressed her lips together, hoping she could figure out what to do about Luke and the feelings stirring in her stomach.

"Come on, let's go inside. I'll get your bags."

He didn't kiss her, but the look in his eyes said he wanted to. She let it go, allowing the moment to pass. Taking in a deep breath, she pushed the car door open and made an attempt to follow behind him. But that was before she was slammed into the side of the car by a force she couldn't see.

* * * *

Luke turned in horror as he heard Crissy gasp for breath behind him. Her bag fell to the ground as he rushed to her side, cursing the whole way. They had been followed the short jaunt from her place to his, and it was no wonder. There was nowhere to hide here. Stone Rose was not safe for either of them.

Whatever threw her up against the car disappeared as soon as it struck. By the time he made it to her, his arms going around her, his hands shaking with fear, she was already grabbing her throat, forcing air back into her lungs.

"My God, Crissy! Are you okay?" Her entire body trembled in his arms, but she

managed to nod her head. "Shit. I'm so sorry. Do you see now? Do you see why you can't stay here?"

He couldn't tell now who was shaking the most. Their bodies trembled in unison as her arms circled him, allowing him to comfort her. God, she felt good. He could lose himself in that mass of red hair and never want freedom. Giving himself a mental shake, he pulled away slightly, looking into her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fine. What the hell was that?"

"Hell is right. It was one of Max's minions."

"Max?"

"Yes. I don't know what to tell you about him except he's not human. I don't know if he's a demon or what, but he's here, and you have got to leave."

"No way am I leaving now. He's got my scent on him. You know the rules about demons, don't you?"

"There are rules?" He almost laughed.

"Yes. Once they get your scent, you can't escape."

Isabella's words echoed in his head. *She was chosen*. God, whatever had happened to him and Crissy out in the woods all those years ago before the marriage ended sealed their fates. Isabella was right, Crissy was part of this whole thing.

"We have to go somewhere else. There's a place I know where you'll be safe. Someone who can protect you like I can't."

"What are you talking about? I'm not leaving you."

"No, I'm going, too. But you have to understand that I can't protect you by myself. I am incapable of protecting you."

"What happens to you, Luke? Once a month, what happens?"

"Not now, Crissy. Now we have to get the hell out of here."

* * * *

The old bell tower overlooking campus was not what she had in mind. If her information and intuition served correctly, this campus was where the trouble had originated. This was the equivalent of Buffy's Hell Mouth. Why would he bring her here as a safe house? There was no place in Stone Rose that was safe, least of all this place.

She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself as the door creaked open. He led her inside, using a flashlight as a guide, but she had a feeling he knew this place inside out.

"It's just us," he called out to the darkness.

"You brought her with you," a woman's voice called back.

"Yes, but she doesn't know yet."

"You must tell her. You are running out of time."

"Who is that?" Christine demanded, the woman's words sending a chill up her back.

"Shhh, don't worry about her," he whispered. "I'll take care of everything," he called to the darkness. "We need sanctuary."

"It is granted."

"Who is that?" she asked again as Luke shifted the light. "Where did she go?"

"Come on. Stay close. It's damned dark in here. Upstairs has electricity. You'll be comfortable here."

"Oh, no, buddy." She froze in her tracks, forcing him to stop his ascent. "You're not leaving me here with some strange woman."

"I'm not leaving. I promise. But you've got to listen to me."

The beam from the flashlight lit his face up in an eerie glow, making him almost appear inhuman himself. She shivered. "Fine," the word came out through clenched teeth.

"Please, Crissy. Please take me seriously."

"I would if I knew what the hell you were talking about. You promised me answers."

"I know. And I'll give them to you. The woman you heard is Isabella. Are you happy now?"

Isabella? A shiver broke out across her entire body. The Isabella of campus legends? The woman whose lover died, who committed suicide, *who haunted this campus*? "Good God."

"Come on." He reached for her hand and practically pulled her up the stairs.

One thing about Luke Callahan. He always knew how to leave a girl utterly speechless.

* * * *

Isabella paced back and forth. She knew this had been brewing for hundreds of years. She had made a deal with the devil that night when Lucian had died. When she had learned the price for her deal, she had climbed up to the top of the bell tower and tried to jump. Something had stopped her. Later, she finished the deed at the convent.

Then Luke had come to her. She had saved his life one night, but she needed something in return. She owed a favor to the force that had stopped her from ending her life here in the bell tower. It had become one with Luke, but it had cursed him in the process. And now, he must live with his monthly curse.

It had all been meant as a way to stop Max. Luke's curse, that is. But Max was more powerful than they imagined. And now all of them were caught up in his web. But Christine was the key to it all. She had seen him that night years ago, and Luke was certain she had. The two of them had never discussed it, but she had looked the demon in the eyes. She had the power to destroy Max alone. Until then, Christine needed Luke's protection, and she needed Isabella to provide sanctuary until the time was right.

In less than a week Luke would turn to stone. As part of his curse, he became a gargoyle, guarding the town. What really happened was that he would lose contact with the world for twenty-four hours. When that happened Christine would be on her own. Isabella would not be able to help her or keep her safe from Max because she could not manipulate the physical world without Luke's help.

* * * *

Christine wrapped her arms around herself as Luke lit a fire in the old stone fireplace. His back was to her, but she could feel the tension in his face. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine the tight lines marring his brow. She sank into the old rocking chair and waited, hoping answers would come soon.

Luke poked at the fire three times before finally standing. She knew he was stalling. Who could blame him? Whatever he wanted to tell her must be big, she thought, because Luke (who faced down death daily) was frightened. He made his way across the room to her, his face a tight mask, just as she knew it would be.

"There's no central heat," he announced.

"I kind of figured that."

"But there's a bed and a hot plate. We can stay for a while."

"How long?"

