



Loose Id

Spirited

with stories by
**SHERI GILMORE,
CYNARA TREGARTH,
AND JEIGH LYNN**

SPIRITED

Sheri Gilmore
Cynnara Tregarth • Jeigh Lynn

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (multiple partners, homoerotic sex, voyeurism).

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Sheri Gilmore, Cynnara Tregarth & Jeigh Lynn

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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"Match Game: Ghost Style," Copyright © October 2006 by Cynnara Tregarth

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ISBN 978-1-59632-351-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editors: Maryam Salim, Vincent Diamond & Olivia Wong

Cover Artist: April Martinez

A WOMAN'S OFFERING

Sheri Gilmore

Dedicated To:

"BoPeep" Abercrombie

May 1938 -- October 2005

*A Soul worth remembering; a Life worth celebrating --
the best "Dad" in the world and my best friend.*

Author's Note:

Ancient Aztec peoples viewed death as a continuation of life, which was considered a dream. When someone died they became awake and only then were they truly alive after their soul passed through nine levels during a four-year period before reaching Mictlan -- the place of the dead. They believed that the soul of a person was dependent on the type of death rather than the type of life that the person led. How a person died determined what region of Mictlan they would go. Once they reached that region they either waited for transformation or lingered for their next destiny. The Aztecs devoted two of their calendar months to celebrate their dead.

There is a legend of an Aztec god, who was characterized as the most beautiful, powerful, supreme deity. He walked over the heavens and the surfaces of earth and hell, meting out justice to sinners and favors to the deserving. He had the power to determine a child's destiny in its mother's womb on the day it was conceived. If a person had the courage to face their fear and rip the god's heart out, then return it, that person could demand a reward for the feat. Legend also has it that this god stole the goddess of flowers away from her husband, because the god thought the husband unworthy of her beauty or love.

His name is Tezcatlipoca.

October 1, Mid-Afternoon

“It’s another sunny day here in the greater San Antonio area. Skies are clear with little or no chance of rain for the rest of the week. So get those picnic baskets out, folks, and head on down --”

Click.

Anna’s hand returned to the steering wheel. A patch of sunlight filtered through the trees and open window of the SUV onto her skin.

Her mouth tightened. She shifted her hand further down the steering wheel out of the sunlight. With her right hand she rubbed the spot on her left.

She didn’t want to hear or feel how beautiful the day was. She glanced out of the window and shook her head. The idiot radio announcer surely didn’t know what he was talking about. There weren’t any bright colors, only a gloomy gray color in the sky.

A stone fountain peeked through the spattering of trees on her right. An overwhelming pressure rose within her chest, as she drew closer, signaling her approach to the park.

“Oh, no.” She had tried to avoid places and people who reminded of things she wanted to keep buried deep within the dark recesses of her mind. She never came this way, but she’d forgotten in her haste to pick up Steven’s suit at the laundry.

“Of all the days for them to close early.” If he didn’t have the suit he’d specified for tonight’s party, he would be angry -- again. She shuddered, remembering the last time she hadn’t gotten his specifications exactly as he had requested.

She touched her cheek where the sting of his fingers had left an imprint for several days. Keeping her focus on the road, she quickly pressed the accelerator and the “up” button for her window. Not quick enough.

A child's shrill laugh forced its way into the vehicle with her, triggering memories of another child's gurgles of happiness. The dreaded pain she kept hidden stabbed her gut, twisting a gasp from her lips, reminding her that it still lived and breathed. Thriving on her need to stay connected to the one person who had truly loved her, it never disappeared. It appeared out of nowhere at the most inconvenient times to crush and strangle her with sycophantic tentacles, sucking what little life she had left from her soul.

Fighting the urge to floor the gas pedal, Anna's grip tightened on the wheel. Trembling, it took all her concentration and willpower to ignore her mounting anxiety and safely maneuver to the other side of the park. Licking her upper lip, she tasted the salty sweat that peppered her skin. The palms of her hands slid across the steering wheel; she gripped tighter, sitting forward in her seat to focus on the wavering image of the road in front of her.

The intersection where she would turn toward home loomed ahead. She released a pent-up breath.

A quick flash of silver streaked into her path, as a car pulled out into the street. Brakes squealed and tires skidded across pavement as she slammed on brakes. Her head jerked forward. Long black strands of hair slashed across her face and vision. She cried out in a second of panic, not able to see her surroundings. Turning her head to clear her vision, she swiped the long mass with one hand. Another movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Her stomach lurched as her original anxiety increased.

Hurry up! She fumbled with the steering wheel, hitting the horn and startled herself and the figures in her peripheral vision.

A baby's frightened scream invaded the glass and steel of her own private hell. The protective features of the vehicle couldn't keep the threats to her peace of mind at bay. Like pieces of a shattered mirror, her insulation against the world outside crumbled.

Anna's gaze met that of the infant's mother. The stare was accusing and angry, as the woman soothed her child.

A faint odor rose tickling Anna's nose. She sniffed.

The sweet, innocent smell of baby powder permeated the enclosed space.

It's not real. It's just your imagination. The doctor had warned her about transference from that time to this during periods of stress.

The roominess she valued so much in her SUV disappeared into the semblance of a compact car. Fumbling with the pedals, she hit the gas and drove without seeing or hearing anything but the furious glare of the young mother and the cries of the child. Over and over the baby's wail ricocheted within Anna's mind. *You let me die! Why didn't you save me?*

By the time she pulled into her driveway her knuckles ached. Pain radiated from her jaw into her temples. Trembling from head to toe, she took a deep breath, unclenching her teeth, as the garage door closed behind her vehicle. The memories were always more vivid

and persistent this time of the year. They attacked her with a ferocity her weakened psyche couldn't deflect. She leaned her head against the door.

Thankfully, Steven would be at the office and the house would be quiet. She glanced at her watch. Just enough time to get her composure together and paste a smile on her face before he came home with a multitude of clients to entertain. He didn't like her to frown or look sad, saying it gave the appearance that he was a bad husband. His wife had to appear happy at all times. Her mother scolded her time and time again telling Anna that she should be happy that she had a successful husband to provide for her and protect her from the horrors of the world. Other women should be so lucky as Anna.

I'm happy. Anna practiced the mantra the psychologist Steven had hired told her to repeat several times a day whenever she felt anxious. *I'm happy.* It helped. Yes, she could feel the muscles in her neck and shoulders easing a bit. *I'm happy.* Stepping into the kitchen, she plastered a smile onto her face. Another self-hypnotic exercise the psychologist had instructed her to practice.

"It will ease your stress and enable you to function in your daily activities. You worry about too many unimportant things, Mrs. Jones."

"I can't have any more children, Dr. Fuchs. I wouldn't call that unimportant." She watched her therapist wave a dismissive hand. His patronizing ways irritated her, but Steven insisted he was the psychologist she had to see.

"Your husband doesn't want anymore children, nor does he like you being so despondent. You owe it to him to make an effort."

Silently, Anna asked, "Do I?" Out loud, she replied, "Yes, Doctor."

"Buenos días, Señora Jones."

Anna's steps and smile faltered. "Uh. *Buenos días*, Sylvia." Anna offered the woman in black and white a quick smile. "I forgot this was your day to clean."

The woman's eyebrow rose; she snorted. "*Sí*, so did others." The little woman's hand shot into the air, waving emphatically, as she returned to her sweeping, mumbling in Spanish about how she didn't know how she ever got any work done with nude bodies lying around in full view ...

Anna frowned. Crossing from the terracotta tiles of the kitchen into the den, her feet sank into deep, plush carpet and she faced a row of windows and sliding glass doors. Beyond, the glare of the sun reflected off the blue-green water of the swimming pool. Anna stepped further into the room, closer to the vision of a very svelte and very nude blond, stretching, as she rolled onto her back. Muscles rippled beneath the tanned skin, glistening with oil. Dark brown nipples stabbed into the humidity. Gold nipple rings winked in careless abandon with the same unselfconscious attitude of their mistress.

Anna slid the door open quietly and stood for a second admiring the woman. Mitsy Hare had been her husband's secretary for a little over a year. Anna could barely remember the names or faces of the string of personal assistants Steven had gone through in the six years they'd been married. Ms. Hare had lasted longer than most.

Studying the woman's firm, rounded breasts and shaven crotch, Anna comprehended the extent of Ms. Hare's qualifications and beguiling manners.

"Well, don't just stand there devouring me with your eyes."

Anna froze. She'd been caught examining another woman's body. She opened her mouth to apologize, but closed it when a figure by the pool house shifted into view.

"Come over here and lick me." With a pouting mouth Mitsy held out her hand and wiggled her hips. "This new clit ring has my pussy throbbing for some attention. It was *your* idea, after all."

Anna's heart thudded to a stop. Should she speak up and announce her presence, or turn and run? She didn't care for Mitsy, but if Steven had given his secretary permission to use the pool, Anna didn't want to intrude on the woman's love life. On the verge of apologizing, the shadowy figure -- tall, tanned, blond, and nude -- stepped forward into the glare of the mid-afternoon sun. Steven!

Anna stifled a gasp and pushed her back against the glass wall that prevented her immediate escape. With the glare of the sun and the deep shadows of the patio awning, she prayed they couldn't see her without great effort. If she remained still, they might never know she was there.

Steven took Mitsy's hand, kissing her fingers.

Even through her shock and surprise Anna acknowledged that at thirty-seven her husband was a very attractive man. The two looked great together. They were two golden warriors of the glittery commercial world of big enterprise. A world Anna had never understood, nor belonged to.

She heard her husband's perfected laugh, cultured to just the right pitch and tone guaranteed to turn the heads of women and men. Over and over she had heard Steven tell associates, "*To make it in this world you have to have a weapon with the ability to mesmerize and hook your prey, so when you reel them in they don't realize they've been caught until it's too late for any escape. At that point they have to surrender or die.*"

"I would, darling, but the housekeeper is here today. I don't want to provide any gossip that would upset Anna. I've sent her on enough fool's errands today; she'll be busy until the dinner tonight. She doesn't like it when I reprimand her."

Snort. "Your own little slave. She's so zoned out in her own pathetic universe. Besides, threaten the servant with deportation or something, and she won't open her mouth."

Anna flinched more from the possible threat to Sylvia than the cruel attack on her own mental state. It just didn't matter one way or the other. Her gaze returned to her husband.

Did it? Somewhere deep down she admitted Mitsy's words sliced through the layers of indifference Anna had wrapped around herself over the past few years.

"You are a cold-blooded bitch." Steven leaned closer to Mitsy's side, distracting Anna's flash of pain. "I love it."

Mitsy's throaty laugh filled the air. She dug her fingers into Steven's hair. "I know you do after the groveling you get from that dull creature you call a wife."

Steven sighed. "Anna doesn't grovel. She doesn't do *anything*."

"Hmm, who are you a slave to, Steven?"

"No one. I am my own master."

With his handsome all-American hero features, Anna wondered again why he'd married her, plain-Jane Anna Sanchez.

Her father's face sprang to mind and Anna had her answer -- money. Steven had been ambitious, wanting to control his own business and her father had wanted grandchildren. Steven had produced the ring, saying he truly loved her. Her father had produced her and the family business.

Anna twisted the gold band around her finger, but kept her gaze on the couple in front of her. The misty veil of her grief lifted and she was able to see him for the first time as he really was. Why hadn't she seen this before? Had she been so buried in her own grief she had let her marriage fall into such rubble and disrepair? Could anything be salvaged? Did she want to try?

Steven dipped his head, claiming Mitsy's lips in a passionate kiss he had never shown his own wife. The sound of lips and tongues mating mingled with the soft lapping of the pool's waves. Leaving her mouth, he trailed kisses down Mitsy's neck into the deep valley of her breasts where he worshipped one globe, then the other. Mitsy's nipple disappeared into his mouth. She latched onto his hair with her hands, pulling Steven closer and angled her shaven pussy into the air in apparent ecstasy. "Ah ... Steven. Rub it; pet it. Please."

Anna frowned, angling her head. Curiosity temporarily replaced any discomfort and heartache she might be experiencing at the situation playing out in front of her. Did women really beg like that?

Steven laughed through a mouthful of tit. He smiled, showing teeth, but didn't release his prize. Closing his lips around the nipple he sucked harder. When Mitsy arched again he sank two fingers into her pussy.

Anna's mouth opened in an O. He'd never done anything that bold and sensuous to her! Then again, she'd never asked him to. She hadn't known how. Now he was sharing with another woman the very things she had unknowingly craved. Things she had wanted him to give to her without having to ask.

She realized she'd taken a step closer to her husband and his lover. Glancing from one side to the other, she eased back to her original point. Her cheeks burned as she admitted she

wanted to watch what happened between the two next. Mitsy genuinely looked as if she were enjoying what Steven did. If he had loved her the same way, maybe they wouldn't have grown so far apart. But then again, maybe men didn't want their wives acting so brazen. A picture of her mother, so prim and proper, rose in her mind. Anna couldn't imagine her parents ever acting the way Mitsy did with Steven.

Glancing at her husband's cock, she decided he was definitely enjoying suckling and fingering the woman beneath him.

Anna's frown returned, but she continued to watch without the slightest flicker of anger or outrage. There was only curiosity that this was what real sex was. Not the tepid unappealing encounters she had ever experienced with the man now down on his knees, licking his secretary's nipples as he tugged on the gold ring attached to the woman's glistening clit.

Mitsy squealed, working her pelvis harder as she climaxed. Her pussy juices coated Steven's fingers and hand. He held them out to Mitsy. "Lick it, baby."

Mitsy's laugh sounded like the purr of a contented cat. Her pink tongue snaked out, as she lapped the clear fluid from her lover's hand. "I bet your *wife* never did this for you."

Steven snorted. "She's so frigid she wouldn't have a clue. I doubt she's ever had a real orgasm."

"Then why are you married to her?" Mitsy pulled Steven's head closer.

He gave Mitsy a quick kiss, rising from his kneeling position. "Money, honey. That's the only reason anyone would ever marry someone like Anna Sanchez."

"What about the kid? It was yours, wasn't it?"

Steven wrapped a hand around Mitsy's throat. His lips pulled away from his gums in a snarl. "Don't even think it wasn't. If my wife even thought of cheating on me, I'd kill her."

A gurgling sound emitted from Mitsy. "You don't want her, but don't want anyone else to have her. So *macho*, darling."

Steven released her throat with a snort of disgust. "What's mine stays mine. Besides, I had to appease her old man. Staunch Catholic. If you're not producing babies like rabbits you're committing a cardinal sin."

Mitsy ran long, red nails down her flat belly and across to her slim hips. "Not me. I'm not ruining my figure spitting out anyone's brat."

Steven laughed. "You're just what I need. Now, come here and fuck me like a good little bitch."

Mitsy spread her legs in invitation.

Anna stood there letting their words wash over and through her, waiting for her emotions to erupt and explode. Nothing happened. She watched Steven position his cock into the opening of his secretary's cunt. Her long legs wrapped around his back, as he pumped into her. Their grunts of pleasure filled the sun-kissed air.

Anna stepped back slowly, sliding the door open and stepping through into the coolness of the house without a sound. Neither Steven nor Mitsy noticed. She glanced around, but Sylvia had disappeared, having seen enough explicit sex for the day. No one knew she'd seen or heard what had been meant as a secret moment of passion.

Walking through the empty rooms of the house, Anna touched the beautiful accessories that littered the shining surfaces. It was all for show. None of the ornaments had personal meaning to her or to Steven. Her feet glided silently over pristine floors that had never heard the sound of a child's footfall. All around were objects with no meaning; no purpose in her life except to hide the agony and loneliness she experienced every second she existed.

She stopped in front of an oval-shaped mirror. A woman with sickly pale skin and large dark eyes sunken in a hollowed face stared back. Reaching out with her forefinger Anna traced the line of her own jaw in the reflection. Was that really her? A fading image of the person she had once been. Her glance scanned the hallway and the room behind. She was just another piece of the illusion that Steven created for his clients and the outside world.

If she disappeared no one would ever notice.

October 31 -- 01:00

Sweat trickled across her forehead and down her temple. The thick mass of her hair plastered against and around her neck adding to the sensation of choking. Bile rose in her throat with the anxiety of confinement. The stench of her fear seeped from the pores of her body as she blinked against the blackness that abounded. The dark void suffocated her to the point she could feel it dragging her into its terrifying depths of all that was unknown.

Why, oh why, had she trusted him? She'd known he was danger at the first sound of that seductive voice, whispering in her ear, tempting her in ways she hadn't experienced since Steven had first dated her. Even so, Steven had never affected her in a way that encouraged her, no, demanded she drop her guard and reserve so completely that she had gone along with everything this man had asked of her.

Disgust mingled with her fear. She couldn't place all the blame on Tez Opoche. She'd willingly taken that fateful step into the world that he had promised -- a world where she could have back the most precious thing that had been taken from her in the blink of an eye.

October 30 -- 20:00

"It's just a dance, *señora*. What harm could that do?"

Anna stared up at the most enigmatic face she'd ever seen. Not handsome, not plain, but beautiful in a very masculine way. She couldn't stop tracing the angles and planes that created his features with her gaze. They were hypnotic, drawing a person in closer. "I guess not much."

He lifted her hand and kissed the top. The brush of his labret tickled the skin of her fingers. Her breath caught in her throat. Even in the night breeze the heat around them increased, as her heartbeat accelerated.

"You long for your dead child."

The heat of lust chilled at his words, like water thrown into a fire. She pulled her hand from his, but didn't walk off. How did this man know so much about her? He was much younger than Steven and didn't have the smooth sophistication her husband did, but she could sense this man was just as powerful as her husband. Instead of looking through her, like she didn't exist, Tez Opoche looked at her, seeing more than she was comfortable revealing to anyone, including herself.

He leaned forward without touching her, as if he knew she would bolt. "*You are la mujer con la ofrenda grande.*"

The warmth of his breath caressed the inner shell of her ear. Tiny needles of pleasure raced over her skin, hardening her nipples. She rubbed her arms and took several steps away from his potent masculinity. He affected her in ways that threatened her equilibrium. Those long ago desires she had witnessed between Steven and Mitsy had been abandoned in the cold, harsh reality of the day. They held no place in her life.

Glancing at the man beside her, she shook her head. Another fantasy that was best ignored. He was too young, too perfect, but unlike Steven his perfection wasn't pretentious.

Tez wore simple clothing and mingled with the locals. Steven couldn't abide touching Sylvia, or for that matter his own wife. Anna couldn't picture her husband laughing and dancing in the dusty streets with real, sweating, gyrating bodies, like the man beside her. Tez mingled and interacted with everyone around him, as if he absorbed their vitality and made it part of his own.

Still, there was no way this man could be attracted to her. He was young and vibrant. She was young, but old in spirit. Had she ever been young and carefree? Or had she always been in this robotic haze, always following tradition and what her family and society dictated was proper and acceptable?

Once, maybe, a long, long time ago. Her fifth grade teacher's face loomed in her mind. "*You are stubborn, Anna Sanchez. God will punish you one day for your willful soul.*"

Well, He had definitely done that. Her gaze fell on the grave, but Tez's words drew her attention back to him.

"I have watched you come here every year for the past four years, placing your beautiful offerings of flowers upon the altar and lighting your candles and incense." He smiled, but it held a slightly mocking quality that Anna couldn't quite ignore; she shivered.

"So good, trying to buy your loved one a place in heaven."

A spark of anger surfaced at the mockery in his voice. Like Steven, this one wasn't so perfect after all. Anna stepped forward, pointing a finger in his face. "What do you know? You can't read what's in my mind, so don't even try."

She waved her hand at him. The rage that took her breath made speaking difficult. Afraid and astonished at her own brazen action, she ducked her head and wrapped her arms tighter around her middle. She had never spoken to Steven this way, but -- she glanced up quickly -- how dare some stranger mock the grief that tore at her heart every second of the day for her dead child. Her *only* child.

Her hands shaking, she grasped the folds of her skirt, as she fought to regain her composure. "I'm not any different than the hundreds of others who come here."

"Ah, but your gift is most special. You spent much time and effort on the beautiful bouquet that you placed on your daughter's grave."

Her frown deepened. She didn't want him to think the flowers she placed were any better than anyone else's gift. "No, theirs are more precious. I didn't grow or care for or pick my own." Heat crept into her cheeks. "I had to buy them from a florist."

As soon as she said the words, she regretted them. She didn't want him to think she had money. Steven had only wanted her for the money he thought was hers. "I'm not wealthy."

"Money has nothing to do with what you give." He stepped closer, lifting her hand and examining her pale skin. He slid his thumb over the spot where her wedding band had lain. The cynical smile gentled. "What you truly offer is your self, your soul."

Anna's head snapped back in surprise. Four years ago she had offered her soul in exchange for the life of her child, but to no avail. The moment her daughter had been born had brought tears to her eyes at the miracle of birth. That from two small cells a perfect human being could be formed. The thought still amazed her that a beautiful child could be created from such a passionless experience. Steven had only stayed with her long enough to ensure she had conceived. The encounters had been quick and almost sterile in his approach to having sex with her.

Her baby had made her marriage bearable. The day her daughter had died, she had died along with that tiny bundle of life that had given her so much happiness and joy.

She snatched her hand from his disturbing touch. Turning, she walked away, not wanting to hear the truth of his words. "You're *loco*."

Rich, masculine laughter filled the balmy night air. His obsidian eyes danced with glee and mischief as he followed. "No doubt, but I can give you what you most desire."

She stopped, but didn't turn. Her fingers clenched into fists. "What is it that I desire?"

He stepped close behind her. The heat of his body teased her skin through her clothing. The sensation was that of tiny needles prickling up and down her spine, painful but stimulating. She swallowed hard, anticipating but dreading his answer. What was it about this man that made her want him to touch her, kiss her, fuck her? He was a complete stranger, but yet familiar, like she'd always known him, been aware of him, as if he'd watched her in everything she'd done up to this point in her life. She had never seen him before, but had been drawn to him the second she'd met him.

His breath fanned her hair, neck, and ear as she felt him lean closer. He pulled her hair away from the side of her face and tucked it gently behind her ear. His arms came around her and with a wave of his hand, like a stage magician, he produced a small black mirror. His eyelashes brushed her cheek. A tiny thrill of desire raced down and across her skin. The juncture between her legs dampened in reaction. Anna shivered. If she turned her head a fraction their lips would touch. Could she be so bold?

Taking a deep breath, she turned toward him; he moved his head.

The moment was lost. Anna closed her eyes as waves of frustration and humiliation crashed over her, smashing her back down to reality.

"Let's see what my magic mirror has to say, for it knows and foretells all."

Biting her lip against an aggravated moan, Anna cast a surreptitious glance into the mirror's smoky depths with a curiosity she knew in her gut she shouldn't experience. She'd just proven that curiosity only led to trouble. Trouble that always took her into uncharted areas she didn't want or know how to explore. She turned her head away.

"A child," he whispered. His tongue traced a path around the shell of her ear. "My child."

Anna sucked in a gasp and jumped. How could he be so cruel?

An arm circled her waist, holding her snug against his body. His cock, long and hard, pressed into the small of her back.

Needs and desires spiraled through her mind. She groaned. "I-It's not possible. The doctor says I can't have any more children."

His grip tightened. "Do you believe everything those quacks and butchers tell you?"

She turned in his arms, pushing against his chest to create some space between them. Her thoughts were pure chaos with him this close. "My husband talked to the specialists after my daughter was born. It was a very difficult delivery. They told him I would die if I conceived another child."

Tez's eyebrow rose and a muscle beside his mouth twitched in apparent humor. "They were correct in a sense."

His hands smoothed up and down her sides, creating lightning bolt sensations along her nerve endings that culminated in her nipples and clit. She pressed her thighs together, trying to stay focused on what he was saying. "What do you mean?"

He leaned forward, but stopped millimeters from her mouth.

Anna bit her lip on a groan, barely stopping herself from crossing the minute distance that separated their lips and claiming what she wanted. She couldn't.

"Sometimes you have to destroy an old life in order to create new life."

Her gaze flew from his tantalizing lips to his eyes, glittering and hungry, like some wild animal. Before she could move away, his mouth covered hers in the most ravenous kiss she could ever have imagined. The swirling motion of the festival faded around them and they were alone within a world of their own. A heavy, slumberous sensation uncoiled from within her, and him, rising up with a hungry growl. Anna received a fleeting impression of a jaguar. Wrenching her mouth from his kiss with a gasp, she clutched her abdomen.

Tez didn't release her, but brought his body flush with hers with one step. "Don't fight it. Let it flow through you."

"It ... hurts." The pain increased. Her knees bent with the sharp, stabbing cramps spiraling outward through her body. Only his support kept her from buckling to the floor. Her breasts flattened against his chest as his arm tightened around her waist. Strong, knowing hands roamed from the base of her skull to the rounded curve of her buttocks. The pain subsided, but the presence within lingered as a dull, continuous throb.

"What is it?" Anna alternated between leaning into Tez's stimulating perusal and struggling against the expert and possessive exploration of her body. He smiled without revealing his teeth. He caught her hand and spun her away with one quick movement in time with the festive music.

"We have awakened your passion. It knows and accepts me."

Spinning in a tight circle, her skirts floated up and around her bare legs. Dust rose from beneath their sandals, coating their feet. The smell of incense and pumpkin bread mingled

with the faint smell of their bodies' sweat, creating a scent she would forever associate with this night and being in his arms. He guided her in a reverse spin back into his arms. Leaning her backwards over one arm, he cupped her breast, as his mouth claimed hers again. The heat was still there, but the "beast" was not.

Anna concentrated, searching for that same tantalizing sensation of something live within him, but couldn't find the impression she'd felt minutes before. The swirl and probe of Tez's tongue inside her mouth mimicking the sexual thrusts she'd witnessed between Steven and Mitsy forced her to relinquish all thoughts except what he was doing to her at that moment. Within seconds all that she could think of was stripping his clothes and hers from their bodies and riding him to the ground regardless of where they were.

When he released her Anna stumbled backwards a few steps. Cool adobe bricks caught her when she would have fallen. Her breath came in pants; her lips throbbed from Tez's domination. She put the back of her hand to her burning mouth, knowing what it must be like to be branded.

He held out his hand to her for the second time that night, silently challenging her to accept him.

She hesitated, fighting indecision and fear. In the seconds of hesitation the faint chords of a flute, wistful but enticing, like the curiosity this stranger evoked, reached her ears. Glancing into Tez's fathomless gaze, Anna placed a shaking hand into his, accepting whatever form of possession he so mysteriously offered.

"You won't hurt me, will you?" she asked in a breathless whisper. Watching him lower his head closer, she could count every eyelash that framed his eyes.

The heat of his breath tickled her chin. His mouth brushed hers, briefly. Long fingers traced her jaw and cheek. "Only if you beg me to."

October 31 -- 03:00

“Ouch!” Something sharp stabbed into her back. “*Madre de Dios*. What the hell is that?”

She groped along her sides across the silken blanket beneath her. Angling her hips, she stretched her hand as far as she could reach under her lower back. A tear in the blanket allowed her to probe further. Encountering an object that was long, hard, and cold protruding through the tear, she wrapped her fingers around the item and pulled.

A brittle, crunching sound echoed in the muffled stillness of her cramped prison. The musty smell of old dirt rose, tickling her nose; she sneezed. The sound didn’t echo. There was a muffled texture to the silence that surrounded her. Her fingers had already told her she lay beneath stone, but now she wondered if the stone was beneath layers of earth. Her initial panic subsided. She was ready to explore her new world. *I think I am.*

Her fingers hesitated, but tightened. She swallowed what little saliva coated her tongue and throat. Curiosity won. She had to know what she held. Already her mind screamed its denial of what she had discovered so far in the darkness.

Taking a deep breath, she maneuvered the object in front of her where she could examine it with both hands. Straightening her legs, she fell against the blanket. *Things* shifted far below the silken material with muffled *crunches*.

Squinting in the gloom, not a sliver of light aided her inspection. She slid her fingers along the cold, jagged edges. Cylindrical, the surface was smooth along the center on all sides with an occasional trace of spongy material while the ends were rough and irregular with sharp points where she’d broken it loose.

“Like a broken bone ...”

The humidity on her skin froze like the blood in her veins. Her breaths came in short gasps. “Oh ... my god. Oh, my god!”

She flung the bone away with an agitated flick of her wrist. A *thunk* sounded as it hit stone. She groped the walls on either side of her and discovered that it extended the entire length of her body. She'd already established she was in some type of coffin, but she had never imagined she would be sharing it with something or someone ... dead.

A high-pitched scream emitted from deep within her throat. Clawing and pounding on the walls above and around her, her fingernails broke below the quick, sending sharp radiating pain through her fingers into her arms. Pounding harder with clenched fists, she screamed until her hands throbbed and her throat burned.

"Tez! Let me out!" She bit her quivering lip on the next word, hating the fear that forced her to beg. A single tear rolled down her cheek and she finally whispered, "Please."

From within the paralyzed recesses of her mind she experienced a fluttering, like wings extending. His voice broke through her terror at being interred alive with his remembered words from the festival. "*Bones are the seeds to life. When we die we return to the earth. In return the earth produces new life.*"

Her pants wheezed with ragged intensity, but she forced herself to take deeper breaths through her mouth and blow slowly through pursed lips when she exhaled. *That's right, Anna. Nice and slow. Nice and slow.* "I'm happy. I'm happy." The failsafe exercise didn't work. Her voice quivered and faded.

She was in a coffin buried alive. "I am *not* fucking happy."

"Terrified" was the only word that fit her present state of being. Any other thought paled in comparison against the knowledge that she had trusted another man with her life. The only difference was this time the man could truly be the death of her.

She shifted her weight, lessening the pressure of the bone jabbing into her hip. The silk beneath clung to her sweat-soaked body, and for the first time she realized she was completely naked. Her brow puckered in a frown as she remembered vague snatches of Tez removing her clothing and whispering that she had to be like a newborn baby, naked and vulnerable.

In that second anger and rage replaced her fear. She pounded on the stone above her. "Tez, you bastard! When I get out of here you are dead."

Far away she heard him laugh. *That's right, Anna. Fight.*

Whether he was speaking to her within her mind or above and outside her tomb, she couldn't tell. She only knew she had to get out of there.

"It's down to live or die. Make up your mind what you're going to do, Anna," she said, talking to herself to stay calm. All the while her fingers searched for any possible crack in the thick stone surrounding her. The claustrophobic air of her prison grew thinner. She kept telling herself the walls weren't moving inward, but -- stone scraped against stone -- they *were* moving.

October 30 -- 22:00

“Fear can be used for many things.”

Music swirled around them, carrying the dancers faster and faster in their bright skirts and white shirts. Guitars strummed, and gourd rattles shook in tempo, creating a staccato rhythm that invited everyone in the vicinity to participate. Their abhorrent masks blurred in a macabre but colorful haze with their costumes. Laughter abounded, but here with him nothing could distract her from his words and movements. He was like poetry, sliding graceful and seductive over her skin and nerves. She cleared her throat to break the spell he cast. Steven possessed a silver tongue that had bewitched her years ago. She wouldn't be taken in again by a good-looking man with a hidden agenda. There was no doubt in her mind that Tez Opoche was after something.

“To tell you when to run from strangers?” She took a sip of lemonade someone had thrust into her hand when they had first sat down at the café.

The edge of his lips curved into a brief grin, as he continued watching the festivities with an old skeleton mask pushed up and off his face. “Perhaps.”

Settled precariously on the top of his head, the *calacas* didn't look as threatening as it had earlier when he had covered his face and danced in the streets with the other citizens. He had blended in, but at the same time stood out, like a prince trying to be a pauper.

“Fear can be harnessed and turned into power that will enable you to accomplish feats you never believed possible.” He shifted his glance to her with a quick turn of his head. “Fear can also be an aphrodisiac.”

Anna's breath caught in her throat at the intense desire burning in the black of his eyes. She shook her head, slowly, in denial, afraid he could hear her heart pounding in her chest. Her fingers curled around her glass of lemonade. “I didn't know that.”

Tez leaned closer with narrowed eyes. He studied her for several seconds. "I would teach you."

Anna suddenly had to glance anywhere, everywhere, but at him. Beneath the table she crossed her thighs to ease the painful, burning throb his words incited between her legs. Steven had never been this good at seducing her with words. It was as if Tez saw into her mind and pulled out every secret desire she longed to explore, but had never been brave enough to scoff at convention and pursue.

"See, I know you are afraid of me, but you are attracted at the same time."

"I am not!" Her denial came out too loud, too fast. Her gaze clashed with his. She could tell by the sparkle of anticipation in his eyes that he was relishing every second they sparred, waiting to devour her every reaction like a hungry beast. Her cheeks flushed with her embarrassment, but she fought the urge to put her hands against them. He would love that he could confuse her.

Long fingers wrapped around her wrist as Tez's laugh wrapped around her heart. "Yes, you are. Trust me. I know these things."

"You are arrogant." She tugged at his restraint, but he didn't let go. Her heart accelerated; her nipples hardened.

"*Si*." He gave a slight half-nod to the side with his head. "But, that has nothing to do with how your pulse beats wildly against your skin. It is the fear of the unknown that causes that -- the fear of letting go and relinquishing control." He lifted her arm at the same time he moved closer, never losing eye contact, and flicked his tongue across the point of her wrist where her pulse was throbbing visibly. "I could make you beg in terror, but teach you to surrender to it and enjoy it at the same time."

Anna's mouth dropped open with his blatant lack of humility. Between her thighs her clit tightened in anticipation of the picture his words painted. Her tied with her legs and arms splayed naked on top of some stone altar with a just as naked Tez between her legs licking, kissing ... biting his way up her thighs to her pussy. He wouldn't bring her quick, like Steven had Mitsy. Tez would take his time and do exactly what he'd said -- make her beg and enjoy the tortures of his mouth, hands, and cock. Anna gasped; the vision faded.

She'd never met anyone like him. He reminded her of a carving she'd seen at Xochicalco in the western part of the state of an ancient Aztec king, noble and proud in all his plumage. Well, that was too bad. She had never begged Steven and she wasn't going to beg a complete stranger for something her own husband hadn't been able to give her. Her chin lifted in defiance. "I don't beg."

A long finger traced the line of her jaw and across her lip. "We all beg sooner or later. You just have to know the right things to beg for."

A shiver of apprehension mingled with the increasing attraction she felt for him. Tez was right. A person could fear something and still be attracted to it, knowing they needed to run as far away as possible, but craving to get closer to the object they feared at the same

time. Like a moth drawn to the light that would ultimately kill it, Anna stared into his eyes, letting him mesmerize her with his words and beauty. For he was beautiful. As beautiful and deadly as whatever wild animal spirit lived beneath his skin that she'd caught glimpses of on and off tonight.

"A jaguar," she whispered. Reaching across the small table she touched a strand of his silky hair with trembling fingers.

His eyebrow rose and his eyes glittered with a triumphant gleam. "Already your fear is allowing you to be brave."

Anna jerked her hand back, tucking it into her lap with her other one. She studied the nicks in the old wooden table. Somewhere in the distance a flute played the same haunting melody she'd heard earlier in the evening. She closed her eyes, smiling. "That is the most beautiful sound."

"They would blow the flutes at midnight to call to the gods to descend."

She opened her eyes, glancing at her watch. It was midnight. The hair on the back of her neck rose. "Why did they want them to come down?"

"To participate in the festivities and enjoy the offerings that were being made to them." His gaze held hers.

"*¿Pulque, señor?*" The waiter shoved a gourd between them, shaking it slightly. The liquid it contained sloshed from side to side.

Tez sat back in his chair with a nod. The spell he'd cast upon her broke. "*Por favor. La señora es sediento.*"

A little weak and disoriented from the connection between them, Anna held up her lemonade with an unsteady hand. "I still have --"

Tez waved her remark away with a quick flick of his hand. "You must try this. It is a local drink that is a tradition during *los días de los muertos*. I believe some variation of the liquor has been around since *Tititl*."

She gave up her protest, wondering again what he did in the community. The way he expected everyone to go along with whatever he decided, he was clearly used to getting his way. "*Tititl?* I've never heard of that."

"It is an ancient Aztec death rite and where this --" He waved his hand toward the dancing crowd. "-- lovely festival originated."

Anna studied Tez as the waiter placed an earthenware cup in front of her. Glancing at the clear liquid, she picked the cup up and sniffed the contents. The smell was familiar, but she couldn't place it. She raised the drink to her lips, but stopped and asked, "Are you a student of ancient peoples at the university?"

"No." His answer was noncommittal. He stared into the crowd, but it was as if he didn't see them. A frown creased his forehead and his easy attitude evaporated into something moody and distant.

She continued drinking, coughing as the bitter liquid scalded her mouth and throat. Through her tears she saw his lips part in a thin smile.

"Careful. *Pulque* is made from the maguey, a very sacred plant in religious rituals."

She placed the cup on the scarred table, coughing less. "That's what I mean. How do you know so much about ancient rituals and peoples?"

"I am a student of life and people of all kinds and times." He waved his hand in an arrogant, dismissive manner.

Anna pressed her lips together. This back and forth between charming, entertaining man of the people and cocky lord of the manor was irritating. "How can you be so certain about the Aztecs' customs? They've been gone for a long time."

Raising his cup to her, he gave her the most enigmatic smile she'd seen from him yet. The hair on her arms rose even though the night temperature was balmy.

"Because I was there."

Anna shook her head, determined not let him sidetrack her with his mysterious mannerisms and comments. "You were at the university, but you dropped out?"

A look of exasperation crossed his face. He put his cup down hard, sloshing its contents onto the table. "No, Anna."

He leaned forward, placing his long fingers over her hand. "You continue to refuse to enjoy the mystery and see what is in front of you." His smile had evaporated and a serious, hard expression remained.

She knew that look. Like Steven, this man didn't suffer fools gladly. She clenched the cup tighter, afraid she knew what he was about to tell her. "That's okay. I don't want to kn--"

"I was *there* in Tenochtitlan. I witnessed such festivals as *Tititl* and *Toxcatl* with their grandeur and blood. So much blood you could drown."

Anna took a slow deep breath, refusing to show Tez how his words upset her. Had she been so enthralled with this handsome stranger she'd missed the signs of insanity? She couldn't get mixed up with another man with "problems." Her soon-to-be ex-husband had had enough issues to last a lifetime -- issues that had allowed him to marry a woman he didn't want. Issues he'd taken out on her, mentally. She just couldn't go through that again. Instead she cleared her throat and asked, "*Toxcatl* is another Aztec festival?"

If she stayed calm and cooperative she might be able to give Tez the slip in the gaiety of the crowd. She'd report him to the constable after the festivities were over. Her plans came to a halt as his words caught her attention, weaving the spell around her again and forcing her plans to the back of her mind.

"*Sí*. A young man was chosen every year. He had to be handsome and cultured for he was to be the *ixiptla* of the god of that celebration." He took a strange mirror from within his shirt. He glanced in it for a second before placing it on the table between them and angling it

so Anna's reflection appeared in the dark glass. Removing the cup from her hands, he held her fingers tightly within his grasp over the mirror and continued his story.

"For a year he lived as that god, traveling the streets of the different cities and playing his flute. When people heard the flute at night, they touched their tongues with dirt and confessed their sins for the god to hear. For he was the most powerful, most supreme deity, and they were too impure for one so great as he to take the slightest pity on. He could crush them for their sins, or reward them for their good deeds. As the *ixiptla*, people followed the young man wherever he went, worshipping him and lavishing him with gifts and food. During that time he had four wives. Each had their own purpose to fulfill his every need, one of which was the goddess of flowers and erotic love."

Flowers? Anna stiffened. He had called her the goddess of flowers --

"At the end of his year, he traveled to the four directional edges of the city, ending his journey near a temple where he was stripped of everything he possessed. Then, he would ascend the stone steps where his heart was offered to the god whom he represented here on earth."

Anna gasped, pulling her hands free. "Who are you?"

Placing his hands on his knees, he sat straighter in his chair with both feet planted on the patio floor. Without breaking their gaze he said, "Behold, I am Tezcatlipoca, god of the night sky and the night wind." His chest expanded as he took a deep breath and opened his hand, revealing an obsidian figurine in the shape of a jaguar. "I have many names -- 'god of mirrors,' 'he whose slaves we are,' 'the master of human destiny,' 'maker of himself,' 'sower of discord on both sides,' and many more ... Take your pick, woman."

He leaned closer, offering the figurine to her. "It is a *fetish*. Take it. As long as you possess it I will answer you by whatever name you choose to call me."

Anna's curiosity rose, overcoming her mounting fear. He was so sincere. She shifted her weight so she could get a better look at what he held. Glancing from the black cat to him, she finally reached out with a tentative hand to accept the beautiful figurine.

He curled his fingers just as the fetish passed over to hers, brushing her skin with his fingernails. Shivers of awareness tingled through her hand and arm. She closed her eyes, not fighting the sensation, but allowing it to course through her body and settle in her abdomen. She wanted to feel him.

No. She wouldn't give in the temptation he offered. Her fingers closed around the warmth of the fetish. If she couldn't have his cock, she would settle for this.

For a second he studied her with hooded eyes, like he knew of her inner struggle. He sat forward so quickly, Anna didn't have time to feel threatened by his close proximity. She didn't back away.

"Feel Tezcatlipoca's power and face your fears, Anna. If you can face the terrifying beauty of *Chalchiuhtotolin* and capture him, you will be blessed among women. If you give him what he wants, he will give you what you need to live."

"Who is *Chalchiuhtotolin*?" she asked, watching his face intently. Eyes blazing with passion -- his nostrils flared, breathing in all that this life had to offer. Surely nothing could be more beautiful or terrifying than he was at that very moment.

"Me." He blew into her face and nostrils with a mighty force of air from his lungs. Her hair brushed back from her face as her eyes closed at the crisp, minty heat of his breath. Anna coughed, dropping the jaguar fetish. A bitter taste that was worse than the *pulque* formed on her tongue. She stood, but within seconds the world twirled around her. Slumping to her right, she grabbed for her chair and stumbled.

From far away, she heard Tez telling the waiter that the *señora* was drunk.

"I ... am not. You did something."

"Shh." He stooped and picked up the fetish before wrapping a strong arm around her waist. Their steps proceeded slowly with Tez taking the majority of her weight. "The breath of *Nahuaque* will allow you to see and hear that which will make you stronger."

Sweat broke across her brow. The muscles in his arm and back bunched and flexed around her body. She swore she could feel each minute muscle working. This close to him she could hear the *thud* of their hearts. She blinked, wondering at the contrast of sharp clarity overlaid with a distorted view as they wove in and out of the celebrations.

The music, so gay just minutes earlier, droned into the night, taking on the appearance of the high-pitched carnival music she had hated back in the States. Every year her parents had taken her, and every year she had cringed whenever she heard the music of the carousel and saw the painted, demonic faces of the clowns. Her breathing quickened, as the same suffocating feeling she'd experienced as a child came back to taunt her in the images of the festival.

The crowds thinned and faded as they continued through to the older section of town and on past the cemetery. The ground shifted and they were going uphill. At some point they started climbing. Even though it was uneven, the path was more like steps than an earthen trail. During the entire trek, Tez whistled the haunting tune that he had played on his flute.

Anna glanced through the hazy distortion of her vision. The darkness was thicker here. The sound of crickets reverberated off the stones around them. With the full moon overhead, she could see the outline of the structure they climbed. With a start she realized they were on some sort of pyramid.

A coyote, closer than she remembered, released a mournful cry.

Her fear returned. Tez had stopped whistling.

They reached a flattened plateau area. A row of squared stones appeared on their right. Tez led her to a cold, damp wall. "Stay here. I'll be back in a second."

He strode away behind her. Stone slid against stone with a sound that grated along her nerve endings.

Anna blinked to focus on what looked like faces in the moonlight. Hollowed spaces emerged in the dim light to reveal eye sockets. Rounded patches represented cheekbones with flat grooves between for nostrils. Below that two wide rows of teeth completed the image of a skull. Glancing toward her feet, she saw piles of white sticks reflecting from the moon's rays. She frowned, as her vision cleared and she recognized a hip bone, a femur ... The list went on.

A mask-covered face, hoary and deformed with an oversized head, enlarged nose, and grotesquely rotting teeth, loomed in front of her. A gnarled hand closed around her upper arm, biting into her skin.

Anna screamed, pulling away. Her blouse ripped and her arm burned as the creature's nails scraped and scratched her. The metallic smell of blood rose into the air. Stumbling backwards she bumped into someone. Arms like bands of steel wrapped around her, pulling her away from the edge of the stone steps.

With another scream she struggled, but turned her face into a warm shoulder with a shudder when she realized it was Tez. "Where are we?"

Glancing back, she saw the hideous caricature leer with distended tongue. Worse than the clowns of old, this demon looked all too real. The strong stench of garlic and peppers fanned across her cheek. Tears welled as she gagged in response to the offensive odor emanating from the creature.

Tez said something low and authoritative in a language that Anna didn't understand. The demon hesitated a second before backing away with a low bow and guttural growl. As he retreated Anna saw that he was dressed in jeans and an athletic jacket. "Who --?"

"He is just a ... guardian."

"Guardian for what?" She shuddered, wondering what lay through the door Tez had entered.

"It is time, Anna." He tilted her chin up with his forefinger while his thumb traced the curve of her bottom lip. Dipping his head, he brushed his lips across hers in the briefest of kisses. "Time to face and conquer your fears."

Heat scorched her mouth for only a second. She moaned, wanting more of his intoxicating kiss.

"I know you won't believe this when you wake, but you will be okay." He gave her forehead a peck. "I have to go now. You have to travel this part of the journey on your own."

"Wait. Don't leave me." Taking hold of his shirt in both fists, Anna tried to pull him closer, but he stepped back. She stumbled. The grip around her waist slid away. In slow

motion she watched the gravel scattered across the stone plateau rise to meet her, then at the last second time exploded and she hit at full speed. Pain radiated through her head and body. Rocks pierced and scraped her skin through the thin material of her skirt and blouse. She didn't move, but lay there watching various feet shuffle around her. Dust rose, coating her face. She coughed and blinked, but didn't attempt to rise. She knew she couldn't. Her arms and legs were like leaden weights. She could hear her heart and blood flow slow within her body. Again, time stood still.

Through the cloud of dust a patch of light flickered, allowing her gaze to focus.

An old woman sat alone wrapped in a blue and red-striped blanket beside a grave. Her cheeks were hollow and sunken with age. Arthritic hands arranged various statuettes of saints into some semblance of order. The white of her hair reflected in the candlelight, as candles of all shapes and colors flickered in the night air. Faded flowers lay withered across the grave. Her dull eyes met Anna's, but she didn't speak.

From the shadows the creature with the monstrous mask weaved through the tombstones, sneaking closer and closer to the old woman.

Anna tried to call to her, but her mouth was dry -- full of grit. She swallowed hard and coughed, trying to warn the woman.

With all the strength she possessed Anna raised her hand, but it was like lead and shaking so badly it fell to the earth. All she could manage were a few fingers.

"¡Abuela, ten cuidado!" The words of warning croaked from her parched throat. She tried again, but it was useless. Anna watched in mounting horror as the hideous creature crouched beside the woman with an arm slung around the grandmother's shoulders. A tongue like a serpent's snaked out, licking the old woman's cheek and leaving a trail of saliva that dripped and oozed onto her shawl. She didn't move, but continued to stare at Anna. The demon sat beside her, crossing his arms over his knees, waiting.

He turned toward Anna, as if he were laughing, and pointed a finger at the headstone of the grave.

Anna's gaze followed his movement. The letters leaped from the stone in a glaring flash of clarity. *Sanchez-Jones*. Her heart lurched with a sudden spasm of pain. The pain of losing someone you loved more than life itself. The grave belonged to her daughter. Her gaze shifted back to the old woman, who wasn't a grandmother, who wasn't a mother. Not anymore.

She's me. Her gaze flew back to the demon. Her demon. He was what she had to overcome. *He's my fear of life.*

A hot breeze blew across her face and body, like a seductive breath, lifting the folds of her skirt around her. The present swirled into a haze of merging colors and the old woman's image blurred until all turned black.

October 30 -- late afternoon

Dusk settled quietly, wrapping the comforting arms of darkness around the sleepy little town several miles on the outskirts of Cuernavaca.

Anna stepped around a small group of women, clearing weeds from a cracked and faded tombstone. She breathed in deeply. Incense filled the air around her and tickled her nose. The heavy odor mingled with the mouth-watering smells of pumpkin candy and *pan de muerto*.

Slowing her steps, she searched in the dim light for the familiar name -- Sanchez.

"Ah, there you are." Quickly, she knelt before the headstone and pulled at the year's growth of weeds. Ignoring the sting of briars, her gaze scanned the inscription -- *Teresa Maria Sanchez-Jones*.

Anna's fingers caressed the cool stone letters as tears welled behind her eyelids. "Hey, Maria. I missed you." She pulled another weed, ignoring the acrid odor the dried flowers emitted as their blooms crushed beneath her fingers. "It's okay, though, because I'll be able to come every day and be with you. I'll keep the weeds from taking over."

A salty trickle escaped, sliding down her cheek into the side of her trembling mouth. Anna wiped it away and sniffed.

The first year her grief had been so sharp she had been oblivious to the laughter and music around her that marked the Mexican festival of *dias de los muertos*. Now, she smiled at the flute music that carried through the air. Little pleasantries of the festival were standing out. Absently, she pulled at the weeds and hummed along with the mesmerizing tune she vaguely remembered from the previous years.

She frowned. It had more of an Amerindian influence than Mexican, very primal and haunting. A melodic tenor joined the flute; the skin along her arms and spine tingled. Anna closed her eyes and smiled as she listened to the foreign words.

"Such a beautiful voice," she whispered into the night. She could remember other men singing in the past, but they hadn't caught her attention like this voice even though she was sure it had to be the same song. It sounded so familiar. There was a needful, beseeching aspect to the tune and words. She frowned, gazing at nothing in particular.

A vague flash of several young, tall, and handsome men over the four years she had been coming here flashed through her mind in conjunction with the flute music, weaving their way through the tombstones of the cemetery. The older folks would quickly cross themselves, as the young men had walked by. It had reminded Anna of how her grandmother would cross herself after the priest had given her confession. Had they stopped here and she had ignored their presence?

Anna shook her head, unable to get more than a quick memory. If they had been there in years past, she had been too wrapped up in her own grief to really notice them. Opening her eyes, she pulled the last weed from the base of the stone. "There. All ready for your flowers."

She arranged a huge bouquet of marigolds into a small glass vase situated beneath the ground in the center of the tombstone. The brilliance of the flowers' color glowed in the darkness at the same time their heady scent carried into the night breeze.

"She is your daughter?" a man asked in accented English.

Anna fell onto her butt with a yelp, clutching her blouse to her chest. Her skirt rose above her thighs as her legs splayed first into the air, then onto the ground. Scrambling to pull her clothing down over her bare skin, she jumped when a strong hand circled her upper arm, hauling her upright.

"*Lo siento, señora.* I did not mean to frighten you."

Firm fingers stroked the inner skin of her arm through her blouse. His touch was soothing, but disturbing at the same time. With her heart beating rapidly, Anna pulled away from the man's grasp. "It's okay. I'm just ... not used to anyone speaking to me here." She cast a glance around the graveyard, but no one was paying attention to what was happening to her. As in San Antonio, it was as if she didn't really exist. She pushed the lonely thought from her mind.

A quick glance upwards proffered a darkened outline of high cheekbones, a flash of very white teeth, and a cascade of straight black hair whose sleekness was altered by the startling angle that slashed the smoothness into two differing lengths.

"Is that the latest hairstyle in the States?" she asked, then clamped a hand over her mouth.

His smile deepened. "I haven't been to the States in several years. They don't know me there, like they do here."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were a musician, traveling around ..." She let the words trail off, biting her lip for sounding so simple.

"I am a musician ... of sorts, but my haircut is indicative of the Aztec warrior class. I have been touring every area of this beautiful town for the past several days. This northern section is my last stop before I must depart on more exciting adventures. My name is Tez." He stepped to the side, offering her his hand.

Two rows behind them, someone lit several lanterns, allowing the glow to fall across his lean face.

Anna's breath caught at the sheer beauty he possessed from the top of his ebony head to the soles of his black-booted feet. Her perusal took in black disks the size of dimes in his earlobes, and a jade stone with a feather extended from the center sat beneath his bottom lip. Neither piercing was feminine in the least. In fact, he exuded masculinity from every pore of his body with the impression of a pure and tightly harnessed power, lethal but intoxicating. He did resemble an ancient warrior. She didn't have a clue why he would want to dress like them, but it suited him.

She hesitated, not sure if she should touch him. If she did, she might not stop with his hands. Everything about him screamed sex -- something she hadn't experienced since she had conceived her daughter four years previously. Glancing at Tez's long, powerful legs, she wondered if he would be as sterile in his sexual technique as her soon-to-be ex-husband had been whenever he'd touched her. Or would Tez, the Aztec warrior, devour her like Steven had Mitsy?

What made a man desire a woman that much? Anna shook her head at her wayward thoughts. It was something she had no intention of pursuing. Her gaze traveled back to his eyes.

His glittering black stare narrowed as he waited for her response.

"I-I'm --" Not wanting to anger him, she placed her hand into his. Immediately, the heat from his skin wrapped around her hand and spread up her arm. Circulating in a spiral motion, the curling sensation spread through her lower abdomen.

"You are Xochiquetzal, goddess of flowers."

She pressed her free hand flat against her stomach. "No, I'm just Anna, and my husband's name is --"

"He is unimportant. You are not married any longer."

"How --?"

"Your ring is not where it was last year." He nodded toward her hand. "You are not from here, but you have buried your child there." His gaze traveled to the grave.

It was a statement, but she knew he wanted an answer. Even though he discussed an entirely too personal subject for a stranger, no one ever wanted her to speak of her daughter. The chance to do so was a welcome change.

"I was on vacation with my parents, visiting the town where they grew up and where my grandmother lived until she died. I woke --" Anna's voice cracked. "-- one morning and my daughter had died in her sleep. The doctors told me it was S.I.D.S."

She glanced around her in the twilight. "I always thought this town was beautiful all the times I visited when I was a child. My family has a plot here, so this is where I buried her."

"The subconscious enabled you to come back where you feel most at home." His fingers tightened around hers.

Anna wasn't sure if it was in sympathy, but the warmth he generated intensified, spreading from her hand and arm into her body. Quickly, she pulled out of his grasp and moved her arm behind her back, deciding they needed to change the subject.

"Why did you call me the goddess of flowers?"

"The women bring flowers as offerings so their loved ones will go to heaven. You --" He shrugged. "-- you bring the most beautiful offerings every year. You are the goddess of flowers and love, brave and beautiful, and I will bless you for those traits alone."

She laughed. "You're acting as a god in the festival?" What a fascinating man. Her glance traveled across the muscles of his chest and arms. "I didn't know the church allowed their parishioners to celebrate with pagan gods."

"Many are Catholic here, but there are those who still remember and honor the old ways. The Aztecs chose people to represent the gods in human form every year. They chose very particular, special people." He reached up and forward with his left hand.

The unexpected caress against her hair was gentle and soothing. Anna closed her eyes in reaction.

"Yes, I know who you are, Anna Jones." The whispered words were like a deep purr from a big contented cat, sliding up and down her spine, as his fingers slid in and out of her hair.

Anna shivered; her nipples hardened; her clit quivered. Fighting against the sexual anxiety his touch caused, she stiffened at his choice of words. "How do you know my name? Do you work for Steven?" She tugged her hand away from his touch.

Glancing around the cemetery, the thought that Steven had found her and had sent spies to keep an eye on her whereabouts and activities rose as did her panic at the possibility. She couldn't go back. She wouldn't.

"*Nada*." Tez held her hand fast. With another shrug he nodded toward the tiny grave. "It is the child's name, no? Jones?"

Of course. Anna relaxed. "I'm sorry, *Señor* ...?"

He frowned before offering his last name. "Opoche. Tez Opoche." His fingers tightened around her hair a second longer before he released her.

"That's an unusual name."

“*Nahuatl* is an unusual language.”

“Let me guess.” She pursed her lips and frowned, as if she were in deep concentration. “Aztec?”

His eyebrow rose and his smile widened with a look of pleasure. “Very good. Intelligence blended with a sense of humor. That will serve you well.”

“Thank you.” Anna felt her cheeks flush at her feeble attempt at flirting and at his strange compliment. She studied his labret; he was quite a strange man. She couldn’t remember being drawn to anyone quite this way. “What does it mean?”

He held up his left hand. “He who has left-handedness.”

Anna laughed. “That’s it? Nothing exotic?”

“I guess it depends on what importance a person places on someone being left-handed.” He shrugged and asked, “If you are finished here, would you like to attend the festival with me? I don’t think I have ever seen you there in years past.”

She smiled in response, feeling more carefree than she had in years. His easy mood allowed her to relax. Maybe, just maybe, she could learn to have some fun this year at the festival. If she was going to be living here, she would need to make friends. “I’m surprised you noticed me.”

“I’ve watched you wander through the world of Mictlan for four years. I waited for the time of your return.”

“Mictlan?” She frowned. He must mean somewhere else besides the Aztec underworld. “I wasn’t dead.”

Tez held her gaze. “Weren’t you? You had no desire to live in this world, so you wandered around in a daze torn between staying here and going with your daughter. This year you conquered your grief and have chosen to return among the living.”

“Someone forced me to wake up to certain conditions in my life that were intolerable. I don’t think I will ever conquer my grief.” Anna waited for the pang of guilt that his words should evoke, but none came. “I am ready to make new friends, though.”

A tiny quiver of excitement shot through her; she glanced at Tez from beneath her lashes. He didn’t really seem the “friend” type, but more the one-night stand kind of guy. Biting her lip, her gaze slid to the ground. She didn’t have to do anything she didn’t want to do. If she said “friends,” then that was what he would be. “I haven’t been to the festival since I was a child when my grandmother lived here.” She hesitated, glancing back at her daughter’s grave. “The only thing I really remember is all the colors and people dancing.”

Like the others, the grave was freshly cleaned and decorated with flowers and candles. Anna had already spoken to her baby and cried her yearly tears in remembrance. There was nothing more she could do here. Taking a deep breath, she turned to Tez. “I would like to go with you very much.”

“*Bueno*. I promise to make it a night you will never forget. Trust me.”

A coyote howled from the darkness of the foothills.

Anna's skin tingled from her scalp to her toes at the haunting sound. She wasn't sure if it was anticipation, fear, or a combination of both that made her heart race, but she placed her hand once again into that of this stranger ... "Okay."

... and let him lead her to the left of the cemetery down a path that she had never noticed, but one she hoped would prove exciting.

October 31 -- 03:30

“Jesus!” Anna brought her knees up to her chest within the small confining space that was growing smaller with each second.

Placing her feet against the wall in front of her and pushing with her back against the wall behind she prayed she could force their shifting to stop. The length of the silk blanket wrapped around her ankles, preventing her from pushing any further. “Shit!”

Snatching at the material, she ripped the silk at the seam and freed her leg. “If I had known I was going to be playing *Indiana Jones* I would have brought something a little more appropriate to wear.”

The silk blanket tangled around her hips, falling in a puddle on the floor of the coffin in the curve of her legs and chest. A soft *thunk* sounded beneath the folds. Pushing harder with her feet and back, she groped in the darkness for what had caused the noise. When her fingers touched against something smooth, cool, and small, she held her breath. The fetish!

Tez had told her she could call him to her at any time if she kept the obsidian figurine with her at all times. He must have placed it in here with her.

“I hope this works.” She kissed it quickly; the large stones shifted inward. “Tez! If you can hear me, get the hell in here. If I’m going to be crushed, you’re going with me.”

The scraping noise stopped. Stale dust sprayed into the space. Anna coughed.

“Oh!” Anna relaxed her straining muscles. The walls weren’t moving. “Thank you.” She gripped the fetish tighter. With her other hand she groped for the bone she’d broken off earlier.

“Ow.” The sharp piercing pain in the tip of her forefinger told her she’d located what she hunted.

Taking the bone in her right hand, she felt along the wall with the fingers of her left hand, clutching the fetish against her palm with two fingers. Finding a groove, she dug at the soil that held her entombed. There had to be a way out of here.

Digging for several minutes, she hit something that felt metallic. Twisting the bone, she felt it slide further into some type of slot. She turned the bone counterclockwise.

Click. Anna stopped. All around her silence abounded, except the hard thud of her heart. It had been oppressive before, but now, it hummed it was so silent. As if everything waited for something to hap--

The stone beneath her gave way with a loud groaning and scraping yawn. Anna screamed, falling backwards -- naked with her legs and arms suspended in front of her. All around was the sense of nothingness -- a great, black void had opened and enveloped her. If she hadn't experienced the sensation of falling, she would think she was suspended in space where time and gravity ceased to exist.

How long she fell she didn't know. Flashes of her childhood zoomed through her mind all the way through to the moment she and Steven were getting married. Steven's voice boomed and echoed. "With this ring, I thee wed."

Suddenly, a gold ring loomed from the darkness, chasing her with the intent to encircle not her finger, but her throat.

It moved closer, trying to choke her.

"No! I don't want you." Anna rolled to one side; the ring rushed past, missing her.

Another image appeared small and blurry in the distance. She squinted, trying to bring it into focus. It drew closer and with a gasp she reached toward the bundle.

"No, it can't be."

The blankets unfolded and a tiny body lay naked and exposed. The baby yawned and stretched, revealing its gender.

A boy! The child opened his eyes, blinking, and focused on her.

"Oh, precious, what are you doing here all alone?" Her fingers brushed a chubby cheek.

The baby kicked and cooed, rewarding Anna with a wide, toothless grin. A band of steel constricted around her heart at the memory of another happy smile.

"I can't have you. You're not my baby," Anna said, hearing the note of sadness and longing in her voice. She turned away, recoiling from the image in front of her. It was too painful. This had to be a dream, but even so, if she didn't touch him, she couldn't be hurt when the time would come to give him up. She didn't think she could bear having to go through the pain of losing another child, even if he wasn't hers. But ... he was such a beautiful baby.

Anna glanced over her shoulder, hoping for one last peek at the child. The baby's bottom lip shook. His beautiful dark eyes scrunched into tight lines, as his mouth opened

wide and he wailed. Tiny hands and fingers balled into fists and his entire body shook with his distress at her denial.

The sound was like a giant shock wave, blowing her hair way from her face and knocking Anna feet over head through the void. The scream, so lost and full of pain, split through the vacuumed air around her. She had never heard such a pitiful cry.

Kicking with her feet and paddling with her hands, as if she were swimming, Anna forced her way over to the child. Folding her arms around the baby, Anna pulled his tiny head to her breast. "Shh, baby, it's okay. I've got you." The words of a lullaby came to mind, and she sang it softly to the perfect little boy in her arms.

The child's sobs subsided into an occasional hiccup. Sleepy eyes blinked up at her until they closed in peaceful repose.

Anna smiled and traced a silky black eyebrow with her forefinger. Leaning close, she placed a kiss on the peachy-smooth skin of his little cheek.

"So sweet." She breathed in, closing her eyes and enjoying the fresh clean smell of a baby's skin and breath. A soft, swirling sensation, like a vortex, encircled them for several seconds, and her feet touched a solid surface, but Anna kept her eyes shut, cradling the baby in her arms.

"You are a good mother."

Startled, Anna jumped and a cry escaped her lips. There before her sat Tez in a rocking chair.

Anna's gaze scanned the area around her. The baby --

"He's gone!" She turned in a circle, quickly, holding her empty arms out in front of her. "What ... happened?" She was no longer in the black void. There was a floor beneath her feet and tall walls surrounding them. She was in a room with a bed and a rug. Her glance retraced its path -- a bed. "Where are we?"

"My chamber, of course," he answered, cocking his eyebrow, as if she had lost her mind.

Anna frowned, not sure she could believe what was around her. She had started in a stone coffin, floated through some kind of vacuum, and now she was in a bedroom. Looking away from Tez, she raked one hand through her hair, trying to remember exactly what had happened since she'd accepted that drink he'd given her. "You drugged me."

Both of his eyebrows rose, but he didn't deny it.

"I was in a frickin' coffin!"

"Crypt, and that language is unbecoming to you."

"Whatever!" She stepped toward him, stopping a good foot outside his reach. "I was buried alive."

"But, you kept your cool, remembered the fetish, and freed yourself."

The man was infuriating. He had no remorse in him for anything he'd put her through. "There was a baby," she said through gritted teeth.

"*Si*," Tez nodded. "My child."

"I was holding him." Anna raised her eyebrows, waiting for Tez's explanation.

"*Si* ... And?"

She stamped her foot against the stone floor. "Where the hell did he go, dammit?" She wanted to strangle the man, who sat so nonchalantly in front of her. He acted as if she was crazy. "How did all that just happen?"

Anna grabbed the bedpost. "Trick doors, mirrors, how?" The muscles in her legs didn't want to support her at the thought she had finally gone over the edge into insanity. Leaning her head against the coolness of the heavy wood, she closed her eyes. "I'm hallucinating. None of this is real."

She felt him move behind her. The warmth of his breath tickled her ear. "Who can say what is real, or not? If you believe what you saw and felt, then it is real to you. I will not tell you otherwise, if it opened your eyes to what you needed to see and know."

A tear, hot and heavy, trailed down her cheek. She pushed away from the bedpost and turned to face him. "Why am I here?"

"To face your worst fear."

He didn't make sense. What fear? Hell, she was afraid of everything -- disappointing her family, disappointing her husband, disappointing her child. The frustration of her past rushed forward, crushing her with its impact. "What do you want from me?" she screamed, pounding her fists into his chest.

Hard muscle met her assault. Her fists burned and ached with the impact, but he didn't move and she couldn't stop. He stood firm, letting her hit him over and over. Finally, exhausted, her last blow landed with her fingers uncurling against his chest. Sliding to the floor, Anna realized she was sobbing, hard.

Tez followed her down, cradling her body the same way she had cradled his baby's. *His* baby.

She hiccupped. "H-He was beautiful."

Tez smiled, stroking her hair with his left hand. "*Si*."

"May I hold him again?" she asked, hoping Tez would agree. She glanced up.

His smile disappeared to be replaced by an expressionless mask. Only his eyes glittered with an animated light. "Will you take care of him and protect him when I am unable?"

"Of course," she agreed, wrapping her fingers into his shirt. "I won't let anything happen to him." The memory of her daughter filtered across her mind. She closed her eyes for a second, fighting the pain that rose at the sense of despair and failure she had experienced when her child had died. She had blamed herself when she knew, now, that it

had been “one of those horrible things” that happens in life. There was nothing she could have done to prevent her daughter’s death.

She glanced back up. Her heart skittered at the sight of his gaze waiting for her. She swallowed the sudden surge of longing that circled low in her abdomen. “I promise to take care of your baby the best that I can.”

“I know you will.” He kissed her, softly. The caress was reassuring, but coaxing, asking her silently to open and willingly give him more.

A twinge of fear resurfaced. Anna averted her face, but stayed within his embrace. “What is it you want from me, Tez?” she asked again, but this time she was in control of her emotions. His hand cupped her breast; she gasped. Well, she’d thought she was.

“I want to give you what you want the most.”

She raised her head and studied his face, noticing a muscle along his jaw, flexing, as if he struggled against some great force, holding it back with all his strength and willpower. “A baby,” she whispered.

“Life!” The word exploded from his mouth. His breath, like before, had a will and power of its own as it flowed into her nostrils and mouth, consuming her mind, body, and ... soul.

Anna gasped, trying to catch her own breath, but whatever spirit Tez had released within her refused to relinquish its newfound control. She flopped against his chest, losing the use of her arms and legs.

When he lifted her into his arms she tried to resist, but couldn’t. Her muscles were no longer hers to command. She attempted to speak, but that too, was unavailable. Whatever tools of defense she once had were gone.

He laid her upon the bed, spreading her arms and legs out in a sacrificial pose. “Just relax, Anna, and let it happen.”

What happen? she screamed within her mind. How could she relax when she couldn’t move and didn’t understand anything that was happening to her?

Us. Tez crawled onto the bed, stretching his long frame beside hers. *Relax your mind.*

Other than to lay his head upon her chest he didn’t touch her. But ... something was! Her mind froze, terrified of knowing what exactly was happening. Did she really want to acknowledge that she was being seduced by some unseen ghost? She shut her eyes against the questions.

God, Anna. And, I am not unseen. I am before you in body and within you in spirit.

She opened her eyes. Staring at Tez, staring at her, invisible hands and lips explored her body, teasing and enticing. Her nipples hardened and moisture gathered between her legs. With a low moan, she spread her legs wider for his access.

Tez smiled; she blinked. “I moved!” The words, loud and screeching in the silence, reverberated around the walls. Tez flinched.

At once she clamped a hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she whispered, lifting her hand. "I can move my legs and arms."

"Yes, you can." Tez trailed his fingers up the inside of her thigh. "Touch me."

In response she dug her fingernails into his shoulder. When he reached her pubis, Anna bit her lip, silently willing him to read her mind and do the things she'd witnessed between Steven and Mitsy.

Tez's explorations stopped.

She glanced at him and found him studying her with narrowed eyes. A nervous flutter worked from her stomach into her throat, forming a knot. Swallowing hard, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I'm waiting."

"F-For what?" she asked, knowing what he was going to force her to do.

"For you to tell me what you want me to do to you."

Anna sucked in a painful breath, placing one hand on her chest to ease the sudden pressure that had gathered beneath her ribcage. She shook her head. "I-I don't know how."

A hint of a smile teased the corner of his mouth. He leaned his forehead against hers and gazed into her eyes. "Words are magical keys, Anna." He kissed her lips, softly. "All you have to do is speak."

A thousand different thoughts ran through her mind at that moment, but only one manifested in the air between them. "Ruff!"

It was out before she could prevent it. She watched his gaze widen in surprise.

He blinked twice, as if he couldn't believe he'd heard her correctly.

A deep rumble shook her body. Anna frowned, not sure if they were experiencing an earthquake. The laugh that erupted from deep within his chest through his mouth took her by surprise. She stared in amazement as his head flung back in abandon and the rich, vibrant sound of his laugh at full force, surrounding her, sinking through her skin into her blood. His pleasure *zinged* throughout her body, tingling and exciting erogenous zones she'd never known she had. Her nostrils flared with the scent of his skin -- wild and exotic -- like the jaguar she associated him with.

Rolling to one side, she moved from beneath his arm and leg and straddled his waist, sitting above him.

The wide smile faded, as did the laughter in his eyes, to be replaced by a very knowing and predatory stare. He stretched his arms wide across the bed and did the same with his legs in the same sacrificial position she'd occupied earlier. A vein throbbed at the side of his neck, signaling either arousal or fear.

"Or both," he whispered, letting her know he could still hear her thoughts.

The knowledge that he was aroused didn't scare her. The admittance of fear of any kind surprised her, but enabled her own fear to transform into a boldness that surged through her veins. Leaning forward, she covered his mouth with hers and kissed him, taking what she wanted and offering him promises of things to come. A hunger for something she'd never experienced spread through her body.

Pulling her mouth from his, she nibbled and licked a path down the column of his throat. The pulse from earlier throbbed against her lips. With a groan she opened her mouth wide, biting and sucking hard.

Beneath her Tez bucked, but didn't move his arms or legs from his spread-eagle position. That didn't stop his cock from pressing hard between her legs, rubbing up and down her slit. If she angled her pelvis just so. "Oh, yeah."

A flood of juices escaped her, as the friction their bodies created pulled and massaged her clit. The extra lubricant to his penis allowed him to slide against her body with one fluid motion. She heard a guttural groan before his hands grasped her hips, pulling her upward once, then down. Hard.

His cock, long and thick, filled her.

She lay panting against his chest, dazed at the feel of him inside her body. Shifting her hips, she acknowledged a slight amount of pain, but nothing compared to what she suffered when Steven had made love to her. Made love ... right. There had been no love involved on his side. Had she really ever loved him?

"Oh!" With one deft movement Tez rolled her beneath him, pushing her legs up and out at the knees. "W-What are you doing?"

"You were lying there daydreaming. I thought I would wake you up." He rocked his pelvis into her slow and deep. Both groaned together.

A thin sheen of sweat peppered her chest and the back of her neck. Her hair clung to her skin, as Tez worked his body in and out of hers, watching her intently.

Tension, tight and sexual, curled within her abdomen with each of his thrusts. The sensation that he was claiming her crossed her mind, but Anna blinked it away, trying to stay focused on the rising pressure within her body. Her clit twinged and hardened as his pelvic bone rubbed over it again and again. Her vaginal muscles tightened and flexed around the cock that occupied that most personal part of her. A part she had thought she'd never share with a man again.

"He doesn't deserve you." He thrust harder and faster. "You are too beautiful for him, inside and out."

Anna turned her head back and forth, fighting the rising tide that was both a pleasure and a pain.

"You were right to leave him, Anna." Tez's face, covered with sweat and a fierce, determined expression, loomed above hers. "You need someone who will worship your body and your mind."

She covered his mouth with her fingers, as his hands gripped her thighs and he drove into her deeper. Her legs, still bent at the knees, flopped in time with his thrusts. The sound of skin against skin mingled with the electric smell of sex. Her breathing burned within her chest as she fought to stay focused, but the chaos he created within her body was taking over her mind. At the point of explosion she arched her hips into his thrust, screaming her release.

His mouth covered hers, drinking in her scream and sending her further over the edge with the tactile stimulation of his skillful tongue.

The void encompassed her and there was nothing -- no thoughts, no emotions; just a blinding light rushing past her at a high speed, then something shifted and the light was sucked back into the vortex she had felt earlier in the night until all was quiet and calm and dark. The weight of Tez's body no longer crushed her, but she couldn't remember him moving. Had she slept?

Anna frowned into the thick darkness, wondering what had happened to the lamps. "Tez?"

His name sounded muffled. The smell of damp, dank dirt tickled her nostrils. Her anxiety rose with each heartbeat.

Reaching out a tentative hand, she didn't get far. A cold, stone wall met her search on all sides. She was back in the crypt.

Anna gasped. "I-I never left."

Far above her a coyote howled.

October 31 -- 08:00

Frowning into that liminal time between sleep and wakefulness when a mind wanders through a multitude of dimensions that all seem real, but not, Anna brushed a hand across her nose to dispel the streak of warmth that tingled and burned her skin. She rolled onto her side, snuggling deeper into the soft down of her mattress and pillow, and heard her own sigh of contentment.

The next second she sat up straight in the hotel bed -- wide awake, clutching the cotton sheets closer to her breast. Her heart beat a tattoo through her chest.

Scared to move too quickly in case she was imagining the room and the daylight, she scanned her surroundings with a slow movement of her eyes. Satisfied that no one, or nothing, supernatural was present, she swallowed the boulder that felt lodged in her throat.

An old black clock on the bedside table *ticked* in the early morning silence. The windows were open, admitting a soft, dewy breeze that tugged playfully at the white gauze sheers. Below, the sounds of the day grew louder, as people exited their homes to begin their daily tasks. A rooster crowed and a woman sang a cheerful song, as the smell of breakfast, tortillas and coffee, wafted through the air.

Anna lay back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling. Light reflected in strange patterns across the plaster. Slowly, her muscles relaxed with the normalness that surrounded her. She wasn't in a coffin buried beneath the earth. There were no demons threatening old women, and there was no handsome young man trying to seduce her. She should be elated that she wasn't hallucinating and everything had been a nightmare, but ...

She wasn't.

Anna held her hands in front of her, studying her fingernails. They were clean. "It was real. I know it was."

Throwing the bedcovers onto the floor, she examined her body for traces of Tez's lovemaking. There had been times he had touched her with such gentleness she had wanted to cry. Then, other times he had been so rough to the point of torture, but she'd relished every second, even when he'd bit ...

"There!" Her fingers pinched and lifted an area of skin on her buttock that lay just out of her sight. Jumping up, she ran to the tall, oval mirror in the corner. Angling it upwards, she twisted around, cocking her hip and lifting her butt. Just inside her cheek, close to her thigh and pussy was the perfect indentation and purple bruising of Tez's teeth. She smiled at the evidence she'd been searching for. "I'm not crazy. You were there with me."

Twirling on the balls of her feet, she hugged herself at the erotic memories of the night before.

Dancing to the opened windows, she breathed in deeply and gazed down into the busy street, not caring if anyone should look up and catch her naked in the morning sun. She felt so alive. Tez had breathed into her a new life last night and shown her an entirely different world than what she had ever known. Passion could be hers, was hers. She had not been the problem in her marriage bed. Steven had. He hadn't known what she needed to bring out that side of her nature. He hadn't wanted to know. He had only ever wanted power and money.

"Things are going to be different." Her gaze narrowed on nothing, her fingers gripped the windowpane hard, as she decided her course of action.

Picking up the phone, she instructed the operator to dial her attorney in San Antonio. He answered on the third ring.

"Lopez speaking."

Enrico Lopez was the family attorney. Anna knew he would report everything to her father as soon as they hung up.

She took a deep breath. *I have to do this.* Steven was at fault here, not her. "Rick, hey, it's Anna Sanchez."

"Getting ahead of the horse, aren't you? I believe your name is still Jones until you're divorced."

"Which I know will be soon," she said, inserting a steely note in her voice.

Enrico hesitated. Anna knew she'd gotten his attention. "I've filed the papers, Anna. Your father and Steven are in discussions. Since you left your husband without cause, Steven is demanding to keep control of his stocks and position within your father's company."

"Well, Papa will be happy to hear this, then." Anna waited a second, letting Enrico think about her words. She hadn't listened to Steven and her father all these years that she hadn't learned a few pointers on negotiating. The opening statement could make or break a deal. You had to make them hesitate, lose their footing, their confidence. "I'm changing my grounds for divorce to 'adultery and mental and emotional abuse.' I believe that if you

subpoena the files of Dr. Fuchs you will see a clear pattern of where my husband instructed the good doctor to brainwash me into being the perfect little wife.”

“That doesn’t prove adultery.”

“How does finding my husband fucking his secretary in my backyard sound? I believe our maid, Sylvia, can vouch for that.”

“Anna --”

“Do it, Rick. I mean it. I’ve put up with his shit for years without lifting a finger to defend myself. Well, I’m over being a pawn for him or my father. I want half of everything that Steven and I own. My father can decide if he is going to allow his sleazeball son-in-law, whom he bought, to keep any control in the family business. I don’t care about that.”

Enrico Lopez sighed. “Okay. I’ll draw up the new papers and have them filed this afternoon. Just tell me where you are, so I can contact you in case I need some additional information.”

“I’m home where I belong.” Anna placed the receiver in its cradle and smiled.

October 31 -- 20:00

The mariachi band wound its way through the dancing crowd. The lively strum of the guitars had everyone spinning. Bright skirts flared and twirled in a cascade of yellows, reds, blues, and greens. The men were very stylish in their bolero-style jackets and tightly fitting pants. The jackets were embroidered with intricate designs and silver buttons while the pants flared slightly at the bottom in order to fit over their black boots.

Anna watched, fascinated at the rapid, shuffling movements of their feet, back and forth between the males and females. The flamboyant male would advance, dancing around the female, attempting to entice her in courtship. The females would toss their heads and swirl their skirts in rejection of the males' preening.

"And so the dance of courtship plays out -- advance and retreat -- until the woman submits, completely, to her man."

His voice, so dark and deep, drew her attention from the spectacle in front of them.

She sipped her lemonade, having refused the potent *pulque*. "Why should the woman submit? Why can't the man?"

Tez's snort of disgust caused her to bite her lip to prevent a laugh escaping. "It is a mating dance. What woman in her right mind would want a weak man for a lover?"

"You think if a man is submissive he is weak?" she asked. "I think that shows how strong he is, if he can relinquish control to his partner."

"Do you, now?" He sat back, studying her from beneath a furrowed brow. "You seem ... different ... tonight. What has happened?"

Anna felt heat rising in her cheeks. Still unsure how much of the previous night was reality or fantasy, she didn't want to say anything that would make her sound crazy. Toying with the handle of her cup she said, "I've realized what it's supposed to be like. That's all."

"It wasn't like that with your husband?"

"No, and that made me angry when I discovered that I wasn't the frigid bitch he accused me of being. I'm capable of experiencing passion just as well as every other woman. I just have to find the right lovers, who are willing to explore what turns me on and take their time bringing that part of me out."

"I am glad you have discovered this." His answer was clipped, almost annoyed.

Anna frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Let's dance." He held out his hand, but she didn't take it as she had the night before.

"Oh ... I don't know how to dance like that." She sat back, retreating from his invitation.

Tez stood abruptly, his chair clattering across the brick patio. "Fine. You can watch."

Her mouth opened in surprise at his curt words. Not knowing how to reply, she watched him down his *pulque* before grabbing the hand of the woman at the table beside them. The woman's partner looked as if he would object, but when Tez narrowed his gaze at the man and gave the guy a tight smile, the gentleman bowed in deference and took a step back. The woman beamed with pleasure and moved her body close to Tez's.

"Uh!" Anna's mouth opened wider at the woman's brazen behavior. She turned and glared at the guy beside her. He shrugged as if to say, "What do you want me to do?"

"He is *Titlacahuan*. I cannot tell him he can't have my wife."

"His name is Tez Opoche, and if she's your wife you are a poor excuse of a husband, letting another man grab her like that without a protest."

The man nodded profusely at Tez's name. "*Exactamente, señorita. Es un dio.*" The guy hissed the last, glancing around as if frightened he would be overheard. Anna angled away from the man to avoid being sprayed with spittle.

"What are you babbling about? What exactly does *Titlacahuan* mean?" she asked, but had a strange feeling she didn't really want to know after some of the flashbacks she'd had throughout the day of the night before. She'd put it down to too much alcohol, but now --

"'He Whose Slaves We Are' -- the master of all destinies."

Anna's breath came out in a rush. "Oh shit."

For several minutes she didn't move, but laughter brought her out of her daze. She sat forward for a better view.

Tez stamped his feet, advancing toward his partner, who turned her head away in a coquettish manner. All the while a sly smile teased the woman's full, red lips.

Anna had to admit that even in plain white *calzones de manta* Tez looked fantastic. He should have seemed less vibrant than the costumed men, but he wasn't. He was the epitome of life itself -- young, handsome, and passionate -- dancing as if there were no tomorrow.

Pure rage gripped her gut at the sight of Tez dancing with another woman. Anna wanted to rip the other woman's throat out with her bare hands.

"Oh, my god." Anna sat back, slowly, with the realization of her jealousy. She couldn't be jealous. That would mean ...

She stood up; her chair clattered to the brick patio. The music and festivities were so loud no one paid much attention. Without glancing back, Anna made her way through the throngs of people toward her hotel. She had to get away. Surely she had been mistaken in her moment of clarity.

October 31 -- 22:00

Closing the hotel door, she leaned against the heavy wood. Any energy she'd experienced earlier now seemed drained. Her legs and arms were heavy with fatigue. The bed, only a few feet away, seemed the distance of an opposing team's field goal. She would never make it if she left the support of the door.

Her reflection stared back at her from the long mirror across the room. Her face was very white and her brown eyes were huge in her face, as if she'd had the fright of her life. She had.

"I'm in love," she said into the empty room. The quiet words bounced around as if she'd screamed them. Anna covered her ears with both hands and sank to the wooden floor. "No, no, no. This can't happen. I've just discovered my freedom. I can't be in love with anyone, especially not Tez."

He was all wild and chaotic, like a tornado. Nothing like what she'd always considered herself to be -- calm and sensible.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Anna screamed and jumped at the same time with the pounding on the door. Scrambling across the floor, she situated her body between the wall and the dresser. "He can't know. He'll laugh and think I'm naïve and stupid," she whispered.

"Anna!" *Boom. Boom.* "Open the door."

Taking a deep breath, she crept from her illusion of safety. If he wanted in, that flimsy piece of wood wouldn't keep him out. With a trembling hand she turned the knob, unlocking the door to reveal her destiny on the other side. Whether good or bad she had no clue, but she knew Tez Opoche held the keys to her future in his hands. "I'll just hear what he has to say and close the door."

The door swung open. They stood facing each other, but not touching.

Her gaze rested on his chest revealed by the unbuttoned shirt. The material clung to his dampened skin. The scent of his body rose to tease her nostrils and curl low within her abdomen. She wanted him to look at her the way he'd looked at the woman he'd danced with earlier.

She hung her head. There was no way she could possibly tell him that. He'd know too much.

"Look at me."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"You can; you just won't." He pulled her chin up with his thumb and forefinger.

Anna turned her head away, breaking his hold. "Don't."

"I can't come in?" he asked, grasping either side of the doorjamb and leaning toward her. His feet remained on the opposite side of the threshold.

She cleared her throat, finding it more difficult every second of his nearness to speak. "No."

"Invite me into your room. I want to make love with you, and you're being stubborn."

"Go ask flamenco girl." She took a step back, reaching for the door. That's when she decided to meet his gaze.

Anger burned with a darker emotion in the black of his irises. A muscle flexed along his jaw. "She's not the one I want to spend my last night in this town with."

Ha! He admitted he was leaving. Anna's resolve not to get involved with him any further strengthened. He would just end up hurting her. She couldn't take any more emotional pain.

"Tough." She had meant to shut the door, gently, but her hand slipped along the door handle, as she pushed it closed. The door *swooshed* between them blocking him from her view. "Crap."

She saw him pull his head back with a jerk. An impatient hand caught the door before it slammed in his face. The wood rattled with the impact, like a freight truck hitting a brick wall at full speed. A low growl emitted from the other side of the door. Anna knew she'd gone too far.

Backing away from the door, she glanced around the small room for a place to hide. There was nothing. She spotted the window.

Maybe she could climb out onto the ledge --

Strong hands wrapped around her upper arms. She cried out, more in shock than actual pain.

He shook her. "Why do you play these games? You know what's between us."

That did it. She brought her heel down on his foot. Though she doubted it hurt him in any way through his boot, it did surprise him enough that he let go of her. Taking the

advantage, she pivoted away from him. "I thought you couldn't cross the threshold unless I invited you inside."

"What gave you that absurd notion?" he asked.

She scurried to the other side of the bed. "Everyone knows that supernatural beings can't do that. Right?"

Tez raised his gaze to the ceiling and shook his head. "I think you are confusing gods with vampires. You Americans watch too many movies."

"Oh yeah?" She placed her hands on her hips. "A fair amount of you foreigners seem to enjoy them, too, as vivid as your imaginations are."

Crossing his arms over his chest, he smiled, but it wasn't pleasant. "Where are you going to run to now?"

In her haste and distraction with the habits of fictional vampires she'd turned the wrong direction. She realized that he had her pinned between the bed and the wall. She stamped her foot. "No!"

Tez threw his head back and laughed.

That infuriated her more. Picking up one of the bed pillows, she threw it at him, hitting him in the head.

His laughter was replaced by a surprised expression that turned to a thunderous cloud upon his face. "Come here."