"Not long enough." He took off his hat and raked a hand through his hair before replacing the hat. It was the first time she'd seen him without the cowboy hat. His hair was long, not like it had been when they were married when he kept it cut so short. He reminded her a little

of a movie screen idol standing there with his hat on, his eyes serious.

"I want you to tell me the truth, Luke. All of it."

He sank down to the floor in front of her, raising himself onto his knees, and placed his arms around her waist, and his head on her stomach. She felt his warm breath against her skin beneath her t-shirt and almost melted at the sensation as it swept across her. Then there was the defeat in his pose, as if he were giving in to something with his silent confession.

His hat fell to the side as she reached for him. When he looked into her eyes, she knew she would never be able to fight him if he tried to kiss her. Biting her lip, she secretly hoped he'd do it soon. Otherwise, she might have to take the bull by the horns and do it herself.

"I love you, Crissy. And that is the truth. Right now, the rest of it don't matter."

She resisted the urge to correct his grammar. Instead, she focused on the first of his words. He loved her. She had known it all along. Luke had to love her because she had never stopped loving him. But she couldn't tell him that right now. So she did the only thing she could do. She sat there with his head in her lap, fighting back tears that threatened to spill onto his hair.

"Luke."

He looked up at her again, and she swore she saw mist in his eyes, too.

"Yeah?"

"Come here." She pulled him up and then stood in front of him, waiting with eager anticipation.

"I want you, Crissy. And if you give yourself to me, it doesn't change anything. We're still in danger, and I still need you to leave."

"I told you I'm not leaving."

"And I told you you're in danger."

"I don't care," she shrugged, fighting down the panic in her stomach.

"Well, I do. I want to love you, but I can't keep you safe."

"Let me worry about that part."

His hand circled the back of her neck while his thumb ran along her spine. God, it felt so good to be back in a familiar embrace with the man who made her weak in the knees.

"I love you," he repeated, his voice strained as if the words were painful to say.

"I love you." There was no use in hiding it when it was both true and obvious. A tear slid down her cheek as Luke's lips turned up in a crooked smile. That happened about one whole second before he pulled her to him and molded himself against her body.

She let out an audible gasp as his lips came down on hers, soft yet demanding and damn near knocking her off balance with the intensity of the gentle motion.

"I missed you," he whispered against her.

"Mmm," was all she could manage as his scent sank into her body, leaving her breathless.

His mouth was hungry, needy as it claimed hers again, covering her lips, drawing her into him with wild abandon. To hell with everything else. All that mattered right now was that Luke had his hands on her, and she didn't want him to ever let go. Her mouth opened for him as his tongue delved inside, seeking permission gently before devouring her.

God, she was lost in him. She always went weak over him, and this was no different. If anything, it was worse now that she had been without him for so long. He was like the balm her life needed for everything to feel right again. To be honest, nothing had been the same since she and Luke had divorced. This was the first thing that had felt right in ten long years.

"I want you, Crissy." His breath brushed against her face as his husky tone sent a shiver down her back.

"I want you. Is there a bed in here?"

"Yeah. But you'll be warmer by the fire. Come on." He pulled her along behind him, not that it took much encouragement. When they finally settled on the soft rug in front of the fire, all thoughts of the outside world melted away.

Luke shed his shirt and then leaned into her to kiss her shoulder. Her hands immediately went to run along the stretch of skin she had cuddled against so many nights in the past. His chest was rock hard, and his breathing was obviously erratic as indicated by the rapid rise and fall and rhythmic heartbeat. But the feel of his body beneath her fingertips was pure heaven.

"You like to touch me?"

"You have a great body," she admitted without looking up to see his sparkling blue eyes.

"So do you." He reached for her, but she stilled his hands mid-motion.

"Not yet. Let me, Luke. I just want to touch you."

"I want to touch you, too. I can't wait long. I wanted you from the second you stepped out of that car. "

This morning seemed like years ago. Had there ever been a time when she wasn't touching Luke, wasn't feeling his breath against her, and wasn't hearing his low moan vibrate through her body? Time seemed to stand still as she caressed, rubbing her fingertips across his tender nipples and watching their reaction as he sucked in his breath.

"Crissy," the word held a warning.

"What?" she looked up at him and smiled.

"Lie down."

She obeyed without protesting. It would be much more fun to let Luke have his way. Slightly spreading her legs, she opened her arms for him and pulled him into her embrace. When his body pressed against hers, his taut chest moving slowly against her t-shirt, she felt completely at his mercy. Whatever cologne he was wearing made its way into her system like an aphrodisiac, intoxicating her with the need to run her mouth along his skin. She leaned forward, hoping to taste a nipple, but he moved slightly to the side.

"No, Crissy. Tonight is about me loving you. Just lie back and let me."

That was all the encouragement she needed to give in and to do exactly as he said. If memory served correctly, letting Luke love her was one of the most wonderful things in the world. And she wasn't about to put up a fight.

* * * *

"I love touching you." He ran his hand along her spine, reveling in the way her skin felt beneath his fingertips. God, she was amazing. What had he ever done to deserve such a woman? It was as if she deliberately drove him insane with her soft skin and her wild eyes.

"Mmm. Then touch me." She arched her back toward his hand, her breasts rising and falling in front of his face as he leaned forward.

"I plan to touch you all night long."

He lowered her back onto the fur-covered rug, which lay in front of the fireplace. This had been one of his most wicked fantasies for a long time, having Christine here with him, kissing him, making promises with her body. His hand covered her breast, and her moan made its way into his system. He wouldn't last long if she kept moaning like that, as if his hand were what she needed for salvation. Did she have any idea the kind of salvation she was offering him just by being here with him?