Anna heard the command and the promise beneath that if she didn't go to him, he would come after her and the consequences would be worse. She glanced around, but her situation was the same. There was nowhere she could run. Releasing a resigned sigh, she walked around to the other side. Standing in front of him, she fidgeted with the tie of her wraparound skirt and waited for his verbal wrath. He would probably tell her she was too much trouble and he'd had enough of her childish behavior. Steven had never failed to take advantage of an opportunity to deride her.

When Tez cupped her face with both hands and kissed her gently on the lips her eyes opened wide.

"You're not --" She stopped to respond to another kiss. "-- angry about the pillow?"

"No." Tez stepped closer, wrapping one arm around her waist. He kissed her harder, drawing the kiss out long and slow.

She staggered backwards, as he released her. Blinking, she tried to focus her vision from seeing double. "Wow. Those are some really powerful kisses." Her balance wavered. Clutching his shirt, she took a step closer to him. He produced within her an overpowering need to flee, but at the same time she wanted him as close as possible.

"So the legends say." He grinned and rubbed his cheek along hers, nibbling her neck and ear. "I have something else a lot more powerful than my kiss."

Anna giggled. "Yeah, what?"

One minute she was staring into his face, the next she was flat on her back looking at the ceiling with her skirt bunched around her upper thighs. "Whoa!"

"Head still spinning?" he asked, climbing between her legs on the mattress. Her skirt bunched around her waist, exposing the bare skin of her thighs.

"Yes." The barest caress of his fingertips against her ankle, her calf, and behind her knee had her squirming against the mattress. His hands moved from her thighs to her breasts where he unbuttoned her blouse with deft fingers.

Feeling unexpectedly brave earlier, she'd gone without a bra to the festival. Now, she wasn't quite so bold with all that skin bared. She covered her breasts with her hands. The heat of a blush spread over her entire body.

"No." Tez caught her hands in his, lowering her hands and arms to her sides. "You are beautiful. Let me see you." He bent over her, taking first one nipple then the other into his mouth, sucking and licking each with an enthusiasm that made her blush harder.

"Skin so smooth, like silk." He lifted a swath of her hair and put it to his nose, breathing deeply. "The smell of you has been driving me crazy all night."

Arrows of desire engulfed her, spreading throughout her body.

She shuddered at the bite of his teeth into her neck and shoulder. A long, drawn-out groan from deep within her rose into the night air. She reached up, digging her fingers into his scalp, trying to draw him closer and push him away at the same time. The curling sensation from the night before unfolded within her stomach, consuming her with desire. The flood of moisture between her legs gave proof to the heightened sensitivity of her body. Willingly, she spread her legs, inviting him to explore all the places her husband had neglected and ignored.

His lips and teeth made their way to her abdomen, nipping and sucking. The sensations *zinged* across her nerve endings. Her nipples tingled and tightened. Contracting her thigh muscles, she tried to ease the simultaneous throbbing of her clit with each continued torture of his mouth.

Hot puffs of air tickled the hair of her pubis. She groaned, raking her fingernails over the muscles of his shoulders and back.

The temperature increased to scorching as he covered her mons with his mouth, saturating her folds and clit with moist heat. Her own skin radiated heat. The smell of her perfume, body heat, and arousal permeated the room around them.

Her neck arched against the pillow. The need to scream strangled her. Just when she was about to release it, he entered her, transforming the scream into a gasp. Her hips rose into his thrust, taking all of him into her body. The slick juices of desire slid over his hardness, allowing him to stretch and fill her to maximum capacity and then some.

This time the room spun out of control, as her muscles flexed around his hard length. She didn't know when he'd taken their clothes off and didn't care. The feel of skin sliding against skin was all she wanted to concentrate on. That and the feel of his cock deep within her pussy, filling her to the point of pain. But it was so good. "So good," she said, tossing her head back and forth on the pillow. His mouth covered hers, cutting off the rest of her words.

The hotel door crashed into the wall.

Anna jumped so hard, she bit Tez's lip.

He pulled his body from her with what sounded like a *Nahautl* curse, but only turned his body partially toward the door. The scowl on his face would have frightened most hardened criminals.

Splintered chunks of adobe dropped to the floor, but Anna didn't pay much attention to the damage. Pulling the sheet over her breasts, she stared at the figure looming in the doorway. Her stomach lurched. "Steven!"

Steven entered the room followed closely by two of his biggest and meanest bodyguards.

A whimper of fear escaped her lips. Tez's arm tightened protectively across her abdomen. There were a few moments of silence as everyone measured the situation.

Heat rose in her cheeks. She glanced down at the bedding, rumpled and clearly a sign to anyone that she and Tez had been making love. Anna's grip tightened. She didn't know if she was more ashamed of being caught in the arms of her lover by her still-legal husband, or for her nakedness in front of four men.

Tez rose from the bed, primal and proud, not bothering with covering his nakedness, clearly taking a stance to defend her.

She reached for him, but her fingertips only grazed his skin. "Don't ... Don't do anything stupid."

Tez's nostrils flared and his gaze narrowed on her. "You consider me stupid?"

"That's not what I mean! He's --" She glanced quickly at Steven. "-- dangerous."

Steven smiled. "I'd listen to *my* wife, lover boy."

The blond of Steven's hair glowed in the moonlight that filtered into the room, giving him a surreal look. He had the eerie presence of a specter, leering down at its terrified prey.

Tez offered a sneer in return. "If you don't mind, we are not prepared for visitors."

That produced a round of laughter from Steven and his companions that ended abruptly, as soon as Stephen lifted his hand for silence.

"Whatever my wife does is an open invitation to me." Steven stepped to the small desk in the corner. Hooking the chair with one hand he twirled it around to face him. Straddling the seat, he sat forward, crossing his arms over the back. "Please, don't let us interrupt. I

enjoy a live erotic show.” He rested his chin on top of his hands. Behind him his men crossed their arms over their chests with their weapons in view.

Anna’s heart stopped as she grasped her husband’s implication. “Steven --”

Tez held up a hand, silencing her. He stepped closer to Steven.

Her heart jump-started with a pain. She knew her husband. The capability to kill lay just beneath Steven’s polished civilized veneer. Anna had watched him in the boardroom, slicing and dicing his opponents into mincemeat. Tez was no match, no matter what he claimed about being the human representative of an Aztec god. Tez was a musician, a poet. “Tez, please,” she whispered.

Tez took another step toward Steven. That was one too many. In a flash the bodyguard on Steven’s right stepped forward, punching Tez in the face.

The punch sent him staggering backwards. The sound of knuckles hitting flesh and cartilage crunching resounded through the tiny room, mixing with a woman’s cry of “No!”

Bile rose in Anna’s throat at the sight of violence and a metallic smell, warm and rich, tickled her nose. Glancing at Tez, but too afraid to go to him, she saw blood pouring from his nose -- black in the darkness.

He wiped a hand across his face, smearing his own blood in two lines across his cheeks in a deliberate movement.

Anna watched his jaw tighten and his eyes glitter. He licked his fingers. She gasped. What was he doing?

“The sacrifice begins,” Tez said.

Steven’s head angled back. Genuine laughter erupted from his throat and mouth. Looking forward again, he said, “I like you. You’ve got guts.”

Tez inclined his head in a mock bow. “*Gracias.*”

Disgust replaced fear. “For Pete’s sake. What do you want, Steven?” she asked.

Steven’s smile vanished. His gaze narrowed onto Anna.

She fought the urge to burrow beneath the blankets and hide. They were in the middle of a divorce. She had caught him red-handed fucking Mitsy. She’d be damned if he was going to turn the tables on her for finding some sort of happiness with Tez.

“You’ve changed, Anna.” He turned his head slightly, studying her.

She couldn’t see his eyes, but she could feel them travel over her body outlined beneath the thin sheet. “Yes, I have.” She raised her chin, but didn’t look directly at his face. Instead she shot Tez a quick glance.

“I think I like seeing a spark of defiance in you.”

She turned back to Steven with her mouth parted. “You never even knew I existed, except to get a monthly dividend check from my father for my stocks in his company.”

Steven shrugged. “That was business.”

"This isn't?" She raised her eyebrows, glancing at the two bodyguards.

"It was. But, now --" Steven licked his lips. "-- now I think I'm going to mix business with pleasure."

Anna felt her blood stop flowing in her veins. Her body froze within that second. She couldn't have moved if she tried. Beside her, Tez was just as still, like a statue.

"If you want your boyfriend to survive this night, you'll do two things." Steven's voice was crisp and businesslike, but his eyes glittered with anticipation and lust.

Anna managed to clutch the sheet tighter. "W-What?" The word was barely a whisper across her dry throat.

"You will stop this nonsense of divorce and return home with me. I've already told everyone you're spending some time at a ... resort. No one will know of your adultery."

"Of course, they'll think a mental rehab center." Anna sat forward. "I guess your little indiscretions won't be discussed either."

"Why, whatever are you talking about, dear? Everyone knows how devoted I am to you. How concerned I have been for your fragile mental state ever since you lost our child."

"*My* child. She was mine! You never wanted her."

Tez touched her shoulder. Without looking at him she grasped his hand. "What else do you want, Steven?"

"Don't agree to his demands, Anna," Tez said, low and angry.

Glancing at his face, Anna squeezed his hand. "I have to. I care about you. It would kill me if something happened to you."

Tez's expression looked startled at first, then he nodded, giving her a small smile. His jaw tightened. "Thank you."

"How touching. Aren't you forgetting one small thing, my dear? You're still married to me."

Anna jerked her head back in Steven's direction. "Just tell me what you want, Steven, and let Tez go immediately."

Steven smiled, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. When he opened them, his eyes sparkled with excitement. "Not so fast."

He leaned forward, dragging out his response with cruel intent.

Anna wanted to scream her frustration. She fought the urge to wrap her hands around his neck and choke the words from him.

"I want to watch you fuck him." The smile faded and a cold, calculating mask of lust and triumph remained.

"No," Tez replied with a soft menace.

Anna could feel the waves of anger rolling from Tez's rigid body.

His hands shook with his rage.

"It's okay." She placed a comforting hand on Tez's arm. Somehow she'd known what Steven was going to request by the lust in his eyes when he'd first caught them in bed together. That same expression of ravenous hunger had consumed his features the day Mitsy had lain in the sun, offering her body to him.

She'd watched him; now he wanted to watch her. Disgust and anticipation warred within her psyche. She remembered Tez's refusal. This wasn't just about her and whatever warped desires turned her on. "No."

"Anna, Anna, Anna." Steven stood and walked toward her.

Anna's heartbeat accelerated. She might anticipate someone watching her have sex, but she didn't want that someone to be Steven. With the thought of him touching her, she fought the rising panic that screamed for her to move away.

Anna sat perfectly still as Steven approached. He stopped beside her. His breathing sounded heavy in the still room.

On her other side Tez stood. She could feel the tension oozing from the pores of his skin. She knew he would pounce if Steven made a wrong move.

Steven didn't touch her, but leaned close enough that his breath fanned over the top of her breasts. "I'm not asking, Anna. I'm telling you. If you want him to live, you'll do it. The choice is yours."

"No, it's ours." She glanced up at Tez, who hadn't moved or spoken for several seconds.

"If you hadn't noticed, sweetheart, your boyfriend likes the idea." Steven pointed at Tez. "Jumped right up there to volunteer as soon as I issued the demand."

Her gaze shifted downward. She sucked in a gulp of air so hard and fast, she coughed.

Long and hard, Tez's erection verified Steven's observation.

A stronger wave of desire crashed through her. Steven had taken the responsibility away from her by declaring she had no choice but to do what he wanted. Tez's physical approval was just icing on the cake. Juices pooled beneath her on the bed sheets. She closed her eyes, as flashes of her and Tez "performing" shot through her mind and body -- hot and arousing.

"Don't do it, Anna."

She opened her eyes and met Tez's stare. Like her, his gaze told her he wanted to, but didn't. Their need and desire fought with control and principle. "He'll kill you if we don't."

Tez's smile was cruel and cynical. "I'm dead either way. Don't sell yourself to him."

Suddenly, Steven's breath hissed in her ear. "Do it, Anna. I can see on your face that you want to." He trailed a path across the swell of her breasts with his forefinger.

"Don't touch her." The words were a growl from deep within Tez's throat.

Steven's fingers stilled, branding her skin with their torturous heat. "I'll kill him," he whispered in her ear. Louder he addressed Tez.

"If you don't like me touching her, then tell her you agree to my ... request. Either way -- by you or me -- she's getting fucked."

He had to understand she couldn't let Steven kill him, and she would rather die than have Steven's cock anywhere near her. "Tez --"

"It's okay." The mattress creaked and gave beneath Tez's weight. "I will do what I have to do to keep his filthy hands off of you."

Anna glanced from him to Steven. Both men glared at each other. The two looming figures of the bodyguards shifted their stance, clearly uncomfortable at the lack of space between their employer and a potential threat.

"We're in agreement here?" Steven asked.

"*Sí*. Just remember, *señor*, to each his own."

Steven chuckled, kissing Anna's cheek. "Indeed. Payback is hell."

Anna angled away from his wet lips, wiping a hand over the spot he'd kissed.

Steven's expression hardened. Fingers dug into her shoulder. "Fuck him. Now." He released her, pushing her into Tez, who took her full weight without complaint.

What had she agreed to do? Closing her eyes, she swallowed against the bile rising in back of her throat.

Strong arms wrapped around her and a warm, comforting hand slid beneath her hair, caressing. She angled her head back and studied Tez's face with its high cheekbones, chiseled jaw and straight nose. She'd thought Steven handsome at one time, but her husband paled in comparison to Tez's noble beauty -- so proud, so primal. Reaching out, she traced his jaw with a trembling finger. His skin was smooth and warm. Dried blood coated his cheek.

She frowned and whispered, "Why did you do that?"

His gaze traced the outline of her face before meeting her gaze. "I am a warrior facing his enemy."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he placed a finger over her lips.

"This is a battle. Life or death. Are you prepared to die?"

She shook her head. Fear clutched her heart. Fear that Steven would harm Tez. Fear that she would have to return to the prison she'd dwelled in the last four years and which she thought she had finally escaped. "I want to live."

"Then, we will do this right --" His lips quirked at the corner, as he slipped a hand beneath the sheet and stroked her belly. "-- as if this were our last night on earth and we were the only two people left in the world. They do not exist in the place that our minds can travel to together."

Ripples of desire arrowed through her abdomen to her clit. Not fighting the sensations he created, her head dropped back and her eyes closed. In the darkness she was transported to the coffin and that magical time she'd spent in his arms. His mouth and tongue invaded

her mouth. A hand gripped the back of her neck, holding her in place as her fantasies merged with reality.

When the sheet slipped from her body her nipples hardened from a combination of the desert night air and Tez's caresses beneath the swollen, throbbing globes of her breasts. She arched into his touch, silently begging him to pinch and squeeze her flesh. Rotating her hips, she laid back against the pillows.

He followed, not relinquishing his possession of her mouth and body.

Spreading her legs, his weight settled into the cradle between her thighs. His cock pulsed, hot and heavy, against the slit of her pussy. Her flesh parted around the width of him. Their tongues tangled and mated. His teeth scraped her lip, but she didn't complain even with the metallic taste of her blood.

His mouth left hers as they both groaned at the deepened contact of his hardness sliding along her slick heat. Breathing heavily, he rested his forehead against hers. Anna watched a vein throb in his temple and his neck muscles contract as he swallowed.

"You ready?" he asked with a husky voice.

She blinked, having completely forgotten about Steven at the onslaught of Tez's kiss. Unable to keep her gaze from wandering, she glanced toward the three strangers in her room, including Steven. In his suit with his immaculate hair he gripped the back of the chair so tightly, the wood creaked. She'd been married to him for six years, but he was a complete stranger. He'd never taken the time to know her -- to dance with her, to kiss her, to learn how to love her.

Her gaze returned to Tez -- a complete stranger, but the husband of her heart. A man she'd just met, but who knew more about her than her own parents. She had to protect him. It was more than just making love to him to please Steven's perverted mind. She had to leave Tez and return to a life in which she had never belonged. She smiled and nodded, cupping Tez's cheek with the palm of her hand. "I'm ready."

Tez didn't hesitate. With one swift movement of his hips his cock pushed its way into her body.

Both arched their backs, *hissing* at the claiming. His fingers dug into the flesh of her thighs, pulling her legs open wider so he could thrust deeper into her body. Anna clung to his shoulders and back. She raked her fingernails at whatever she could to keep her body beneath his. Tossing her head from side to side, she clenched her teeth against the burning pain and pleasure of that initial thrust that was so good.

Her muscles adjusted, relaxing. Tez's cock slid full length into her body. "Ah ... yes."

"What do you want, Anna?" The voice didn't belong to Tez, but Steven's, breathless and full of anticipation and passion.

Tez turned his head toward the other man and growled, baring his teeth. The sound that emitted was that of a wild animal.

Sweat plastered her hair to her neck and face. It trickled between her breasts. At that moment time evaporated and she was above it all, looking down upon the scene unfolding.

Steven and his goons were licking their lips, watching with bated breath as Tez pumped his cock into a woman's pussy. His ass, naked and smooth, tightened with each thrust. One leg extended over the side of the bed. The other bent, digging into the mattress to give him more power.

Anna studied the woman beneath Tez. Long black hair fanned across the rumpled sheets and her legs were open in invitation to the man between them. The woman opened her eyes, staring up at Anna. It was her.

Awareness flashed in the woman's eyes. Anna was pulled back by some force as time erupted and she was suddenly back in her own body beneath Tez.

Steven's voice, angry and urgent, roared through the room. "Tell me what you want!"

Anna looked at Tez. His face was flushed with exertion and arousal. "Tell me, if not him."

"Get behind me," she said.

Tez's eyes widened; he kissed her fast and hard. "Like the wild beasts in our souls." He pulled out of her, quickly, and rolled her onto her stomach. Grasping her hips he pulled her ass toward him.

Anna came up on her knees, arching her back as Tez smoothed his hands over her hips, massaging and caressing. She relaxed further and moved her hips in motion to his touch. No one else mattered. This was just the two of them -- her and him. She sighed, closing her eyes, and let her inhibitions fade.

"Ow!" His bite on her hip took her by surprise. She pulled away from his grasp, but he pulled her back, entering her pussy hard and fast. She buried her head into the sheets to muffle her scream. Her body rocked back and forth with three hard thrusts.

His chest, coated with sweat, covered her back as he laid his body along hers. Long fingers worked into her hair. Her pussy throbbed and burned around his cock, as the sensitive area around her anus pulsed and quivered with need.

He pulled her hair hard, forcing her head up and back.

To her left she heard Steven groan.

"What animals are we?" Tez asked, pulling her hair harder and biting her shoulder.

A shudder ran the length of her body in response. Juices, hot and viscous, ran down her inner thighs. She tried to answer but her throat was too dry. Swallowing hard, she said, "J-Jaguar." The word was barely a croak.

Deep within her body his cock lengthened and pulsed. Tez growled low in his throat and deepened his bite into her shoulder. Releasing her, he grasped her hips and worked his cock so deep and hard into her body, Anna couldn't catch her breath.

He rode her across the mattress until she knew she'd go over the edge. When she felt herself falling, he grabbed her thighs and pulled her back to the other side, never missing a stroke. With his feet on the floor his angle of entry shifted.

Anna's pelvic muscles tightened. When he thrust again the head of his cock crashed into her "spot."

"Oh!" She squirmed away, digging her hands and knees into the mattress.

He held her tight. His fingers dug into her flesh and he thrust again.

She screamed, as pressure built within her abdomen as did the urge to orgasm. "Tez! I ... I have to --"

"What?" Tez and Steven asked together. Both sounded desperate and on the verge of climax.

"Come!" The pressure exploded with her cry. Her fingernails ripping across the sheets of the mattress, as her body convulsed around Tez's cock, echoed through her mind. Spirals of light blinded her as the orgasm continued forever, radiating in waves across the tide of eternity.

Behind her Tez's body stiffened and he bellowed her name into the night air. His fingers worked her hips, tightening and releasing. Then, he collapsed on top of her. His weight crushed her into the bed, but he rolled to the side, curling his body and arms around hers and blocking her from Steven's view.

Their hearts beat with ragged, irregular rhythms with his chest against her back. As their breathing steadied, so did their heartbeats into a synchronicity that was at once peaceful and right.

Tez kissed her hair. "*Te quiero, mi esposa.*"

He loved her! Anna's lips trembled in reaction to his words. She turned her head to tell him she loved him too, but Steven stood over them, adjusting his pants.

"Well, that was real sweet, but I think you're forgetting whose wife she is."

Anna closed her eyes on a surge of bile within her throat. To think it had excited her to have him watch her and Tez make love. Something so sacred turned so vulgar.

Tez kissed her ear. "Don't cheapen what we have, because he was here. That was between the two of us. No one else."

Anna nodded, drawing her knees in closer to her body. The show was over and she didn't want Steven and his goons seeing any more than they already had seen earlier.

Tez shifted his weight away from her and stood, pulling the blanket over her body as he went.

Immediately guns *clicked* ready for action. Tez halted, raising his hands above his waist. "I am unarmed."

Steven stepped forward. "So you are." He punched Tez hard in the gut. A *whooshing* sound escaped his lungs as he doubled over in pain.

"Tez!" Anna scrambled off the bed, pulling the sheet with her. Before she reached Tez, Steven grabbed her by the arm and marched her to the bathroom. At the door he shoved her inside.

"Clean yourself, you whore, and get dressed. We've got a plane to catch."

"You promised not to hurt him," Anna said. Glancing over Steven's shoulder she watched in horror as the two bodyguards picked him up under his arms.

"Other than that love tap I'm not going to touch him," Steven said, offering her a smile that made her blood run cold with fear. "Now get dressed!" He threw her clothes in her face and shoved her further into the bathroom.

She stepped forward, trying to see Tez, but Steven slammed the door.

Outside Anna could hear them beating Tez. As she wiped her body with a wet cloth, tears ran down her face. After tonight all traces of Tez would be gone from her body, and he would be gone from her life. With shaking fingers she buttoned her blouse, jumping with each blow of knuckles against tender skin and bone. Covering her ears, she leaned her head against the cool wood, willing her mind back to that time and place where only the two of them existed.

A sharp rap on the door forced her back into the small space. The door opened, revealing a satisfied Steven. "Very good, my dear. You were quick." He stepped back to allow her to walk past him. "I'm sure your *friend* is much appreciative. Any longer in there and I am afraid he would have been dead."

Anna gasped, covering her mouth with shaking hands at the horror in front of her. Her beautiful Tez, hung between the two men, limp and bloody, barely conscious.

"Tez!" She moved toward him, but Steven grabbed her arm, stopping her with an abrupt tug.

"Don't go anywhere near him, wife. You've fucked the last strange man you're going to in your lifetime."

Anger built in the pit of her stomach. Anger and hatred. Anna spit.

Saliva splattered across Steven's eyes and mouth and slid down the features she had once thought handsome. Now they were nothing but grotesque. "I hate you!"

Steven's fist smashed into her cheek. Stars flared within her mind and throughout the room. From what sounded like far away, Tez struggled to reach her.

The sound of fists pounding into flesh echoed around her, but her limbs were limp and useless. Steven had an arm around her waist. Bending, he scooped her up with a grunt. "Bring him. The truck is out back. No one will see us with the festival still on."

Anna tried to struggle, but her eyes wouldn't focus and her mind and body weren't communicating. Her head lolled back over Steven's arm as he carried her down the stairs and

out into the night air. Dumping her into the back of a dark SUV, the bodyguards threw Tez in beside her. The storage door slammed with a dull *thud*. Nausea rose in her throat and her head throbbed with every bump they hit. She reached out in the darkness for Tez.

Her hand encountered something warm, wet, and sticky -- his blood. She closed her eyes, swallowing several times to keep from getting physically sick. She had to focus on where they were. Tez was unconscious. If they were going to get out of here, she would be the one to do it. Thanks to the time she'd spent in the crypt, her fear of tight, small spaces wasn't as pronounced as it once had been.

Groping along the perimeter of the door, she found a spot that she thought was near the locking mechanism. The insulation strip sunk in, but didn't give, as she tore at it with her fingernails. Rolling to her side, she patted the floorboard for anything that would tear into the rubber material. If she could find something long and hard, like the bone in the coffin, maybe she could pry the lock open.

Her fingers encountered a screwdriver. Picking it up in one hand, the SUV hit a pothole, jarring the entire vehicle. The screwdriver slipped through her fingers, hitting the floorboard. The sound of it rolling away made her freeze. She glanced at the seatback above her.

"What was that noise?" Steven asked from the front passenger side.

The seat in front of her groaned and creaked as one of the goons shifted his weight. "Don't know, boss, but I'll check."

Anna dropped to the floorboard, closing her eyes. A flash of light angled across her face. She groaned, as if in pain. Her heart thudded hard against her chest, but she lay completely still. Sweat trickled between her breasts, tickling her skin. Something poked her in the ribs, but she kept her muscles loose and relaxed, not responding in any form or fashion.

The light disappeared and the seat creaked again. "Don't see nuthin, boss."

Steven snorted. "What a pair of lightweights. She really thought she'd get away with this divorce crap."

Anna, releasing a long, silent breath, opened her eyes. Light from the full moon shown in the back window, illuminating the space around her. Moving slowly, she worked her hands in the area around her. Nothing. Rolling to her other side, she faced Tez. Gently, so as not to hurt him in any way, she eased her hands beneath his body, trying to find the screwdriver. There!

Her fingers curled around the handle at the same time a hand circled her wrist. Her mouth opened to scream, but Tez's hand closed over her face. Close to her ear he whispered, "Shh. It's me."

Hearing pain in his words, Anna trailed her fingertips over his cheek, offering as much comfort as she dared in their predicament. She nodded. Placing her mouth close to his ear,

she said, “I found a screwdriver to open the back door. When I get it open will you be able to jump?”

“What do you think, *querida*?” The question was laced with humor and sarcasm.

Only Tez would laugh in the face of possible death. While she could hope and pray Steven wouldn’t stoop to murder, she couldn’t take a chance. Prayer wouldn’t save them. They would have to save themselves. “Okay. Get ready.”

She shoved the screwdriver into the gash she’d dug out. Working it around until she felt the latch, she angled it up, then down. Metal scraped against metal. Sweat broke across her forehead and beneath her underarms. Stopping every few seconds, she checked to make sure the bodyguard didn’t notice anything.

Click.

Her heart stopped; she held her breath. Reaching with one hand, she squeezed Tez’s arm.

His hand circled her forearm, as his fingers counted *1-2-3* against her skin.

“Jump!”

October 31 -- 24:00

Sailing through the pitch black, air rushed past at lightning speed. It reminded her of falling through the never-ending void of the previous night.

She hit hard. The breath she'd been holding slammed from her chest. Arms and legs tangled and mangled over and over, as she rolled down an embankment and across the hard surface of the desert floor. Somewhere to her left she heard Tez go through the same ordeal, but his sounded much more painful. At one point he emitted a scream that tore through her heart.

She couldn't help him. As fast as she tumbled, her mind flashed through the entire events of her life: Her earliest memory of laughing as her father pushed her on a swing -- "Higher, Daddy. I want to reach the stars!" Her mother arranging her hair for the worst birthday party she'd ever had -- "Anna, don't move. You will mess up your hair and dress. What will the mayor think of my ragamuffin daughter?"

Her body's momentum slowed and she crashed into a rock. Her breath came in ragged spurts, but the thoughts continued to flow freely: Her first disastrous date in high school -- "If you don't put out, *chica*, get out!" Her wedding day -- "It doesn't matter if your husband doesn't love you, Anna. He can provide you with all the material assets that any woman could want or hope to have. Why are you never satisfied with your station in life?"

Something wet and hot scalded her face. Reaching with one hand, she wiped her cheek, gingerly, flinching at the stinging pain the motion produced. She realized she was crying. Crying for all the wasted moments in her life. None of them were important, but she'd let them dominate her and her actions. All those magical stars had crashed around her in the grip of life's cruel reality.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to stop the tears, but they kept coming. "I promise --" She hiccupped. "-- they won't take control of me ever again."

Her fingers fisted in the dirt beneath her. Rolling to her side, she squashed the moan that worked its way from her toes to her chest and throat, demanding to be released. It was a miracle she hadn't broken any bones.

She pushed up onto her knees, wincing at the stinging pain in her elbow. Rubbing her arm, she bit her lip, stifling a scream, when she encountered cactus spines. She traced her fingertips up and down their length. "Ah, shit," she whispered. At least three inches.

Taking a deep breath and swallowing against the nausea of what she had to do and how much it was going to hurt, she pulled the quills from her arm. The barbed edges tugged and pulled with sharp bursts of pain radiating through her body as she retracted them along the same route they had entered.

Sweat soaked through her clothing. Blood trickled black against her skin. A wave of dizziness attacked and she wavered back and forth, trying to maintain her balance. She couldn't faint. If she did they would die. If Steven had anticipated showing any mercy toward her and Tez, that option had vanished with their little stunt. One thing she knew about her husband -- he didn't like to be defied, or bested in any way.

Anna had done both.

Squinting in the moonlight, she could make out the pyramid from the night before. If she and Tez could make it there before Steven found them, they stood a chance to escape. She'd heard the brakes squeal on her way down the gulley, but their attackers weren't in sight at the moment. "Tez?" she called, whispering loudly, hoping no one but he heard her. "Can you hear me?"

Off to her right and a short distance ahead, something shuffled on the rocky floor. A deep groan cut off, as if the owner realized he was making too much noise. "Anna?"

"Tez, I'm coming. Hang on." Rising, slowly, she eased onto the balls of her feet, careful to stay beneath the cover of the various shrubs that sprinkled the terrain. Praying she didn't meet a snake, she eased toward the spot she'd heard him call from.

A light flashed across the ground in front of her. She dove for cover. Her already raw knees scraped against the rocks. She bit her lip, tasting blood this time.

The cry of pain had been halted, but tears streamed down her face in silent distress. In the distance above her she heard Steven shouting.

"I don't give a fuck if it takes all night! Find them! I lose everything if that bitch divorces me."

Tez moaned again.

Turning back to her task, she scurried across to his side. "Are you okay?" Her hands moved over his arms and legs, checking for broken bones.

"No, I am not." His answer was cryptic with a note of *what do you think* thrown in.

Anna sighed. "What I need to know is, can you walk? The pyramid is a few hundred yards to the north. If we --"

"If we make it there, we might have a chance to escape."

She took his hand in hers, locking their fingers together. "Yes."

Tez's fingers squeezed hers. "Beautiful, compassionate, and smart. I knew it the first time I saw you."

She felt the blush spread over her skin at the praise. It wasn't the time or place, but it felt good. Clearing her throat of the emotion that wanted to erupt in a flow of tears and a profession of love, she asked again, "So, you're okay to walk? I'm not sure how much I can support you. My knees and legs are pretty banged up."

"You're not seriously hurt, are you?" he asked, the concern for her evident in his tone.

She smiled. It felt nice to have someone genuinely concerned for her well-being. "I'll be okay. I'm more worried about you. You've been through it worse than I have tonight." Remembering his earlier beating forced a shiver down her spine. Her injuries paled in comparison to his.

"I'm fine. Let's go before they spot us." He tightened his grip on her hand. Rising, he pulled her beside him toward the pyramid.

Stumbling over the rough terrain, they hurried as fast as they could. The moon was bright enough to see a few feet in front of them, but further away it was difficult to make out what awaited them. They stopped every few minutes to make sure they were heading in the right direction.

Tez bent forward, leaning with one hand on his knee and the other holding his chest. His breathing was labored. "Do ... Do you hear them?"

Anna shook her head after a quick glance over her shoulder. Frowning, she placed a hand on his shoulder. He was so weak. She knew Steven's goons had worked him over, but she hadn't expected it to be this bad. "How are you doing?"

He raised his head, looking up at her through furrowed brows. His face was pale, creating a startling contrast to the bloody stripes he's smeared across his cheeks and jaw. Removing his hand from his chest, Anna saw the same black substance coating his hand, but it was different, not like the dry --

"You're bleeding!"

Tez pulled away when she would have tugged his shirt loose so she could see. "It's not as bad, now. Leave it."

Twigs snapped and rocks scattered behind them. They both turned to see if it was the bodyguards, but the night was too dark.

"We're almost there. Let's go." Tez took her hand, kissing her fingers. "You are strong and brave. Believe in yourself."

She covered his hand with hers. "I'm only brave because you're with me. I wouldn't have known what to do."

“Shh. That’s not true. You’ve got good instincts. Go with them.” He squeezed her hand before releasing it and continuing toward the pyramid.

Anna raked a hand through her hair. If she could only believe what he said. She wanted to have faith in herself, but at this second she didn’t even have a clue what to do for him. Maybe if she tried to negotiate with Steven and get Tez to the hospital. She turned away from the pyramid.

Rock splintered beside her foot. She jumped. The sound of a gun firing ricocheted around her. Turning, she dodged left and right behind the scattered brush, as she ran in a zigzag pattern toward the pyramid. Passing Tez, she didn’t slow down. “Hurry up, Opoche, or you’re going to be coyote dessert.”

Tez’s mouth spread into a wide grin. He stopped walking and laughed.

Anna’s own mouth dropped open in amazement that he could think anything funny at a time like this. She cast him a quick glance over her shoulder. “What is wrong with you? They’re shooting at us.”

“You have the answer to our problems.” Stopping behind a boulder, he pulled a flute from his pants leg.

Her own gait slowed as she did a double-take. “Where the hell did that come from?”

Tez held it up to the sky with both hands. “A gift from the Lord of the Smoking Mirror, Tezcatlipoca.”

Taking a deep breath, he put the flute to his lips and blew, producing a haunting tune.

Gooseflesh peppered Anna’s arms; her nipples hardened in response; coyotes howled all around them. Anna kept moving. “Tez, please come on.”

The animals were drawing nearer from the sound of their howl. It almost seemed that the flute hurt their ears, making them angry. Behind her she heard a man curse; a gun fired; a coyote yelped; the man screamed. Hungry growls and snarls mingled with the screeches of terror until the sounds ceased.

Tez kept playing. The howls intensified from a new direction.

Farther to her left another gun fired three times. “Goddamnit! Get off me! Get off -- ahhhhh ...”

Bile rose in her throat knowing that the two men had been eaten alive. Whether they deserved it or not, it was a gruesome way to die. Stepping backward onto the first level of the pyramid, Anna hugged her body. The desert wind was warm, but all of a sudden she was freezing. Her teeth rattled with the force of her chills. She covered her ears with her hands. “Stop! Tez, stop. I can’t take anymore.”

A forearm snaked around her upper body with a viselike grip, forcing her against a hard chest and warm body. Aftershave wafted across her nose. Steven!

Twisting, she tried to break his hold, but he dug his fingernails into her upper arm. “Quit squirming, you little whore, or I’ll give you something to scream about.” He pressed a

handgun to her temple. "I should've beaten you harder years ago. After tonight's little performance between you and lover boy, you and I are going to be doing a lot of things differently in our marriage."

Anna stilled, not even daring to breathe. "What are you doing?"

"Tell your boyfriend to call off his pets." He pressed the muzzle into her skin harder.

Flinching, she did as she was instructed. "Tez, stop, please."

Something must have been evident in her voice, because the music ceased. From the darkness the howling turned to an occasional bark and a few whimpers, as if the creatures waited in anticipation for their next order. Several feet in front of them the night shadows shifted, revealing Tez, horrific and beautiful like some ancient god of war with his face painted in blood and his hair in disarray. His shirt lay open at the chest, revealing the obsidian mirror from earlier dangling from a string of leather. The moon reflected an eerie light from the glass, casting the illusion of smoke radiating from its depths.

"Stay back, you bastard, or she dies." Steven's grip tightened. Dragging her with him, he retreated up the steps of the pyramid. "I don't know what the hell is going on, but throw down that flute. Now!"

Tez's expression flashed an instant of fear, but turned steely within seconds. Taking the flute in both hands, he smashed it across his raised knee, breaking it in two. Throwing the pieces onto the steps, he advanced.

"Stay there!"

Tez stopped, but his gaze stayed fixed on Steven's every move.

Anna's foot slipped and she stumbled, but Steven refused to release her.

"Get up!" Steven jerked Anna closer against his body.

"Where are we going?" Anna asked. She didn't know of any other steps leading down unless they went inside.

Steven kissed the side of her head. "Well, sweetheart, the Aztec did sacrifice their victims at the top of the pyramids, so I guess we'll see just how much lover boy wants to keep you alive. When we get up there it'll be a choice between you and him."

"You can't do this! You're crazy."

He shook her. Hard. The stars that had spun through her mind earlier returned. A wave of dizziness and pain washed over her. The nausea she'd contained now forced its way out of her mouth. Doubling over, she coughed and gagged, letting the emesis spew over the side of the steps. Perspiration coated her skin and she trembled from head to toe. Steven released her, taking a few steps away from the vomit.

Within minutes the spasms stopped, except for the occasional dry heave.

"If you're ready to go, we have an engagement to attend." Steven reached down for her. Anna scooted away.

“Come here!” Steven aimed the gun at Anna’s head.

She shut her eyes in anticipation of the bullet’s impact.

“No!” Tez ran up the steps, hitting Steven with enough power that Steven fell back upon the steps with Tez on top. Both men wrestled, rolling down several steps, as they fought for control of the gun. In the end strength won out.

Steven pried the gun from Tez’s grip and shoved the weaker man away from him. Running several steps above, Steven stepped to the edge of the stairs and angled the gun down at Tez. “Say goodbye to my wife.” Cocking the hammer, he took aim.

A scream rent the air. Anna pushed herself up with what strength she could find within her body. Rushing her husband, she tackled his legs, knowing she wouldn’t have the time or the strength to take the gun away from him. Steven yelled and kicked his legs, trying to break free, but Anna hung on. Glancing up, she watched him raise the gun again and point it at Tez. She did the only thing she knew to do.

The feel of her teeth sinking into flesh sickened her, but she refused to let Steven kill Tez.

“Owww ... you bitch! Get off me!” Steven managed to free one leg, kicking Anna hard in the ribs.

She released the other leg, but pushed at his waist with all her strength. Steven’s arms flailed, the gun waving in the air. His black shiny dress shoes were too slick to grasp the stone’s edge. Feet flailing, he toppled backwards over the side. Anna rushed forward and watched his horror-stricken face disappear into the abyss. Darkness folded over him, erasing him from existence.

Behind her Tez struggled to sit. Pain and fatigue etched deep grooves into his face.

“Here, let me help you up.” She got behind him and positioned her shoulder under his arm. “Push with your legs.”

In a matter of seconds he was standing, unsteadily. Blood poured from the wound in his chest, soaking his skin and shirt.

Patting it with the ragged end of his shirt, she pressed the wound to stem the flow. “We have to get you to a hospital. It’s opened back up and you’re bleeding really bad.”

“It’s okay.” He covered her hands with his, stopping her fussing.

“No, it’s not okay. I’m tired of people always telling me everything is okay when it isn’t.” Her voice rose on near hysteria. “We rush around our busy days like bees and ants, focusing on our menial tasks that don’t mean shit in the long run. In the meantime the people we love and cherish the most ... die and disappear from our lives in the blink of an eye.” The hysteria had vanished. “We don’t even get to say goodbye or ... I love you before they’re gone.” The last of her tirade had been whispered, as the reality of the situation came forward. “Oh, fuck.”

"Don't curse." He placed a finger across her lips. "Your mouth is too perfect for that coarse language to come from it."

She kissed his finger. "At least let me take you to one of the local doctors."

He shook his head. "I must go."

November 1 -- early morning

She frowned, glancing around their empty surroundings. Maybe he meant the secret room. "I'll come with you."

"No, Anna. You made your sacrifice." He caressed her cheek with his finger. "It's my turn to complete what I am meant to do."

With eyes glittering, he leaned forward, pulling her close. His mouth, hot and hard, crushed hers, drawing every ounce of emotion she had experienced with and for this man. He'd forced her to acknowledge her needs and desires. He'd shown her how to let go of her fear of life, so she could live.

"You are the wife of my heart, my goddess of flowers." Gathering a handful of her hair, he inhaled with a deep groan. "I fell in love with you every year you came to that gravesite and I watched your spirit wander through hell at your loss. You would have given your life for your daughter." He kissed her hard, but quick.

"You ripped my heart out with your suffering and offering, but you faced your fears and allowed me to love you these last few days. You gave the god's heart back and I thank you for that. Please, don't forget that I love you."

He released her. With regret etched into his handsome face, he climbed the ancient stone steps on his own, ascending to the temple's peak.

"Tez, no!" Running up the steps, she tripped twice, but finally reached him. "You can't do this."

He caught her to his chest, one arm around her waist and the other across her upper back with his hand buried into her hair. Again, he kissed her hard, but placed her firmly away from him. "Don't make this harder for me, Anna."

"I just found you. I can't lose you." A tear rolled down her cheek closely followed by another. She grabbed his shirt in both of her hands. "I won't!"

"Shh." A wide, masculine thumb wiped her tears. "I agreed to this willingly, knowing what was required of me. There has to be death in order for life to grow. That is how the universe works."

"But it isn't fair." The pain that radiated through her body from the night's escapades couldn't compare with the pain that now crushed her heart. She was losing him and there was nothing she could do.

He smiled, gently. "Life isn't fair. We have to make the best of what we are given."

She moved toward him, but halted when he lifted his hand. His smile had disappeared and his features were stern.

"I must go. Don't follow me. Whenever you hear the flute, remember me."

She watched him until he disappeared into the darkness. Her bottom lip trembled, but she bit back her tears. She wouldn't mourn him. He'd given her back her life. "I'll remember you with or without the flute."

October 30 -- three years later

The smell of freshly turned dirt and marigolds scented the crisp night air of the desert cemetery. An owl hooted as a coyote howled in the distance. A light breeze lifted the layers of her long skirt.

The hair on Anna's arms rose. She pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders, settling her bottom more comfortably onto the grassy ground.

With a quick flick of her hand she tucked the hem more snugly around her spread thighs. Glancing up, she noticed the sky had darkened, except for splashes of pink, purple, and orange on the western horizon. All around candles were flickering and guitars echoed soft melodies. The festival had begun.

She patted the earth. "There you go, Teresa Maria. The last of the weeds are gone." Placing the bouquet of marigolds in the vase, Anna smiled. "I miss you, but I know you're alive somewhere and you're okay."

The hauntingly familiar notes of a flute drifted closer.

Anna closed her eyes and smiled. Beside her a tiny, black-haired head turned to the music and back to her with wide eyes.

"*¿Es Papá?*" His little face lit with excitement, as his mouth formed in an O.

"*Sí, mi hijo.*" She smiled and continued their conversation in English. "He is coming to visit us before he continues his journey."

Her son's bottom lip poked out and he dropped his chin to his chest. "He go bye-bye 'gain."

Anna felt the tug of sadness at her son's words. "Yes, but he will always return." She reached into her skirt pocket and caressed the obsidian fetish.

The thrill of the flute stopped, as a shadowy male figure emerged, tall and dark. Much taller! Anna gasped, standing slowly from her sitting position. With a nervous swallow she wiped the dust from her skirt with shaking hands.

Her son stepped behind her. With his thumb in his mouth he peeked from around the security of her skirts, his eyes wide.

Anna sympathized with Diego. That same sense of apprehension mingled with awe, attacking her every year.

"*Hola, Anna.*" The voice, deep and gruff, wrapped around her. Her heartbeat accelerated.

Diego's hands fisted within the folds of her skirt. A tiny whimper revealed his agitation at meeting this stranger in the dead of night.

"*Hola.*" Her greeting came out whispered and shy. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head, forcing her gaze to meet that of the man in front of her.

She patted Diego's head. Glancing down at him, she whispered, "Shh ... it's --" She shifted her glance to the man. "-- okay."