When he took the rosy peak into his mouth, all thoughts stopped. The only thing he could concentrate on was her body and the sweet way she felt writhing against him. There had been a

time when he knew every curve of her body, had memorized every single freckle. The body that lay before him was, he was sure, the new and improved Christine, though all the improvements still made her old body just as appealing. She was sexy. It didn't matter what the plastic surgeons had done to her breasts. It wasn't the cup size that turned him on, anyway.

Her hands went into his hair, guiding him, pressing her firm breast into his mouth even further. He braced himself, placing his hands on either side of her head while her red hair spilled out around her, covering his hand and looking like flames in the firelight.

His cock, ready to probe deep inside her, stood at attention, rubbing against her thigh, hoping to find release soon. But Luke wasn't ready for release. He wanted to relish this moment in case Crissy changed her mind later and decided this was the second worst mistake she'd ever made. He wouldn't think about that now. Pushing all thoughts of the past out of his mind, he let his hand stray down to her flat stomach and then move further down to linger at the thatch of hair beckoning him.

"I want to taste you," he said as he moved lower, sliding his body against hers until his knees hit the hard wood floor.

She opened her legs for him and arched her back, raising herself up to meet him. Cradling her bottom in his hands, he pulled her up, opening her folds in order to allow his tongue to worship her the way she deserved to be worshipped.

Gliding along her outer lips, his tongue coated her skin while his hands held her firmly in place, keeping her from wiggling away from him. It was all he could do to hold her still, her movements were so frenzied, and he had yet to touch her tender nub with his tongue. When he did, she came up off the floor, his hands useless in an effort to contain her desire. Her wet warmth wrapped itself around his mouth as his tongue dipped deep inside her body, licking the nectar from her inner walls. God, she tasted like heaven.

Her fingers wound around his hair and pulled his mouth further into her. She was moaning, whispering words of love and encouragement, but all he could focus on was how good she felt, how good she tasted. He had never forgotten the scent of Christine's body, and heaven help him, it surrounded him now, making it difficult to think about anything save for sinking himself into her.

When she finally released his hair and reached for his shoulders, pulling him toward her, he was more than ready for her. His cock rested against her opening for a mere second before she moved her body, arching her back, guiding him into her by sheer force of will. There were no words between them now, nothing except the meeting of bodies, their eyes locked together, their legs intertwined.

Seeing himself reflected in her eyes reminded him of all the reasons he loved Christine. She had always been the only woman for him, and that had not changed in spite of their bitter divorce. When she smiled up at him, he knew he loved her and would never love another. Then her body began to quake. At first, the tremor was small, starting somewhere deep inside, gently caressing his cock as it moved slowly in and out of her body. Then the intensity built. Just as Luke felt his cock constrict and threaten to orgasm, Crissy's body let loose in a frenzy of tremors, shaking him to the very core. Her body forced his response, seeking out his juices as he shot them into her, hot, without a warning.

He bit down hard on his bottom lip, fearing he'd draw blood as the entire world seemed to spin around him. For three whole seconds, he didn't breathe. All he could do was collapse against her, his cock still buried to the hilt, still burning for her. She sent a shiver through him when her fingernails gently raked against his back.

“You’ve still got it,” she murmured against his skin.

“So do you.”

“I missed you, Luke.”

He swore he saw tears in her eyes as she spoke, but knew he had to be mistaken. “I missed you, too, darlin.’ ” He could tell she wanted to say something else, but for now, she just lay there looking up at him, whatever it was lost in the embrace.

Chapter Five

"Are you going to tell me the truth now?" She was lying next to him, tracing tiny circles on his chest and almost killing him with her sudden softness.

"I reckon so." He didn't want to tell her anything that would ruin the moment or their earlier confessions.

"So, spill it."

"It's kinda hard to talk about, you know." He stared at the ceiling, trying to find the words. Gargoyle. He turned into a gargoyle once a month. A stone statue, about seven feet tall with wings, a forked tail, the whole bit. And he had never told a living soul. Isabella was the only one who knew his secret. Well, Isabella and Max. Now he knew he had to add Crissy to that short list.

"I understand, but you have to tell me."

"Okay. I will. Do you remember I told you I almost died in college?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, I didn't die, but something else happened to me, something I didn't really understand until that night in the woods." He ran his finger along her scar as he spoke. Damn, they had both come close to dying that night. They had been lucky to escape with the few scars that marred their bodies, but those on their hearts were another thing entirely.

"Go on."

"I change once a month." He bit the words out, not really wanting to speak them but knowing he had no choice.

"And?"

"And I change."

"Into?"

"Into a gargoyle. A stone statue. And, Crissy, I'm defenseless then. I can't protect myself or anyone else, not even the kids on my campus."

"So that's where you go once a month."

"Yeah. That's it. I come up here where I know Max can't get to me. Only thing is, the whole rest of the town is vulnerable."

"When did this start?"

He was aware that her hand had stopped moving and just lay against his chest now, but at least she hadn't pulled away from him.

"Two weeks after we were attacked."

"You mean when we ..."

"Yes. When we called it quits. That attack triggered something inside me. I mean, I always knew there was something else in me, something I was hiding from Max. I just didn't know what it would do to me if it took over. And now I know."

"A gargoyle," her voice was filled with soft disbelief.

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"You've got to let me help you." She raised up onto her elbow and leaned over him, forcing him to look her in the eyes, something he hadn't really wanted to do.

"This is so dangerous, Crissy. If you ever got hurt"

"I already did." She ran her finger along her scar. "Remember? This thing goes all the way to the bone. The surgeon couldn't remove it."

"By the way, nice job on the tits."

"Pig." He smiled as she playfully slapped his shoulder.

"Well, I do appreciate what the divorce settlement did for you."

"I'm glad to know it wasn't a waste."

He rolled her over so that she was beneath him again, his erection pressed against her wetness. "I'll just pretend they're the reason I had to sell my boat."

She smiled. Thank God something was going right. He had thought for certain she'd knock him on his ass the second he mentioned her boob job. There was something different about Crissy now. She might have only been back for a day, but he could see the difference in her.

Everything about her made him want to do better, to be better. This time, if she gave him a second chance, he wouldn't screw things up. This time, he would ... hell, who was he kidding? There would be no 'this time.' He was a cursed man and there were demons out there who wanted him dead.

"What?"

He hadn't realized he was staring at her until she spoke. "Nothing. I just ... you're beautiful."

"Thanks."

"No, really. You are. There's something different about you."

"It's the nose. You were right. It's new, too."

"No, Crissy. It's you. It's like you've got a light shining inside you or something."

"You getting poetic in your old age?"

"Not likely. I'm just saying you're beautiful, and I love you. But we do have things to deal with here. I want to tell you Isabella's ideas about all this. Then you can tell me if you want to hang around or not."

She ran her fingernails up his back, sending a shiver all the way to his cock.

"I thought we could do something else first. Anybody ever tell you that you talk too damn much, Sheriff?"

* * * *

Christine raised herself above Luke, determined that this time they would do things her way. One of the things she always loved about Luke was his adventurous sexual nature. There had been a time in the past when they had enhanced their sex life with various toys. Tonight, all she needed was one toy, the one that was still awake and beckoning her fingers to touch it.

Straddling him, she sat just below his cock, her legs on either side of him. "Now it's my turn to please you."

He shot her a crooked smile, which was quickly replaced by a look of quiet lust as her hand closed around his shaft. God, his skin felt so smooth, so sensual beneath her fingers. Stroking up and down slowly, she allowed the feel of his cock to penetrate her system, imagining how it had felt moments ago when it was buried deep inside her. How had she gone so long without Luke? No one could compare to him, and no one ever had in the time after their divorce. Now, it felt as if they had always been together.

“You’re gonna kill me, woman,” he groaned.

“That’s not what I plan to do.” She leaned forward and took his head into her mouth, carefully sucking as her tongue played and teased. Luke’s cock was extremely sensitive, something she had not forgotten. When she heard him audibly inhale, as if his breath were caught in his throat, she looked up at him.

For a second, she sat stock-still. With lust in his eyes, they almost glowed yellow. Fear crept into her system as she wondered whether or not her mind was playing a dirty trick. The second she stopped moving on his cock, he shifted positions and buried himself deep inside her body. Her heart felt as if it would explode for a second, and her breath came in slow spurts. Then his eyes were normal again, and she realized it had to be a trick from the glow of the fireplace. The thing with yellow eyes was not inside Luke.

Shaking herself back to reality, concentrating on Luke’s body thrusting into her, she threw her head back and gave in to the sensation of loving him. She’d figure out the rest later, she promised herself. Still, there was the nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she had just looked into the eyes of something that saw her as a threat.

The feeling didn’t go away even after Luke had spilled his seed into her body, rendering her a useless mass of jelly thanks to the intensity of her own orgasm. She lay next to him in the dark, the fire dying out, and wondered how the hell things had gotten so complicated. How long had it been since she’d worked a spell? It seemed like ages, but now the words formed in her mind, and she knew it was up to her to keep Luke safe. Whatever was inside him was not going to be content forever with cohabitation. She was certain of this.

As Luke started drifting off to sleep, she pulled herself from his embrace. There was more to this story than Luke knew. He had never been one to ask the right questions, even if he was a cop. Yes, it was up to her to save Luke and change things back to the way they used to be.

Chapter Six

Christine stood near the bell in the old tower watching day break across the college campus. Nothing she had ever read about or heard about came close to the story Luke had told her last night. She had known all along that something must have happened to him to make him cheat on her, to make him break her heart that way. Now she knew the truth. Something was inside Luke that he couldn't fight--something that had been pushed to the limits and had awakened that night in the woods.

She remembered parts of that night. Her therapist called it selective memory loss. She had really thought it was because the blow to the head she had suffered left her unconscious for longer than anyone thought. There had been something out there with them that night, waiting for them, as if it knew they would be there. The midnight rendezvous was her idea, but going to the edge of the forest out near the old convent was a whim.

God, she'd give anything to take back that night and the pain that went along with it. Whatever had attacked them had awakened the beast that had lain dormant inside her husband at the time. Luke had fought with a fury Christine had never known--subduing whatever it was that had chased them through the woods.

But he had lost the battle to the beast inside, the devil that ruled his soul and good sense.

He had told her last night that he and the creature had reached a truce. Monthly, Luke would turn over the reigns to the creature and it would be allowed to rest in its true form, which was why the gargoyle existed. She had never seen Luke's gargoyle form, but she suspected that if it were alive, it would have soft red skin and glowing yellow eyes.

To be honest, she didn't trust whatever it was that lived inside Luke, cohabitating, as it were. And she swore that sometime during their lovemaking, she had glimpsed those yellow eyes for only a split second. Luke thought bringing her here, keeping watch over her, would protect her. And it might protect her from Max, but who was going to protect her from that thing inside of Luke?

Well, she wasn't a Cabot witch for nothing! She knew a thing or two about Tai Chi, spirit balls, and levitation. Plus, she could cast a wicked spell if needed. She might be a bit rusty since academia had taken over her life, but those kinds of things remained buried in one's mind and never really went away.

"What are you thinking?" It was Luke's turn to pose the question to her as he came up behind her.

"Just watching the sunrise. How many more days 'til you turn?" There was no sense in mincing words.

"Three."

"The magic number." She leaned against him, allowing his arms to encircle her. "Will you let me try something?"

"What?" he stiffened.

"I want to read your mind."

"Some of that Wiccan hoodoo?"

"If you want to call it that. You have your voodoo, I have mine. The point is, you're

possessed. That's why you change each month."

"What are you talking about?" His arms left her body, causing her to sway backward a bit before catching herself.