The stranger stepped closer with a slow, determined gait. Her heartbeat pounded hard in her throat, choking what little air she had to breathe. Fighting her fear and the urgent need to run, she didn't back away.

A strong, elegant hand extended; she closed her eyes, not moving. She was never sure of what would happen, except that the fear of not knowing had to be defeated over and over.

Long fingers, warm and trembling, caressed her hair and face.

He was scared, too? She opened her eyes and studied his features. His lips were drawn and his jaw clenched tight, as he traced the outline of her face with dark, shimmering eyes. "Every time I see you sitting there, it's like seeing you for the first time. My music stops, because I have to catch my breath at the sheer wonder I feel each time I find you waiting for me."

His gaze zeroed in on hers.

The skin along her arms and spine tingled with a sudden rush of gooseflesh. Her clit twinged with the excitement of recognition. Anna pressed her thighs together, as a warm flow of juices saturated her panties.

His nostrils flared. The strained control of his lips and jaw relaxed; he nodded. "You know me." Not a question, his words were laced with relief and steely determination.

Anna's eyebrow rose as she recognized the arrogant tone. "Well, it still takes a bit of adjustment getting used to your *new look* every year, but I always know it's you by that arrogant attitude."

His arm snaked around her waist a second before she was pulled hard against him. His free hand wrapped into the length of her hair, twining the thick mass around and through

his fingers. "Is that the only way?" He gave a small tug; her head went back, but there was no real pain.

"Your eyes." Anna squirmed, trying to break his hold, but the more she moved, the harder his cock pressed against her pubis. "I always recognize your eyes -- so dark, so intense and full of passion -- always the same."

His tongue and lips circled the skin of her throat. "There's just no surprising you anymore."

She bit back a groan, focusing on her words instead of the hot, aching pressure between her thighs and the heaviness of her breasts. "Tez, you surprise me every second I'm with you. Every day is fresh and new and ... full of life."

"Hmm, yes." He quit attacking her neck and smoothed his hand over her abdomen. His dark head angled toward her, catching her lips with his for a long, slow kiss, drugging in its sensual exploration with his tongue of her mouth. "I think we should create another new life tonight."

The aftereffects tingled all the way to her toes. The muscles in her legs turned to mush. He broke contact; Anna clutched the front of his shirt to prevent herself from falling.

"You are my heart, Anna. You confronted the god of mirrors, who sees into souls and knows their deepest desires and fears. You offered yourself. He accepted the trade. That's why he returns to you every year." If the smile on his face hadn't told her he was happy to be with her, his words would have.

"We'll have another son." He kissed her again quickly before he squatted, gripping her skirt and peeking around the opposite side of her body. "Speaking of which, where is --?"

"Daughter."

A quick frown marred his face, but Tez continued his game of hide and seek with Diego. When he would move one way around, Diego moved the other, resulting in both father and son laughing and squealing in abandon. "I think I know these things. After all, I am the one who determines a child's destiny the moment it is seated in the womb."

Anna rolled her gaze to the night sky. A shooting star streaked across the black void -- an omen, or a sign of great things to come?

Diego darted from behind her and tackled his father's legs, tumbling them both to the ground where Tez rolled onto his side and tickled the boy until their laughter filled the air.

Rubbing a hand over her belly, Anna smiled and glanced back at her husband and son. "You're the one with the magic mirror, so whatever you say, dear."



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Also, I would like to extend special thanks to Mr. James Fitzsimmons for sharing his knowledge with me about ancient Aztec rites and for pointing me in the right direction.

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* * * * *

MATCH GAME: GHOST STYLE

Cynnara Tregarth

Chapter One

October 31, Samhain

Shari Livingston held the phone against her shoulder as she maneuvered filled containers of vegetables and fruits toward the beige marble counter in her kitchen. “Marie, did you hear from Ben? He didn’t tell me if he was coming to the Dumb Supper tonight for Manuel and the others.” With her psychic talents, Shari reached out and sensed that one of the bottles of spices had fallen between the wall and the stove. Squatting low, she pushed one hand into the small space while shielding her hand from any nasty spiders that might be there as she retrieved the cinnamon.

“I saw him briefly yesterday and he said he was bringing his special salad and a bottle of Chianti.”

“Good. Thanks, Marie. Usually Ben and I manage to talk at least a couple of times a week, but since Manuel’s sudden death ...” Shari let the words fall away as she opened up the container of Mexican chocolate that she’d been hoarding since Manuel last went to Mexico City to get more. Sadness tugged at her as she remembered her friend’s vivid smile when he presented her with the five-pound block. “Gods, I miss him, Marie.”

“I know. I think we all do, in ways none of us had ever considered. I was picking some fresh flowers this morning, and suddenly I realized that my favorite vase was from him. It’s going to be hard for a while until we accept that he’s gone. Ben must be having the roughest time, though -- he and Manuel were best friends since high school.”

“Yeah, and finding Manuel didn’t help matters.” Shari brushed back a lock of hair that fell from her loose ponytail. “Hopefully having our annual Dumb Supper tonight for *día de los muertos* will help the healing process for us all since we didn’t have a reception after Manny’s funeral. When will you get here?”

"I should be there at four. Thanks for having the supper at your home tonight. I know that you don't like opening up that formal dining area too often, but it's the only place to hold the six of us comfortably."

"Seven," Shari corrected as she shaved the chocolate into tight curls. "Maybe Manny will come sit at his spot at the table tonight."

"You'd be the only one to see him if that happened." Her friend's voice turned to a teasing manner. "Considering that the rest of us just barely have any kind of psychic talent, you're the only one who has a shot at reaching him. Have you considered --"

"No. It's not a consideration. I won't do a séance or a trance. Manuel wouldn't want me to put anyone or myself at risk with that. But maybe with this day being so important to him personally and it being October, the ancient time of celebrating the dead, he might come to see us on his own."

"I'm sorry about asking that, Shari. It's just hard not having the only man who mothered me better than my mother around anymore."

Shari sighed, pausing in her work. "Yeah, I know. Who the hell knew that we'd end up with the ultimate mother figure in our lives and it'd be Manuel?"

Both laughed and made their goodbyes. Shari hung up the phone, then turned back to the ingredients for the final dish of the night -- the special cake used to toast and thank those who had died in the past year. The cake that Manuel, the best damn caterer in Silver Springs, Florida, had taught her only months before. "Remember that you must whisk the chocolate into a frothy mixture once you get the milk to the right temperature. Think of it as taunting and teasing the man who rocks your boat, *chica*. Only when he's at that edge can you get what you want, too. Same thing here with the chocolate."

Shari took the shavings and put them into the double boiler, turning the heat on medium. Manuel's death had left a void in the small group of friends that had known each other for the past five years. Ben had been devastated to find his best friend dead in the catering kitchen where everyone hung out at on weekends. She had arrived soon after she heard the news; the look of pain on Ben's face was one she'd never forget. It had taken all of her willpower to not give in to the temptation to bring him home with her and help ease the sorrow with physical love that echoed the love she felt for him. In the end, she hadn't done it, and had regretted her decision ever since. She had loved Ben for a long time, but their friendship was too important to mess up by having sex and a relationship that might sour once the rules changed from friends to lovers. But the haunted expression on Ben's face lingered in her mind, tugging at her heartstrings. Tonight she'd offer to sit and talk to him privately, perhaps helping to ease the pain with words and friendship.

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Ben Cameron looked around Manny's professional kitchen that was housed in the building that Ben had owned since his parents' deaths ten years ago. In a town that relished uniqueness, Manuel Ortiz de Montellano had found himself catering to the whole city at one time or another. Ben remembered when his best friend told him that he wanted to cook for a living and that he was gay. It had been right inside this building, in this very room, and Ben had just barely gotten past his parents' freak death, and his best friend dropped that bomb on his lap.

"Ben, there's never a good time for this, but I have to tell my best friend. Especially since I'm going to ask a favor of you."

"Okay, what do you need to tell me?" Ben looked at the tall, cocoa-skinned man who had been his best friend since eighth grade. "And should I be scared?"

"Are you afraid of gay people?"

"No, why?" Ben shrugged, watching his friend squirm slightly under his gaze. Sometimes Manny dropped the most unusual things into their conversations, but he didn't understand where this was going.

"Good, I'm gay and I want to have a catering business instead of being part of the real estate company anymore." Manny crossed his arms over his chest, standing in a defensive position.

Ben blinked as the words penetrated his personal thoughts, then tossed his head back as a roar of laughter poured out. "That's your big news you had to tell me? Oh, my gods, Man, I thought you were going to ask me out or something. I've known for a while you were more gay than bisexual." Reaching out and giving his friend a tap on the shoulder, he continued. "What do you mean, you want to have a catering business?"

"You know how I've done different parties for people? Organizing, making most of the food, et cetera? There aren't any caterers here in Silver Springs, and I want to be it. There's a need, and if people don't have to go any further for their needs, then the money stays here to benefit everyone."

"So, why do you need me?"

Manuel pointed around the room they stood in. "I want to lease this space, have the right equipment installed, and make this home base."

Ben blinked. "You mean you want to give me money for letting you use this part of the building?"

"Why not? Our real estate agency is on the second floor, so why not put the catering on the first? It would help with people coming into town. Hell, we're on the main drag where most people come by before going to Reincarnation Lake."

“Hmm, you might have something there, Man. Make me up a business plan, including how much money will be necessary to redo this place, and we’ll see about drawing up a contract.”

That had been six years ago, and not long after Manuel started Open and Say Ah Catering, they had met the five other people who had become their closest friends. Now Man was gone and the pain among his friends battered at his soul. He knew that they all worried about him finding Man dead from a massive stroke, but it was their caution that made him withdraw more. Some of them knew of his sensitivity to intense emotions and his ability to detect lies, but they didn’t realize how their mourning drove him further down that dark path. Just last night he had considered driving down Death Street with no headlights on so when he hit the curve where Destruction Street intersected, he’d be yet another casualty.

Luckily for everyone, Shari had reminded everyone that the Day of the Dead was coming up, and since they had all celebrated it every year with Manuel, this year was no different except he’d be the one they’d remember the most. Though they all gathered for Manny’s celebration, they all separated for their own rituals celebrating this holy day. This time was different and Shari had made all the arrangements for what was brought and who did what portion of the ceremony they were all sharing. He was amazed at how she once again stepped up to lead them all in Manny’s absence. Without her, he doubted that he’d have remembered to honor Manny on his own since he still hadn’t gotten over losing his friend.

Healing -- Shari was great at that. Hell, she was great at many things. She ran Cultures Unlimited, which catered to the Pagan community as well as to anyone interested in learning about ancient cultures. He had met her through Manuel, who saw her opening her shop and brought her some *sopapillas*, a puffy dessert, bringing her into the “family” fold. Man had been on his case to ask Shari out, but he didn’t want to push her into moving their great friendship into something that might not work out. Yet he still longed to run his fingers through her long auburn hair while making love to her. But she was a true friend and he wouldn’t fuck that up just to sleep with her. Hell, he had been the perfect gentleman when she had drunkenly admitted that she liked him as more than a friend. It had taken him so much to not give in at that moment, to not wrap her body around his and show her how good they could be as lovers.

Ben tugged at the gold bracelet on his wrist until the clasp made one revolution around; then he stopped. Enough thinking. It was time to get his famous salad made and to pick up the wine from the local wine shop. Shari wanted everyone at the house by five to have the supper at five-thirty. Hopefully she was right and getting a chance to honor Man in his own beliefs would ease the ache of their friend not being around anymore.

* * * * *

Shari removed the cake from the pan, turning it onto the silver platter. She allowed herself a moment to look at the intricate designs that were done in an ancient Mayan tradition, her mind wandering to when Manny had given her the platter for her birthday. As she inhaled deeply the heady aroma from the cake, Shari reminded herself that it wasn't yet time to allow the memories out. She grabbed the bowl of icing that she made earlier and stirred the thickened semi-liquid. "This smells as if Manny made it. Thanks, Man. I know you might not be hearing me just so, but thank you for teaching me some of what you knew." With careful movements, Shari drizzled the pale icing back and forth over the cake, allowing it to form geometric patterns as it wanted. Once it was done, she put down the icing just as the doorbell rang. "Come in! Door's unlocked!" She wiped her hands on a small kitchen towel before making her way toward the front room to greet the first arrivals.

"We're here!" Three voices melded as one, giving Shari a moment's joy. Paul, Jon, and Marie had arrived. Marie and Paul were dating, thanks to Mother Manny, and Jon was their best friend and occasional lover. "Where do you want our food?"

Shari stood before the kitchen archway, enjoying the moment of seeing three of her closest friends looking so much better than they had less than a week before. Though Manny never expected it, his passing created physical manifestations of illness, not just the psychic kind that most people were familiar with. "If it's hot stuff, it needs to be put in the oven. Cold stuff, the fridge. Anything that's fine as is -- in the dining room."

Jon came forward, hugging Shari. "Thanks for doing this, Shari. You're brilliant to do this on Samhain, combining both rituals for all of us."

"You mean before you go werewolf on all of us." Shari chuckled as Jon stuck out his tongue. The tall blond man was so easy to tease, though she had to admit that with his shoulder-length hair and his sinewy build, he did have that slightly animalistic look about him. "Hey, it's not my fault you're a freaking lunar wolf. You're the one who likes the moon so damn much. The rest of us wouldn't mind if you changed at another time -- say, the dark moon time."

"Yeah, yeah. I can just feel the love here tonight." Deep brown eyes gazed directly into hers. Within their depths, she saw the pain of losing Manny, the one person who showered everyone with true acceptance of their unusual talents as well as healing them from past pains. She only hoped this ritual would ease the ache that Jon reflected so openly. "Seriously, Shari, thanks. It's been hard to deal with Manny being gone."

"I know. Tonight he'll realize just how much he's missed, even with our bitching at him for playing yenta to us all."

"Amen," Paul, the dark-haired, deeply tanned vampire, said, moving past them both. "I loved that man to death and back, but his idea of subtle matchmaking needed work. A lot of work."

"He got us together; what more did you want?" Marie replied, carrying her dishes toward the dining room. Shari grinned at the shorter woman, enjoying the caustic, yet loving

tone that Marie was known for. Not many people realized just how much of that tone was a front to protect herself from becoming a target.

“A little less beating me over the head with the idea of other men fucking your luscious body, a little more subtle shoving,” Paul retorted from the depths of the kitchen.

Shari and Jon snorted in laughter. “Hey, at least he was smart enough to know how important Jon was to each of you,” Shari remarked, wrapping her arms around Jon for another welcoming hug. “How often do a vampire and a witch need the hard loving of a werewolf otherwise?”

Jon growled low against her ear as the others laughed. Stepping back, Shari shot him a huge grin. “Anyone heard from Pam or Ben yet?”

“Pam’s heading here shortly,” Marie answered, taking Jon by one arm and moving him toward the brightly decorated living room. “Ben, I don’t know.”

“He’ll be here within thirty minutes,” Paul answered, moving toward the witch and the werewolf, sliding next to Marie. “I spoke with him before meeting up with Jon and Marie.”

“Good, then we should be able to start on time. Everyone remember the rules of the Dumb Supper?”

Jon raised his hand and Shari nodded. “The meal is served by the hostess and her assistant -- you and Marie. There is no talking until we get to dessert, when we say a prayer and thank you for those who’ve passed on this past year. Nothing has changed from how Manny used to host them, right?”

“You got it in one. Give the wolfie a cookie.” Shari headed back into the kitchen, ducking Jon’s slightly inhuman growl. “Drinks, everyone?”

“The usual, Shari, thanks,” Paul called out.

“You need help?” Marie asked.

“I’m fine. Just answer the door when Pam and Ben arrive.” Shari removed four glasses from a cabinet, a smile playing about her lips. Where else but in this unusual community could she find a deep friendship with other psychics, witches, werewolves, and vampires? Yes, Silver Springs had brought her a happiness she’d not known in Atlanta. Manny had brought them together and the result was something special -- a family. Opening the fridge door, Shari pulled out the preferred drinks of each person, from the chilled AB positive for Paul to the nutrient-fortified orange juice that Marie preferred. Putting the filled glasses on a tray, she maneuvered into the living room, just as Jon shut the front door, having admitted Pam, a sidhe from the Seelie Court. “Hey, Pam, you need a drink?”

“Yes, I’m beyond famished.” The tall, lean woman looked like she was about to blow away in a gentle wind. Being a sidhe, it was that glamour and otherworldliness that often had men falling for her. Even the blonde hair accentuated that delicate, porcelain look. “Have any Draevos in the house?”

Shari finished passing out drinks before hugging the young fae. "Yeah, I bought some the last time that fae peddler came through. Let me get you a glass. Looks like we're waiting only for Ben, and then we can start our supper."

Pam nodded. "I brought a lovely casserole. Let me put it in the oven to warm up a bit." Pam followed Shari into the kitchen, where she grabbed Shari and hugged her tightly. Shari rocked the young woman against her while Pam sobbed for a while. Though very open on many fronts, the fae were mostly quiet when it came to mourning their loved ones. A hiccup emerged from Pam's mouth. "I miss him, Shari. He was everything to me. How could he leave us like this? So lost, so without his loving guidance?"

Shari brushed back the long, wavy golden locks of hair from Pam's pale face. "Shh, it's okay. I know it hurts. It's going to hurt. He didn't ask to leave us. It's just one of those things. Manny still watches over us; I know he does. But those things he used to do are going to be more indirect now, especially with him only able to work from the Otherworld."

"I want him back. Make the gods give him back to us." The fae wept against her shoulder, sobs wracking the delicate frame. Shari sighed and massaged Pam's back while holding her. She knew that Pam had held back as much as she could, but no one could deny their deepest emotions for a long period of time. This supper was to heal them all and Pam needed it just as much, if not more, than Ben did. Shari sighed softly as the fae slowly calmed down.

"He can't come back except as a ghost. You know how his abilities worked, Pam. In fact, you were one of the few who recognized his gifts while he was alive. So, remember that now he's a bit more powerful than he was before. If he can come tonight, he will. We want him to know just how much we love him and miss him."

"I know, but it's not fair. He promised to help me find the love of my life. He promised that I would find him this year, by my born-day. That's in three months, Shari."

"Don't give up hope. You know how Manny pulled off much happiness when it seemed less likely to happen." Shari pulled back, giving her friend a smile. "You came to this world from Helia to make sure that you had a chance at happiness and to bring a link between the mortals and the fae. Manny wouldn't promise without a way to make things come true, even if he wasn't here."

"You're right," Pam hiccupped, while Shari grabbed a goblet from a cabinet. "Manny has always kept his word. Remember how --"

"Ah, don't start the story just yet. Save it for the end of the supper," Shari gently chastised. She reached into the fridge, removing a unusually curved glass jar with deep emerald fluid inside. Unstopping the cork, she poured some of the liquid into the crystal goblet. "Here, drink and relax. This should help you feel a bit better." Gently, Shari ushered Pam back to the group who were all talking with the last person to arrive, Ben.

She watched him hug Pam, taking in his careful movements and his face showing nothing beyond pleasure of seeing everyone. With a start, Shari realized that Ben was trying

to block everyone from reading his emotions. Though the only one he had to really worry about was her, Ben was trying to hide how deep his pain of losing his best friend from them all, as if they didn't know.

Shari bit back a sigh and stepped forward. "Hey, Ben, good to see you today." She opened her arms, urging him to hug her. It was a quick yet intense hug, his emotions tightly held back. Giving him a tight, reassuring squeeze, Shari pulled back and smiled. "I mean it; it's really good to have you here."

Ben pointed to the items he brought. "Let me put them both in the fridge for now." Without another word, he took the salad and the wine into the kitchen, everyone knowing Shari's home almost as well as she did. Marie and Shari exchanged looks. *He's really hurting, Marie.*

Yeah, he is. Hopefully tonight will help ease that ache. Do you think Manny will come?

Perhaps. I doubt Manny will want to leave us alone doing the Dumb Supper without him for the Day of the Dead.

Paul looked at Marie, then at Shari. "Knock it off, you two. No telepathy tonight. It's not fair."

Shari stuck out her tongue. "Not my fault we can talk like that. It's that vampire-lack in you that prevents you from linking that fully with your wife."

"We vampires can mind-talk to each other when we're within a fifty-mile radius."

"You just can't talk to any other telepath," Shari teased. "Have you ever figured out why, Paul?"

Jon interrupted. "I think it's that genetic difference between mortals and vampires. I can hear him just fine. I just can't respond to him in kind."

Shari raised a brow. "Now that is interesting. We'll have to see if you can hear us one day. Run some tests."

Ben re-entered the living room. "Make sure he's in wolf form, I think that's the key to him being able to hear you. Though then you're dealing with him having to change his wolf thoughts into human thoughts. That might be where it falters."

Shari turned slightly, taking in Ben as he sat next to Pam. She tamped down the small feeling of jealousy that roared within her. She wanted him, but she also wanted him happy. If he wanted to comfort Pam, who obviously showed the lack of Manny in her life, so be it.

Trying to cover her own feelings, Shari glanced at her wrist, seeing the time on her watch. "Marie, Pam, if you want to help me get the food in the kitchen, I'd appreciate it. If you guys want to unwrap the food in the dining room, that would help us get started." Shari nodded at Jon and Paul, before turning toward the kitchen. "It's time to start. Remember from this point on, no talking."

Chapter Two

Shari brought in the last of the food into the dining room while her friends took their seats, leaving the head of the table open for Manny. It hurt to know there was one less at the table this year and that they were holding the feast at her home instead of Manny's. Yet tonight would help settle the pain in her heart as well as in her friends'. No words penetrated the room as she set down the main course, a Mexican dish of chorizo and vegetables, a meal that Manny had served every year at the Dumb Supper.

Carefully, Shari served each plate with a helping of the stew, while others passed the vegetables and other dishes to each other. It was amazing seeing the harmony of how they all worked together with no words, no telepathy, all of them respecting the ritual started over six years before by Manuel Cervantes. Once everyone had been served, including a plate full of food for Manny, Shari took her seat, always keeping her eye out if anyone needed a drink refill or some other item.

The meal started off well, no one speaking, everyone remembering the one man who made them a family -- a family of people who normally wouldn't have come together -- psychics, witches, druids, werewolves, vampires, fae, and ghost. Yet they were a family without their leader, without the yenta mother who gave them reason to be close. Shari wiped away a few tears as she wondered if this was the end of their family.

I don't think so, chica. This is my family, and there is no way I'll let you all separate. You need each other, and as a group you can show the world how we others can be with regular mortals, a familiar voice said clearly -- a voice that wasn't around anymore. The voice wasn't speaking aloud, but in her mind. What the hell was going on?

Shari glanced up, looked around, and bit back a gasp as a fuzzy outline sat at the head of the table. There was Manny, in all his glory. Ghostlike, true, but dressed to the nines in a

suit, skull-patterned tie, and a huge grin. *You're here. How the hell did you manage to make it back in so short of a time? I didn't think the gods allowed that this quick.*

Ben coughed, catching Shari's attention. She looked at him, realizing he too could see Manny, though the others didn't seem to notice his presence. *Ben sees you.*

Good. Now, you both can hear me, and I'm starting with you two. First things first -- the gods agree that my job wasn't done before I died; thus I'm ghosting for a while. Second, you and Ben need to get over this stupid thinking that's keeping you apart. You both need to screw each other's brains out and become a couple. I'm so tired of trying to get through your joint stupidity -- everyone knows you're meant for each other and no one understands why you both hold back. So, go fuck and get on with the relationship already.

You left me, you stubborn son-of-a-bitch! You left me and this family of yours. How the fuck could you leave us and not tell us that you were sick? Ben's words rang in her mind, hot and heavy with anger and repressed sadness. Shari understood those emotions all too well when it came to Manny, but she also knew that Ben was the only one who hadn't known that Manny had been sick. Her gaze shot back to the ghost.

Man, you never told Ben?

You knew? Ben's gaze grabbed hers and Shari found herself swallowing against the pain that showed in his eyes.

She knew because she was once a medical doctor, Ben. She treated others with my condition and insisted I get treatment straightaway. Little did she or I know that the medications given to me would instead cause a massive stroke. Manny clucked, his finger shaking before Ben's face. *Don't be angry with her. I made her swear not to tell anyone while I worked on getting myself better.*

I should've been told, Man. You know that I kept you abreast of anything going on with me. You insisted on knowing, since we were the only family each other had. You kept this from me and never once warned me. I'd have helped you any way I could!

Shari stepped back at the intensity of Ben's anger at both her and Manny. She hadn't realized how much Manny had kept from Ben. Trying to recover her balance, Shari collected the used dishes, placing them into a small plastic tub she had put on a small side table earlier that day. As she smiled at each guest, she realized that only she and Ben were aware of Manny's presence in the room.

When she finished, Shari cut the Day of the Dead cake, placing each piece upon each guest's plate, her gaze never leaving the cake, never looking into each person's eyes. She tried to ignore the argument between Manuel and Ben. She had given up her medical practice when she had realized that nothing she did, short of miraculous healing, would ever help her patients recover, and since it was so rare when she could accomplish that type of healing, she had run from the medical life, until Manny was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer.

"To Manuel, our own special mother and father -- the one who loved us enough to bring us together and create a family from people who hadn't anyone else in this world," Jon said, raising his wine glass.

"To Manny!" Everyone raised their glass, saluting toward the empty, yet not empty, chair.

Manny smiled at them all, then turned his attention back to Ben. *You and Shari owe these people. They count on you both. Just as I've been the unofficial parent of this clan, you two are its future. You can be pissed as you want that I didn't tell you what was going on, Ben, but Shari couldn't -- not without violating patient-doctor confidentiality. Plus, I asked her not to say anything unless my symptoms got worse since she was also my health care proxy.*

I don't want to get over it, Man. You and I are ... were best friends. Hell, even I know I shouldn't be seeing you. Ben gulped down his portion of wine, then coughed. Shari moved toward him, but stopped at his glare. *Yet here you are, and only Shari and I are seeing you, speaking to you directly on Samhain. How fucked up is that?*

"Let's start talking about the memories we have of Manny," she said softly, her eyes never drifting far from the ghost's presence. "If everyone will stand, I'll start with my first recollection of meeting Manny." She waited until everyone stood and with a slight nod toward the head of the table, she began. "My first meeting happened when Manny stepped into my shop, speaking Spanish, demanding sacred Mayan objects." Shari laughed. "It took me a minute to get over my shock and respond back in fluent Mayan dialect that I had no precious Mayan objects, only sanctioned reproductions, though if he needed a mental health counselor, I could recommend one for his Tourette-style outbursts. Soon after, in walked Ben, apologizing for Manny's behavior." She raised her glass toward the ghost. "To Manny, who knew that I wanted to start life over where I wasn't a freak, but someone who wanted to be part of a loving community."

Everyone laughed, toasting the first memory by clinking glasses of drink before sitting down. The slender witch, Marie, spoke next. "I actually knew Ben first; I bought my house from him. I came into the office to sign the papers and this dapper Hispanic man greeted me at the door and kissed my palm, telling me how proud he was that someone like me not only could be sexy, but wanted by many men." The smiling woman paused, sharing a glance with Shari. They knew just how persuasive Manny was in his belief about the people in his "family."

"He invited me to a picnic at Reincarnation Lake to meet some of his friends. Little did I know when I got there that I'd be the center of attention among the group. I also found it funny that Ben and Shari were put in charge of the picnic, instead of Manny. But I guess that was the point -- to make us look outside our expected ideas and find what pleases us best. Manny loved us and showed us just how important love was. Thank you, Manny."

Paul raised his glass in toast. The vampire's eyes glittered with unshed tears as his voice shook at first. "To Manuel, who knew that it didn't matter what you were in the human world -- vampire, witch, psychic, werewolf. What mattered was that you did good things, helped others, and minded your manners both publicly and sexually. He was both mother and father to someone like me, who was abandoned once I was turned. Without his help and guidance of learning control, I'd have killed myself long ago. Thank you for giving me a family and the loves of my life, Manny. May you find happiness in the afterlife. Don't forget to drop a line now and then."

See, now Paul understands me. You two obviously have forgotten what I've said over the years about loving and enjoying each other in friendship as well as more. The ghost looked from Shari to Ben before wiping away a stray tear. You are all my family, and these three, as well as those who've hung out with us loosely, will be counting on the two of you to be the parents.

Ben shifted in his spot, angrily interrupting Manny's speaking. *So, Shari and I are to just forgo our friendship for the sake of a romance that may or may not be for our benefit, as long as it helps the others? I don't think so, Man. Unless you can come up with something better, I won't put my friendship with Shari at risk. Ever.*

Shari didn't look at Ben; she sensed his anger, his determination from across the table. Though she did agree with him on some parts, she also wasn't sure that it would hurt for them to perhaps try for something more. Granted, she too worried about losing his friendship, but Manny seemed so sure that they were meant to be together and as far as she knew, he hadn't ever been wrong. *How many times have you been wrong in putting people together, Manny?* Before he could answer, Shari stood up, grabbing the wine and refilling glasses of those who wanted more.

Never. The ghost sounded so sure that Shari hesitated a second before pouring more wine into Marie's goblet.

Never? Besides Paul and Marie, you've put together how many others? Ben's dark brow rose in question as Jon started his memory of Manny. *Manny, how can you ask me to risk my friendship with Shari? Do you not realize how important it is?*

Is it more important than the secret love you both harbor for each other? Don't you think that from this side, perhaps I have a bit more ability to get to the heart and soul of each of you? Dark brown eyes seemed to bore deep within her soul as she and Manny matched gazes across the room. If she didn't know better, she'd have said that Manny had intensified his power to a level unachievable by anyone living.

She stepped backwards, breaking the stare when Jon finished his toast. "To Manny, the universal yenta who taught us the true meaning of love and giving. *Salud!*"

Even Pam chimed in with her favorite memories of Manny, shedding both tears and laughter as everyone recalled various group and individual stories of how Manny helped direct their lives. Most especially their love lives. It was amazing to Shari at the depth Manny

had affected them all and how he still managed not to be picked up by a psychic witch or her companions. The memories continued, each one adding a bit more to the stories out there, giving their own perspective and what Manny told them during those times.

The group of friends toasted Manny's memory as Ben cleared his throat. "To the one man who made me wonder about love, sex, and how to make the impossible possible. The only man who let me be me, encouraged me to race down Destruction Street at breakneck speed and leap off the pier into Reincarnation Lake after having drunk one too many Black Russians with him. May you find peace and happiness, Manny, because there is none here with you gone from our daily lives."

Shari looked at Ben, bringing the fluted glass filled with wine to her lips. She noticed him staring at her. It wasn't the "how are you dealing with this shite from Manny" stare, but a hungry, erotic, needy stare. Directing her thoughts into the ghost's mind, she whispered, *What have you done to him, Manny? Why is he looking at me?*

He's finally seeing you as he should've seen you from the beginning. Don't run from him, Shari. You're meant to be together.

Don't force him into this, Manny. Just don't.

I'm not forcing anything but the truth in front of his face. You're made for each other. Now, deal with it. Just as suddenly as he'd appeared, Manny was gone, leaving a small void in Shari's heart. They had said their good-byes, but still, she wondered if Manny was truly gone.

Chapter Three

Evening, October 31

Shari ignored the prickling down her back that told her that she was being watched. Once Manny disappeared from her sight as they drank the last toast, she'd been overly aware of just how much she wanted Ben. But he was right -- their friendship was so damn ingrained into them. It was something of legend, their ability to not let sex get in the way of being there for each other, regardless of circumstance. Yet -- yet, Manny said they were meant for one another. Could it be true? Really, honestly, made by the universe true?

Concentrating on rinsing off the last bit of dishes before putting them into the dishwasher, Shari started humming a tune before realizing that it was a song playing on her stereo. Placing the last dish into the rack, she poured in the detergent, shut the door, locked it and turned it on. Inhaling slowly, Shari tried to calm herself; there was no way Ben was playing her favorite romantic song because Manny had told him they were meant to be lovers. A small scuffing against the floor made her turn around. There, lounging against the open doorway, was Ben.

He had removed his tie, rolled up his sleeves to mid-forearm; the top three buttons of his shirt undone, showcasing just a hint of hair on his chest. Even his leaning against the doorjamb was sexy, his faded jeans hugging him in the right places. She swallowed as desire swept through her body, dampening her panties. Thank gods he didn't have a preternaturally keen sense of smell. "What are you still doing here, Ben? I thought you were heading home, just like the others."

"We need to talk about Manny's appearance and what he said."

"There's nothing to say, Ben. You said it all, without asking my opinion on things. Why bother discussing it now?"

He stepped toward her and Shari retreated before realizing that he was making her on guard in her own home. Spreading her feet shoulder-width apart, Shari put out a hand to stop Ben in his tracks. "Don't try to overrun me in my own home, Ben. It's not going to work. Not now, not ever."

His smile seemed to light his face as his eyes darkened in thought. "I'm not trying to overrun you, Shari. I agreed to give Manny a chance to see if this thing between us is truly meant or not. So why not give in wholeheartedly when he promises me that if it's not, that our friendship won't suffer."

"Oh, is that what he promised? Planning on wiping my memory, are you?" Shari crossed her arms in front of her chest, trying to ignore the pain of being treated as an experiment. How dare they put together a scheme against her? Weren't they all friends? Or is this the result of being shown whatever Manny had forced into Ben's mind?

"No, nothing like that, Shari, I promise. Manny said that even if we indulged in one night's passion, our friendship wouldn't be hurt by it." Ben sighed as he reached for one of her hands, bringing it to his chest. The heat of his body warmed her chilled hand as his words flooded her mind. "I want to believe him on this. Too many times have I wanted you, wanted to make love to you only to stop because our friendship is the closest thing to a treasure like my parents shared."

Closing her eyes briefly, Shari listened to his heart, allowing herself to see if he was lying to her. His pulse was steady, there were no other telltale signs of lying, and she wanted to believe him. She had wanted him just as much as he wanted her. Why not give into one night of passion? Tonight could celebrate the joy of life after losing someone like Manny, who brought love and life into each person he touched. Opening her eyes, she nodded briefly. "Fine. One night, my home, my rules. Our friendship remains even if this romantic interlude doesn't work and even if it does."

"One night, your home, *our* rules. I won't let you have the upper hand in this." This time his smile reached his eyes. "I know how you can be; you forget how many times you've told me about the latest sex escapade, not realizing how hot it made me to claim you myself." Tugging her close, Ben slid one hand into her loosened hair, then pulled, guiding her lips toward his. "Tonight won't be like anything you've ever had before, Shari. That, I promise."

His lips were warm and demanding while his tongue swept along her lips, trying to slide between them. With a soft moan, she opened to him as she slid her hands up his chest to his strong shoulders. His taste was not just maleness at its finest, but a combination of the wine he had drunk, the chocolate cake, and something spicy that defied recognition to her sensitive taste buds. Her tongue slid against his, teasing him with bold and then soft strokes as she pressed her body against him. Too long she had denied herself even thinking of the only kiss they had shared so long ago. This kiss seared the old one away, leaving behind quaking need as his tongue caressed the roof of her mouth before slowly withdrawing to outline her lips.

"Gods above, Shari," he hoarsely whispered against her lips as their foreheads touched. "I need you tonight. Say yes."

Deep blue eyes filled with desire, respect, and something else captured her gaze. There was no other answer to give. To deny this one night would be denying the dreams she'd had for months now. "Yes."

Ben wrapped his arms around her and picked her up as if she weighed nothing. "Good. I was afraid --"

She put a finger on his lips. "Don't say it. Do you know how to get to my bedroom from here?" A grin answered hers. Wrapping her legs around his waist, feeling the bulge that hardened against her warmth, she whispered, "I see that's a yes. Let's go play, Ben."

Each step toward her room was torture. His breath hitched as her mons rubbed against his swelling cock and Shari smirked against his shoulder while she adjusted her hold on the man. His long strides turned her on, but she wasn't going to give in that easily. Yes, she wanted him, but she wasn't about to let him run the whole show tonight. This was about mutual pleasure, not about who topped who. He turned down the hallway, making his way to her pale cream door when she realized that some of her toys were still out. "Ben ... wait ..."

"No, we've waited long enough." With a shove of his one hand, the door opened and Shari closed her eyes while clinging to Ben. At his quick intake of breath, she knew that he saw her special toys, like the vibrator, the special oils, and even the graduated sized strung pearls, to tempt and tease herself and her lovers. "In fact, I'd say that you were preparing for me, even if you don't want to admit it." His voice was huskier now, laden with something more than she had ever sensed before from him.

She felt his last steps until he reached her four-poster bed. Her lids fluttered open, allowing her to glimpse once more the gaze of the man who haunted her dreams for too many months. "The toys are things I've had through the years. I just did my monthly cleaning -- I meant to put them away ..."

His chuckle filled the room and her heart as he leaned forward, releasing her. She fell against the bed while her legs remained wrapped around Ben's waist. "I'm just teasing you, though I'm curious about some of these toys and why you'd need any of them, Shari. You're a sexy woman; and considering some of the stories you've told in mixed company, I doubt you'd need all this to help climax." The last words were nothing more than a whisper as his lips brushed hers before claiming her once more.

Reason fled. Sensations filled her mind as did the open, unshielded thoughts that Ben sent her way. Thoughts of her tied to her bed while he touched, tasted, and made her scream with desire. Seeing herself through his eyes was a bit daunting as she was sure that her breasts were not that big, but if he wanted to think that, she was more than willing. She gasped as a hand cupped one of her breasts through her shirt. "Ben," she whispered. "If you touch me like this, we should be removing clothes. Really."

"Oh, your clothes are coming off." His words sounded husky and even more erotic to her ears while his fingers swiftly undid the buttons of her shirt before shrugging it down her arms. Then they quickly released the front clasp of her bra. "However, I'll remain clothed just a while longer until I get my fill of you."

"No way, Mr. Man. I want to look at your naked body if you're going to ogle mine. Fair's fair." Using her legs as leverage, she yanked on him, using her hands to catch Ben as he fell toward her. Quickly, she ripped apart his shirt, stopping only for one minute to admire his well-toned chest. Then she lifted her head upwards and drew her tongue across one flat dark nipple then across the heated skin to the other. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Ben? You want me naked, you best do the striptease dance yourself or no touchie of the pussy for you, babe."

"Don't even think that you can stop this now, Shari. There's no way in bloody hell that I'm not going to have my cock buried in you." His words breathed hot against her cheek as she continued suckling on first on nipple, then the other. "But I do agree to mutual nudity. After that, it's winner takes all."

That's all the warning she got before she found herself untangled from his waist, turned on her stomach with his hands undoing her pants. *Dammit! How the hell did I miss his hands moving to trap me?*

She tried to kick at him, but Ben had moved himself to where he was able to place one jean-clad knee on her now bare bottom while he stripped both pants and lacy underwear from her. "You have a beautiful ass that just begs some attention, Shari." His body shifted and suddenly her legs were forced apart and she felt Ben's body between them. Thinking to take a tactical advantage, she lifted herself upwards, intending on crawling away. But two firm, strong hands grabbed at her inner thighs, as a warm, wet tongue rasped against her slit taking all desire to move from his touch.

"Damn you, Ben," she whimpered as she arched her body toward his mouth which opened, allowing his tongue to lick down her slit. Her legs splayed outwards as his shoulders opened her up to him while she leaned forward, her forehead touching where her hands gripped the maroon and black quilt.

His warm breath played across her oversensitive skin as his tongue flicked out, licking her damp slit. His hands slid down, cupping her inner thighs before moving to part the silk folds, exposing her to his sight. Shari shut her eyes, allowing the intense sensations to flow through her as he continued to lick and stroke her body, the heat inside threatening to spill out of her. "Ben, I need more, please touch me."

"But --" *Lick*. "-- I'm --" *Lick*. "-- enjoying this --" *Lick*. "-- very much, Shari," he whispered between swipes of his tongue. Then she felt a thickness at her drenched opening before one, then two fingers slid deep within her, stretching and preparing her for something more.

“Yessss,” Shari hissed, rocking her hips against his hand, while he curled his fingers inside, erotically torturing her with pleasure.

“Come for me, Shari. Let me see how much you want this,” Ben whispered before she felt his mouth surround her clit, suckling on it while his fingers thrust in and out of her fast and hard.

A rushing noise filled her head as her body stiffened and the overwhelming release consumed her, forcing Shari to move forward, sliding against Ben’s mouth, continuing the flood of sensation. He moved his mouth from her, moving out from under her. “Gods, you’re too damn beautiful to come alone.” His voice sounded distant, ragged, causing her to smile.

“Fuck me. You know you want to,” she chuckled weakly as she slowly came back into herself.

“I’m about to.” Ben positioned himself behind her and she felt something larger than his fingers pushing at her vaginal entrance. A moan of excitement escaped her lips while she imagined just how aroused he was.

Tell me, does the sensation of a thick cock feel the same in a vagina as it does being put into your ass? All gay ghost men want to know. Manny winked into existence before them, a grin splayed across his face. Shari wasn’t sure if she wanted to kill the damn ghost or send him to his room for interrupting. But he kept talking as he walked further into the room toward the bed. *Does it really feel like home?*

Ben moved away, leaving Shari feeling exposed while she lay flat against the bed. Ben draped the blanket over her which she wrapped a bit more around her naked body. Turning her head, she smiled in thanks at Ben, who looked beyond angry.

“Why are you here, Manny? You said that you wanted us together. Why the hell would you interrupt us now?”

Because normally most men would be done fucking the woman they love, and ready to sleep. Plus, I needed to speak to you both before you both fell asleep for the night.

“I’m sure you noticed we hadn’t gotten that far when you popped in. Why the interruption? What’s so important you had to interfere with the sex you wanted us to have so badly?” Shari turned on her back, making sure her breasts were covered with the blanket, and sat up as Ben scooted next to her.

Because I wasn’t sure that you’d both give in to this thing you have for one another. That you’d both rationalize this desire and love you have for one another and agree to something stupid -- like a one-night stand or something.

Shari and Ben shared a surprised look before turning to Manny. Cursing under her breath, she realized that Manny must have been hanging around where neither she nor Ben could sense him. “So what if we had? It’s not your business.”

But it is, my sunshine warrior. I'm not the matchmaking yenta for nothing. You two are meant for more than just one quick or even one long fuck. You're to be together forever. Don't you be messing with the bounds of love. Now, let's discuss how this relationship is going to work.

"No, we're not going to discuss this with you, Man. You're a dead man who had various kinds of relationships and none of them long term except for friendship. Yes, you had a skill at matchmaking, but our relationship, as you call it, is not one of the things you get to stick your nose in." Ben was adamant, crossing his arms across his bare chest, his face stonily set with determination.

And leave it to you to fuck it up because of your screwed-up sense of nobility? I don't think so, Ben. Manny stepped forward until he and Ben were within each other's personal space. Shari watched as each man tried staring the other down. If it wasn't for the fact that she was partially nude and they were doing it almost over her, she'd be highly amused. Pointing out to Ben that he couldn't beat a ghost wasn't in her best interest, especially if he decided that she was also the enemy in this. Then again, she wasn't sure if she was for or against Manny's idea of them being together.

Letting out a low, frustrated sigh, she sat up between the two men, breaking their line of sight. "All right, children, that is *enough*." With a shove, she pushed Ben so he reclined against the pillows at the head of the bed. Before he could sit forward, Shari moved herself so she and the blankets were in Ben's way. "Sit back and listen to the man. We don't have to agree with what he says, but considering he might have acquired some insight since his death, we might as well listen." Satisfied Ben wasn't going to try decking a ghost, Shari settled in beside him, allowing him to wrap his arm around her shoulders.

The taut tugging of her emotions warned her that she was at her limit in dealing with any more shit. For the first time in ages, she was about to have mind-blowing, inner slut sex and this happened. One more problem, argument, or whatever and she didn't envy those in her path when she exploded. "Manny, explain."

Manny settled at the end of the bed, taking off his hat. *You two are meant to be together. Everyone who knows you both realize this. Even in your hearts, you both want to be together. I want to make sure that just this once, you both take this chance on each other and not worry about your solid friendship or anyone else.* Shaking a tanned finger at Shari, the ghost sighed. *You are a damn stubborn woman who thinks that she can handle everything thrown at her. Yet you crave a man who will not only challenge you, but let you be yourself while demanding his right to be at your side to help as necessary. Ben is all you've wanted and more, yet you continually push him and test him -- as if he's going to run away because you get your grand high bitchiness costume on.*

Manny then looked at his best friend and shook his head slightly. *And you, Mr. I-am-alpha-hear-me-roar-and-don't-ask-me-to-be-soft. You have wanted Shari since you saw her. Time and again, I listened to you extol her virtues while cursing her stubbornness. From*

both of you, I've heard nothing but longing and "No, I can't tell him/her because he/she only wants friendship, and if I lost that, then I'd have nothing at all" tripe. Our family group had to live through the bad times when one or both of you would date other people and make the rest of us miserable with your comments about the other's lover.

Shari bit her lower lip as Manny continued to catalog why they were meant for each other and the pain they caused their friends when they acted out. With each damning sentence, she felt Ben twitch, though she couldn't quite tell if it was from embarrassment or anger. For her, the anger was tempered by the realization of what her actions did to those she cared about -- including Ben.

"Since we're so bad for all of our *family*, as you put it, wouldn't it be worse to get us together, as we're liable to get volatile with all our issues that haven't been worked out?" Ben's tone was flat, hard. He almost didn't sound like the same man who had growled her name in ardent lust just minutes ago.

"Or is that the point, Manny? That if we actually try having a relationship, we'd find that there are less arguments over superiority and letting it spill into everyone's lap." It took effort to keep her voice even, without censure. There wasn't much chance that if she and Ben dated that it'd be the peace and joy that Manny seemed to think it'd be. They were both alpha and enjoyed leading too much to easily let someone else have control -- as their foreplay had indicated.

What it means is that you won't ever know if you don't try wholeheartedly. None of that "we only have sex and go back to how we've always been" shit, Shari. Don't think I didn't hear you two discuss that. Making a tsking noise, Manny leaned forward and placed both hands on the mattress. *You can't fool me or the gods with that kind of stupid rationale. Do you really think that you can fuck each other, even once, and go back to how it was before? If you believe that, then you need a reality check from your patron gods.*

Neither Shari nor Ben said anything as they looked away from each other and kept watching the ghost. Manny rolled his eyes, then gestured at their movements. *Look at you both! You've realized too late that things have already changed and you think that by not touching each other at this moment that you can stop what's meant to be?* Ayuda dios en cielo, *grant me the patience to not smack their childish heads together.*

"It's not that simple, Manny." The words were the quietest of whispers as Shari moved to the bed's edge and grabbed at her robe that lay across the wicker chair. Once it was wrapped and tied, she walked away from the bed. "You think that it'd be simple to let go of our essences just because we're meant for one another. There are many people who are meant to be together but can't because they can't get along while living together." Pausing in front of her bathroom door, Shari sighed. "Manny, this is tough for me. I don't know about Ben, but though I like him, want him, want to try to be with him -- there's the doubt that it'll work. We are warrior types; we like bossing people around and we don't always compromise the best, especially with another alpha. I'm willing to try, but I'm realistic to

realize that just because it might be meant to be doesn't mean that our natures might keep us apart. Remember, we have a tendency to rub each other the wrong way every so often."

"More often when you act first, think later," Ben countered. She whirled around, her body tense in anger. Then she saw his toothy grin and realized he was deliberately baiting her. "See, you thought I was being rude." He turned to face his friend. "This is why we're not sure it'll work, Manny. Even when we're playing, sometimes we take it wrong because we don't like to be thought of as less."

You're not less to each other or to those who love you. Just date each other, fuck each other, and do things like Paul and Marie do.

"You mean have Jon fuck us both? I don't think so," Ben quipped, his dark brow rising, questioning Manny's intelligence.

Snorting with laughter, Shari shook her head back and forth, trying to shake that image from her mind and failing miserably. "Oh, goddess, that wouldn't work for us. We'd cow the poor man into deep submission. Paul and Marie would never forgive us."

"Then there's the fact that I am a hetero male with delusions of having a harem. Jon does not constitute a good member to the creation of an all-female harem." He got up from the bed, moving toward Shari. "Can you imagine trying to get him to belly dance for us? I don't think it'd work, considering his lack of coordination in the dance department."

Inhaling deeply, the scent of Ben's spicy aftershave and his unique fragrance rekindled an ember of desire deep within her belly. Instinctively, she stepped toward him as she continued the banter. "Then if we have Jon, the other two will want to play as well. I have sharing issues most times, and I know I'd have issues sharing you with Paul and Jon."

"But you could with Marie?" Ben teased, his right hand cupping her chin, raising it so their gazes met. "What if I don't want to be shared?"

"We can vote on it at the next meeting." She winked and grinned at him while she fell into their familiar, playful chatter. "Who knows, we might develop a schedule on who gets you for which days."

"Does this mean that I have to share you with the guys? Because if I am shared with everyone, then you are, too, and I'll be the one making the decisions on which days people get the joy of your presence." His head dipped toward her, his gaze never leaving hers. "What if I don't want to share you? Do I get exclusive use?"

She bit her lip, thinking, then answered him. "Depends, do I?"

"Only if you don't try to pawn me off to the lowest bidder." His rich chuckle at her comment flowed through her body, sending frissons of desire to her core.

"You know me too well. I might do that if you were getting a bit too full of yourself," she responded, then giggled huskily. Swiftly, she brought her mouth a hairsbreadth from his, then darted her tongue out against his full lips. "Perhaps we need to discuss just what's allowed as we explore what each other enjoys most?"

His lips parted and warm breath brushed across her lips. "I think that would be wonderful, but that'd require our own private yenta to leave us alone for a while."

Well, if you're going to discuss this dating thing and get on with getting it on, I'll leave you to it. Through her peripheral sight, she watched Manny stand up, put on his hat, then move toward the bedroom door. All as if he was still alive. Manny shook a finger at Ben. *Now, make sure you do everything that I'd do.*

"Yes, Dad," Ben drawled, while rolling his eyes. "We'll be sure to make you proud of us with our creativity. Just do us a favor and don't watch."

I wouldn't watch the act itself -- it's not arousing to me in the least. I'll go hang out with Hermes and Hodir. Those two are dating and you should see the side of their home shake when they get going at it! The ghost chuckled while rubbing his hands together and walking toward the bedroom door.

"Bye, Manny. See you some other time --" Shari broke off when she sensed that the ghost left the room. Then she turned her attention back to Ben, whose smile looked just a mite too mischievous to trust. Licking her lips, she decided to try to get him off guard. "So, I do believe you were under my power when we were so rudely interrupted. Why don't I just help you get comfortable on the bed ...?"

Warm lips brushed against hers, silencing her words. His kiss deepened as his strong, agile fingers pulled her closer, and then slid down her back before kneading her ass under her silk robe. Arousal, deep and hot, flared within her and she took advantage of it to thrust her tongue deeply into his mouth, claiming it just as he had done to her earlier. Cupping his face between her hands to keep him from moving, her tongue teased Ben's mouth as it darted from one area to the next, suddenly sliding against it fully before pulling back to trace his lips with just the tip.

"I like the way you taste," she whispered huskily, taking one of his hands in hers, then bringing his fingers up to her mouth. Opening her mouth, Shari slid his forefinger in, sucking on it lightly. With a slow, deliberate motion, she eased the finger from her mouth, then repeated the gesture with his middle finger. Ben's deep cerulean gaze never left her mouth as she continued the gesture with his ring finger.

"Gods, Shari, what are you trying to do -- kill me?" He groaned while pulling her toward the bed until his leg hit the frame, sending them both onto the mattress with a thud.

Shari chuckled as she tried to move sideways. "No, but you're obviously trying to take me out with you. Very romantic, Ben."

A broad, toothy grin greeted her comment as he pulled her onto him so their faces were inches apart. "It might not be your traditional romantic move, but your throaty chuckles are very erotic." Bracing his hands on her hips, Ben thrust his hips upwards and his erect cock slid up and down her belly. "See what you do to me?"

“Well, I definitely feel something,” she teased, shifting her legs so her knees rested on either side of his hips, guiding her damp slit to slide down the length of his cock, then back up. “But for some reason, it seems a bit shy. Maybe it needs a mask or something.”

“Or something,” Ben agreed, his body lifting to meet her rocking motions. “What do you recommend?”

Shari reached past Ben’s left shoulder to the nightstand. “I believe that there might be something in there that might help.” Her hand dipped into the drawer and as she slid it back and forth, she didn’t feel the telltale sign of foil. Concerned, she shifted her body so she could reach everywhere, but there was nothing. *How the hell can I be out of condoms? How can this be happening right now?* She pulled back her hand and eased slightly off Ben to one side. “Seems like I spoke too soon about having the necessary covering. Did you manage to come here prepared for anything, by chance?”

Ben’s eyes opened wide, then he tossed his head back against the bed with a frustrated groan. “I’m prepared for most anything, except having protection so we can have hot, kinky sex. I can’t fucking believe this.” His fist hit the headboard behind him. “So now what?”

Shari repositioned herself on her side, propping her head up on a hand. “So, there are two choices. We suffer not-so-quietly and try to get some sleep ...”

“Or? Tell me the ‘or’ plan is better than that one,” Ben grumbled, turning on his side to face her.

“Or we get dressed, drive to the convenience store two blocks from here and buy some condoms so we can return to the fun and games.” She looked past him, trying to see if Manny was anywhere near by. “It’s your choice.”

“Of course it is.” His abdominal muscles bunched as he shifted his weight and sat up, shifting his position so his cock bobbed directly in front of her. Shari grinned as another idea came to her and she shifted her gaze to Ben’s face.

“Well, there is a third alternative, one that wouldn’t require us leaving the house, but it means refraining from penetration.” Her hand circled his cock, squeezing slightly as she stroked upwards then down. His muscles tensed as his cock thickened in her slow, steady stroking. “How good is your control?”

He didn’t answer, instead placing one of his hands over hers. His fingers pressed against hers as his hand urged hers in a slightly faster pace. While he guided her hand in pleasuring him, Shari watched him bite his lower lip to keep control. Carefully, she shifted her fingers under his, readjusting her grip on his cock as their tandem strokes increased in speed. Saying nothing, she shifted her position so that her mouth licked the head of his cock with each downward stroke.

Finally she edged the head of his cock fully in her mouth, suckling it as their hands continued gliding faster along his thick length. His gasps turned into wordless moans while she flicked her tongue over the bulbous tip. “Gods, Shari ...” Ben moaned, his free hand fisting in her hair. “I’m going to come ... stop ...”

Shari ignored Ben's begging by lowering her mouth further over his cock. He went rigid, his hand stopping as her tongue slid against his cock's underside as his orgasm poured out of him. Carefully lapping at the salty liquid that slid against her mouth, then down his cock, Shari urged him to completion. When his body sagged back slightly, she released his cock and smiled up at him. Ben shook his head at her while a lopsided grin crossed his lips. "You're un-fucking-believable, Shari. Why didn't you stop?"

Instead of answering, she moved off the bed and headed into the master bathroom. Shari flipped on the light switch, then turned on the faucet. Using one hand, she cupped the cool water, using it to rinse out her mouth. Once done, she washed her hands with liquid soap and water. "Why didn't I stop you?" she called out loudly.

"Yeah," Ben asked, his voice close, making her jump. Looking to her left, he stood in the doorway, unconscious of his nakedness. "Why didn't you stop when I told you I ready to blow?"

Shari shrugged. "I wanted to feel you come by my touch." When he stepped forward, she held up a hand. "It was my choice and I have no regrets on doing it. Now I know exactly how you taste."

His smirk came back. "Just like I know how you taste. Which reminds me that I can't leave you unsatisfied when I've been taken care of."

Shari lifted one brow. "Yes, you can. If you recall, you took care of me earlier. Plus, it's like everything just hit me. I'm exhausted." Ducking under his arms, she slid past him, only to be stopped as he wrapped his arms around her waist. "Seriously, Ben, I'm ready for sleep."

"Then we'll sleep." He walked her to the bed, pulling down the comforter and sheet. Shari crawled in, scooting over to her spot on the bed. "I see we're going to have issues on who sleeps near the door," Ben teased lightly as he climbed into bed behind her. His body spooned against hers and Shari let out a soft, comforting sigh. "Yeah, you feel wonderful against me, too."

Shari elbowed him. "Don't start or I'll make you sleep on the floor. Trust me, that's a promise."

"Mean evil woman."

"Damn straight," Shari yawned. "Do you need to be up at any certain time? I mean before the ritual?"

"No, I'm off tomorrow. How about you?"

"Yeah, I've got my assistant in the shop tomorrow so I can go to Manny's grave." She pushed against Ben's body as a slight chill went through her. "It's hard to believe ..."

"I know. But no more thinking, Shari, it's time to sleep." His right arm draped over her hip and she felt her body's last ounce of tension dissolve away. "Good night."

"Night, Ben."

Chapter Four

November 1, día de los muertos

Ben groaned as the sun shone against his face. “No sun. Make it go away,” he growled, covering his face with a pillow. The blinds and curtains in his bedroom were specifically tailored to block out sunlight; why on earth was it coming in?

“Get up, you big baby,” a voice called out from across the room. “It’s a bright, clear Florida morning and you’re trying to hide from it.”

“No, you can’t make me. Just a few minutes more,” he groaned as he shifted onto his stomach, trying to keep the pillow in front of his face. Something tried tugging the pillow away, but he kept his grip while burying his head further into it. “No, don’t be mean, Shari.”

“Don’t be mean, Shari,” the woman mimicked as the sheets covering him flew off the bed. “It’s morning and we’re due at the cemetery in about an hour or so. There are still rituals to do for Manny today.”

Ben lifted his head from the pillow and tried focusing his gaze upon the redheaded beauty. Knowing she was really there, wearing a red and black nightgown, he concluded he hadn’t imagined the night’s escapades after one too many salutes to Manny. “You’re right. Do you have a spare towel and facecloth?”

Shari gestured to the small wicker table near the door. “Yes, it’s there along with a spare bathrobe I keep if anyone crashes over.” She paused, her lower lip caught attractively between her teeth before releasing it. “Do you still have your overnight bag in your car or do you need me to do a quick run to your place for some clothes?”

He sat up on the side of the bed and scrubbed his face with his hands. Part of him wondered if his talent of siphoning energy had flared during his time with Shari, but he didn’t feel any kind of energized so he doubted it, which made him happy. “There should be

clothes in my car. In fact, I wasn't sure if we all would end up crashing here, so I brought my clothes for this morning as well as some of the things Manny used when he celebrated *día de los muertos*." Standing up, he stretched upwards, letting out a loud yawn. She moved past him, but he caught her on the upper arm. "Wait a minute; you're not having one of those morning-after moments, are you?" Scanning her face, he tried to see if she was embarrassed over what had happened, even if it hadn't resulted in full intercourse.

Shari's mouth dropped open slightly and her left brow shot up under her loose, long bangs. "Excuse you? No, I'm not having a morning-after issue." Huffing, she crossed her arms over her chest. "I just want to do this right for Manny. He never failed to do it for others every year, Ben. And with him being a ghost, perhaps if we give him the proper final sending, he won't come back to check on us."

"Gods, I hadn't thought on that. The rituals take priority and we'll discuss us later. We'll go by Reincarnation Lake and talk a bit." Cupping her chin, he tilted her head back and gently kissed her. "If you'd get my stuff, I'll shower so we can get going."

Shari shot him a mischievous smile then spun on her heels and walked out of the bedroom, leaving him to enjoy the way her nightgown hugged her curves. He followed her, grabbing the towels before heading toward the huge bathroom.

* * * * *

Shari gathered the last of the flowers and candles, packing them into the proper containers before handing one container to Ben. Lifting the other one onto her hip, she smiled softly. "We're ready to go now." As Ben walked away, she turned one last time toward the gravestone with the small *ofrenda*, altar, where they'd placed the *pan de muerto*, bone-shaped bread dough items, alongside the marigolds they had bought. "May you become the hummingbird or monarch that you so deserve to be."

Suddenly a feeling of being watched hit her, rushing her to catch up with Ben. "Wait up, you're walking too fast," she called out, trying to balance the rectangular container on her hip as she picked up the pace.

Ben stopped and turned, curiosity written on his face. Not wanting him to laugh at her, she didn't tell him what she sensed, instead lifting the box a bit. "It's a bit more awkward than I thought it would be to carry like this. Sorry."

"You said a last farewell too." His voice was warm, understanding.

"Yeah, I did. He was one of the first people to make me feel welcome in Silver Springs." Casually, they walked side by side to Ben's parked car. "Manny's words of wisdom and explaining this unusual town went a long way to making me feel part of the community."

Ben chuckled as he unlocked the trunk of the car. "Yeah, Manny felt it his responsibility to welcome preternatural newcomers. He was a one-man welcome wagon for

the city's paranormals and everyone adored him." Ben shut the trunk after Shari deposited her container inside. "At least they did until he started managing their love lives."

Shari shrugged her shoulders while laughing. "There is that, definitely. But when you consider how many of them ended up happily bonded to who Manny chose for them, it does make you wonder."

"I guess so." Ben opened her door, watching her as she slid into the passenger's seat. "Honestly, except for when he kept trying to force us together, his matchmaking ability didn't have my attention."

She watched as he shut the door then walked around to the driver's side. His chivalrous nature intrigued her, especially since it was so rare that she'd let any man act in such a cavalier manner, as if she were unable to close a door for herself. Shari suspected that Ben didn't even realize he did that when he buckled up, cranked the ignition, and then pulled the car out onto the road. "I think many people didn't talk loudly about it because of embarrassment and the fact that he was uncannily accurate."

As Ben took the second right from the cemetery, Shari piped up, "You might want to take Hell Street to Frozen Over Road to get to Destruction."

"Why? Death Boulevard leads straight to Destruction." His fingers drummed on the steering wheel and Shari huffed at his impatience.

"Today is not just *día de los muertos*, Ben. It's also All Saints' Day, Samhain festival weekend, and a lot of other festivals. Wheel of Life Park is hosting that huge fair today, remember?" Shari pointed to a couple of signs. "They've got part of Death blocked off to accommodate the people attending. Turn right onto Hell; it's faster and most people don't take that route."

Ben nodded while hitting the turn signal. "Yeah, they'll go down to Purgatory Road since it's well-traveled, and I hate negotiating that three-way with Elysian Fields and Heavenly Way."

"Too many accidents happen there with careless drivers late at night," Shari agreed as she reached over and flipped on the radio. "Wonder if they're still playing some Halloween songs today."

The local radio station was playing Halloween-oriented tunes, so Shari sat back and hummed along as Ben drove silently toward the lake. Perhaps she should be nervous about having a talk at a known lovers' lane, but she was intrigued to know why Ben wanted to talk to her at the lake rather than her home or his.

Finally, he pulled into the parking lot on the east side of the lake, stopped the car and turned off the engine. Ben looked at her and smiled. "I know you're curious about why here. Walk with me and I'll tell you why."

She got out of the car and shut the door as Ben did the same. Ben led the way toward one of the small piers used by waverunners. Noting his slightly tense movements, Shari said

nothing, instead concentrating on calming the fluttering nerves in the pit of her stomach. Coming out here did nothing for making her calm since many times she'd come down here to work out her feelings for Ben.

When he sat down on the dock, leaning against one of the poles, she took the opposite pole, sitting down and reclining against it. Rubbing her hands on her khaki pants, Shari decided to take the adult way and open up the lines of communication first. "Okay, Ben. Why here? Why not somewhere else?"

His gaze dropped to his lap while he gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "Honestly? If we talked at your house or mine, we wouldn't talk. Touching you just that once was enough to create a need. And we need to talk about this -- you, me, the whole thing with Manny."

Her body twitched at his honesty. Time to be honest. "I feel the same way, though I'd like to think I'd be able to talk to you and not jump straight into screwing your brains out." His head jerked upwards and their gazes met. She chuckled then continued. "What's got your pants twisted so tight about all this? The fact that Manny is determined that we should be together?"

"Yeah, that's part of it." He looked away toward the north side of the lake. "Manny was my best friend. I know he had this uncanny ability to match people together like the Dating Game or the Match Game or something. But this pushing makes me feel that if we get together it's not our choice but his."

"I don't like people interfering either, Ben. I've ignored Manny many times when he suggested I ask you out." Shari leaned her head back, looking up at the slightly overcast sky. "Yet Manny came back as a ghost for a reason. His wanting us together isn't just based on his wants or ideas. Which is why on some level, I'm thinking that perhaps he might actually know better than we do in this -- and trust me, it's not easy to say that."

Silence descended and Shari sighed. *How the hell did I get caught up in letting this happen? Dammit, this is exactly why I tried keeping this only as friends. One night of pleasure and already I start paying for my stupidity when the lover claims it shouldn't have happened. Fuck!*

Exasperated at herself and at Ben's quietness, Shari stood up, and walked off the pier. Ignoring Ben calling her name, she headed down the track that encircled the entire lake. Perhaps walking would get her over this stupid belief that one night wouldn't ruin their friendship. With each step she concentrated forcing her anger and regrets into the ground, letting Mother Earth absorb it all. Luckily she knew Reincarnation Lake to her house was only two miles. Not a bad walk for a day like today. Maybe by the time she got home she'd be over this pain in her heart.

Why are you running away, Shari?

"Go away, Manny. It's All Saints' Day now and you should be locked up tighter than Fort Knox." Each word came out in a huff as she picked up her pace, trying to ignore the ghost that kept pace at her side.

The ghost kept speaking while she tried to ignore him. *Shari, stop beating yourself up. You love my best friend and he loves you.* The ghost grabbed at her arm but passed through it. She shot him an evil triumphant look but continued walking away. Manny's voice rang out in her mind; clearly he was unhappy by what happened as well. Chica, *listen to me. I understand why Ben's feeling like this, but you can't just walk away from what you really want.*

"Yes, I can. Yes, I am." Shari stopped walking and faced Manny squarely, resisting the urge to poke him in the middle of his chest. She noticed he had changed into a t-shirt and shorts just like he had when they walked the lake every Wednesday. "This isn't about me; this is about your best friend. I accept that you know we should be together. I'm willing to try. But Ben isn't. He feels that his freedom of choice is being taken away and he's got every right to feel that way."

I know he does, but the point is simple. Left on your own, you both will do everything possible to not give into the love you both feel for each other. I know it, our friends know it, and the gods know it. Manny's ghostly appearance deepened, making him appear almost alive. *No one is taking away his choice or yours. But gods dammit, you've put all of us through hell and back with refusing to acknowledge the feeling you have for each other.*

"What about what we want? Does that matter?" Ben strode forward, his skin damp with perspiration. "It should be our choice to have a relationship or not. I might be deeply in love with Shari, but if we can't get together on our own, how can we know we're right to be together?"

Stepping back, Shari looked from Ben to Manny and back again. "What did you just say?"

I think he admitted to being in love with you, which we already knew.

Shari smacked at the air near Manny. "Not you." Pointing at Ben, she asked quietly, "Did you just admit to being in love with me?"

Ben glared at her then looked at Manny in anger. "Yes, I did. But loving you isn't the issue, Shari. You know that."

"You're right, it's not the issue." She shook her head, an ironic smile sliding into place. "You know it's funny. Had you ever said that prior to now, I'd have been shocked but thrilled. Right now, I feel as if I were sentencing you to death -- all because you have issues with Manny trying to get us to this point." She turned away from them both, started walking and called over her shoulder, "When you figure out what is more important to you -- having someone who loves you at your side regardless of how you get together or denying your love because of friendship -- let me know. I'd like to either find an old lover like Niam Maraigh or Micheal O'Connor to make me forget you or actually start trying to be together as a couple."

Breaking out into a light jog, Shari kept her gaze straight ahead while trying to ignore Manny and Ben calling her back. She needed to find a place to get out her anger and despair. Hell, drowning her sorrows might even help. One of her old pals, TJ, owned a pub in town

and she'd make sure Shari got home all right afterwards. Hearing footsteps closing in, Shari picked up her pace slightly, not looking back, knowing it was Ben. At least Manny wasn't trying to talk to her. She didn't need talk, she needed action. If she could hit a tree and not break her knuckles, she would.

The footsteps faded away and Shari slowed down until she was walking at a comfortable pace. There was less than a half-mile until she'd be able to cut across Death to Summerland Avenue. Once there it was another mile or so to her home. Luckily she had worn comfortable clothes to the cemetery and her walking shoes, so the walk wouldn't be painful. With each step, her mind questioned her decision to actually allow herself this one moment at Samhain. *How the hell could he deny the fact he loves me? How could he put the idea of being matched together by someone else was wrong when arranged marriages and dating services introduced people all the time? Could he just not want to be --?*

A honking horn stopped her thoughts and she looked to her right. Ben was there gesturing her to stop. She shook her head and kept walking. "Go away, Ben. I told you not to talk to me until you know what the hell you want."

"Shari, you can't walk home. I brought you here, I'll take you home. Then if you want, I'll leave you alone for a while."

"No. Go. Away." She didn't want to go in the car with him. If she did, she'd lose her anger and right now, it was the only thing sustaining her from asking him why he hadn't ever told her how he felt. Why he hid this from her when she had told him once, granted she had been drunk, that she could easily fall for him since she liked him so much. Fury flooded her system and she stopped, turning to face him as he drove slowly. "You were obviously forced into participating in this against your will. So, being the kind human I am, I'm opting out from forcing you to do any gods damn thing in regards to me anymore."

Without waiting for his reply, she darted across the street, scooting past a couple of cars. Defiantly, Shari cut across the private lawn of one of Silver Spring's most eccentric residents -- and one of her former lovers -- Niam Maraigh. As she rushed past the sacred threshold of the wooded area of his home, she whispered the words Niam had taught her, thankful that the path that appeared before her would take her to the end of her street, thus cutting her route shorter than it would've been otherwise. Her attention focused upon the path and at remaining calm as the guardians of the woods came forward. Not many could see these caretakers that reminded her of elves, but those with paranormal talents often commented on being watched -- and they often were. Spreading out her palms upwards in a gesture of supplication and openness, she spoke softly, "I come to thee seeking peace and a path home."

The tall blond male elf nodded, gesturing to a small path. "Come and be welcome, Shari, healer among the light and the dark. You are granted peace along the path to your home."

“Thank you, Weyleth. Thanks to you and yours for this safe passage.” Carefully she stepped onto the trail, knowing that it would lead her to safety and that the elves would make sure no harm came to her during her travel through the woods.

Twenty minutes later, Shari emerged from the woods, thanking the guardian spirits for the safe passage before stepping onto the sidewalk. Scanning the road, she didn’t see Ben or his car anywhere. Cautiously, Shari walked down her block toward her home. The neighborhood looked fairly quiet for a weekend. The kids weren’t playing in the nearby yards, though there were still many Halloween decorations up everywhere. Inhaling deeply, she summoned up a calmness she didn’t feel, but knew she needed for whatever lay ahead. Ben wasn’t going to let her get away with what she said, but honestly, what the hell did he expect? Had she known that he’d act like this, she wouldn’t have given in to a weak moment of wanting a chance for herself as well as trying to honour a dead friend’s wish. But until he showed up, she was going to do everything in her power to ignore her own emotions. All her life she’d fought for what she wanted, and though she wanted Ben -- she wouldn’t coerce him. It wasn’t her style, and after the outburst, Shari figured she wouldn’t be seeing him anytime soon.

* * * * *

Ben stepped on the gas only to slam on the brakes as another car darted across the intersection where Death and Destruction met. His heart pounded in his chest as he watched Shari dash across the lawn of a home. Worry and anger warred within him. How the hell could he explain this to her so she’d understand that he didn’t accuse her of coercing him, only Manny? Slamming his hands on the steering wheel, he growled his anger. “Come on out, Manny. I know you’re here. I can feel you, dammit.”

Ben felt the moment Manny appeared in the passenger seat. The temperature in the car cooled slightly and he noticed a slight musky odor that reminded him of Manny’s favourite aftershave. *I’m here. I take it you called me here to yell at me more? Personally, I’m fucking disappointed in you, my friend. You hurt the woman you love.*

Ben’s jaw clenched tightly as he struggled not to lose his temper. He headed down Hell Street. Deliberately, he turned right, avoiding the way to Shari’s house before he spoke. “Yes, I know, you’re disappointed and you wanted me and Shari to find happiness and love in each other’s arms. But you know what -- how the hell do I know it’s real love if I’m feeling pushed into it and it’s not my heart’s choice in the matter?”

Manny glared at him, and Ben fought a shiver at the glowering look. Never had he seen his friend this angry at him. His friend had seen him through many relationships, including the night he realized how much he wanted and cared for Shari. But how could he make Manny understand that he wasn’t ready just yet to even admit to Shari his love when his heart still hurt at losing him? Manny still said nothing, so Ben spoke, quickly, finally letting

out everything he had held in since Manny's death. Perhaps telling his friend the truth of his feelings was the only way to make him stop interfering.

"You know what you don't get? You don't get that right now is not the time for me to get involved with Shari. Fucking sakes, Manny, you *just* died! You're no longer just downstairs cooking or in the house next door anymore. How the fuck can you expect me to just move forward when I still don't want to admit you're dead? How can I think of being with Shari, even at your insistence, when the only thing that I can see is you lying dead, and I still feel the guilt over leaving you that night and going home?" Ben choked out the words, his voice cracking at the end. One tear slid down his cheek and he brushed it away with the back of his hand. "I know you won't always be around every day, even as a ghost, Manny. We've been the best of friends for so many damn years, I have no idea how the hell I'm going to get through this coming month without finding myself in your damn shop every time I need to talk to someone."

Mi amigo, te amo. I love you, too, my friend. The ghost sighed. Ben felt a hand squeeze his shoulder, just like Manny had done more than once when they'd argued over things. *Don't you think I know that? Ben, I did this now because you need someone to be there for you. Shari is the only person who can heal this pain for you. Amigo, listen to me and hear me with your heart, not just your head now.*

Ben signaled his turn left, then slowed down as his home came into view. "Go ahead, Manny. I'm listening, though I definitely do not understand how you could've considered my missing you as a reason for pushing us together."

I'll meet you inside, Ben. We'll talk there without you having to worry about anyone seeing you talk to a ghost. But know this ... when I died, I worried over how you'd cope, and the only person who came to my mind was Shari. The ghost dematerialized as Ben pulled into his driveway.

Throwing the car into park and turning off the ignition, Ben left everything in the car, while he grabbed his keys then headed toward his home. He mulled over what Manny had said while entering his home, slamming the door shut behind him. Without stopping, he made his way toward the kitchen, only slowing down to toss his keys onto the side table near the kitchen archway.

After grabbing a much-needed beer from the fridge, Ben popped the top and took a long sip. Swallowing the slightly bitter, yet full-bodied imported beer, he set the bottle on the counter. Glancing to his right, he watched as Manny materialized in front of the wall of pictures he had taken through the years of friends and family. Though his friend wasn't facing him, instead looking at the pictures, Ben knew Manny was gauging his emotional state. Sighing, he grabbed the bottle and walked to the ghost.

It always amazes me how many people we've met and keep in touch with over the years. When you first started this wall, I wondered why you'd create this hodgepodge of pictures. Manny touched a couple of pictures, murmuring what sounded like blessings to

Ben. *But now, now, I see why this wall exists, amigo. This is your way of showing how much you value us in your life. I hadn't realized how many pictures I've been in, but thank you. As I said before, while I lay dying, I knew that you'd have the hardest time with my death. We've been friends a long time, Ben. We're family. When I asked to come back as a ghost for a while, to finish what I started -- bringing soulmates together -- I knew that you had to be first on the list.*

"Why? Because you're gone?"

Manny nodded, then pointed to a picture where Shari was the center of interest. A small grin played on his friend's lips, and Ben knew it was because that picture had been taken at the last huge party they'd thrown at Manny's place. *Do you remember what happened this night? How you admitted to me that no matter who you dated, who you slept with, no one made you feel like that one stolen kiss with Shari?*

Ben sipped his beer first, thinking back on that night. Shari had brought her latest boyfriend over. Ben hated seeing that jerk-off touching her, caressing her, when he couldn't. That was the night he had gotten so drunk, Manny took away his keys and forced Ben to admit the truth. "Yeah, I remember that night. I meant it, too, Manny. Since that night, I waited until she broke up with that asshole. She'd only been single two weeks before your death. Once you died, I haven't thought about anything else but taking care of your estate, dealing with your will, and trying not to pick up the phone and call you for advice."

Manny's hand grabbed Ben's shoulder, and Ben could've sworn he felt the reassuring squeeze again. *Listen to me. I know that this has been damn tough on you. Everyone's been trying to help ease your burden, but you won't let them. You're not to blame for my death, Ben. Even if you had been there, I would've died. Even if I had been in the hospital, I doubt they could've saved me. But this is about you now. You need someone to talk to, to confide in, to bitch at you when you go off half-cocked when things get unusual.*

"But why force the issue of my being together with Shari? I could've leaned on her without becoming sexually involved with her." Ben chugged the last of the beer then placed the bottle on the kitchen table. "I don't like to be forced into doing anything, Manny. You of all people know that."

Sí, I know. But you wouldn't have gone to her, not before you had a nervous breakdown, Ben. You weren't taking care of yourself and you were hiding from the others, limiting your time with them to be here, alone, mourning a man who doesn't want you to mourn. I want you happy, Ben. I know Shari is that person to do so. You do, too, but you're afraid.

Ben shook his head as he rolled his eyes. "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

Afraid that she might not love you like you do her. That once she discovered that you left me that night, she'd reject you. But most of all, you're afraid that if you are meant for each other, she'll be like everyone else you've loved through the years -- dying early, thus leaving you alone to mourn once again.

Ben said nothing, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. At that moment, he hated his friend, hated the fact that he spoke aloud the one fear he had never voiced to anyone, yet, somehow, Manny had known. He hated being forced into anything, but after losing his parents and his beloved grandparents, there was always this part of him that wondered if everyone he loved was fated to die young. Manny's death shook him badly, bringing back the old fear once again. *And I still wonder -- are they dead because of me? Is my talent linked to them dying before their time?* He hadn't spoken much of his talent of being able to shift life force energy from someone else to himself, though not like a true energy vampire. There was only the one time when he had shown Manny his talents, but that was when Manny had been really sick and Ben shifted the energy from himself to his friend.

"How did you know about my fear?" His voice sounded off, slightly panicked, even to his own hearing. "I hadn't ever spoken about it to you. Plus, you've only seen my talent in action once."

Manny smiled softly, sympathy shining in his brown eyes. *Mi amigo de corazón, you have spoken about your fear at least once to me. It was that night after your parents died; you were so far gone into the cesspool of drunkenness that you asked me if one of your abilities was to drain life from those who were around you for a long period of time. Before I could respond, you passed out. The next day, you refused to speak on the subject.*

"I see." Ben looked away, his gaze scanning in some of the pictures, his mind recalling when each picture had been taken. "So why push me? You know I wouldn't subject anyone to being killed by being around me for long periods of time, like a live-in lover or spouse would go through."

Because you wouldn't have on your own; we both know that. Plus, you're wrong about your talent draining people without your consent. It only works when you activate it, and you're damn conscientious in how and where you use it. Then there is that fact that you'd have made some damn excuse to refuse your heart's wish because of that fear. Shari is the same way, though in her case it's not that she's afraid of people dying. For her, it's the fear of never being loved and accepted for who she is -- including her kinkier aspects. Her parents weren't very affectionate people, unlike yours. But when you two are together in any environment, all anyone sees is this couple that won't admit they love each other while looking like the poster kids for a happy marriage.

Snorting in laughter, Ben faced his friend again. "Yeah, right. We fight and argue a lot over things."

Mostly in teasing or about your dates. Both of you are extremely jealous and it shows when one of you is dating while the other isn't. The petty spite could knock a person over. Ben, you don't want to be pushed, and I accept that. However, you have to see this from a point of view other than your own.

"Why?"

You've never asked yourself why Shari agreed to the idea of you both spending one night together -- even if to please the ghost. Aren't you just a bit curious about what would make the self-assured, self-possessed woman you love risk her heart on the chance that even after a night of hot sex, you might not want her anyway?

Ben rubbed his cheek, thoughts tumbling over each other. Questions, answers, possibilities all weighed and discarded instantly, flooded him. Stepping back, Ben swore violently, grabbing the empty bottle then heading toward the recycling bin. Tossing it in with a clatter, Ben looked at everything that had happened, trying not to impose his own feelings about it all. Manny's words scored hard as he realized the only reason that Shari would've done such a thing was that she had already decided that he wouldn't want more from her. Guilt hit him at his earlier words at the lake. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, and damnation! How the hell can she believe that I wouldn't want her long term?"

How many times, when people teased the two of you, did you emphatically insist you were nothing more than friends, because your friendship was too damn important to see if it could be more?

"Condemned by my own damned words, though we know she often said it, too."

The ghost moved toward the living room and Ben followed, mentally kicking himself. *Sí. Shari often talked about how important your friendship was to her. But occasionally, she asked on whether or not you were still friends with any of your ex-lovers, as she hadn't ever seen them again, whereas she maintained some kind of friendship with hers.*

Cussing again, Ben went toward the front door, thinking he had to straighten this out with Shari. Explain everything to her and reassure her about wanting to try the relationship thing once he felt a bit more settled about losing Manny. He stopped as his hand touched the doorknob. "She's not going to talk to me. Not right now while she's angry."

Manny's sudden chuckle caught Ben's curiosity. "Why the laugh?"

You. Seeing you in love and finally getting that loving her for however long it is won't ruin your friendship. It's something I never thought I'd see -- alive or dead. Manny tilted his head to one side, as if listening to someone speaking, though Ben knew that it wasn't him and he didn't see anyone else here with them. Manny nodded, pulling at his T-shirt. *One of my ghost friends came to let me know that Shari's muttering about going out and getting drunk at Draco Familius tonight. There was also something about getting laid by any man who asks, just to get you out of her mind and heart, but I think she knows that is impossible.*

Ben stiffened, shock keeping him immobile. Finally he felt able to talk. "What do you mean, she's going out to Draco? What the fuck does she think she's doing?"

She's decided you've rejected her both as lover and friend. So, she's going to do whatever she can think of to purge you from her system. Manny looked at Ben expectantly. *Are you going to let her?*

"Hell no!" Ben slammed a fist into his hand. "When will she be there? I've got to shower and change. Do I have time?"

Sí, amigo. You've got time. She's just decided on this plan of action and is showering as we speak. If I know her well enough, I'd say she'll be at Draco's by nine. What do you plan on doing?

Ben grinned as an idea came to him. "I plan on claiming my woman. I love her and I'm going to make up for my asshole behavior. You're right, I do love her. Yes, I'm still worried about her dying early, but to not have her in my life while she's alive isn't an option." Ben stepped forward and put his hands out, touching Manny's shoulders, which seemed almost solid. "Thank you, my friend, for everything. I miss you, and it's not easy getting used to you not being here. Hopefully we'll still be able to talk even with you being a ghost."

Definitely. Won't be as frequent as when I was alive; it's hard to keep the solidity for long periods of time. But if you really need me, I'll be here. Now, tell me your plan for winning the heart of your woman.

Ben sent a grateful look to his friend before answering. "Well, what I'm thinking is this ..."

Chapter Five

Shari stepped out of her car, looking around the crowded parking lot at Draco Familius. After calling TJ and asking her friend to make sure she got home safely, she showered and picked out the sexy costume that she had bought in hope of tempting Ben this year. But Manny's death meant canceling their annual costume party the day after Samhain, though TJ had announced that she'd honor the party by having everyone come tonight to celebrate Adult Halloween at Draco. Catching glimpses of people arriving in various costumes, Shari grinned, glad that some people were participating in the fun.

Once at the door to the pub, Shari glanced around the parking lot as a sudden jolt of being watched hit her. Easing open her psychic shield slightly, she tried to sense who was out there, but the small groups of people making their way from the parking lot to the pub made it difficult to differentiate who she sensed. Giving up, Shari turned and went in, smiling at one of the security guys. "Hey John, good seeing you tonight. TJ here yet?"

"Yup, she's behind the bar. She told me that you might get a bit tipsy and to make sure that you don't do anything stupid." John, the tall, blond Southern gentleman shook a finger at her. "Don't do anything stupid, Shari. You look damned hot in that outfit, but that alone won't save you if you get dumb-assed. If you do, I'll make sure to blast some serious death metal at your house in the early morning."

She shuddered, then patted John's arm reassuringly. "I won't do stupid, just planning on drowning some sorrows and honoring Manny."

"Yeah, I miss him, even if he was somewhat pushy."

"Yeah, he could be, but he wanted everyone happy. Too bad he didn't find happiness for himself." Shari smiled at John as she moved toward the main doorway inside. "Take care, John. I promise not to embarrass you too much."

Bass-thumping music filled the room and the lights swirled about as Shari waved at people she knew in passing while making her way toward the back bar. As a new song started and she recognized the tune, Shari slid up to the bar. "Little Red, I like how your hood emphasizes your basket of goodies," she teased. "How about getting me a drink and we'll discuss how you can best make good on delivering those goodies to your grandpa."

"Very funny, wise ass," TJ answered as the bartender grabbed a glass from one side, dumping a small scoop of ice into it, setting it down and grabbing a couple bottles of liquor. "Interesting costume. I thought you didn't pander to the underdressed comic book market, though?"

"No, I said that the guys should be as underdressed as the women, not that they shouldn't be underdressed," Shari corrected as TJ slid the drink her way. She fished out some money from a small, unnoticeable pocket and handed it to the woman. "Plus, tonight's a good night to explore another side of my personality. Maybe I'll get lucky or something."

TJ grinned, her hazel eyes sparkling. "I'd bet 'or something' any day, when it comes to you. The trio arrived about twenty minutes ago; you can find them somewhere on the dance floor. Just keep safe, if you plan on going through with this, okay?"

"Yes, Mom. I'll be fine. Just need to blow off some steam and some memories." Shari sipped on her drink, and then nodded before walking away toward the dance floor. So many people had dressed up from nurses to vampires and more. Of course, some of them weren't really dressed up, but actually showing their true natures, which to her seemed like cheating the whole dress up idea. The dancers were lively, some of them dancing quite erotically with one another to the electronic trance music. Shari tapped out the bass rhythm while continuing toward the disc jockey booth. Before she could maneuver the corner demarcating the dance floor from the rest of the bar, someone stepped in front of her and she stopped suddenly to avoid colliding with him.

"Hey, watch out ..." she said testily, letting the words fade away at the sight before her. She brought her drink up to her lips and greedily sucked it down while trying to figure out why Ben was there and why he was wearing a pirate outfit. Granted, he looked damn fine in the black leather pants tucked into the boots while the off-white shirt set off his tan. Then there was the crimson red vest that emphasized his sexy chest. He even seemed to be armed, though she knew the swords were fake. "Why are you here? I thought I told you that I didn't want to see you for a while."

Ben smirked and gestured around. "It's a party and it's open to everyone. As for why I've gotten your attention -- we've got unfinished business to discuss." His gaze dragged across her body and sharp desire tingled through her body. "Not to mention there was no way I could ignore you in that outfit. I always had you pegged as the Wonder Woman type. Then you turn around and show up as the Scarlet Witch, erotic style."