"I'm talking about the thing that lives inside you." She turned to see the disbelief on his face.

"Crissy, let it go."

"No, I won't. You saw the movie *Stigmata*, right? Well, that girl did not have stigmata. She was possessed by a spirit of a man with stigmata. The plot fell apart, imploded on itself, but nobody realized it. I'm telling you that you are not cursed. You're possessed."

"Whatever. I'm telling you that in three days, it won't matter what you call it 'cause you'll be talking to stone."

"I feel like I already am." She tried to brush by him, but his hand caught her arm. "Let go of me."

"No. You listen to me, Crissy. I know what's inside me, and I can handle it. But if you fuck with it"

"What, Luke? It'll come sit on the edge of my bed again? Oh, I see. That look on your face says it all. You think I'm nuts, don't you? Well, let me tell you a thing or two. They're all demons and you can't trust any of them."

"Let it go," his voice roughened as it tumbled across his lips.

"Or what? That creature inside you will push me off the ledge, too?"

Luke let out a roar then, one that shattered her bravery. Shit. It had been a hunch, and she had never suspected she would be right about it. As he came toward her his eyes glowed yellow. She didn't wait around to see what happened next. Hell-bound for the door, she leapt past Luke and his guard dog and fled from the landing. The campus would be littered with students soon, and she would hide out in a place Luke would never look: the library.

* * * *

Luke fell to the floor, his heart feeling as if it would beat right out of his chest. What the fuck was happening to him? Shit. He had never considered that what Crissy said might be right. He hadn't questioned Isabella or her intentions or anything else about his curse. Until now.

Now, it felt like a goddamned sledgehammer was pounding on his chest from the inside, trying to get out. Three days. God, in three days, he would be defenseless. And if Crissy was right, he might not come back from it this time.

"You doubt me." Isabella floated above him as he stumbled down the stairs.

"No." The word was strained as it pushed past his lips.

"I read your mind. I know she has poisoned you against me."

"No. She hasn't," he grumbled.

"Then why are you leaving? Why are you chasing after her?"

"You said it yourself. She can help break the spell."

"The curse, Luke. She can help break the curse."

"Now you're gonna correct my grammar? Shit. Fucking ghosts. Get out of my way."

"You can go through me." She stood on the stairs in front of him.

"Don't push me, Lady." He had never moved through Isabella and didn't plan to start now.

"Already she has turned you against me. Is she that good, Luke?"

"Don't talk about her like that."

"Go to her, then. It's what I want anyway. Go to her and pour your heart out to her. It

won't matter in the end." She disappeared, clearing the way for him to pass, but her words echoed in his head.

The need to find Christine was fierce. He knew he was missing several pieces to an important puzzle here. And something told him Crissy had the answers.

* * * *

"They know. What are we going to do now?" Isabella paced in the darkness. Her lover couldn't hear her, but she knew he felt her despair.

Everything had been so precise, so planned. And now, it was all going to collapse around them because she had gotten impatient. She thought she could force the girl to lend her body and the girl had ended up falling from the tower. And now Luke, her only ally, was suspicious.

He had always told her Christine was nothing but trouble, but Isabella wanted to believe so badly that Luke and Christine's love could reunite her with her one love. They would inhabit two beautiful bodies and live a lifetime together. Now, her plans were being ruined by the two people she thought would be her salvation.

And Max was closing in. If he discovered the plan and the amount of work she had put into this, he would destroy her himself. But there was one last hope. She could still convince Christine that Max was the enemy. If she did so, then maybe the girl would destroy him for her, leaving her plans intact. Then, while Luke was turned to stone, the transformation could begin. Once Christine's spirit had fled, Luke's would follow, she was certain.

They would never live one without the other. This was her hope, anyway.

Now she had to wait for night to fall, as she didn't dare step out into the sunlight. Luke would return if she made it appear that this was his only safe haven. And she knew she must. Too much depended on his being here when he turned to stone.

Chapter Seven

After having the good sense to grab her purse on the way out, Christine stopped off in the science building to freshen up before heading for the library. None of this business with Luke seemed to add up when stacked against her intuition. She knew she was right about whatever it was that lived inside his head, but she just had to convince him of that. Taking the elevator to the all but abandoned third floor, she entered the rare book room, checking over her shoulder about a dozen times in the process.

She didn't want to see Luke again until she figured all this out.

"Hi, I'm Christine Callahan. I'm visiting from UL in Lafayette and was hoping I could have a look at some of your books."

The lady smiled friendly enough even though she looked down her nose and refused to shake hands. "Sign in. You'll have to leave your purse here. No notebooks or pens are allowed. Don't rest on the books while you copy notes."

Christine already knew the procedure after having been in rare book rooms around the country. Still, she complied without a snide remark, though she seriously wanted to give the woman one.

"Thank you," she said when the woman handed her some loose-leaf paper and a pencil.

"And no writing on top of the books."

"Sure. Not a problem. Tell me, can you point me in the direction of history and demonology?"

The woman about lost her teeth then. Her face completely turned white before she pressed her lips firmly together and pointed toward an appropriate dark corner. "That way, but those books haven't been touched in a while."

"I've no doubt about that," Christine managed under her breath.

"They may be out of order." The woman clung to her cross necklace as she spoke, clearly afraid of whatever might lie inside the books. Silly, superstitious woman! There was nothing in the books that could harm anyone. All the danger lay outside of the library.

"Thank you."

"We close at noon for lunch," the woman called as Christine headed for the dark stack. She had four hours to get to the bottom of the mystery. Then she would go home and shower, to hell with whatever wanted to knock the breath out of her body. This was a new day, and she wasn't afraid anymore.

Well, not much to be found here. She ran her fingers along the spines of the twenty or so volumes in the back corner. If the librarian were anywhere near her, she couldn't hear her moving. She seriously doubted she'd be disturbed as she perused everything from books by Alistair Crowley to a couple of old journals. One in particular caught her eye as she gazed across the weathered spines.