Shari licked her lips and resisted the urge to tug at the top which dipped low across her breasts, just barely keeping them restrained. "Yeah, well, I do like Wonder Woman. But there's something very provocative about Scarlet."

Ben's smirk turned into a sexy, mischievous smile as he traced the outline of her costume from the shoulder downwards to almost over one nipple, then across to the other breast, then back up to the other shoulder. "Well, there is that whole S&M aspect about Wonder Woman to enjoy, but I happen to agree with you about the Scarlet Witch. She was sexy, vulnerable and the men in her life were damn lucky to have her, even when they did stupid things that would've pushed most women away."

Rooted to the spot, Shari waited as Ben's hand threaded through her hair, urging her head backwards a bit. "At least they spoke about it and they all moved forward." She hesitated a moment before asking, "Does this mean that you're going to explain things?"

Ben's body brushed hers and his heat flared her senses into hyperawareness: the silk of his vest caressing the thin satin of her outfit, the leather of his pants pressing against her thinly covered lower belly. His husky voice tickled her ear as he whispered, "I'm going to explain, then I'm going to show you just how much I love you by taking you somewhere so we can fuck each other senseless."

Before she could respond, his mouth captured hers. His warm lips pressed against hers and she parted them, letting his tongue in while her tongue darted into his. His hands slid down her sides before cupping her ass, pulling him tightly against him. She loved how he felt against her, his passion spurring on her own. Just when she thought she might pass out from his hungry kiss, Ben ended it. Before letting her go, he kissed her cheek. "Come on, Shari. TJ will make sure your car is safe until we retrieve it tomorrow. Let me explain everything."

She nodded and took his hand, their fingers intertwining. Slowly they made their way toward the back bar where Ben shot TJ a thumbs up. "She pointed out where you were to me and agreed to watch the car when I explained to her what I planned on doing."

"You told her you were coming for me?"

His chuckle sluiced over her body, setting her nerve endings tingling with anticipation. "Actually I told her that you weren't going to go home with anyone but me and if need be, I'd fuck you in front of everyone to prove that I love you and that I want to be with you." Ben guided her toward the exit, nodding at various people as they called out to them.

"You do? Don't you still feel pressured by Manny?" She wasn't sure she understood this. Just a few hours ago, he didn't want to be pushed into anything, now he was saying he wanted a relationship. What the fuck was going on?

"Manny and I talked. Some of the things he said made sense and he forced me to face my biggest fear." They stepped out into the night, the stars twinkling as he directed her toward the motorcycle parking area. "Then he told me that you were going to come here tonight and that I might lose you forever as a lover and as a friend for my stupidity."

Shar said nothing at first, her mind not completely understanding what he meant. "How the hell did Manny know I planned on going out tonight? I didn't sense him when I made the decision."

Ben nodded as he unstrapped two helmets from the back of his bike. She took the one he held out for her, pulled it over her head, sliding the protective face shield up. "I guess he had one of his ghost buddies watch over you. When they heard you talking about your plan, he told Manny, who told me. I realized at that moment that I couldn't let you do that." He climbed on the bike, gesturing her to sit behind him.

As she slid behind him, Shari made a mental note to yell at Manny for invading her privacy. "Okay, though I don't like the idea of him spying on me. So, you came to talk. Where are we going so we can talk about this?"

"You'll see." Ben pulled down his face shield and she did the same before wrapping her arms around his waist.

The engine roared to life, vibrating softly beneath her thighs as Ben guided the bike out of the parking lot and onto the road at the edge of town. As they sped away, Shari held onto Ben, trying not to be too hopeful that he meant what he said about loving her and wanting to be with her. She couldn't take him rejecting her again if things got rough again. Of any man she had ever known, he was the only one who could break her heart completely. Once they talked, perhaps she'd know whether or not he meant it or if she'd have to walk away forever from the hope in her heart.

She recognized the lane they turned down, even this late at night. In the southern part of the town, there were a bunch of camping cottages that Manny and Ben rented out to fishermen and the like. They bypassed the main building and headed down a smaller road off to the left. Shari didn't remember going down this road the last time they camped out, but trusted Ben knew where he was going.

A small cottage came into view as their headlight shined to the end of the cul-de-sac. He pulled into the small driveway and stopped the engine. Shari hopped off, removing the helmet. Handing it to him, she asked, "Whose place is this?"

"Mine. It was my parents originally, but I kept it afterwards. I've not been here in a while, but I figured this was the quietest place where we could talk."

Shari nodded as he walked toward the door, unlocking it, then letting her go in first as he flipped on the light switch. Her gaze slid over the small living room with tan overstuffed furniture, small wooden tables, and a television in one corner. "Nice little place. Who do you bring here, your fishing buddies?"

Ben locked the door before answering her. "Actually, no, I don't. I only bring people I trust and want to be intimate with to this place."

Comprehension hit Shari. "This is the legendary playroom of yours! Sweet!" She wandered past Ben, looking at the small but well-organized kitchen. After checking out the fully functional bathroom, her curiosity took her down a short hallway, only to stop at a door. "What's behind the door?"

"Not until you hear me, Shari." His hands slid over her shoulders, turning her so she faced him. "I was an asshole earlier. I'm sorry about that, but I want you to understand why." Ben kissed her forehead then placed his forehead against hers. "All my life, the people I loved died unexpectedly. My grandparents, my parents, cousins, some friends, then finally Manny -- all gone and each time I wondered if somehow one of my talents was draining the life from those closest to me."

Shari placed a hand on his chest as her heart constricted in pain for Ben. "Oh, Ben, I hadn't known about the others, only your parents."

He brushed back her hair, his fingers lightly caressing her cheek. "It's okay, sweetie. I've never told anyone except Manny, it seems and that time I was dead drunk. So, with you, I never wanted to risk our friendship because I feared one day --"

Shari placed a finger on his lips. "I understand. My own fear is similar to yours, though not the dying part. But I don't understand why you freaked over Manny wanting you and me to get together."

Ben looked away for a moment, then back at her. "I've lost my best friend of too many years to count and I was having trouble dealing with losing him. Yet, suddenly, his ghost is demanding that you and I get together, while I ignore my deepest fear and mourn for Manny. Suddenly, I felt like he wanted me to forget him and what he meant to me and there was no way in hell I could do that. Plus, suddenly, I'm put into this position of trying to tell you how I've felt all along and dealing with everything else and I snapped."

Shari looked down at her feet, trying not to cry. "I'm sorry we pushed you, Ben. To be honest, I didn't even think that you'd feel like Manny was forcing a replacement for him on you. I was only thinking of being given one night with you. Though Manny said for us to date, there was no guarantee we'd actually end up being together except that one night." She bit her lower lip for a moment, trying how to say the words in her heart. "I've loved you for a long time, Ben Cameron. Most of the people in my life that I love leave me because they don't love me like I do them. So, I've learned not to expect much from people."

His fingers curled around her chin, lifting her gaze to his. "I know. Manny pointed it out and how my reactions over everything ignited yours. I am sorry, Shari. I want us to try, but I'm going to be honest, this is going to take time. I miss my best friend and finally being open about how I feel for you will take some getting used to."

Shari grinned mischievously. "How do you feel about me?"

Ben snatched one of her hands and pressed it against his leather pants. "I'm already hard for you. I think about you constantly and," he leaned in close, trapping her hand against his cock, "I do love you, Shari Livingston."

His lips gently brushed hers once, then a second time, slightly deeper as she squeezed his cock. Ben's low moan delighted her as they slowly pulled back, smiled on both their faces. "Hmmm, does this mean we're now going to go into the playhouse?"

Ben opened the door and walked in, the light slowly brightening up. Shari went to one wall where a series of chains, restraints, and other binding items were organized. Brushing her finger over one fur-lined cuff, she nodded, then walked over to where Ben opened up a wooden cabinet. "What do you have in here?" She tried peeking over his shoulder, to no avail.

He handed her a small bottle. "Just some items that help enhance pleasure. I keep them out of the way so they won't get spilled." Gesturing to the large bed at the left corner of the room, Ben smiled. "I think you might like my bed."

"I think I might too. Though, I have to say, you're taking the fact that I'm going to be in charge this time very well." Shari grinned as she finished sliding the other cuff onto his hand. Tugging on the rope that connected the two cuffs, she led him toward the bed. When he stopped, she looked back at him, enjoying the mulish expression on his face. "Oh, don't tell me you thought I was joking about taking the lead, did you?"

Ben grabbed the ropes and pulled hard, sending her into him. "I knew you weren't joking," he muttered as he kissed her cheeks, down her neck, his hands, though cuffed, sliding under the satiny fabric until he had both breasts free for his viewing pleasure. "But there is no way I'm letting you have full control tonight. I can see many more wrestling matches in our future."

Shari groaned as his mouth captured one nipple while one thumb teased the other. Not wanting him to have all the fun, she pulled at his shirt, untucking it from the leather pants. Her fingers grazed against his abdomen before sliding upwards. "Gods, I love how you suckle my breasts, Ben." Her fingers sought out his nipples and she matched him stroke for stroke, tug for suckle, until they both moaned.

He reached around her while she lifted his shirt upwards. "This has got to come off, Shari." He grunted while trying to unzip the back of the costume. "Dammit, woman, wait until I've got you undressed before you take off my clothes!"

Chuckling, she stepped out of his embrace, taking his shirt up over his head. It came off, but got stopped by the cuffs. After swearing for a minute or two, she released him from the cuffs. Reaching downwards at the crotch area of her costume, she pulled at the fabric until the snaps gave away. "The zipper only goes three inches, dear. The only way to take off the suit is to open the bottom and unlace the corset."

Ben shook his head. "The corset is staying on for a while longer, but the rest of that costume is history." Proving his point, he tugged the fabric from under the corset, until it lifted clean from Shari's body, leaving her standing there with only her knee-high, spike-heeled, red leather boots and the matching red corset. The shocked expression on his face

when he realized she didn't put on any panties with the costume would be one she'd long remember. "Surprised you?"

"Something like that," he muttered as he knelt before her, forcing her legs further apart. "I think that I really like you in these boots. You're going to need more of these, definitely." His fingers slid up her inner thighs until they reached her labia. His fingers parted the swollen, damp flesh, exposing it to the cool air. She caught at one of the poles that surrounded the bed, bracing herself as his hot breath brushed across the front of her mons.

His tongue licked from the clitoris downwards, until it slid into her pussy. Ben adjusted his position a bit, then repeated the action as if he were a cat lapping up heavy cream from a saucer. Each stroke of his tongue made her inner muscles clench as shivers of pleasure shot through her body. Sliding her fingers into his hair, she enjoyed the silky texture before gently guiding him where she wanted him to lick. "Ben, I need you to suck my clit. This teasing has me on edge." She felt him hesitate and she rocked her hips forward and said in a tight voice, "Dammit, Ben ..."

Suddenly his mouth covered her clitoris as his teeth gently raked it back and forth. Feeling the tension reach to almost an exploding point, Shari gasped when he sucked the clit hard between his teeth. The orgasm was sharp and intense, leaving her breathless as Ben's fingers slid deep in her pussy. "Oh sweet woman, I love watching you orgasm," he whispered as she released him. He slid his fingers out of her body as he stood up. "There is nothing like seeing how pleased you look, the satisfaction of knowing that I'm the one who made you look like that."

"I like how you make me feel. Then again, I like the way you look when I pleasure you as well." She pointed to his pants. "I think those can come off. In fact, I think you should let me take them off for you. Lie down on the bed."

Ben chuckled, but sat on the bed as he undid the button and zipper to the leather pants. "Leather is not easy to get in or out of. Sure you don't need some assistance?"

Shari pushed him on the chest, sending him sprawling. "No, I don't need your help. I've dealt with leather many times before." With quick efficiency, she removed his boots and socks, then adjusted herself so that she knelt over his hips. Using careful, pulling and peeling techniques, Shari slowly slid the leather down Ben's hips, and she watched as his cock sprung to life as it was released. Then when she got to the end of his ankles, she stopped and slid up his body, trapping his legs under the thighs.

Her fingers stroked the length of his thick, long cock. "Hmm, seems that this wants some attention yet again." Ben watched her but didn't say anything. "Perhaps I can help it feel a bit better." Her tongue darted out, flicking the head, then sliding in one smooth stroke down the front. Using one of her hands to cup his testicles, Shari gently squeezed them while guiding the head of his cock into her mouth.

Setting the rhythm of going down slow, then squeezing his testicles while sliding her mouth upwards quickly, Shari enjoyed the sensation as his cock expanded to its full width.

Her mouth slid as far down as possible, then back up before going down deeper. Finally she licked the tip before releasing it from her mouth. Crawling up his body, sliding her pussy against his cock, she braced her arms on either side of his head. In his gaze she saw how much he enjoyed being there with her and her heart fluttered.

Getting an idea as her gaze went toward the head of the bed, she lifted herself upwards so her breasts dangled over his mouth. His mouth latched onto a nipple. She reached for one cuff, then the other. While she traced a pattern on one of his wrists, Shari rocked her hips, distracting Ben slightly so that she was able to cuff one hand. Then she took his other hand, which had crept to her unoccupied breast, and brought it upwards, sliding the cuff into place quickly. "Seems that you're my prisoner now, darling." She chortled.

Ben let go of her breast as the bed shook slightly from his tugging at the bonds. "Let me go, Shari." She shook her head while scooting off him. "Let me loose and I promise I won't get even."

Shari skipped toward one low table, looking at the various items. "Um, no, I don't think so. I kinda like you at my mercy. I promise to be kind and not tease you too badly." Selecting a flogger, furry mittens, and a small bottle with red liquid, Shari made her way back to the bed. "See, we're really going to have to work on this sharing of domination thing. But, since I won this round, you're just going to have to enjoy it."

She placed a bit of the red oil on each flogger tip then poured a small amount in the palm of one hand. Ben's eyes opened wide as she stood to one side of him and reached for his cock with the oil-covered hand. "I see you recognize the liquid. Must admit," Shari said as her hand coated his entire cock from the head to the balls with the liquid. His hips bucked upwards as she continued stroking. "I'm surprised you have this oil to keep a man hard and aroused."

Ben grunted through clenched teeth as his body arched into her hand. "It comes in handy at times when I want to pleasure a woman for a long time before climaxing." His breath came out in short pants. "Dammit, Shari ... you have no idea what kind of trouble you're courting by doing this."

"Uh, yeah, I do." Grinning at how his body pushed against her hand, causing his cock to slide through her encircled fingers, Shari raised the flogger with her other hand and brought it down gently but firmly over Ben's upper thighs. Then she flicked the ends of the flogger over his cock before going back to his upper thighs while she slid her free hand over each flogged section, easing the ache. "I love how your body jumps at the slight sting of the flogger, yet pushes harder and faster, showing me how much you enjoy it." Her pussy clenched when Ben moaned deeply as his hips thrust hard against her hand, breaking the grip she had. "Seems like you're close to coming."

"Don't stop, Shari. Gods, please, don't you dare stop."

Shari bent over and kissed one nipple, then the other while lightly flogging his cock. Then she looked into his dark, lust-filled gaze. "Oh, but I am. Two can play at this game,

Benjamin Cameron, and this is for what you did to me last night.” Her teeth tugged a nipple; then she stood up, unlacing her red corset. “Ah, much better, I think. Hmm, how else can I tease you ...?” Her eyes lit onto a small case on the table next to the bed. Opening it up, a huge grin filled her face. “Oh, I think we have a winner.” Lifting two rings, Shari flicked the small switch on each. They vibrated in her hand and she moved back. “I think I could love you just on the toys alone, my darling.” She slid first the one ring, then the other over his erect penis, gently pushing them until they rested at the base of his cock. “Cock rings, vibrating ones at that. You definitely like pleasing your woman.”

“You do realize when I get out of these restraints --”

“I’m dead. Yeah, I know. Which is why I’m enjoying this while I can.” She climbed onto the bed, removing his leather pants and helping him until he was in the center of the bed. She rubbed some of the oil Ben handed her earlier on her breasts then on her labia, gasping as the liquid first heated up her skin then made it feel so cold with each breeze that caressed her skin. “Oh, gods, is this what I think it is?”

Ben nodded smilingly. “Yup. Look at how your nipples tighten. Looks like you need to have them sucked and played with. Untie me and I promise I’ll make sure that your nipples get plenty of attention as well as your plump, pink pussy. Bet that liquid is making your lovely pussy lips throb with needing to be touched.”

Shari groaned as she rubbed at her clit, trying to ease the sudden tension that vibrated deep within. “Evil male. You’re so going to ease this ache, all right.” Maneuvering herself so that she knelt over his face, she lowered her pussy to his mouth. “Suck me, Ben,” she moaned as she lowered her mouth over his cock once more. “Suck me and I’ll suck you.” Then she slid her mouth fast and hard down his cock, taking him deep, setting up a dizzying rhythm that his mouth followed. His tongue probed deeply into her pussy as his lower teeth raked her clit.

She enjoyed the taste of his cock as his pre-cum coated the top of his cock. Her mouth spread it downwards as her hips shifted her pussy hard against his mouth, and she whimpered as another orgasm slammed through her body. Rocking her hips forward and backward, Shari whimpered as she let go of Ben’s cock, using one hand to continue sliding up and down its full length. When she felt a bit more in control, Shari shifted herself so she was sitting on one side of the bed. “Condom?”

“Drawer below box.” Ben’s eyes looked glazed with primal lust and Shari reveled in the moment, the power she felt in bringing him to the point of overwhelming need and desire demanding fulfillment. Quickly she found the condoms, opened up one of them, then quickly slid it over the length of his cock. Keeping her back to him, she climbed into position, tilting her hips slightly to accommodate the unusual positioning. Her free hand guided the head of his cock to her entrance and wetness seeped from her slit.

“I want to see your face, Shari,” Ben whispered. “Turn around.”

She looked over her shoulder as shifted her hips, her pussy completely filled by his cock. When she had him completely in her, she rocked her hips slightly and moaned. "I thought you might like this." Then she rocked again, sliding his cock fully against the back lining of her pussy, sending frissons through her body.

"Oh, my fucking gods," Ben gritted as he matched her moves, thrusting his cock hard into her. She heard him jerking on the bonds around his wrists, smiling at how wild he was getting. "You feel so damn good, my love. Don't you dare stop."

"I don't think I can," Shari panted as she increased the tempo while leaning back, her hands clasping her ankles. "I feel like I'm getting close to coming again." Her words tumbled out as she heard a noise behind her.

"Oh, we're both going to come this time," Ben growled. Suddenly his hands grabbed her hips, thrusting her harder and harder against his cock. Shocked, she turned to face him, but he continued fucking her hard, not letting go of her hips. "I warned you what would happen if I got out of these bonds."

He shifted his weight suddenly, sending her off to one side. Shari tried to move, but Ben's hands held her hips in place as her legs opened further apart as his cock withdrew almost completely before slamming hard and deep into her pussy while the cock rings vibrated against her tight clit. "Don't stop," she begged as he continued fucking her harder, pulling her hips as his cock rammed deep.

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. Lift your sweet ass up higher, Shari." Ben's hands guided her hips upwards, while her chest pressed against the soft sheets. "Just like that, sweetie." His hands kneaded her ass, exposing her puckered hole. She knew that he didn't have anything to use to pleasure her there. Then she felt pressure at the entrance as something slowly slid into her. The sensation of the slender yet nubby object going in then slowly out while Ben's cock pleased her pussy was pure bliss.

"Like this, do you?"

"Yes," she hissed, lifting her ass higher. "What is it?"

"You left the flogger out," Ben answered, his voice tightening as his body tensed up. "Do you know how erotic it is to see you enjoy this with me?"

"About as much as I enjoy pleasuring you," Shari answered him. Her panting increased as her body tightened. "I love you, Ben. I don't want anyone else."

"I want you always, you hot, sexy woman. You're mine." His voice sounded ragged as he grunted. "Tell me."

"I'm yours and you're mine." She let out a low moan. "I'm going to come, Ben. I don't know if I can wait much longer."

Ben's body suddenly let loose, his cock hitting so deep within her that Shari could only accept the pleasure while squeezing his cock with her inner muscles. Her body tightened as waves of her orgasm shot through her, and Ben's body tensed against hers, his cock

thickening then pulsating as they climaxed together. She kept moving against him, her body numb to everything but the pleasure that filled her, the love that she had for this man.

Suddenly she felt the end of the flogger slide out of her as Ben's warmth enveloped her back. He eased her to her side and they lay there, spooning, his cock still in her. She sighed contentedly as she reached back her hand resting possessively on his hip. "You are definitely one of the most creative lovers I've ever known."

His sexy chuckle had her smiling. "Well, you're one of a kind, Shari. I doubt we'll ever get bored with each other since we both enjoy erotic, kinky sex."

"Uh-huh, and I think once we recover, we should explore all the toys you have and see what we have in common and what we'll need to make sure they're at both places."

Ben brushed back her hair, kissing the nape of her neck. "At least until we figure out where we're going to live together. But I think we'll keep this as our special playhouse."

Shari laughed as Ben squeezed her tightly. "Definitely. I think we'll have to come hide out here sometimes away from everyone."

"You know something, Shari?"

She turned slightly and looked at him. "No, what?"

Ben smiled and pointed toward the doorway of the room. "I think we owe Manny some thanks. He definitely knew how to play this version of Match Game so we'd both win."

Shari looked at the shimmering figure in the doorway and let out a chortle, pointing him out to Ben. "How much did you see, Manny?"

Not enough, or too much, depending on how you like that kind of thing. Manny was dressed in khaki pants, a pale blue shirt, and his panama hat. I'm glad to see the two of you happy together. Those wistful, yet fearful looks aren't there anymore; instead I see happiness of the heart and soul. This ghost has done trabajo bueno, good work, hasn't he?

Ben hugged Shari closer. "Yes, you have. Granted, we're going to take this a step at a time, but yeah, you've done good, you otherworldly yenta."

Shari sang softly, "Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match ..."

"Not just any match, but matchmaking in that ghost style he has," Ben teased.

Knock it off, you two, Manny scolded them teasingly. I know the others will be thrilled by this when you tell them. I've got to go now, but remember, I'll always be around when I'm needed. There are still some people needing my services, and I'll come and spend some time with you all when I can.

Shari wiped a small tear from the corner from her eye. "I'd like that, Manny."

"Me, too, old friend," Ben replied, kissing Shari's cheek. "I'm going to spend some more time with the love of my life. Thank you for everything, *mi amigo de corazón*."

They watched as Manny waved before walking through the door. Ben withdrew his slightly erect cock, deftly handling the condom to dispose of it in a small basket. Then he

took out a small box with wet wipes, cleaning himself, then Shari. Ben pulled her on top of him so their gazes met. “So, since we love each other, that leaves only one major question to be answered.”

Shari lifted a brow. “What question is that?”

“Whose turn it is to be in charge of our next play session,” Ben answered as he rolled over, taking Shari with him.

“No fair!” Shari started ticking his sides. “You can’t just try to sneak past me like that ...”

“Gods, we’re going to have fun together,” Ben whispered as he pinned her hands over her head.

“Yup, but you’re still not in charge.” Her knee slid up between his legs, sliding against his cock. He sat upwards, releasing her hands and she pushed at him. “Let the games begin!”

~ * ~

Cynnara Tregarth

Born in Chicago, currently living in the Peninsula state, aka Florida, Cynnara loves to write, has always been writing or telling stories. Unfortunately for her, it means that her sense of direction sucks on occasion, but she can tell you all about ancient history. She always writes hot, but on occasion, delves into various other genres. Yet her first love is paranormal with various other genres tossed in for good measure.

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* * * * *

**MOON:
VIDA, AMOR, Y LA LUNA**

Jeigh Lynn

Dedication

To Mason and Tyson. Even though neither of you is allowed to read this story for another ten years or so, I want you to know that you are always in my heart and my thoughts. I love you both!

Special thanks to Andre, JBuL, and the great crew at Loose Id.

Prologue

Día de los muertos, Day of the Dead, is a day to celebrate the deceased, to respect them and their memories. But death cannot be recognized without first paying homage to life. Can life be celebrated without honoring love?

Chapter One

November 2, 1973

It looked like a black demon swooping down to get her, dark but for an outline of fiery orange and red. With the sunlight behind it, its face was cast in shadows and looked ... sinister.

She shivered.

This couldn't be right. He was usually good at listening, but he had to have misinterpreted what his fiancée had said. No one met family in a cemetery.

Someone tapped on the passenger side window, taking her attention away from the angel statue. Sarah gasped, clutching her chest, and glanced over at the empty driver's seat. Surprised by their destination, she hadn't realized he'd left the vehicle.

"Come on, Sarah, what are you waiting for? Get out of the car."

She gave the iron fence and its hovering beast a frown through the windshield before looking back at her cousin's smiling face. She shook her head. "Get back in the car, Kyle. We need to find a phone and call Rita."

He sighed, blowing a lock of strawberry blond hair off his forehead, and reached for the door handle. She hit the lock. No way was she getting out; the sun was on its way down and it would be dark soon.

"We don't need to call Rita. She's already here." He put his hands on his waist, cocking his hips slightly to the left. She might have been intimidated by the stare he gave her if she hadn't lived with him and his parents for most of her life.

What was it with men and directions anyway? She shook her head again. "She is not. You got the directions wrong. Rita isn't meeting us in a cemetery. Let's go call her, so we

won't be too late." Sarah knew Rita could be a little kooky at times, but not even she would introduce Sarah to the rest of her family in a graveyard.

Her cousin closed his eyes briefly, pinched the bridge of his nose and chuckled. When he spoke, his dark blue eyes twinkled with mirth. "I knew you'd act this way. That's why I didn't tell you."

What did that mean? So she didn't like cemeteries. Who did? They were morbid and scary. She frowned harder. "Get back in the car, please."

"Sarah, I know exactly where we are. We're supposed to be here, it's a celebration."

Ha! Just how naïve did he think she was?

Kyle strode around the back of the big blue Cadillac his mama had loaned them and opened the driver's side door. He leaned down, his arm resting on the door. His bangs fell into his eyes again. "Come on, coz. I thought you wanted to meet Rita's family?"

"I do, but Kyle --"

He slid into the driver's seat until his leg touched hers. "It's a culture thing. They really are here. They do this every year."

"A culture thing? Kyle, we may not be werewolves, but we come from a family of them. Have you ever heard of any of our relatives partying in such a place? Our family wouldn't be caught dead in a graveyard at night."

Kyle's lip twitched.

Oh, that was bad. She grinned, despite the seriousness of the conversation. "Well, I guess if they were dead ..."

Kyle laughed and hugged her, then released her. "You nut. It's a Mexican thing, not a werewolf thing. It's called *día de los muertos*."

It very well could be. His fiancée, Rita Hernandez, not only came from a family of werewolves, but she was also Mexican. The only thing Sarah knew about Mexicans was that the men were hunks. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. You know how narrow-minded my parents are. You're the only one in the family that doesn't have a problem with me marrying Rita; I want you to see this and share it with me. Besides, you've already met Diego, and Mexican culture is fascinating. Death is viewed very differently from the way we do." He kissed her forehead. "Please ..."

She really didn't want to go, but how could she not? Kyle was right. His parents were generally wonderful people, but they weren't very open-minded. They hadn't even allowed Sarah to date until this year, for crying out loud.

Sarah sighed. "Okay." Wanting to make a good impression on Rita's family, she flipped the car visor down and checked her appearance in the dim dome light. In the approaching darkness, her green eyes looked brown and her auburn hair looked less brassy than normal. Maybe if she was lucky the deepening dusk would continue to dull her bright hair.

She fluffed up her bangs and pulled her ponytail tighter, then let the ends fall back to her shoulders. Sliding out of the car, she straightened her white hip-hugger bell-bottoms and tugged on the hem of her green sweater.

"Lead the way, *Señor* Garrett. I'm all for learning new things. I *am* going to be a reporter, after all." Shutting the door she grabbed Kyle's hand. "But you better not be lying to me."

He chuckled and kissed her hand. "I'm not."

Clutching Kyle's fingers, she let him lead her out of the car and past the black cast iron gate. She tried not to think about where she was or how quickly the sun was setting. She wasn't a timid person, and it normally took a lot to give her the heebie-jeebies, but graveyards were too morose.

Kyle squeezed her hand. "You okay? You're not going to scream when someone speaks to you, are you?"

"Not unless it's a ghost. Then all bets are off."

Her cousin grinned and tugged her along. "Come on." He led her deeper into the cemetery. It was a very large place, with well manicured grass and trees. If it hadn't been for the fact that dead people were buried here, it would have been lovely, especially in the daytime. As it was, the place was just plain spooky.

Sarah heard them before she saw them. It did indeed sound like a party was going on. She'd never heard of such a thing. Everyone she knew talked in a hushed voice in graveyards. Were Rita and her family like this in churches and libraries, too?

She and Kyle rounded the corner of a mausoleum, and Sarah had to blink to make sure she was seeing things right. Kyle hadn't lied, after all. There were tons of candles and party decorations and about a dozen people scattered around a plot eating and drinking. It had to be the strangest thing she'd ever witnessed, but it looked like fun, too.

Kyle pulled on her hand. "Close your mouth, Sarah." She snapped her mouth shut, but didn't take her eyes off the sight in front of her.

Rita, who was standing with a group of women, looked up and saw them. She smiled and waved, heading their way. Her waist-length black hair floated behind her as she jogged up to them.

It was easy to see why Kyle had fallen in love with her. She was beautiful inside and out. Tonight, she had on a long, red, Spanish-styled skirt and a white long-sleeved shirt that did nothing to hide her ample bosom. Sarah thought it wasn't fair that someone so petite and thin should be so well endowed.

Kyle dropped Sarah's hand in favor of hugging his fiancée. They kissed briefly, and Sarah resisted the urge to sigh. She had never shared her aunt's opinion that Kyle needed someone fair. From the very first time she'd met Rita, Sarah had thought the affection they

shared was obvious in every glance they exchanged, and they looked good together, with Kyle's blond handsomeness a complement to Rita's dark beauty.

How could Kyle's parents frown on the match? They'd come very close to disowning their son when he'd announced his engagement. The only reason they hadn't was because Rita came from good werewolf stock. Her brother, Diego, was alpha of the local pack, which apparently made up for the fact that Rita wasn't lily white. Sarah wished she had someone who loved her the way Kyle did his fiancée.

Rita pulled back from Kyle and smiled at her. "I'm so glad you're here, Sarah. You have to meet my mama."

"Is she dead?" *Oh, God!* Sarah slapped her hand over her mouth.

Rita burst into laughter. "No, Red, she's very much alive. But never fear, I'm sure she'll introduce you to my papa, who *is* dead. That's his grave." She pointed to the spot Sarah had noticed was decorated with candles, flowers, and streamers, where all the people were gathered.

Sarah groaned. Rita wasn't the only one who had ever dared to call her "Red," but she was the only one Sarah hadn't been able to intimidate into dropping the nickname after the first time it was used. *Cursed red hair*. At least she didn't have the freckles to go with the mane, even if she did have the dreaded pale skin that burned if you so much as mentioned the sun. "Rita ..."

Rita's big brown eyes twinkled with mischief. "What? It's a cute nickname. Or maybe I could call you Scarlett; it fits you better than it does me."

A small Mexican woman rushed up, going to Kyle immediately. "*Mijo*."

"Hello, Mama." Kyle dipped down and hugged the woman, kissing her cheek.

The woman returned Kyle's kiss and stepped back. She tsked at Rita. "*Mija*, you aren't named Scarlett for your appearance. And it's not a nickname; it's a middle name." She then turned to Sarah, openly looking her up and down.

Sarah resisted the urge to squirm under her close scrutiny. This was her only cousin's future mother-in-law, and she wanted the older woman to like her. It meant a lot to Kyle. In a way, Sarah was acting as ambassador for her and Kyle's family.

Then Rita's mom smiled and hugged her, giving her no choice but to hug back. "Welcome, Sarah; you're even prettier than Margarita has said. I'm Esperanza Hernandez. Please call me Mama, *mija*." She grabbed Sarah's hand and brought her toward the festive grave. "Kyle tells me you're a writer. What do you write? I love romance novels. Have you read *Gone with the Wind*?"

Sarah glanced over her shoulder at Kyle and Rita. *Help me*.

Rita waved and shrugged, grimacing. "It's okay. Have her tell you about our customs. She's harmless ... I promise."

Sarah turned back to Esperanza. "Y-yes, ma'am. I love that novel."

"I named my children after its characters. Well, their middle names anyway."

Sarah smiled. And people accused her of living in a book. "What are their names? I know Rita's is Margarita Scarlett. What's Diego's?"

"He is Diego Ashley, and Emilio is Emilio Rhett."

"Emilio? I've heard Diego talk about him, but I've never met him. Is he here?"

"Oh, yes. He's around here somewhere. Emilio is the baby. He's eighteen months younger than Margarita." Esperanza patted her hand. "Come, let me introduce you to my Nestor."

They stopped in front of the plot. Against the headstone and between two potted arrangements of marigolds was a picture of a man. A very handsome man. Rita's older brother and Kyle's best friend, Diego, bore a very strong resemblance to him. Something about the portrait's smiling face made her relax, and she smiled back.

"This is my husband Nestor. This --" She motioned around her. "-- must be quite strange to you. What questions do you have, *mija*?"

Sarah glanced at Esperanza. The concern in the older woman's lined face made her want to reassure her. And she was very curious. It was strange, but she sensed a kinship to the older woman; she thought she could ask questions without offending her.

"Esperanza, I'm not like my aunt and uncle. I'm very glad Kyle is marrying Rita. I adore her. I'm also very curious about not just your culture, but about werewolf culture, too. The wolf gene skipped my uncle, Kyle's dad, and he doesn't talk about that side of the family with Kyle and me so we don't know very much. My father was a wolf, too, but he died when I was young."

Esperanza smiled and tugged her down to sit beside the grave. "Then you may ask me anything at all, *mija*. I didn't come from a family of wolves like you, but my sons are wolves, as was my Nestor."

What does *mija* mean?"

"*Mija* means 'my daughter.' *Mijo* is 'my son.' They are terms of endearment."

Sarah grinned, realizing the woman had accepted her into her family already. "What is the Day of the Dead about? Why is there a party and decora--"

"*Mami, Emilio es malo conmigo, no me quera dar una galleta.*"

Sarah froze. Right in front of her were two of the most gorgeous men she'd ever laid eyes on. One man, the one who'd spoken, had black hair and piercing gray eyes, and the face of an angel, with high cheekbones and a dimple in his right cheek. He was fair-skinned with a golden tan, but not as fair as Sarah, and ... beautiful. The other man was obviously Mexican; he, too, had black hair, but his eyes were big and brown, and his skin was a very dark tan. He wasn't as lovely as the first man, but he was quite handsome and very sexy. Of the two, he was the larger, although not by much.

Esperanza pointed a stern finger at the tanned man, but she was smiling. “Emilio, give Michael one of those cookies and quit being mean to him.”

The one who had initially spoken, Michael, was now hanging off the back of the other one, Emilio, trying to reach a skull-shaped cookie in Emilio’s outstretched hand. Both men were laughing. Finally, Emilio relented and handed over the cookie as his friend dropped onto his feet.

Michael looked down at Sarah, his mouth making a small O. He smiled again. “Hi.”

Sarah felt like she’d been run over by a big rig. “Hel-lo.”

Emilio smiled just as brightly as Michael. “Hey.” He took the cookie back from his friend and held it out to her. “Would you like one?”

Sarah opened her mouth, but nothing happened. Her body responded, even though her brain had obviously taken a leave of absence. Her nipples perked right up, and she was suddenly grateful that she wore a bra under her thin sweater.

Esperanza saved her from further embarrassment by waving her hands at the men. “Get away, the both of you! Sarah and I are talking about *día de los muertos* and books. Shoo ...”

Michael winked at her, grabbed the cookie back and stuck it in his mouth before turning away.

Emilio rolled his eyes and shook his head, then he followed his friend. A few yards away he swung around and waved. “Bye, Sarah.”

No, don’t go! Sarah waved back in a daze. The two men eventually blended in with the crowd and Sarah lost sight of them. She looked at Esperanza.

“The taller one was your younger son, right? Who was the other?”

“Oh, *mija*. You may just be the one. Yes, that was Emilio, of course, and his close friend, Michael McCoy.” The older woman grinned, her eyes twinkling. “Any woman who loves Emilio or Michael must accept the other as well, I’m afraid. They are a package deal.”

Huh? Then what Esperanza had said earlier hit her. “The one?”

The older woman nodded. “The one for both of them.”

Chapter Two

November 4, 1974

She was bored out of her mind. They'd been here for an hour and the priest hadn't even called for the groomsmen and bridesmaids yet; he was still giving Kyle and Rita instructions. You'd think the couple had to perform some elaborate dance or magic act the way the priest made them repeat things over and over. Of course, that was probably why they called it a rehearsal.

"Hey. Sarah, right?"

She jumped, not having realized anyone had come up beside her. "Oh!" She put her hand to her chest and looked up. Emilio and Michael stood at the end of the aisle, smiling at her. She nearly swallowed her tongue, and her belly started doing flip-flops.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Can we sit down?" Emilio asked.

"Sure." Sarah scooted along the pew, making plenty of space for them, but instead of sitting on the end, Emilio walked past and sat on her other side, leaving the space by the aisle for Michael, who ended up leaning against the back of the pew in front of them. *Okay, be cool, Sarah.*

Emilio grinned and dipped his head toward the altar, where Kyle, Rita, and the priest were. "Boring, isn't it?"

Sarah grinned back, trying her best to relax and not make a complete fool of herself. "Very. I should have brought a book."

Michael nodded. "I was thinking the same thing." He was even more gorgeous up close. His skin was so smooth; surely he was old enough to shave. He had to be around her age, but there was no hint of facial hair. Unlike Emilio, he didn't appear to be naturally dark, but

rather as though his golden tan was from exposure to the sun. Anyone with his skin tone and hair color normally had brown eyes, but the contrast between his jet-black hair and gray eyes was amazing, almost startling in its beauty. He wasn't a huge man by any means, but his snug shirt showed off well-defined muscles, like those of an athlete. He also had high cheekbones and a barely visible cleft in his chin.

"You're Kyle's cousin?" Emilio asked, bringing her attention back to him. Michael awed her with his good looks, but Emilio exuded a rugged masculinity. He was the type of man that instantly made a woman think of sex. The size and the breadth of his shoulders made her want to strip him bare and touch him. He raised one black brow, looking at her expectantly.

Oh, Lord, she was gawking. He'd asked her a question. "Yes. He's more like a brother, though. I've lived with him and his parents since I was four. You're Emilio?"

He grinned, his big brown eyes crinkling just a little at the corners. "Yes. And this is Michael." Emilio reached up and ran a finger down her forehead. "Why the frown?" His touch was soft, gentle, almost seductive. And very forward, given that he'd just met her, but she didn't mind; for some odd reason it felt right.

She was relaxing in their presence, the more they talked. "I was just thinking that you have a slight accent when you say your name, but it was Michael who spoke Spanish at the cemetery." She looked at the other man. "Are you Mexican, too?"

He grinned, looking mischievous and showing off the dimple she'd glimpsed last night. "*No, hermosa, soy americano, pero hablo español.*"

She didn't have a clue what he'd said, but it went straight to her core.

Michael's eyes flared wide for a second, then grew a shade darker, a stormy gray. "*Te gusta cuando mi hablo español?*"

Sarah shivered, unable to help herself, and hoped neither of them noticed. "What did you say?"

"He said, 'No, beautiful, I'm American, but I speak Spanish.'" Emilio's voice was raspy and close to her ear. His breath moved the hairs at her temple. "Then he asked if you liked it when he spoke Spanish to you."

Her inner muscles squeezed tight and she felt moisture seep out. Sarah closed her eyes and leaned toward him, then straightened quickly, blinking. What was it about these two that got to her? They were gorgeous, sure, but there was something more.

She faced Emilio, trying to regain her composure. "Oh, yes. It's a pretty language." *Wait.* Michael had called her beautiful? She swiveled her head so fast that Emilio had to shift to avoid being hit in the face with her ponytail. "I'm not beautiful."

Michael's cheeks turned pink, and his gaze shot to Emilio before he ducked his head. It was both an endearing and interesting reaction, and did funny things to her insides. How could such a handsome man be shy?

Emilio chuckled. "Yes, you are."

It was on the tip of her tongue to argue, but she smiled instead. If they thought her beautiful, she wasn't about to try and talk them out of thinking so. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Sarah glanced at Michael, glad to see the charming blush was starting to fade. "How is it that you speak Spanish so well?"

Michael grinned. "I learned it growing up. Emilio's d--"

"My dad was the foreman on the Bar Mc --"

"Before I was born." Michael shoved Emilio's shoulder. "Stop talking for me."

Emilio shoved back, chuckling. "Then talk faster."

Michael rolled his eyes, but the humor shined through. "See what I put up with, Sarah? Just because I'm the youngest --"

"Oh, brother." Emilio sighed and threw his hands in the air. "Here he goes. He loves to tell everyone that he's persecuted because he's the youngest."

"Ahem. As I was saying, the Bar Mc is my family's ranch, and as a kid I spent most of my time with Esperanza and Nestor. My parents were busy overseeing the ranch and training my older brother, Morgan, to take over. Emilio, Diego, Rita, and I all grew up together." Michael studiously avoided Emilio's gaze, clearly trying to keep a smile at bay, but he failed miserably.

Sarah couldn't help it; she giggled. They were too cute. Esperanza was right: anyone who dated one of them would have to get along with the other. "Do you both still live on the ranch?"

Michael nodded. "We live in the guesthouse. When --"

"When my dad died, my mom and siblings moved out of the foreman's cottage and into the guesthouse. Diego's married now, and Mama and Rita rented an apartment in town. The place was too big for just me, and we both work on the ranch, so Michael moved in."

They were real cowboys? Sarah's heart rate sped up a notch. She'd always had a thing for cowboys. She loved the gentlemanly attitude that most of them had, and the sight of a man on a horse with his hat pulled down low over his eyes ... was there anything more manly? It sure appealed to the writer in her and to her sense of romance. She wished she could ride off into the sunset with these two. "What do y'all do on the ranch?"

Michael shrugged. "Anything and everything. My brother runs the place now that my parents are gone, and we have a new foreman, so we take our orders from him."

"Oh, your parents died? I'm so sorry."

His gaze darted to Emilio and back. Michael swallowed audibly, then waved her words away, like they weren't a big deal. "It was several years ago, but thank you."

An awkward silence fell between them. She got the impression that Michael was almost relieved his parents weren't around anymore, but she didn't question him. Instead, she tried to regain the easy camaraderie they'd all shared before his parents were mentioned.

"Do you ride horses?" Sarah groaned. Had she really asked that? They were born on a ranch and still worked there; of course they rode horses.

Emilio chuckled. "Yes, we do. Do you ride?"

"No. I've always wanted to learn, though."

"Yeah?" Emilio arched a dark brow and glanced at Michael.

"We could teach you." Michael smiled. "What are you doing Wednesday? Even though it will be the morning after the wedding, do you want to come riding with us? I'm not going to school that day. Maybe the three of us can pack a picnic lunch and make a day of it."

Oh, my God. "Like on a date?"

"Yeah, like a date."

"With both of you?" *Please say yes.*

Michael blushed. "Uh --"

Emilio chuckled and patted her on the thigh. "Yes, with both of us."

"Good. It's a date, then. I don't have any classes this Wednesday." Sarah had the urge to kick herself. What had she done? If her aunt and uncle found out, they'd strangle her. The fuss they'd made over Kyle dating a Mexican girl wouldn't hold a candle to when they found out *she* had a date with two men at once. She knew this was wrong, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to be upset. Worried, definitely, but upset? She glanced at Michael, then Emilio. Nope, there wasn't an ounce of remorse in her. She wanted them both; sadly, if her feelings didn't change, it might even test Kyle's sense of propriety.