Old Stone Rose, the spine read in gold letters. The leafing was a little worn, but in all, the book wasn't in bad shape, she realized as she pulled it from the shelf. The spine creaked as she opened it, noting the inside cover. *Maximillian Valentine, 1850.*

Settling back against the opposite row of books, she took a seat on the floor and began

thumbing through the ancient text. The whole thing was hand written, as she had suspected from the title and cover. It was somebody's journal. Maximillian's journal. A map covered the first two pages, detailing the town as it had been at the start of the Civil War. In the center stood what was now the college campus, but what had once been the Bullard Mansion and later the Stone Rose Convent. The bell tower held a prominent position on the map, reminding Christine of why she was here in the first place, to save Luke.

Turning to a random entry, she began reading.

It is the ninth of June and the visions have not stopped. What was begun on old Midsummer or May Eve has continued. The creature with the red wings haunts my dreams even though I have banished him on numerous occasions. I say him because there is no doubt in my mind that the creature stalking me is of the male variety. Its eyes are too evil to be those of a woman.

A shiver ran up Christine's back as she read the entry. Flipping back a few pages, she found April 30. Her heart pounded in her chest as she read the words to an ancient banishment ritual. God, she had never seen anything like this before. The witches she had grown up with were neo-pagan, not having a traceable line through history. But this, this was a ritual that had been performed and lay before her in explicit detail.

"It worked for a while." The voice was incorporeal as it seemed to surround her.

"What?" she looked up from the book, wondering when the librarian had walked up. She was here alone, though, the librarian having disappeared.

"It worked. For a while." The books sitting opposite her seemed a bit blurry, and she wondered how much longer she could survive on steam alone.

"Get a grip, Christine. You need some sleep."

"You don't need sleep. If I go away and come back as a man, will it help?"

"What?" She closed the book, completely unaware that she was talking to a ghost.

"There. Is that better?"

He stood before her now, fully materialized, dressed as if he were in the 1800s. "Yeah," she nodded her head in disbelief. "Who are you?"

"I am Maximillian Valentine, at your service," he bowed, removing his fashionable hat before bending at the waist. His long, dark hair fell forward.

"M ... Maximillian?" Her heart leapt into her throat.

"You have my book."

She turned the book over to read the author's name again. Shit. This was not funny. "What do you want from me?"

"You are in danger. There are evil winds blowing, and they are all swirling around you."

"Who are you? What do you know about me?" He wasn't a danger to her. Her every instinct said this was a man she could trust, but Luke didn't trust him for whatever reason.

He laughed before settling onto the floor in front of her, something she knew he would never do if he were still living. "I have been watching you. Not only you. The others, too. I have sworn not to interfere, but now I find my hand being forced. Your friend, Luke, he doesn't know the danger."

"You're Max. He told me about you. You're the one who masterminded all this evil." If Luke was right, that is.

"No, I'm not. Isabella and Lucien are the masterminds. They seek an eternal union, and I am here to stop them. For years, I have watched them, assured the safety of all those in Stone Rose, but now, they are close to what they want. They are close to reclaiming bodies and living

as mortals again.”

“This doesn’t make any sense.” Why would Luke say this man, or ghost, was the enemy when he wasn’t? Luke usually had better sense than that. Well, okay, so he had made plenty of mistakes in the past, but his instincts were usually good.

“It will. Isabella is the one who attacked you in the forest that night. She also pushed the girl who died months ago. She is the one whose invisible hands went around your throat. You are in danger.”

“Luke is in danger.” The knowledge crept up on her.

“Yes. He is. I placed the curse on Lucien, the curse of the stone rose. When he entered Luke’s body, the curse went into Luke. Now, Isabella wishes for you to destroy me, and she wants control over your body.”

Christine let his words sink into her mind. It all made sense. The visions, the threats, the warnings she had been feeling since she came back to Stone Rose. “What can I do to help?”

“You must stop Isabella. Once I subdued the powers here in Stone Rose, the powers that granted immortality to Isabella and Lucien. They do not work alone. There is something stronger, something bigger here. I still don’t know what, but I do know that it is a threat.”

“And you vanquished it once?”

“Yes. But it has now chosen you as its host. It will join with you in two days when Luke turns. Unless you stop it. Isabella’s plan is also to join with you. The two will fight, she will lose, and you will be the victim. Unless ...”

“You’ve got to help me, Max.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“What do we need to do?”

“First, you need to take this book out of the library. I will divert the librarian’s attention while you walk out with it. I don’t recall the exact wording I used over a hundred years ago, so I need you to read the book to me.”

“Consider it done.” She winked at the ghost, who smiled in return. Together, they would do away with whatever it was in Stone Rose that threatened to overtake her sanity and her body.

When the loud crash came in the back room, she took the opportunity to bolt from the room, ignoring the alarm as she dashed into the elevator before pulling the sensor off the book. When Max joined her, she finally shoved the book into her purse.

“Now what?”

“Now we wait for sundown.”

Chapter Eight

Luke's heart felt as if it were going to beat out of his chest. In all his times being melded to whatever it was inside him, he had never felt like this. The feverish ache started somewhere deep inside and made him feel as if his head was about to explode. All this had happened within ten minutes of Christine leaving him.

He was going to go after her, and he had even made it to the door, but then the attack had come and he found himself so weak that moving forward was not an option. Instead, he stumbled backward against the hard, stone floor, where he had been ever since.

Isabella had floated in and out, her sobs and the wringing of her hands incoherent to him. For the first time since all this craziness began, he really had no idea how to proceed. He had not felt this helpless and aware of the helplessness since the transformations first began. Right now, it felt as if he were transforming to stone, yet he was aware of the movement in the room, the beating of his heart, and the pain that radiated throughout his entire body.