A door slammed somewhere in the distance. Loud whispers followed the rapid clip of high-heeled shoes echoing in the church paced by more measured steps. Someone cleared their throat.

Sarah got the feeling of impending doom before she even turned around.

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Kenneth sat down in a back pew. Her aunt had her blonde hair piled into a pristine beehive, looking her usual immaculate self in a blue polyester dress with a white suit jacket, appearing as though she'd just exited a board room. Unfortunately, the look on her plump face brought to mind someone sucking on a lemon. Her uncle didn't seem much better; he was dressed more casually like the rest of them, but his auburn eyebrows were drawn together in a frown as he glowered toward the altar. It was obvious that they didn't want to be there.

"Who are they?" Michael asked.

Emilio shrugged.

Sarah had the sudden urge to slide to the floor. "That's my aunt and uncle," she whispered.

Michael's eyebrows lowered. "I'm sorry." His eyes widened, and he slapped a hand over his mouth.

Sarah burst into laughter. She loved her aunt and uncle, but she hated how they behaved toward anyone they deemed beneath them, whether socially, politically, economically, or otherwise.

Everyone stared at her, Emilio, and Michael. The soon-to-be-wed couple smiled, then quickly turned back to the priest, but not before Sarah quickly covered her own mouth and slumped down on the pew. Emilio groaned, reaching to pinch Michael's arm, but he, too, was chuckling.

Uncle Kenneth caught Sarah's gaze, looked at the men with her, and glared even harder.

* * * * *

The smell of spicy Mexican food hit her as soon as she opened the door. The place had a wonderful Spanish flair to it, decorated in rich reds, golds, and dark wood, with paintings of matadors. Soft mariachi music added to the pleasant ambiance. She suddenly felt underdressed in her bell-bottom jeans and pink paisley shirt. Hopefully, no one else from the rehearsal had changed out of their casual wear.

The hostess smiled at her from behind a dark wood podium. "Can I help you?"

Sarah looked around the dim restaurant, trying to locate her group, then spotted Kyle waving to her over the hostess's shoulder. She noted with relief that everyone was still in the clothes they'd worn earlier. She pointed. "That's my party there."

"Follow me, please." The woman picked up a menu and led her to the table. Kyle remained seated while Rita sort of flitted around, talking to everyone.

Sarah realized that with the exception of Michael and Emilio, who'd both gone back to work right after the rehearsal, and her aunt and uncle who'd claimed not to be hungry, the men had congregated at one end of the table and the women at the other.

Sarah sat beside Rita's sister-in-law, Claire, just as Rita caught sight of her. Rita grinned like a loon and sashayed over, her knee-length blue skirt showing off her pretty legs. She arched a brow at Sarah. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Sarah asked, looking around to see if anyone had been served yet. She was relieved to see no one had anything more than a glass of water in front of them. She'd been the last one to arrive because she had gotten lost on the way to the restaurant. Well, that and the fact she'd stood in the parking lot of the church talking to Emilio and Michael for ten minutes after everyone else had left. She had wanted to spend more time with them.

Rita scoffed and looked at Claire before snagging a chip from a bowl and dipping into some hot sauce. She fluttered her eyelashes. "Sarah's holding out on us."

Claire chuckled and raised a pale brown brow at Sarah, too. "Come on, spill it. We saw you talking to Emilio and Michael."

Rita giggled. "Nothing stays secret in this family for long, cousin."

Claire shook her head, her long brown hair falling over her shoulder to blend in with her brown button-down shirt. "Nope, it sure doesn't. Welcome to the Hernandez family, Sarah." She also dipped a chip in salsa and took a bite.

"I'm not a Hernandez."

"You're Kyle's cousin, close enough." Rita said at the same time Claire waggled her brows and tossed in a "Just about."

From the two intense stares she got, Sarah realized that she wasn't going to get away with trying to ignore them. She glanced around to make sure no one was listening and was thankful to find most of their group was ordering their food. "Okay, okay, I have a date the day after the wedding."

"With which one?" Claire took a drink of water.

"Ooh, I bet it's Emilio." Rita clapped her hands and stomped her feet. The men at the other end looked up and glanced at them. Great, now everyone was going to know. Sarah groaned and snatched a chip, quickly popping it into her mouth.

Claire waved at the men. "Hi, order your food; nothing to see here."

Her husband, Diego, raised a dark brow. Kyle mouthed, "What?" To which Rita responded by blowing him a kiss.

"Do something. Act normal," Claire hissed from the side of her mouth while still smiling at her husband.

Sarah and Rita both grabbed their glasses and took big gulps. Finally, after a last quizzical look, both men shrugged and went back to their conversation with the waiter.

Rita sighed. "Well, are you going out with Emilio or Michael?"

Sarah gnawed her bottom lip. How was it going to sound when she admitted the truth? "Er ... both of them."

Claire let out an excited squeal, then promptly bit her fist.

Rita did her little impromptu tap dance again. "Yes!"

Sarah was glad someone was okay with it because her aunt was going to have a fit. Well, that is, if Sarah told her, which she wasn't going to do. Lord, how had this happened?

"It's just a friendly get-together. It isn't like it's a *date* date. They don't mean anything by it." But, boy, did she want them to.

"Yet." Rita smirked.

Sarah groaned. How could Rita act like it wouldn't be a total shock for her to date two men at the same time? That was just strange.

"Honey, you've lasted longer than anyone else," Claire said. Rita nodded enthusiastically in agreement and took another tortilla chip.

"Longer than anyone else? What do you mean?" Sarah frowned.

Claire chuckled. "You talked to them for several hours and agreed to a date ... with both of them."

Sarah had a feeling the women were trying to tell her something. "Are you saying that neither of them can get dates? Because I won't believe you."

Rita glanced down over at the men, then lowered her voice. "Oh, no, not at all, but usually when women see them together, they get a little put off."

Sarah frowned. "I don't see how that's possible; they're so ... Any woman would jump at the chance to date either of them."

"They're mates. They won't admit it but, and they don't act on it, but we all know they are."

Sarah gasped, oddly excited by Rita's words. "Are you saying they're lovers?" Her panties grew moist. What she wouldn't give to see the two of them kissing and ...

Claire shook her head. "No, that's just it. They aren't. They refuse to face it or discuss it with anyone. They carry on like they're just best friends." She motioned Sarah forward, which Sarah did after sparing another glance at the other end of the table.

Claire lowered her voice to where Sarah had to strain to hear. "Diego says when they were younger they got caught ..." She shrugged, waving her hand around in a small circle. "... exploring. Michael's dad apparently hit the roof. From what I've heard, Nestor wasn't too happy with the boys, either. Esperanza got in the middle of it all, and the whole situation became a huge mess. She didn't think the boys should be punished, but both Nestor and Michael's dad were adamant that the boys' relationship was wrong. According to Diego, Nestor nearly moved his family off the ranch to keep Michael and Emilio apart, but Esperanza put her foot down."

Wow. The guys she was interested in were mates. Sarah let that thought soak in. What had happened to them was terrible; after all, they couldn't help their feelings for each other. Even she knew that werewolves didn't choose their mates but were born to them. How could their fathers, who were both wolves themselves and had their own mates, be so harsh?

Maybe this was a good thing; maybe she could have the both of them and bring them together the way they should be. Emilio and Michael deserved to be happy. The idea certainly held tons of appeal, and the Hernandez women apparently didn't have a problem with Sarah enjoying both men.

"Now you just have to convince the guys that you're right for them," Claire continued.

Rita nodded. “And you already have a head start. I don’t think they’ve ever asked out the same girl before.”

How had she gotten herself into this? She couldn’t walk away now even if she wanted to. She desired Emilio and Michael, regardless of any repercussions.

Chapter Three

November 6, 1974

She pulled through the double iron gates and up the dirt drive of the Bar Mc at ten a.m. She would have liked to have come earlier, but she'd stayed up late the night before at the wedding reception, hours after the couple left for their honeymoon. The wedding had been beautiful and wonderfully romantic, and best of all she'd gotten to dance with both Emilio and Michael. She was almost giddy about seeing them again today.

It was bright out, and not too chilly for a fall day. Sarah put her little red VW Bug in park and noticed there was only one man coming out to meet her. She was certain by the swagger and the wide shoulders relative to the waist that it was Emilio heading her way, even though his face was partially covered by a cowboy hat. Where was Michael?

Emilio looked good enough to eat in his long-sleeved red flannel shirt, blue jeans, and black hat. He walked to her car door and opened it, then offered her a hand. "Hey, there. You made it. Did you have any trouble finding us?" He pulled Sarah up and into a hug, then brushed his lips across her cheek.

She was surprised at the warm greeting, but it didn't stop her from reveling in his attention. He was big and felt wonderful against her. She wasn't short by any stretch of the imagination -- she was actually on the tall side for a woman, standing five-foot-eight -- but he made her feel slight, feminine.

"Hey, yourself, cowboy." She squeezed him back and kissed his cheek. The embrace lingered for several seconds longer than necessary before he stepped back, smiling down at her. "I didn't have any problems getting here. Michael's directions were very clear." She glanced around, hoping maybe she'd somehow missed Michael joining them and that he was actually right there. "Where is he?"

Emilio shut her car door, then grabbed her hand and started tugging her toward a big and long brown building. He sighed, sounding a little upset. "He had to run some errands for the foreman, but he should be back in a couple of hours."

Sarah squashed down her disappointment and threaded her fingers through his. Hopefully, Michael would make it back sooner rather than later. Until then, she would enjoy Emilio's company. "So, what are we going to do today? Are you going to teach me how to ride?"

"Sure. Let's go. Michael will catch up."

They went inside the oblong building, which turned out to be a barn, or was it a stable? There was a row of stalls along each side of the long walls; four on one side, with a room on the end, and six stalls on the other side. Some horses were in a few of the stalls, and everything was surprisingly clean. The air was redolent of leather and some other scent she couldn't name. Horses? Hay? Maybe both.

Emilio chuckled and squeezed her hand as she stopped. "You look cute with your nose scrunched up like that. What are you trying to smell?"

She grinned. "Just trying to decide what that odor is."

"Horses."

She laughed. "It's a good smell, like leather, and kind of fresh."

He nodded. "The hay and the conditioner and stuff from the tack room." He pointed to the end of the building and began walking. "I'm surprised you can detect it. You must have a good nose."

"I guess. Not like yours, I'm sure."

Emilio turned toward her. He was still holding her hand so she had no choice but to come to a halt with him. "You know?"

"That you're a werewolf? Yeah. Well, I sort of assumed. I know Diego is. My father was a wolf, too."

"I knew Kyle's family had the gene, but since his father isn't a wolf, I assumed the trait came from his mother's side. Your father and Kyle's were brothers, right?"

"Right. My uncle doesn't really discuss wolf or pack things with us. I guess since he and Kyle aren't wolves, he doesn't really see a need."

"Anything you want to know, feel free to ask. Michael and I are my brother's betas." He squeezed her hand and took a step forward, waiting for her to follow.

Sarah strode beside him, swinging their hands just a little. "Really? The two of you are like seconds in command?"

He nodded. "We are. In all honesty, Michael is probably the strongest wolf in our pack, but Diego is a better leader." She wondered if he realized his voice softened a bit when he said Michael's name.

"Now we have to get saddles. Come on, I'll teach you how to saddle your mount." He opened the door to the tack room.

The scent of leather nearly overwhelmed her. Sarah inhaled the deep rich air. "Mmm ..."

Emilio grinned and took a deep breath himself. "I know what you mean. I love the smell, too." He turned to her, his grin fading. They stood there for several seconds, just staring at each other.

Sarah swallowed a lump in her throat. She was inexperienced, yet this man made every one of her nerve endings shout to be touched. Excluding Michael, she'd never wanted another man the way she wanted Emilio.

He reached for her face slowly, giving her plenty of time to pull away. Instead, she leaned into the caress.

"You just fit in, like you belong." His gaze left her as his fingers traced her cheek. "And you're so beautiful. Your creamy skin reminds me of milk." He trailed his fingers over her nose, looking her in the eye again. "You have the most beautiful green eyes." He smoothed his hand over her hair until he got to her ponytail, then he tangled his fingers in it. "I never thought I liked red hair until I met you."

"I like you too." With his keen sense of smell, he had to know how turned on she was, but she didn't care. She couldn't have stopped her reaction to him even if the sky fell in. And she didn't want to stop. She needed this man to know that she was feeling everything he was.

His gaze and thumb caressed her bottom lip. "Can I kiss you, Sarah?" He leaned forward.

She moved toward him, too, closing her eyes. "Please." Her voice was so husky it sounded strange to her own ears.

His hands covered hers and she realized she'd placed them on his chest. Emilio pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. His mouth covered hers.

She'd been kissed before, but this was like nothing she'd ever experienced. It was light and gentle and made her head swim. He nibbled and sucked at her lips, taking his time. It was like he was savoring her, learning her. His tongue licked at the seam of her lips, not forcing its way inside, but coaxing.

Sarah opened with a sigh, needing to taste him. Her hands clenched and unclenched on his chest until finally he gathered them up in his own. His tongue caressed the inside of her mouth, tangling with her own. He moaned and let go of her hands, grabbed her waist and drew her closer. Her stomach pressed firmly against his erection. It was heady to realize he was as aroused as she was.

The kiss grew heated until they were clutching at each other, almost trying to merge with each other. She was matching him moan for moan and, giving no thought to right or

wrong, she moved against him, writhing to ease the achy feelings he had awakened in her body. Moisture tickled her as it ran down her inner labia. She wanted him to touch her there. The friction of his thigh wasn't nearly enough.

Abruptly, Emilio gasped and closed his eyes, holding her at arm's length. His face was tight and pinched, almost like he was in pain. "Sarah, I'm so sorry. I got carried away."

Sarah took a deep breath, trying to calm her pounding heart. She looked around, realized where they were, and blushed. She was embarrassed by her own boldness and felt a stab of guilt thinking about Michael, but she wouldn't apologize for it. She wanted them both and she didn't want to leave him in any doubt about that. "I liked it; you don't have anything to ask forgiveness for."

Emilio smiled and gripped her hand, caressing it with his thumb. "I'm glad, but we should slow down a bit, get to know each other a little better. I want this to be something that lasts, not just a fling."

She may have squeaked, she wasn't sure, but her spirits soared at his words. She nodded. "Me, too."

He kissed her forehead. "Good. I'm glad I'm not alone in this." He jerked his head to the side, indicating the tack room beyond the door they were standing in. "Come on, let's saddle up a couple of horses and go for a ride."

They were sitting by the stock pond talking and letting their horses rest when Michael found them. Sarah heard the hoof beats a few seconds before she looked over her shoulder and saw him. He came galloping up with a huge smile on his handsome face and his hair mussed and windblown. He wore a pair of faded blue jeans, scuffed, dusty brown boots, and a green-and-white-striped long-sleeved shirt. He looked every inch the cowboy Emilio did, and handled his horse like it was absolutely effortless, which only added to the cowboy appearance. The only thing missing was a gun at his hip and a hat.

"Hey, y'all." Michael stopped about a yard behind them. He waved at Sarah and made a face at Emilio, twisting his nose and snarling out one side of his mouth.

Emilio stuck his tongue out, then grinned at Sarah, pretending he hadn't.

Sarah chuckled, looking from one to the other. The two of them were so fun together, the way they played and teased each other. Was it because they were mates or because they were both wolves? She'd never really seen two wolves together. Her dad and grandfather had both died before she was old enough to remember them, and her uncle wasn't a wolf. "What was that for?"

Michael swung down from his horse and let go of the reins, allowing his horse to wander around with theirs. "He's wearing my hat." He bounded over to them, snatched the black felt hat off Emilio's head and put it on his own. He sat down on the other side of Sarah,

stretched out his long legs and smiled so big at her that the dimple in his right cheek appeared. "Hi, Sarah."

Sarah grinned, still half chuckling. "Hi, Michael."

Emilio reached around her back and snatched the hat back. "I bought it."

Michael snorted. "Yeah, because you ruined my other one."

"Did not."

Michael raised a dark brow.

She was impressed; as pretty as he was, she'd have never thought Michael could look intimidating, but he pulled it off nicely. It made her giggle though. What was it Claire and Rita had said? That they made most women uncomfortable with their closeness? Their interaction certainly didn't have that effect on her. Instead, their antics and ease with each other made her feel good, like she belonged with them.

"I didn't ruin it. It was just a little --" Emilio shrugged.

"Flat. And it wasn't a *little*. It was flatter than a pancake." Michael rolled his eyes, a huge smile on his face. He was clearly enjoying taunting his friend. He looked at her, his lips all but twitching. "He sat on it."

"I didn't sit on it; I fell on it. There's a difference."

Sarah laughed and patted Emilio's arm. "I imagine you go through a lot of hats working on a ranch. Accidents are bound to happen."

Michael chuckled. "Well, he goes through more hats than most. And the demise of my last hat wasn't a ranching accident. It was him goofing off with his brother." Michael's voice took on a serious note. "That reminds me. You're supposed to call Diego. He got through before I headed out to find y'all. He said it was really important and to tell you to call right away."

Emilio's smile faded. "Did he say what he wanted?"

Michael shook his head. "No. I tried to get him to tell me, but he said you'd fill me in after you talked to him."

Sarah frowned. She liked Diego and Claire. Diego had been Kyle's friend for years, so she knew him fairly well. "I hope nothing's wrong."

"I don't think there is." Michael shrugged. "He didn't sound upset."

Emilio stood up and dusted his jeans off. "Well, I better go and make sure."

Sarah got up as well. "Okay, I understand." She dusted off her own pants and prepared to leave.

Emilio grinned and put a hand on her arm. "Nah, stay here. Michael will keep you company. I'll just talk to my brother and come back. I'm sure if it were something major he would've told Michael."

“Oh, all right.” She tried to ignore the giddy feeling she got at the thought of spending time alone with Michael. It would give her a chance to get to know him, just as she’d had the time with Emilio.

Michael lay down, looking up at the sky. “Have y’all eaten?”

Sarah sat again, trying not to notice the long, lean body stretched out beside her. “No.” The idea was to get to know him, not attack him like she had earlier with Emilio.

He cocked his head, looking past her. “Hurry back, and I’ll let you take Sarah and me out to eat.”

“How nice of you.” Emilio swung up into the saddle, tipped his hat and winked at Sarah, then galloped off.

Michael turned on his side, facing Sarah. “Have you had fun learning to ride today? I’m sorry I wasn’t here to meet you.”

Sarah lay down, too, and propped herself up on her elbow, mimicking his position. “I have. It took me forever to get on the horse, though. Emilio finally just picked me up and plopped me in the saddle.”

He leaned forward, sniffing her, his gray eyes dancing. “Well, that would explain why you smell like him.” He got closer, his nose almost touching her neck.

She had the urge to cup the back of his head and pull him to her. Her body, which had finally gone back to normal after her kiss with Emilio, started acting up again. Her stomach got that weird feeling again, and her nipples perked up and her pussy tingled.

“Mmm ... you smell good.” Michael froze. “Uh ...” He stayed right where he was but looked up, his face inches from hers. “I’m sorry. I --”

“Am a wolf?”

He bit his bottom lip and nodded slightly. “Yes, but that’s not what I was going to say.” His voice was almost a whisper.

She stared at his lips, wondering how they’d feel against hers. Would he kiss like Emilio? Would he taste like his mate? “What were you going to say, Michael?”

“I --” His mouth touched her tentatively in a soft, almost shy kiss. It was nothing like Emilio’s kiss earlier. Michael’s was reserved, awkward.

Sarah was no practiced lover herself, but she recognized his innocence. It spiked her arousal. Her pussy grew more wet, beginning to ache, but not in a bad way. It was like it was begging to be touched, filled. For the first time ever she became the initiator of a kiss instead of the kissed. She closed her eyes, wrapped her arm around his neck, and pulled him over on top of her.

He caught himself on one hand, but his chest lay on her, mashing against her sensitive breasts. His erection pressed against her hip. She moaned and touched her tongue to his lips. Knowing that he was excited went right to her head. She wanted him every bit as much as

she wanted his mate. She opened her eyes to find his eyes wide and unfocused. They had turned a smoky gray. She licked his closed lips.

Gradually, he opened his mouth, letting her in. At first, he didn't do anything, just let her explore him, lick the insides of his mouth, his tongue. But then he began to kiss back, whimpering into her mouth, fairly swallowed her whole, and bucked his hips against hers. His actions revealed his inexperience; even so, it was a very sensual kiss. Maybe even more so because of his eagerness.

She sighed and sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, inched her pelvis beneath his, and aligned his erect cock with where she wanted to feel it most.

Michael gasped and pulled back, his eyes wide. "You taste like Emilio."

Sarah blinked, trying to regain her bearings. "You've kissed Emilio?"

"What?" Michael shook his head and sat up. "No. You have." He frowned and sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping.

Sarah sat up. She wasn't sure how to handle this. Now, more than ever, she wanted them both, but something told her she was walking a fine line. There was no doubt in her mind that he, too, was as attracted to her as she was him, but if she pushed too hard, Michael would withdraw. And no one had to tell her that if Michael didn't approve of her, Emilio would back away as well. She sensed it instinctively. Michael might be the stronger wolf, but Emilio seemed to be the more dominant.

She touched his cheek and tilted his face up so she could look in his eyes. He lifted his head, lids closed, before he took a deep breath and opened them. His insecurity of seconds ago melted away in an instant.

"Sarah, I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I should have realized that it was Emilio you wanted. I think the two of you could really have something; he really likes you. I hope you won't let my actions mess that up. You won't have to worry about fighting me off; I won't come on to you again, I promise. I want him to be happy." He nodded, barely stopping for breath. "Please say you won't hold it against me, and we can still be friends."

Sarah fell head over heels in love with him in that very instant. She wondered if Emilio knew what he had. She sure did, and she wasn't letting go of it until she had that same loyalty and admiration Michael showed to Emilio ... she wanted it from both of them.

She desperately needed to ask him about Emilio and their relationship, but if what Rita and Claire said were true, the men weren't physically intimate. They'd never even admitted to being mates, so there was no way to tell what plans the two men had for her, if any. She feared opening her mouth too soon and driving them both away. Then again, she didn't want to lie to them. "Michael, I want both of you."

"Excuse me?" He blinked.

She swallowed hard and stared into his eyes. "I want you and your mate."

"I-I -- What --?" Michael's eyes were very wide.

The sound of a horse and rider thundered over the hill.

Michael jumped to his feet and pulled her up. "I can't, Sarah. I --" He kissed her cheek. "I can't. You and Emilio make a good couple. I want you both to be happy."

"But --"

"Woo hoo!" Emilio appeared, a huge grin on his face and Michael's hat in his hand. "I'm going to be an uncle!"

Chapter Four

December 1, 1974

Sarah sighed and got out of her car. The cold wind hit her at once, making her teeth chatter. “Brrr ...” She huddled deeper into her coat and made her way across the Bar Mc’s wide drive to the guest house where Emilio and Michael lived. She should be studying for her journalism final instead of coming here, but she couldn’t think. She had to talk to Emilio about their relationship, and about Michael.

For the last month she’d spent all of her free time at the ranch. She’d met Michael’s brother, Morgan, a few times, but she rarely saw anyone besides Emilio and Michael. She’d quickly learned that Esperanza had been right: it was a rare thing to see one of the men without the other, and as she’d found out more about both men, Sarah had grown increasingly attached to them. However, even though she and Michael obviously had a connection, Michael had distanced himself, making it clear he saw her as Emilio’s girl. Every time she tried to talk to him about his relationship with Emilio, he changed the subject.

It was exasperating, but she didn’t lose hope. Instead she’d finally decided to talk to Emilio. If Michael wouldn’t cooperate, she’d get Emilio’s help. It was obvious that the men loved and were attracted to each other, but they ignored it. If things got too intense when they were playing and goofing off, they simply stopped. Sarah sighed. She was going to have both of them if it was the last thing she did. They were, as Esperanza had pointed out, a package deal. It wasn’t going to be her that broke up the pair.

She knocked on the door, hoping Emilio was inside instead of out working. It was way too cold to be outdoors as far as she was concerned, although Emilio would probably laugh to hear her say so. Winter in Texas was much too frigid for her; she’d never survive a winter

further north. *Please be here.* If not, she was going to have to walk back to her car. Not a happy thought. She was likely to turn into a popsicle halfway there.

The door opened. Brown eyes widened above a white grin. “Hi, honey. What are you doing here?” He looked mussed and rumpled in a pair of jeans, a sweater and some slippers. If she hadn’t been so cold and stiff, she might have jumped into his arms. She nodded and smiled as best she could with clacking teeth. “H-he-hello.”

He moved back quickly. “Get in here before you freeze to death.”

Sarah hurried in, glad for the cozy heat. She crossed to the fireplace, thankful that he’d lit it. He and Michael had an ongoing argument on how chilly it had to be before they started a fire. Fortunately for her, Emilio’s definition of low temps was far less extreme than Michael’s. Although it was freezing enough that she was pretty sure even Michael would have agreed.

Emilio came up behind her, pulling her against him and rubbing her arms. He kissed the side of her neck. “Honey, you’re shivering.”

“That’s because i-it’s re-really c-cold out-s-side.”

“Tell me about it. I was out earlier feeding the livestock. What brings you here? Not that I’m complaining. I was just thinking about calling you.” He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tight.

She sank into his warmth and rubbed her cheek against his bicep, nuzzling the soft sweater. This was her spot, and she wasn’t about to share with anyone. Well, she’d share with Michael, but that was it. She sighed, remembering what she’d come for. She needed to tell him what she felt, but she didn’t know how to broach the subject. How did a girl, a virgin at that, tell her boyfriend she wanted not just him but his best friend, too? She and Emilio had made out a few times, always when Michael was in school, like now, but it had never progressed further than kissing and some light petting. That, too, was frustrating, because when Sarah made up her mind about what she wanted, that was it; she was on a set course that would not be derailed.

She turned toward him, looking up into his deep brown eyes. Her heart nearly melted. The man oozed sex appeal and, as always, her body responded.

He smiled at her tenderly, still rubbing her arms to warm her up, then nuzzled his nose with her own before pulling back and tracing her lips with his thumb. “Still cold, honey?”

The affection and gentleness in his eyes made her forget all about being chilled and bolstered her decision to come clean. “I love you.” *And Michael*, she silently added.

His face went blank, and he blinked several times, looking confused.

Sarah bit her bottom lip; she hadn’t meant to say it quite that baldly, but she wasn’t going to take it back. She did love him. Finally, he smiled, then he threw his head back and laughed, yanking her to him in a hug that threatened to break her ribs.

"I love you, too, Sarah." Then he kissed her. His lips were rough, desperate. He pulled back suddenly, looked her in the eye, then dove right back into the kiss.

She could barely breathe, but she didn't care. She didn't want to stop. Her nipples, already hard from the weather, began to ache. Her pussy clenched, making milking motions that she knew was meant to ready her for him.

He peeled her coat off, dropping it on the floor, then broke their kiss to pull her sweater over her head. Her bra followed next. She should have been embarrassed, but she wasn't. Instead, she grabbed his sweater and started tugging. He helped her yank his shirt over his head, tossing it next to hers.

Sarah gasped at the masculine beauty of his bare chest. He was truly a magnificent sight. His upper body was not only wide, but very well developed. She touched the hard muscular chest, feeling the smooth hairless skin and his heart throbbing under her hand.

He let her look at him and explore him for several seconds, then he took his own turn. He cupped her breasts in both hands, rubbing his thumbs over the nipples. His gaze on her breasts was intent, heated. He ducked his head and sucked one erect nipple into his mouth. The sensation shot straight to her pussy. His dark skin against her light breast was an arousing contrast. She grabbed his head in her hands, threading her fingers through the thick black hair. She moaned low and deep, dropping her head back.

Emilio got to his knees in front of her and started working on her jeans without removing his mouth from her breast. When her jeans came undone, he slid them and her panties to her knees, then licked around her areola one last time. Looking up her body, he groaned. "Damn, honey. You're so beautiful. I want you so bad, Sarah."

She nodded, whimpering. "Yes, please. I want you, too." She gave a brief thought to Michael and what he'd think. But he'd made his position clear. She was going to have to change his mind, and the best way to do it seemed to be through Emilio. She loved them both and she'd eventually have Michael like this, too.

Emilio held his hand up to her. When she took it, he tugged her down, helping her to the floor. Once she was there, he undid her tennis shoes and pulled them off, removing her pants and panties the rest of the way as well.

The heat of the fireplace felt good against her skin and the soft rug was warm against her back. She couldn't have asked for a more romantic setting. The house was earthy and raw, like a log cabin, with wooden walls and floors, a stone fireplace. Even with the light coming through the window next to the door, the fire cast an orange glow on his muscled chest, giving the moment a dreamy quality.

Her fingers itched to touch him at the same time her body begged for him. She reached for him. "I want to see you, too."

"You will, but not right now. Just relax. Let me make love to you." He raised her knees and spread her legs. For the first time, she felt a twinge of self-consciousness, but the heat in his eyes quickly made such feelings fade away. He slid down her body, then watched her

from between her open thighs. Using his fingers he spread her open and inhaled deeply, his eyes closing. Then he did the most amazing thing -- he licked her.

Sarah nearly screamed. Her hips bucked up, pushing against his mouth. She'd never felt anything so good in her life.

He opened his eyes, put a hand on her hip and held her open with the other, using his thumb and a finger. He met her gaze as he dragged his tongue up her slit and back down. He hummed against her, like he was tasting something decadent, then pushed his tongue into her sopping opening. Thrusting his tongue in and out, he rubbed her clit in a circular motion with his thumb.

"Oh, Emilio ..." She wanted to move her hips so badly, but he held her immobile. "Please."

"Please what, honey? Please, this?" He pushed one long finger inside her. Her pussy tightened around the digit.

He bit his lip, meeting her eyes. "It's barely there, Sarah, but it still might hurt."

"Huh?"

He leaned forward, covering her clit with his mouth and sucking at the same time he let go of her hips. She thrust up into his mouth, then against his finger. There was a slight sting, then her whole body went tense. She felt like a tidal wave washed over her. She moaned, her body clenching and sucking at his finger. Everything went white and she came, calling out his name.

When she could think again he was on his knees over her, his pants at his ankles. Her attention immediately went to his cock. She'd seen pictures of naked men, of course, but none of them looked like him. His dick was red and very thick. Instead of hanging down, it stood up, almost reaching his navel. The tip had drops of clear fluid on it. She wanted to touch him and explore, but she wanted to feel him inside her even more. She held her arms out to him. "Make love to me?"

He closed his eyes again, then raised his lids and nodded, positioning himself above her and bracing himself on his arms.

Sarah couldn't resist the wall of his firm chest. She caressed him, running her fingers down his belly over his rippling stomach and learning his body. When the blunt head butted up against her pussy, she gazed into his deep brown eyes. His chiseled features were tense.

"I love you, Sarah."

"I love you, too."

He rubbed the tip of his shaft around her opening, then pushed forward. Even as wet as she was, she could feel every inch sink into her. He stretched her wide. It wasn't painful, but she was aware that it could be if he wasn't careful. He seemed to know that, too, because he took his time, moving very slowly. He reached down and stroked her clit again just as his

balls came to rest against her. He stayed there, fully inside her for several minutes, then pulled out gradually.

She gasped at the friction. Her muscles pulled at him, tightening and releasing. She thrust her hips, making him slide all the way back inside. Sarah grunted and did it again. It felt so good, but she needed more. "Faster."

He groaned above her, then dropped down to his elbows. His tanned face was only inches above her. His breath fanned across her hair, blowing the hairs at her temple that had escaped her ponytail. "Honey, you're killing me."

"Then move."

"Are you sure?" His eyes squeezed tight.

Sarah raised her head, nipping his lip. "Oh, yes."

Emilio moved and they both moaned. He caught a steady rhythm and began to fuck her in earnest. The momentum built with their pleasure. Her body was reaching for that exquisite explosion again, but right before she orgasmed, he stiffened above her. A ragged groan tore from him and sweat dripped off his chin onto her chest.

Sarah stared, caught by the raw splendor of him. Her body clutched at him, begging for her own climax, but she was mesmerized by his pleasure. After several seconds, he looked down at her and smiled. Then, still seated deep inside her, he reached between them and pushed his finger into her body alongside his cock. Pulling it back out, he used the moisture to rub her clit. That was all it took, Sarah arched her back, her body spasming.

"That's it, honey, come for me again." He sucked her nipple into his mouth, suckling hard as he pinched her sensitive bud below.

She came with a hoarse yell. After several more moments, she collapsed and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tight as she struggled to keep her tears at bay. She had no idea why she felt the need to cry -- she was beyond happy, after all -- but tears were indeed welling in her eyes.

Emilio stroked her face and kissed her cheek. He lifted up and brushed the wetness from her cheek. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and started laughing. She had had the most amazing experience of her life, and she was crying. How ridiculous was that? "I'm just happy."

"Me, too." He kissed her nose. "Will you marry me, Sarah?"

"What about Michael?" Oh, God, had she blurted that out?

Emilio's eyes widened. Then he smiled. "What about Michael, honey?"

"I -- He -- I know he's your mate, Emilio."

Sucking in a breath, he sat up and stared at her for several minutes before averting his eyes. She thought he was going to rise without responding, but then he nodded slowly and turned back to her.

“Yes. Funny how fate works, isn’t it?” He smiled, but there was no happiness in it. “Michael and I can’t be together, Sarah.”

This time it was she who caressed his cheek. “Why? Why can’t you?”

“It’s not right, but how can we possibly have a full life as we are? Should we be doomed to spend our lives alone just because he and I are mates?”

It was now or never. Sarah took a deep breath and let it out. *You can do this, Sarah.* “Why would you be alone? You’d have each other ... and me, if you want me. I love you both, Emilio.”

The smile he gave her was absolutely radiant. “You’d be willing to be with both of us? You’d let us share you?”

She was stunned; he didn’t sound like he was talking about the same thing she was, but at least it was a start. “Why can’t all three of us be together?”

“Apparently, we can.”

“I mean, why can’t the two of you be lovers, too?”

“What?” He jerked back like she’d hit him.

“Why can’t all three of us be lovers as well as friends?”

“Sarah ...” He frowned. “That wouldn’t bother you?”

Oh, boy, would it not bother her. “Why should it?”

“It will take some time to convince him. He cares about you a lot.” He looked down, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and glanced back into her eyes. “He loves you, too, you know, but he’s got it in his head that you belong with me. And he ...” Emilio sighed. “We’ve never been lovers. When we were younger, we got into trouble.”

“Claire told me. Have you tried to reach him since then?”

“No.”

“But you aren’t opposed to it?”

“No. I love him, Sarah. I always have. I just don’t want people to hurt him. People don’t understand.”

She hesitated only a moment. *One down, one to go.* Then she nodded, the tears coming again. “All right. If you still want me, I’ll marry you.”

Chapter Five

December 12, 1974

Sarah closed the front door quietly, trying not to wake either of the men. She glanced at the kitchen clock -- 9:00 a.m. Emilio didn't have to go out to work until noon, and Michael didn't have to go to school until eleven.

She crept into the bedroom to find Emilio still asleep. She thought about waking him, but since she still had some unpacking to do, she decided to let him sleep a little longer. They'd only been married for five days, and she'd been too busy studying to put all her things away. Now she'd finally finished her last final exam and had aced all of her other classes, so she was one semester closer to her journalism degree.

At last, she could devote her time to getting Michael where he should be in the relationship among the three of them. Emilio had made it clear that she would have to take the first step. She was fine with that, but she still hadn't come up with the perfect plan. Who knew that seducing a man could be so hard?

She and Kyle had discussed it after she'd announced her intention to marry Emilio. Her cousin had warned her that his parents wouldn't like it, but he'd wished her luck with both men. Then the fiend had seen fit to tease her, saying, "Well, this ought to put me back in favorite status. We both chose spouses who -- according to my parents -- are beneath us, but at least I'm not a pervert." He'd pretended to be stuck up and looked down his nose at her. Both she and Rita had practically been in tears with laughter, but Sarah had known even then that while she was amused, Kyle was right.

She'd married Emilio six days later at the courthouse. Surprisingly, her aunt and uncle hadn't made an issue about her choice of groom, no doubt remembering Kyle had married

the man's sister, though they had kicked up a fuss about her not having a long engagement and a big wedding. But both had come to the wedding.

Sarah and Emilio had forgone a honeymoon so that she could finish the fall semester of college. She was a little disappointed, but they'd talked about going in the summer and taking Michael with them. That would more than make up for the lack of one now. It would be even better if Michael were sharing their bed by then.

Sarah was pulled out of her musings when Michael's dark head popped around the doorjamb of the master bedroom, his gray eyes twinkling. "So, did you pass?"

She was sitting on the floor, sorting her clothes. "Made an A."

"Damn, I'm impressed. Wanna go take my tests for me?"

Sarah chuckled. "Yeah, like you need my help." The man was extremely intelligent; he was on the honor roll and at the top of his graduating class. Unless things went very wrong, he'd complete his studies in May and be valedictorian.

He came in, dressed in a pair of blue flannel pajamas and tube socks, and plopped himself down on the bed next to Emilio, who was sound asleep. Michael's hair was still mussed from sleep, but otherwise he looked wide awake and adorable and sexy, all at the same time.

The bed bounced under his weight, and Emilio grumbled something, then snuggled back down into the covers. Michael muttered something back and sat cross-legged facing the side of the bed. He peered down at her, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well, I wouldn't say no. I hate calculus. I have that and English lit tests today." Michael lay down, rolled onto his back and hung his head over the edge to look at Sarah upside down. He threw his legs over Emilio's prone body.

Sarah laughed and leaned forward and kissed his cheek. The emotional distance he'd put between himself and her had started to fade. He still didn't act like he had when they'd first met, but at least he now flirted and played with her like he did with Emilio. Watching him watch her and Emilio, she was convinced he wanted to be with them both, but he never said anything. She'd have to make sure he understood he belonged with them.

She pinched his cheek. "Brat."

He nodded. "You bet." He sniffed, his nose wrinkling. "Something smells sweet. You got candy in here?"

"Nope, no candy. Just socks and underthings."

He sniffed again. "You sure? I'm telling you, I smell sugar." He grabbed her shoulder and tugged her forward. "It's you. *You* smell sweet."

Sarah's heart quickened at his nearness. His mouth was right below hers. All she had to do was dip her head and kiss him. She wanted to so badly.

He held her there much longer than necessary, staring at her lips. He licked his, then raised his head closer just a fraction before he abruptly jerked back.

“Still!” Emilio snuffled and slapped at Michael’s legs. Michael froze.

Damn it! Talk about horrible timing. Sarah squelched down her disappointment. She would have plenty of time to kiss him. Now wasn’t the right time to push.

Michael grinned mischievously and raised his head, looking at Emilio, then back at Sarah like they hadn’t almost kissed each other. He winked at her, pulled his feet up, placed them against Emilio’s side and shoved. Sarah slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing.

Emilio hit the throw rug on his side of the bed with a thud and a “Son of a bitch! Michael! You little --”

Michael took off like a shot, chortling, before his sock feet slipped on the wooden floor. He had only made it to the hall before Emilio tackled him.

Sarah gasped, fearing Michael’s face was going to be smashed, but at the last minute, Emilio’s hand snaked under, coming between his face and the floor.

Michael grunted and struggled to turn over, but it was no easy feat with two hundred and twenty pounds sitting on the middle of his back. Sarah knew firsthand how heavy Emilio was.

“You are so going to pay for that, butthead.” Emilio lifted up, just enough to let Michael roll over, then braced his arms next to Michael’s ears, effectively trapping him. He might have been irritated at first, but now he was laughing as hard as Michael.

Michael pushed at the mountain of muscle on top of him and rose up, trying to dislodge Emilio, but he only managed to nearly smack the other man in the face with his head.

Emilio sucked in a breath, his laughter abruptly cut off. Michael stilled, his face inches from Emilio’s, and his own mirth suddenly came to a halt. They stayed like that for several seconds, just staring at each other. The tension was palpable. Then Sarah noticed several things. Emilio was stark naked and very clearly aroused, and his eyes were amber, wolf eyes; fangs protruded from his mouth, too.

Michael’s eyes had also clearly shifted to his wolf eyes, a pale icy gray, like an Alaskan Husky’s. As Sarah watched, the tips of his canines slid out from beneath his top lip. Michael closed his eyes and laid his head back on the floor, breathing heavily.

Emilio stayed where he was and shut his own eyes.

Kiss him! Sarah stayed silent, staring at the two men as they struggled for control against their bodies’ natural reaction to their mate. Her own body responded to the sight of them so close and so obviously aroused. Her pussy grew damp and her belly clenched.

Another several minutes went by before Michael opened his eyes, now human again. “Get off me, doofus. You’re naked.”

* * * * *

Sarah sat in the rocking chair adjacent to the couch, trying to work up the nerve to set things in action. She'd been planning furiously since the men's encounter in the hallway this morning. There was no doubt in her mind that she could get Michael in her and Emilio's bed, but it was obviously going to be up to her to make the first move for all of them.

After dinner, the two men had gone right to the couch to watch TV and she'd slipped away to take a shower. She'd considered putting on something a little risqué, but she thought that might be a bit too obvious. So instead she was in a long white cotton gown with no panties, observing the men staring at the TV.

Enough was enough; she wasn't going to get any braver. She'd either lose them both or gain herself two equally incredible men. Sarah got up and went to the couch. Emilio looked up from the show and scooted over, making room for her between him and Michael. She thought briefly about taking the seat, but decided she'd be better off on the other side of Michael for what she was about to do. She squeezed herself between Michael and the armrest, giving him no choice but to scoot closer to Emilio.

When she got settled, they were both looking at her. Not quite frowning, but definitely puzzled. She grinned and focused on the TV, trying to act like she was interested in *Hawaii Five-O*. In no time, both of them were once again engrossed in their show and oblivious to her presence.

Sarah took a deep breath, ignored the fluttering in her stomach, and laid her hand on Michael's denim-clad thigh. His eyebrows pulled together and his forehead wrinkled, but he didn't protest. He patted her hand and gave it a squeeze.

After a few minutes, she got braver and rested her head on his shoulder. Again, not much reaction. He bumped her head with his and reached up and caressed her cheek. Emilio frowned slightly, then shook his head and went back to watching a car chase.

Sarah stayed there for long moments, not moving. Getting to touch him and be close to him already had her pussy damp. She closed her eyes and pressed her nose into the side of his neck. His collar-length hair tickled her nose, and she pushed it out of the way to inhale slowly. He smelled like vanilla, cinnamon and hay. He also smelled like Emilio. But, then, he usually did. It was a totally unconscious thing, but she'd noticed they were always touching each other; a jab to the ribs here, a pinch to the ear there, anything to be near the other. She saw it every time, and it never failed to make her smile. She loved to watch them play.

Sarah opened her eyes. It was now or never. She slid her hand over, cupping his groin at the same time her mouth found his neck.

He gasped and jerked away from her. His bare feet had been propped up on the coffee table, so when he jumped, he ended up practically in Emilio's lap. His pretty gray eyes were wide as saucers, his mouth open in shock.

Immediately, Emilio grabbed his shoulder, pulling him nearer, out of Sarah's reach, and growled at her, baring his teeth. Fortunately there were no fangs, just his normal, even white

teeth. She raised a brow at Emilio and he slowly relaxed as understanding dawned on his face.

Bless his heart, he looked like a scared rabbit ready to bolt. Again, Emilio hugged him closer, his hand still on Michael's shoulder. She hadn't thought this would be a problem, but she understood it. She'd have to use caution until Emilio got used to her touching his mate.