It had never been like this before.

Thoughts of Crissy ran through his head. He could practically feel the danger swirling around her, could almost see her face in front of his. A couple of times he had reached out to touch her only to grasp the air. They had really started something yesterday. He felt it deep in his soul that he was on the way toward rekindling whatever they'd had before that he had fucked up. He swore that if he ever got out of this room, he would go to her and proclaim his love, and he would guarantee that he'd never hurt her again.

He sucked in a deep breath. He could never promise such a thing. His future was so uncertain, what with this curse hanging over his head and his obligation to Isabella. All he could do was tell her he loved her and hope that the rest would come in time, even if this time he knew he was ready for forever.

* * * *

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Christine looked down the stairs toward Max, who sort of floated near the end of the stairway.

"All will be well. You should clean yourself and rest. The night will be long." His lips were held in a thin line, the severity of the job before them etched on his handsome face.

They would be walking into the mouth of hell tonight, facing down demons that had haunted Max for years and now held the man she loved prisoner. Christine nodded her understanding, but she knew she'd never be able to sleep while Luke's life was in danger. Max had told her everything. She knew all about Isabella's deception, Lucien's possession of Luke's body and what the two of them had been planning in Stone Rose for as long as Max could remember. Christine knew she had an ally in the handsome ghost. Luke might not trust him, but she did. As long as he was guarding her house, she knew Isabella would not come close to her again.

What she didn't know was where Luke was. Fight or not, this was not like him. He usually stormed after her rather than letting her leave with the last word. Allying with Isabella was not in his nature, but if he really thought he owed her something then maybe that would explain his absence. She really hated to admit how much it hurt when she returned home only to

find that Luke was not sitting on the porch waiting for her.

Pushing aside feelings of longing and regret, she stepped into the shower. The holiday season was here and as the water hit her, she remembered her first Christmas as Luke's wife. It had seemed like they would be together forever. She remembered sitting by the fire, sipping red wine and looking into his eyes as he gazed back at her. Back then, they could look at each other for hours, run their hands along each other's bodies as if they'd never tire of one another.

She shook herself. Things had changed, but the longing she felt for him hadn't subsided. Since last night when they were together again, everything seemed as if it were possible. The past might be lost, but she had felt a spark of promise when she had looked into his eyes.

Something was not right with Luke. He had told her he loved her. Something had to be keeping him from her otherwise he would be here now. The feeling started at the base of her neck and worked its way around to her throat. It wasn't the suffocating feeling of being choked like she'd had last time. This was more subtle. It was a vision. Luke was in trouble.

She sprang from the shower and dried herself quickly before pulling on a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt. The need to get to Luke was overpowering. She met Max on the stairs. Speaking at almost the same time, they said:

"We have to go now."

"Come on, I'll drive." Christine grabbed the keys to the Fury, knowing Max would find his own way there. Still, she felt the need to say it. Her other hand clutched Max's journal, the one thing she knew could save Luke from whatever had gotten hold of him.

Thankfully, she caught all the green lights on her way back to the bell tower. The need to get to Luke as quickly as possible was so intense she could hardly stand it. Something was wrong with him, and she had to go save him. That was the only thing on her mind as she pushed the door open and stepped into the dark room.

"Luke! Luke! Are you here?"

A low groan coming from near the entrance answered her. He was lying on the floor with Isabella--the ghost--standing over him.

"Holy shit." She had known the campus was haunted, but for some reason seeing Isabella was more disturbing than seeing Max had been. It had something to do with the desperation in her eyes and the bloodlust. It was then that she realized Isabella would rather kill Luke than lose him to her.

"You get away from him!" She yelled at the ghost as she stood her ground, hoping Max had made it here in time to help her.

"Or what? You'll kill me?" Isabella floated above Luke, her eyes glowing red as she looked down at Christine.

"No, but I will."

Isabella's gaze flew from Christine to the far side of the room as Max materialized. "How the hell did you"

"I've been here all along, my dear. Watching you, waiting for you to mess things up like you have this time. You can't have this man. Your precious Lucien will not be allowed to control him."

"You can't stop me. The transformation has already started."

"I can stop it. You know I can. I stopped it before when you tried this. I only regret that I couldn't stop you from killing innocent people along the way. Tell me, do you think Lucien will be faithful to you among all these luscious young bodies?"

"I'll have her body," she pointed to Christine.

"Yeah, nice as it is, I'm sure Lucien will soon stray. Just like he did last time."

"That's not true! You know that isn't true."

"Face it, Izzy, he died because of another woman. The deal he fought was not for you but for her. He's been using you all these years to gain mortality."

"No!" She shook her head frantically.

"Yes. The reason you were in danger in the first place was because of him. He's the reason for all of this. He's been playing both hands, Izzy. And now, you're the loser."

"No!"

"Yes. And now it's time for him to go."

"I won't let you!"

"You have no choice." He turned to Christine. "Do it now."

She closed her eyes and recited the words she had since memorized, the words that would return Luke to normal and would banish Isabella and Lucien. Max had explained that their souls would go back to where they had lain dormant for so long, back to the bell in the tower. As the words fell from her lips, her life with Luke flashed before her eyes.

They had loved each other so much back before things had gotten out of hand, back before this curse that turned him into a gargoyle and made him an unfaithful SOB. And now her heart ached for him, wanted to let him back inside. But could she really trust him? As the last of the words were spoken, she opened her eyes only to see an empty room. It was as if Isabella and Max had never been there.

Luke stirred on the floor and then sat up, holding his head as he moved. "What the hell?"

"It's okay, take it slow." She rushed to his side and then sank down next to him. "It's over."

"What's over?"

"This curse of yours."

"Over."

"Yes."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. "I never should have doubted you. How did you know?"

"Woman's intuition?"

"Witch's intuition."

"Whatever you want to call it." She smiled. "All that matters is tomorrow night you get to see the full moon."

"I'd like that. But there's one thing I'd like more." He reached out and stroked her cheek before taking her hand in his and placing a kiss on her knuckles. His lips burned all the way through, sending a shiver of desire through her. Man, he still had the power to turn her on with nothing more than the brush of his lips.

"What's that?" She smiled as she tried to shake the desire from her body.

"I'd like to see it with you. You want to go somewhere special to see it?"

"As long as it doesn't involve bells."

"No kind of bells?"

"Any kind of bells."

"Fine. We'll take it slow. No bells. But I promise you, one day you and I will hear bells again."

"Is that so, Sheriff?"

"Yeah, that's so."

Chapter Nine

The sun sank over Stone Rose and for the first time in a long time, Luke wasn't dreading the full moon. He stole a glance at Christine who looked absolutely beautiful with her hair all wild in the wind. The windows were down on the Fury, and he was in the driver's seat for a change. She shot him a smile before turning her attention back to the road as it zoomed by.

Luke took in a long, deep breath, knowing he didn't deserve this second chance, but thanking God that he had gotten it. "We're almost there," he said in a whisper, his throat choked with emotion.

"Good. I can't wait to see this surprise of yours."

"I know how you love surprises." He laughed when she rolled her eyes. Christine was known for a lot of things, but patience wasn't one of them.

"I'm just thrilled by them. But I have something for you, too."

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow as she ran her hand up his jean-clad thigh.

"Yep. And I'll give it to you as soon as I get mine."

They couldn't get to the cabin soon enough as far as he was concerned. He had spent all day working on this surprise for her and knew she would love it.

"Come on," he said once they reached the little cabin overlooking the lake. "We're just in time."

"For what?"

He stepped out of the car and then went around to open the door for her. "Come see and I'll show you."

They stepped out onto the pier just as the first of the lights hit the sky. "The fireworks! I had forgotten."

"I figured you had." Stone Rose was known for its elaborate Christmas fireworks display. This year was no different except for the fact that it was the first time in a long time that he'd actually be able to share them with the woman he loved.

Pulling her close to him, he directed her attention to the splash of color as it exploded in the night sky. She jumped every time the explosion went off, but then again, she always had.

"They're gorgeous."

"Then why do they spook you so bad?"

"Who knows? Maybe I was in the Civil War or something in a past life. I just know they are breathtaking."

"You are breathtaking."

"And you're such a poet."

"You want to see the rest of it?"

"I don't know if my little heart can take more."

"Oh, there's plenty more."

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"Only the ones I want to spend forever with."

"Luke"

"I know. I know. Take it slow. But I just want you to know I plan on doing everything

right this time if you'll give me a chance."

She snuggled against him as they lay back on the pier, their eyes turned toward the exploding sky. "I'll try."

"Try my ass." He rolled over on top of her, pinning her arms down against the wooden planks.

"What? You want more than that?"

"Yeah. I want this."

He lowered his mouth to hers as she arched against him. His body responded instantly, remembering how soft and sweet she felt when she wrapped around him. He heard her gasp against his mouth as she opened for him, allowing his tongue to delve inside and explore. God, he felt like he was coming home. And he knew he would never let her go this time.

"I love you," he whispered against her lips.

"And I love you."

"Do I get my surprise now?"

"I thought you'd never ask. You want it out here, underneath the stars?"

"Damn, woman, if you arch against me one more time, you might get yours here too."

"It's a good thing Christmas is warm in Louisiana."

"You've got all the heat I need."

"Remember that this time."

"I promise."

* * * *

Christine lay against him on the sofa. He had decorated the entire cabin in Christmas lights and even had a tree in the living room. To say that she was shocked was an understatement. When they were married, she had to practically drag him out to get a tree every year. She turned her wrist so that her ring sparkled in the colored lights. A promise ring, he called it, but she knew it meant more to him than her engagement ring had meant back when he first gave it to her. They had gone through a lot together, and now, she finally realized she would never be able to do without him.

Loving Luke Callahan was as easy as breathing. He was too damned charming for his own good and sexy as sin. And right now, his arms were wrapped around her and his heart beat against her ear. The whole rest of the world melted away as soft Christmas music played in the background. Peace on Earth and all that other stuff. Yeah, she felt like she'd found it this year.

"What are you thinking?"

"About you." She turned so she could face him. "I do love you, Luke."

He smiled and pulled her against his chest. "I know, sweetie. I love you, too."

"And I meant what I said, about taking it slow."

"I'll wait for you to decide when you want to turn that little promise into forever."

"Thanks." She rested against him again before looking up once more. "How's next Thursday?"

He laughed. "Damned impatient woman. How 'bout tomorrow?"

"You think Old Man Peterson is up tonight?"

"It wouldn't be legal."

"I don't care. I just want it done."

"Then tonight it is."

* * * *

Mr. and Mrs. Luke Callahan left Mr. Peterson's house around midnight. The old man had

not been impressed when they woke him, but he liked the hundred-dollar bill Luke forked over for a quickie wedding. They could file the papers later. Tonight, he just wanted to bask in the glow of having his wife back. They got back into the Fury and sped off into the night, leaving Stone Rose behind as they headed south toward New Orleans. Deputy Bradley was in charge for the next three days while Luke spent his 'monthly time' getting to know his wife again.

Max smiled down from the bell tower as he ran his hand along the metal. Christine had sworn to destroy all evidence that anything out of the ordinary had taken place in Stone Rose, but he knew that someday some kid ready to try their hand at black magic would reawaken the forces that battled in Stone Rose. Until then, he'd be on guard and would be ready when the time came.

This was his home, too, and he vowed to protect it and those who lived there. With Luke and Christine there to back him up, he finally felt as if things would be right again in the sleepy Southern town.

The End