Emilio finally grinned. "Sorry. It's instinct."

Michael tried to slide off the couch. Emilio held on to him, making him stay.

"Emilio --"

"Not now, Michael." Emilio looped his arm over Michael's shoulder and around his chest as he continued to watch Sarah. She didn't think he even realized what he was doing. It was a very possessive position, and if it hadn't been Michael in his arms, she'd have been insanely jealous.

She swallowed down the lump in her throat. She knew very well how possessive wolves could get over their mates. She may not have had her parents long, but she'd heard stories. She'd even caught Michael in her peripheral vision snarling at her a time or two when she touched Emilio.

Yeah, she knew what she had to do, but she was a bit nervous. Carefully, she watched for any sign of aggression, then slowly got on her knees and placed her hands on Michael's chest.

Emilio nodded his encouragement. She suppressed a sigh of relief and leaned forward, still watching her husband, and pressed her lips to Michael's, who whimpered and started tapping Emilio's thigh. From the corner of her eye, she saw Emilio's lips twitch. He stilled Michael's hand, clasping it in his own.

"Yes, Sarah, I see," he said quietly, still watching her.

Sarah pulled back just a little. Her husband's gaze met hers and something flashed between them. She knew in that moment that he'd let her continue. That he realized the chance she was offering him. She sat back a bit, nudged Emilio's arm out of the way and started to unbutton Michael's red and black flannel shirt.

Michael tried to scoot away but ended up planting his butt firmly in Emilio's lap. He grabbed her hands, stalling her. When he managed to speak, it was barely a whisper. "Sarah, what are you doing?"

"Shh ..." She put her finger to his full lips and brushed his hands from hers. Lord, the man was beautiful. It was no surprise that women always fell all over themselves in his presence. Unlike Emilio, who knew how handsome he was, Michael was oblivious. It was a very endearing quality.

She unfastened his shirt the rest of the way before she glanced at his worried face. He made a little squeaky noise that would have been a whine in wolf form.

Emilio rearranged himself until he was sitting with one leg on the couch and a foot on the floor. When his thighs bracketed Michael's hips, he pulled the other man backward to lean against him, putting Michael's ass on the very edge of the couch.

Michael looked over his shoulder at him. Emilio smiled and repositioned him against his chest, then winked at Sarah. His eyes had shifted into the amber canine eyes she'd caught a glimpse of this morning. He was turned on by her touching his mate, by being this close to his mate in a sexual situation.

That was all the permission she needed. Her pussy clenched in anticipation, and she slid to the floor between Michael's knees. She leaned forward again, pressing her hands to his smooth hard chest and kissed his lips. At first he didn't respond, but when she licked the seam of his mouth, he opened up and let her in. His muscles flexed under her palms, and his heart beat harder. His tongue tentatively touched hers.

It was all she could do not to cheer. She felt her pussy juices coat the outer lips of her labia and her nipples peaked, aching to be touched. Michael's hands flattened over hers, holding them to his torso, and he threw himself into the kiss. He explored her mouth, whimpering. He was breathing so heavily, it was audible.

Emilio groaned and leaned his face closer to hers and Michael's. His voice was husky, sensual, when he whispered in Michael's ear, "Take her nightgown off."

Michael stilled, then nodded. He looked at Sarah for several seconds, like he was trying to make up his mind, then reached down, grabbed her nightgown, and lifted it over her head.

The air on her nipples made them harden more. The sensation shot straight to her core. Emilio reached forward and cupped one breast, pinching the nipple.

"Come here, Sarah." She crawled up on the couch, straddling Michael's thighs, feeling his erection for the first time against her wet pussy. Even with his pants in the way, it felt like heaven. She groaned and pressed down hard, grinding a little.

Michael gasped and bucked up against her. The wonder and awe in his eyes reminded her he was inexperienced. Or at least she thought he was. Emilio rubbed his cheek against Michael's, then dragged her closer. He opened his mouth and flicked his tongue over her lips, asking to be let in.

She moaned into Emilio's mouth as her erect nipples came in contact with Michael's warm chest. Her nervousness was slipping away in the face of blind lust. She wanted this, these men, so badly.

Michael moaned, too, and his breath fanned across her cheek. Something tickled the side of her breast. She broke the kiss to find Michael's fingers timidly dragging up and down her sides.

Emilio groaned. His stare fastened on Michael's hand, then he grabbed it and placed it more fully on her breast. After that, Michael seemed to relax; the curiosity and arousal were

overriding his fears and he squeezed and explored, learning her body. His touches were tentative at first but grew bolder quickly. He pinched and rolled her nipples, observing her closely to gauge her reaction.

Sarah smiled at him and kissed his lips, encouraging him the best way she knew how. "Do anything you want." She trailed two fingers down his smooth cheek. That seemed to be all the permission he needed. He dipped his head and touched one hard nipple with the tip of his tongue.

Emilio moaned, his wolf eyes closing for a second; then he slid out from behind Michael. He nudged the younger man over until he was able to sit between Michael and the arm of the couch. When Michael scooted to his right, it pressed his erection up into Sarah, making her moan, too. Her pussy constricted and dampened even more.

Michael's nose flared, and he looked down. His fingers raked through the hair above her sex, then his gaze shot to hers. She nodded, got off his lap, and reclined on the couch. She spread her thighs wide, dropping one foot to the floor and looping one over the back of the couch. "Touch me." *Oh, please, touch me.*

Michael turned his head, seeking Emilio.

Emilio smiled, too, and reached past him to run a finger along her slit before pushing in. She grunted. Her juices coated her labia, running out and down her crack as he fucked her with his finger. She couldn't decide what turned her on more: the wet sounds of his finger pushing into her or Michael's rapt attention to every move Emilio made. She was very close to an orgasm.

Apparently Emilio realized it because he pulled his sopping digit out and tapped Michael's leg before standing. "Scoot down." Emilio got to his knees beside the couch and looked up at his mate expectantly. He crooked his finger at Michael and finally Michael seemed to understand what he wanted. He lay down on the couch until he was eye level with Sarah's pussy and Emilio.

Sarah's whole body tensed in anticipation. She knew exactly what her husband had in mind.

Emilio leaned forward and licked right up her seam, then thrust his tongue inside. Michael's mouth gaped as he watched, then he rested the side of his face on her thigh and watched Emilio, who turned his head. His nose touched Michael's, and they stayed there for several seconds before Michael moved and took a tentative taste of her pussy with the tip of his tongue.

Sarah whimpered.

Emilio did, too. Then he grabbed Michael's face and kissed him. Hard. Michael gasped but opened right up, moaning into Emilio's mouth. Their eyes remained open for several seconds, then closed. The kiss was rough and almost violent in its desperation. Michael's teeth changed, and a drop of blood appeared on his lip, only to be smeared on Emilio's seconds later.

She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was the first time they'd kissed each other, and somehow that made it all the more exciting. They were so beautiful together. She caught a glimpse of their tongues and moaned in appreciation. She reached down and rubbed her clit, watching them. It was only seconds before she was bucking against her own hand.

It was then that Emilio finally pulled away. He sighed and nipped Michael's jaw, his own teeth still normal. Michael opened his eyes. They, along with his teeth, had shifted. He tried to nuzzle Emilio's face, but Emilio moved away.

"Take a deep breath and concentrate on getting your teeth to go back."

Michael squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. Within moments his canines disappeared behind his lips.

Emilio kissed him again, briefly. "Very good, babe. Now use your fingers and mouth on Sarah and make her come. She's almost there."

Michael turned back to Sarah, intense predator eyes staring into hers. He leaned down and covered her pussy with his mouth. He might never have done this before, but he threw himself into the task. He thrust his tongue into her opening, then replaced it with his finger. Raising his head, he watched his digit sink into her body, then he flicked his thumb against her engorged clit.

She cried out, her body all but vibrating. "Oh, again!"

Michael did it once more, then lowered his mouth back to her clit, bathing it with his tongue and sucking. He hummed against her. She'd been on edge since she'd initiated this whole situation, but now, the sensations and the sight of him with his nose buried in the red curls above her pussy was more than she could take.

Her thigh muscles started to jerk and she writhed against him. She wanted to grind herself into him, but she didn't know how he'd react. She was distantly aware of Emilio standing and stripping, but her focus was on the wicked mouth worshipping her pussy.

Emilio leaned down next to him and rubbed his face along Michael's cheek. "Use another finger, babe."

Michael pushed another finger inside her and sucked harder on her clit. A tingle raced right up her spine, beginning right where his lips were. Then everything exploded. Sarah arched her back and came so hard, she saw stars.

For a minute, she just lay there panting, trying to catch her breath, and stared at her husband.

Emilio kissed her thigh, then he grabbed Michael's arm and yanked him off the couch. He quickly unbuttoned Michael's jeans and tugged them off. When Michael's cock bobbed free, Sarah's inner muscles spasmed some more. It was long, several inches longer than Emilio's, but not quite as thick, and there was a thick patch of black hair above it but hardly any on his balls. His dick was so stiff that it was nearly standing straight up. A clear drop

trickled down the shaft, dripping down to his testicles. Michael was panting, his hands fisted by his sides.

Sarah licked her dry lips, hoping Emilio would lick that drop off. But he didn't. Instead, he stood and tossed Michael's pants aside. The two men stood nose to nose, staring into the other's canine eyes. Then Michael stepped forward and twined his arms around Emilio and kissed him. When their cocks touched, they both thrust toward each other and groaned.

She sat up and reached for both their shafts. She'd found out this past weekend that she rather enjoyed giving oral sex almost as much as receiving it. She liked the feel of a cock in her hand, her mouth, savored the warmth and hardness. And she wanted Michael's, to taste him, sample the fluid that had slid down his shaft. She wrapped her hands around both their cocks and squeezed.

Michael gasped into Emilio's mouth and clutched at his arms. "Ohh ..." His legs visibly shook.

Sarah chuckled. She flicked the tip of Michael's cock with her tongue, sipping the clear precome that had seeped out, then laved a long line down and sucked on the sac below. Umm, he tasted good, a little more salty than her husband.

Emilio threaded his hand through her hair. "Oh, God, what a sight." He maneuvered them to where Michael sat on the couch, his legs wide, and Sarah was on her knees in front of him. When Emilio settled behind her, she resumed her explorations and licked Michael from balls to tip, then closed her lips over the head of his cock.

"Omigod." Michael moaned, his head thrashing back and forth.

Emilio's warmth pressed firmly against her, and then his cock nudged between her legs, raking along her slick labia. He didn't push in; instead, he leaned over her back and rested his head on her shoulder. He chuckled and grabbed Michael's hands, which were attempting to tear the couch cushion apart. "Easy, babe. You can thank me later for teaching her that."

Sarah half groaned, half laughed, and reached back to pinch him.

He nuzzled her cheek. "I love you, Sarah."

She let Michael's cock go with a pop and kissed Emilio, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He returned her ardor, then reached down between them. She was so wet, his cock was able to come against her and slide right in. Her pussy contracted despite the orgasm she'd just had. Grunting into his mouth, she pushed back onto his cock, impaling herself further. "I love you, too, Emilio."

Michael whimpered above them and lifted his hips.

Emilio smiled against her lips. "Someone's becoming impatient."

"Mmm ... Maybe you should help me out." She raised a brow, daring him, then bent and licked the side of Michael's cock. She wanted Emilio to do the same, but she didn't think

he would. So, when he leaned over her shoulder and licked up the opposite side of Michael's cock, it was a contest as to who was more surprised, her or Michael.

Emilio ignored their startled cries and covered the side of Michael's cock with his mouth, gliding up and down as he fucked her.

She watched him for several seconds, wanting him to take the head of Michael's dick into his mouth, pleading silently for him to do so. When he finally did, it went straight to her core, like lightning arcing through her body. She nearly came, her pussy squeezing Emilio tight, milking his cock.

He let go of Michael, gasping for air, his teeth lengthening. "I-I can't, Sarah, honey. My teeth." He gave his mate's shaft one last lick, then clasped her hips and pounded into her.

Sarah took Michael's cock down her throat as far as she could, pumping with her hand and moving with her husband's thrusts into her pussy. Emilio's skin slapped against her ass, the wet sounds of sex surrounded them, accompanied by their moans of pleasure. She never wanted it to end, but it was inevitable. She was already on her way to climaxing and could tell both men were close as well.

Michael came first. His back arched, he lifted his hips off the sofa and he came in a salty gush down the back of her throat. His orgasm spurred her own, making her pussy convulse violently. She let go of his cock and rested her face against his leg, riding the waves of pleasure that crashed over her. Emilio next stiffened behind her, grunting long and low, before he collapsed over her back.

They stayed like that until Sarah felt semen sliding down the inside of her thighs. She wiggled and pushed her butt backward, trying to dislodge her husband. "I'm dripping."

He smiled against her shoulder. "So am I. What's your point?"

"Move."

He chuckled and stood. "Oh, man. I think we broke him."

What? Sarah got to her feet and turned her head.

Michael was slumped to the side, sound asleep. He looked like a debauched angel, with his dark hair over his paler forehead and one eye. The corners of his lips were turned up slightly in a grin.

She brushed the hair off his face. "Can you carry him?"

Emilio snorted. "Of course I can carry him." But his arms wrapped around her from behind, flexing more than normal, and he kissed her cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"You're sure you don't mind sharing?"

"Do you?"

"Oh, God, no, honey. I love you both." He turned her in his arms. "I'm not letting either of you go ... ever." He kissed her forehead, then rubbed his cheek against it.

Sarah blinked back the tears his words brought and bit her lip. She hugged him tight. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, honey. Let’s get Michael and go to bed.”

She stayed in his arms a few seconds longer, listening to his heartbeat, then another drip down her thigh had her moving. She nodded and stepped back.

“Okay, put him in our room. From now on he sleeps with us.”

Chapter Six

December 13, 1974

Emilio shook her shoulder. "Honey, wake up."

She shrugged his hand off. "Shh ..."

"Sarah, wake up. Michael's gone."

"Huh?" That brought her wide awake. She sat up, blinking her eyes open until she could focus on Emilio. He was standing next to the bed, leaning over her. She turned her head and looked beside her. Empty. There was an indentation on the pillow in the middle where Emilio had slept but no sign that Michael had ever been there. She lay back down. "It's Friday, he has school today."

"It's only six o'clock."

"Are you sure he isn't in the house somewhere?"

Emilio's nose twitched. "Positive. I've looked and sniffed. He's not here. The school doesn't even open until seven thirty."

Sarah sat up again. For the first time, she realized that Emilio had pants on. He'd clearly gone looking for Michael. "No note?"

He shook his head. "I checked outside, and his car is gone."

Crap. Did this mean he was mad at them? Upset? Embarrassed? She looked up at Emilio. He ran a hand through his hair, looking worried and agitated all at once. She got up on her knees and kissed his chin.

"Sweetheart. He'll be back. He lives here."

Emilio snorted, but he leaned into her, allowing her to hug him.

“His stuff is still here, right?”

“Yeah.”

She rubbed his back, trying to offer comfort she didn’t feel. Her gut instinct was that Michael had run. The question was why; she knew it must have been because of last night, but what specifically had made him unable or unwilling to face them? “Come on. I’ll fix us breakfast, and we can talk.”

She got dressed and went to the kitchen, Emilio following behind. While she got the food going, he stood at the back window, looking out.

“Why would he leave without telling us goodbye?”

“You think maybe he was embarrassed?”

Emilio shook his head, then shrugged. “I wouldn’t think he could be embarrassed in front of me, but maybe because of you ...”

Sarah’s jaw tightened. Anger overwhelmed her. She tried to bank it down, knowing it was irrational and uncalled for, but the tone in his voice when he’d said that ... “Are you blaming this on me?”

“What?” He shook his head once more but his eyes wouldn’t meet hers. “No, I should have talked to him first. I should have asked, but he seemed so willing last night ... You’re burning the eggs!”

Sarah threw the spatula at him. “Then fix your own damned eggs!” She stormed off toward the bathroom. She heard him slamming stuff around and cursing before she reached the bathroom. *Damn it!* Why had she done that?

No way had she read Michael wrong. She knew he had wanted her and Emilio as badly as they wanted him. But maybe Emilio was right; maybe they should’ve sat him down and discussed it with him ...

She turned on the shower, stripped and got in, not even waiting for it to warm up. She shivered as the water poured over her head. Not only had she driven Michael away from them, but now she was alienating Emilio, too. Tears dripped down her face, mixing with the water. How was she going to fix things?

She stayed in the shower until she heard the front door slam shut, then she got out and dressed. She had a doctor’s appointment for her yearly checkup today, but she wasn’t going to stay here until then. She couldn’t face Emilio. Not now, not until she figured out how she was going to make things right with Michael.

* * * * *

She was walking around the strip mall, window shopping, killing time until her appointment, when her aunt Margaret came up behind her.

“Sarah.” The older woman stood two feet away, her arms piled with shopping bags.

"Hello, Aunt Margaret. How are you?"

"I'm fine, dear. How are you? Married life treating you all right?"

Sarah smiled, trying to look happier than she felt at the moment. "It is. And yesterday, I finished my last exam for this semester. I got As in all my classes."

Aunt Margaret beamed at her. "Good girl." She looked around. "Are you here by yourself?"

Sarah nodded. "What brings you out today?"

Her aunt frowned, eyebrows pulling together; then she leaned closer to Sarah. "Is Emilio's friend still living with the two of you?"

She sure hoped so ... Sarah sighed, trying to decide how to answer her aunt and tell her to butt out politely. She knew where this was going.

"Aunt Margaret, Michael lived there before I did. It's his home and I don't mind him living there."

Her aunt lifted her head, nose twitching like she smelled something foul. A sudden vision of Kyle's playacting hit her, and she nearly laughed in her the older woman's face.

"Sarah, it isn't proper for a young lady to live with two men. I must insist that you tell him to move out."

"And what if I don't, Aunt Margaret?"

Her aunt stiffened, eyes widening in surprise. Sarah almost felt sorry for her, but she might be facing Michael moving out anyway, and it was all her fault.

"He's not moving, Aunt Margaret. Get used to it." She turned on her heel and walked away, though it pained her to do so. This woman had raised her, but Sarah wouldn't let her or anything else come between her, Emilio and Michael ...

* * * * *

Sarah rested her head against the steering wheel of her car and closed her eyes. This couldn't be happening. Her day was progressively getting worse and more complicated. She lifted her head, then started her car, dabbing at the tears tracking down her cheek before backing out of the parking space. Her mood wasn't going to get any better in the parking lot of her doctor's office. She needed to go somewhere and think.

First Michael, then her aunt, and now this.

She'd gone in for a checkup but had come out feeling worse than she had when she'd gone in. Well, in spirit, anyway. She pulled out onto the street and debated finding a pay phone to call Rita or Claire. She needed to talk to someone about the jumbled confusion her life had become in the past day. But the impulse felt wrong. Her sisters-in-law weren't the ones she needed to talk to. She had to tell Emilio and Michael first. Assuming Michael ever came home, and Emilio would even talk to her.

"Hi, Morgan. Is Michael home yet?"

"I haven't seen him."

She barely contained her disappointment. She'd been pretty certain he wasn't here, but she'd needed to ask. At least he hadn't come home and moved out.

"Would you mind saddling Skipper for me?"

"Of course not." He went back into the tack room and came out with a saddle slung over his shoulder and a blanket under his arm. He walked toward the stall of a palomino, leaving Sarah to follow. "Are you going by yourself?"

"Yes, if that's okay." She grabbed Skipper's bridle from the tack room. Sarah had gotten quite good at riding and enjoyed it immensely, but she still couldn't get the saddle tight enough.

Morgan nodded and put the blanket and saddle on Skipper. "I don't see any reason you can't. You handle your mount very well."

"Thank you." Sarah stepped into the stall and put the bridle on the horse. She patted the palomino's nose and waited for Morgan to tighten the girth.

"You're welcome." He swatted the horse's rump, then glanced at Sarah. He didn't look much like Michael but for his eyes, but they were similar enough to make Sarah's heart ache. "You're good to go, cowgirl."

Sarah smiled, trying to look like she meant it. "Thanks, Morgan." She swung up onto the horse, and Morgan handed her the reins. She made it all of a yard out of the stables before she dug her heels in and gave Skipper her head. "Hya!"

The wind whipping through her hair was cold, and she was going to have hell combing out the tangles, but she couldn't bring herself to care. She just let her thoughts go and concentrated on the freeing sensation of riding. It was still cold, but her mind was on more important things than the chill in the air. She had her coat and gloves on, so it wasn't too terribly bad.

Why now? Why did she have to be pregnant now? Would it cause Michael to pull away from them entirely? Assuming he hadn't already.

Finally, when her cheeks were practically frozen, she reined in. She laughed when she realized where she was. The stock pond, the place she and Emilio and Michael had all met up on their first date.

She patted Skipper's neck and hopped off. Holding onto the reins, she walked around the half-frozen pool of water. She couldn't tell the men she was pregnant until she figured out where they all stood. No way was she putting that on their shoulders right now. She still had a couple months before she'd have to say anything, but hopefully it wouldn't take that long.

"Hey, want some company?"

Sarah jumped and swung around, her hand going to her throat. She hadn't heard Emilio come up.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I saw you take off from the stables, and I started walking. I figured you'd end up here eventually." He was sitting with his back against the big oak tree about ten feet away from the pond.

"It's okay. I was just thinking." She led Skipper toward her husband. "You walked?"

"I thought I'd catch a ride back with you."

"Okay. I s'pose you can, but Skipper and I, we charge a fare."

He chuckled and stood, then met her halfway. "You do, do you? I may have to bargain with you. I'm broke."

Sarah pursed her lips and tapped her finger against her chin. "Well, then I guess we'd take a kiss in payment."

Sarah laughed and dropped the reins, hugging him, feeling a lot better than she had when she'd left the stables. At least Emilio was no longer mad at her.

"Are you okay, honey?"

"I will be. I'm sorry about this morning. I shouldn't have thrown the spatula at you."

He grinned and shrugged. "I had it coming. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

She grabbed his hand and Skipper's reins and started walking around the pond again. "You don't regret last night?"

"No way. Do you?"

She shook her head. "The only thing I regret is that we should have woke Michael up and made him talk to us."

"Yeah, we should have. I should have known he'd freak out."

She felt like she should have seen it, too. She knew Michael wanted them both, but it had to be a little overwhelming, being forced to acknowledge something like that the way he'd had last night. "Is he back yet?"

Emilio squeezed her hand and nodded. "Came back right after you took off."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No. He went for a run."

Sarah frowned and looked around. "Where?"

"The other side of the property. He was in wolf form."

"Greeaat. So, basically, he knew that I went this way and wanted to avoid me."

"Nah, he always goes that way when he goes off to think. He'll end up in the hay loft in the barn, wait till dark, then come back home when no one can see him walking to the house naked."

"Fur isn't naked."

“No, but he shifts when he gets to the barn. He sits in the loft for a while to think. He doesn’t do his thinking when he runs; he just gets all his aggression out.”

She grinned. It was really neat how well he knew his mate. She wondered if he’d know her as well in a couple years. He seemed well on the way now. “I want to go find him and talk to him.”

“Want me to come with you?”

“No. I feel like I need to do this. I started it.”

“Honey, you weren’t in it alone. I was right there with you.” He sighed and shook his head, then stopped walking, making Sarah face him. “I won’t give either of you up, Sarah. He knows me well enough to understand that. It’s just a case of letting him make his place and getting comfortable with it. Helping him get his bearings and the realization that he belongs with us.”

She went up on tiptoe and kissed his chin, her tension and anxiety falling away. “Well, I’m going to get him to understand.” She released Emilio’s hand and threw Skipper’s reins back over the horse’s head.

Emilio chuckled and pulled himself up to sit behind the saddle, then reached down for her. “Just do me a favor.”

She grabbed his hand, stuck her foot on his boot, and swung up in front of him. Taking up the reins, she slid her feet into the stirrups. “What’s that?”

“He’s a virgin. Keep him that way until you get him home and I can be involved.”

Sarah shivered and all her blood rushed to her pussy at her image of the three of them together. “You got it.” She dug her heels into Skipper’s sides and away they went. The sooner she talked to Michael, the sooner she got him back to their house.

Chapter Seven

She found him exactly where Emilio had said she would: up in the hay loft of the big barn that sat catty-corner from the stables, lying on his stomach with his chin propped on his hands and peering out the hay lift door.

Sarah stood quietly at the top of the ladder and stared for several seconds. He was breathtaking. She thought, not for the first time, that he looked like a fallen angel. Almost too beautiful to touch. She wished more than anything at that moment that she had some artistic ability. The scene before her would make the perfect painting.

The fading sun cast him in shadows where only his face, the upper swells of his shoulders and his sculpted ass were illuminated in a reddish hue. He was perfectly still, except for the soft breeze that came through the open lift door and blew his hair off his face.

"I don't want you to get hurt, Sarah." Michael didn't turn or give any other clue that he knew she was there.

She stepped up the last rung of the ladder and climbed into the loft. "What makes you think that I will be?" She reached him and lay down beside him, on her stomach just like him, and stared out the door.

"People will see this as even worse than me and Emilio being together." He turned his head slowly, his gray eyes blinking away tears.

She leaned forward and kissed the bridge of his nose. "Do you really care so much what others think?"

He closed his eyes. After several minutes he opened them again, staring into her eyes. "My whole life, I tried to deny it, thinking it was wrong. My dad pretty much disowned me when he realized Emilio was my mate. He -- he caught us kissing when we were kids and after that --" He shook his head. "After that, he didn't have much to do with me. He devoted

all his time to Morgan. He never said anything, but I saw how he looked at me, how he treated me. I disgusted him.”

“Do you think it’s wrong?” She brushed his wet cheek.

“No, not really. I can’t help how I feel.” He shrugged and looked away, gazing out the small square door again. “I don’t care anymore. If someone doesn’t like it, it’s their problem, not mine. I just don’t want you and Emilio hurt by this.” He glanced at her, his tears coming faster now, and his eyes pleading with her to understand. “I love him, Sarah. He’s my mate; he was made for me. Werewolf mates are born to each other.”

Her heart constricted, and her own tears started to flow. “I know that, and I also know you love him, sweetheart. I do, too. And I love you. I want you both to be happy. I want us all to be happy together.”

Michael frowned, his eyebrows pulling together. “Your aunt and uncle won’t understand. You’ll be an outcast.”

“I already am. My aunt approached me today. She told me I shouldn’t allow you to live with us. I told her to mind her own damned business.”

“You did?”

She nodded vigorously. “Yes, I did.”

He frowned and sat up, grabbing her hands. “They’re like your parents.”

“If they disown me because you and Emilio are both an integral part of my life, then they never loved me anyway. I won’t give the two of you up unless you both decide you don’t want me.”

He shook his head. “No, you belong with us. I could tell that from the beginning. I love you, too, Sarah.”

It felt like a huge crushing weight had suddenly been lifted off her lungs, and she could breathe again. She laughed and grabbed him, kissed him. “Good, because I’m selfish. I want both of you.”

He growled and pulled her over on top of him as he rolled to his back. He nipped her bottom lip, then licked the sting away. Tracing her lips with his tongue, he delved inside, kissing her with the same fervor he had kissed Emilio last night. His cock hardened against her lower abdomen, and he began to thrust up against her. Grabbing both her ass cheeks in his hands, he squeezed, smiling against her lips when she squeaked.

Goodness, tell the man he could keep both of them and he became a sex-starved maniac. Sarah chuckled and pulled back, trying to catch her breath. “I guess this means you’re okay with this arrangement?”

“Yep.” He kissed her forehead. “Unless you try to get rid of me.” He kissed her nose. “I can share with the two of you.” He kissed her eyelids. “But I refuse to be cast aside, if you get tired of me.” He kissed her lips again and shifted, putting himself on top. “Forever, Sarah. All three of us as equal partners.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s exactly how we both wanted it all along.”

Michael’s mouth crashed down on hers. He straddled her hips with his legs and started dragging her shirt up.

“Whoa! Slow down.”

“Why?”

He asked it so seriously that Sarah burst into laughter. “Because Emilio is at home waiting for us.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “That’s a good reason.” He hopped to his feet, the sleek hard body moving in one smooth motion. He held out a hand for her.

Her gaze raked down his body, from his shoulders to his muscled chest, and from his stomach to his lean waist ... and the very impressive erection right below it. Sarah groaned and got to her knees, grabbed a handful of cock and led it to her mouth.

“Oh, God! That is not the way to get me to hurry.”

He was right, it wasn’t. And she knew Emilio was probably pacing a rut into the living room floor. She gave the head a quick lick and got up.

Michael groaned.

She swatted him on the butt as she went to the ladder. “Come on. Our third is waiting for us.”

It was dark outside, but not quite dark enough for modesty’s sake, so Michael shifted to wolf form and ran to the house. By the time she made it there and inside, Emilio had Michael pinned beside the door, kissing him.

She was immediately snagged and crushed between the two, her back against Michael’s chest. His cock nestled against her ass, and his hands came around her to pull Emilio even closer. The shy innocence he’d displayed the night before was completely gone today. Apparently he’d only needed the reassurance that they wanted him and loved him, not just saw him as a plaything, to let his passion out.

Emilio kissed her and tugged her shirt off over her head. He unhooked her bra from behind and tossed it aside. As soon as she was bare, Michael’s hands cupped her breasts, and he pushed his cock harder against her behind.

Her husband chuckled and swept his own shirt off. He started to unbutton his pants, then stopped. “Everyone to the bedroom.” He motioned them toward the hall, allowing no room for argument. “We might as well christen the bed. We’re all sleeping in there from now on.”

Michael was the first one in the bedroom. He practically flew to the bed, bouncing on it when he hit. Then he sat there watching them both undress with a grin on his face. “I think I should get to decide what we do tonight. No one consulted me last night.”

Emilio arched a brow and sat down on the edge of the bed to pull his shoes off, his back to Michael. "Are you complaining?"

"No." Michael scooted closer to the end of bed. "But I think I should get to make love to Sarah tonight."

That sounded like a good plan to her. Sarah watched him slink across the sheets and wondered how long it would take him to pounce. She pulled the rest of her clothes off and stood there watching him. This new, needy and horny Michael was every bit as endearing as the bashful one.

He glanced over, saw that she was naked and changed direction. Before she knew, it she was on her back in the middle of the bed with Michael on top of her and his tongue in her mouth.

Emilio chuckled and lay down beside them, resting his head on his hand. He kissed Michael's shoulder and rubbed the younger man's lower back. "Hold up, babe. We have all night." He tugged on Michael's shoulder until he got him on his knees and facing Emilio.

Emilio smiled at her and got to his own knees in front of Michael. They were still, studying each other for several seconds, then Michael sprang to action. He grabbed Emilio and kissed him, mashing their bodies together. Emilio gasped, his eyes widening. Apparently Sarah wasn't the only one not used to this sex fiend that Michael had turned into.

She sat up and scooted back against the headboard. She wanted to see them. Watching them together was an incredible turn on, and being with them, knowing that they were mates and had never done this before only added to her excitement.

Michael gripped his mate's ass and ground them together, making Emilio moan into his mouth. The whole time, their hands were busy learning each other, caressing, stroking.

She'd done this, gotten them together; she *was* a part of them.

Emilio kissed down the younger man's neck, lingering on his collarbone and shoulder while Michael's hands traced his back. Emilio took his time kissing and licking his mate until he got to Michael's cock. He sucked the head into his mouth briefly, then pulled away. With a whined protest from Michael, he came back up to his knees and nudged Michael onto his back.

Michael lay down, his eyes wide with wonder.

Sarah couldn't take any more; her clit throbbed, she wanted them both so badly. Her pussy ached to be filled. She crawled down the bed and met Emilio at Michael's chest. As Sarah stared into her husband's warm brown eyes, she lowered her head to Michael's nipple and flicked it with her tongue. Emilio lowered his head and did the same on the other side. After that they set up a pattern, exploring Michael's body, discovering what felt good to him.

They learned that Michael was ticklish on the hipbones, but he loved being touched on the inner thighs. His nipples weren't as sensitive as hers or Emilio's but by sucking on them,

they could get him to moan and writhe a bit. He really liked it when they laved his balls and the creases of his legs.

Emilio held up Michael's cock so that he and Sarah could both enjoy it. They alternately licked and sucked, stopping to kiss each other every so often. Sharing with Michael with Emilio felt so right. It was strange in a way, but even from the beginning, there seemed to be a bond that pulled not just the two men closer together, but her as well. This intimacy among the three of them only enhanced that bond. It should have bothered her that they were the ones who were mates; it should have made her feel excluded, but it didn't. The men might belong to each other, but they both were *hers*.

In no time they had Michael moaning and shoving toward their mouths. When he started to beg, Emilio pulled Sarah up and positioned her on her hands and knees over Michael, whose eyes were dazed with pleasure. She kissed his nose, then his chin and each cheek. As she bent to take his mouth, Emilio licked a long line up her slit. She whimpered and pushed back, trying to get more. He obliged for long seconds, licking and probing with his tongue until he had her also on the verge of orgasm.

"Trade places. Lie down, Sarah."

She got off Michael and moved onto her back, then Michael got to his knees between her spread thighs. He stroked her stomach, her legs, everywhere but where she needed him to touch her most. All the while Emilio was behind his mate, caressing his shoulders, his back, even his buttocks.

She was going to die of need if they didn't hurry. She wanted Michael's cock inside her. She bucked up, pumping her hips in impatience.

Emilio grabbed Michael's cock and held it down, aiming it at her moist entrance. Michael didn't need any further urging. He pressed forward, sinking slowly into her throbbing core. Her muscles automatically clamped down around him, making him moan. He closed his eyes and dropped onto his hands above her. Sarah gave him a few seconds to absorb the sensations of their joined bodies, not wanting him to come yet. Then she pulled her knees up and thrust.

Michael moaned again and reciprocated. He experimented with his motions a little, then found a rhythm they both liked. Emilio came up beside their heads on his knees. He clasped Michael behind the neck and pulled him forward for a deep kiss. It was frantic, wet and passionate, involving tongues and teeth. When Michael opened his eyes, she noticed they had shifted to their lupine counterparts.

Emilio dragged Michael's head down, urgently pulling his mate's head toward his cock while he held himself with the other hand. "Suck me, babe."

Oh, God, yes! Sarah ran her hand up the inside of her husband's thigh and over his balls. He was so open and exposed. When Michael's lips wrapped around Emilio's thick shaft, Sarah's whole body clenched around Michael's still thrusting cock. He didn't go as far down

on Emilio's dick as she did, but his cheeks hollowed out, sucking more than she had. He closed his eyes again and hummed.

Sarah wasn't sure if the humming was because of Emilio or her, or both, but it was clearly an I'm-enjoying-myself sound. Through it all, his hips never faltered; he continued to fuck her, his long cock gliding in and out of her smoothly.

A tingle began in her pussy and radiated outward. She came with her eyes wide open, still watching as Michael sucked strongly on her husband's cock. With a final lift of her hips and clench of her pussy, she dragged Michael right over the edge with her. His body stiffened above her, and he groaned around Emilio's cock. Emilio thrust two or three more times into his mate's mouth and came, too.

Michael collapsed on her; Emilio, to their side. For several minutes, the only sounds in the room were of their panting. After they had all regained enough strength to move, Emilio got up and retrieved a towel, wiping them down, then they all moved under the covers, ending up spooned together with Sarah in the middle.

Sarah felt nice and cozy, completely sated. There wasn't a place on earth she'd rather be than where she was now. Surely the smile on her face was destined to become a permanent fixture.

She was almost asleep when she remembered she needed to tell them about the baby. Well, it could wait until tomorrow.

"Sarah? Emilio? Are y'all still awake?"

"Barely."

"Yeah, babe, what's up?" Emilio caressed Michael's hip.

Sarah chuckled and elbowed him in the ribs. "That's a loaded question. You probably shouldn't ask him that; we may never get to sleep." Emilio smiled against her cheek.

Michael grabbed her hand and put it on his hip, over Emilio's hand, then put his own on top. He squeezed lightly. "Love y'all."

"Love you, too." She and Emilio answered in unison.

Yep, the smile was permanent -- if not always on her face, then in her heart.

Chapter Eight

December 19, 1974

The ring was burning a hole in her pocket.

She and Emilio had discussed it weeks ago, but she hadn't had time to pick it out, so today, she'd gotten up before either of her men and hightailed it to the jewelry store. She'd been lucky enough to find a gold band that matched hers and Emilio's perfectly. Then she'd gone shopping and to lunch with her sisters-in-law, even though all she'd wanted to do was go home and give Michael the wedding band she'd bought him. They'd considered giving it to him for Christmas, but she couldn't wait that long.

Michael was out of school on winter break and she'd wanted to stay at home, but the Christmas shopping wouldn't do itself. She might not be celebrating Christmas with her aunt and uncle because they'd disowned her after she'd told them Emilio and Michael were mates and she was sharing both their beds, but she still had plenty to buy.

Finally, four hours after she'd left home, she did just that. She got out of her car and practically ran to the front door, shopping bags in tow. She opened the door of the house; there, through the living room, in the kitchen was Michael on his knees in front of Emilio. Now that was a welcome sight to come home to!

Emilio was leaning against the counter, naked from the waist down, and Michael, totally nude, was sucking on him.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to me! Sarah groaned and shut the front door. "My goodness. Can I play, too?" She set her bags down on the couch and went to them.

"Oh, yeah. Come here, honey." Emilio reached out an arm to her and pulled her close, kissing her. Michael immediately started to work on her shoes from behind her. Her pants

and panties soon followed. He pushed her leg up, making her loop it around Emilio's hip and practically ate her up.

Sarah groaned and rocked back toward that talented mouth. His finger trailed over her hip and ass until one of his fingers rubbed against her anus. She squeaked and pressed closer to her husband.

Emilio grinned. "He did the same thing to me, and I reacted almost the exact same way." She chuckled and relaxed, letting Michael run his finger up and down her crease. It did feel pretty good.

Abruptly, he stopped and stood up, kissing her mouth, then Emilio's. "Do we have anything slippery? Lubricant?"

Good God, what had she started? Talk about jumping in with both feet. "What in the world do you need that for?"

He opened the cabinets over the stove. "We have Crisco. That should work." He pulled down the bottle and handed it to Emilio. "Bring that and come on." He turned and headed toward their bedroom.

Emilio frowned and lowered her leg.

She shrugged. "I have no idea what he thinks he's going to do with that."

"Oh, I have a pretty good idea. What scares me is that I don't know which one of us he thinks he's using it on."

Sarah pulled her shirt off and started walking. "Well, since he's your mate, I'll be nice and let you go first."

Emilio groaned. "Gee, thanks."

She chuckled. "No problem."

"Did you get the ring?"

She nodded and pulled it off her thumb. "Here, you give it to him."

Emilio stuck it on above his own ring and pushed her up against the wall, gobbling up her lips. "That was a brilliant idea, honey. He's going to like it."

"Mmm ... well, after you give it to him, I have a surprise for both of you."

Emilio grinned and opened his mouth to say something --

"Would you two hurry up?!"

When they got to their room, Michael was on his back in bed, stroking his cock. It was a pretty sight, but she wanted to participate instead of watch. She tried to hold in a moan but failed miserably.

"We've created a monster." Emilio sighed but his gaze never left Michael's busy hand.

She sat down and crooked her finger at her husband. "Didn't look like you minded too badly a couple of minutes ago."

"I didn't say I didn't like it. I'm just saying it's going to take both of us to keep up with him. He's going to be the death of us. Do you know what I woke to this morning?"

She was almost afraid to ask. She'd gotten up an hour before they normally did.

"I woke up with a dick in my face, tapping me on the cheek." Sarah bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing and covered her mouth. Emilio put the Crisco down on the nightstand and came to stand between her legs. "Then he attacked me in the barn."

"It was the tack room, not the barn." Michael moved but she couldn't see what he was doing.

Emilio shrugged.

"Define attack." She really wanted to hear this.

"Dry humped."

"It wasn't all that dry. We both ended up having to go change pants." Michael slid up behind her, putting his legs on each side of hers. His hard cock pressed against the cleft of her butt. One hand cupped her breast, the other her pussy.

She closed her eyes and leaned back just a tad. She didn't know what was hotter, Michael's erection against her and his hand working its way between her legs, or the thought of him and Emilio rubbing off each other in the tack room.

Emilio took her hand and placed it around his shaft before continuing with his grievances. "Then he dragged me back here for lunch and made me jerk him off." The husky tone of voice didn't sound at all like he was complaining.

Sarah squeezed his cock; he was so hard. She pumped her hand, felling the skin move against his dick. "*Made* you?"

Michael extended his legs and licked her neck. "Spread your legs wider, Sarah." She did, and he pushed two fingers into her pussy. "Don't let him kid you. It was a mutual thing, and he enjoyed it just as much as I did."

Emilio placed a foot on the bed and moved closer, removed his cock from her hand, and positioned it right in front of her mouth. She licked the tip and sucked the head between her lips. Her pussy had gotten so wet it made sopping sounds with each movement of Michael's fingers. She could actually smell the musky scent of her own juices.

Michael added another digit even as he moved behind her just a little, his cock pulsing. The hot, hard length throbbed and pushed against her back. He nuzzled the side of her face. "How far down can you go?"

She took a deep breath, relaxed, leaned forward and swallowed Emilio's cock all the way to her throat. Both men moaned. Emilio grasped the back of her head and slowly fucked her mouth.

Michael kissed, licked and nibbled on her cheek, ear, and neck, making goose bumps rise all over her. He pulled his fingers out of her pussy and brought them to his mouth. "Mmm ..."

Sarah released her husband's cock and twisted to lick at Michael's lips, needing to taste him, taste the two of them together; his mouth contained her flavor and Emilio's, then she tasted his own.

The bed dipped. Emilio moved beside her and tapped her hip. "Come here, honey." She nodded but didn't stop kissing Michael.

It was Michael who finally maneuvered them to the center of the bed. Then Emilio coaxed her onto her hands and knees above himself, then pulled her bottom down so he could reach her pussy with his mouth. His wet, warm tongue laved and sucked at her clit, then he fucked her with it. It was difficult to keep her hips still when her body was screaming for her to move.

She couldn't see Michael, but she was pretty sure what he was doing by the slurping sounds behind her and the occasional moan vibrating her pussy. She bent her head down, looking back under her arm.

Michael's mouth was sealed around Emilio's cock. His eyes met hers and he went down further.

It was too much; her pussy clenched around her husband's tongue and she came instantly, rocking back and forth against his mouth. Emilio didn't stop, but kept licking and sucking until she climaxed again. There was some rustling beside her and the bed moved again, but she didn't have any idea what Michael was doing until she felt a greasy finger rub across her anus.

She gasped, protested and tried to sit up, but Emilio chose that moment to suck her clit into his mouth and plunge two fingers into her pussy, making her come again.

Michael's slick digit pressed steadily into her ass before she finished climaxing. It stung a little but felt good, too; so good that it made her orgasm seem endless. She couldn't decide whether to rock back on his finger or forward onto Emilio's. The two men kept her so on edge that in no time Michael had worked another finger inside her ass and was steadily pumping them in and out.

Emilio moaned into her pussy again, and she dipped her head down to see Michael's hand working Emilio's cock.

"Oh, God." She was so turned on that she was convinced they could do anything they wanted with her and she'd love it. In fact, her entire body was so sensitized that she could probably come from pinching her nipples alone.

Emilio grunted, then ceased licking her. "Michael, stop."

Michael came up behind her without removing his fingers from her rear. He kissed her neck and bit down, sending a shiver down her spine. "Let me fuck you in the ass, Sarah." His language should have appalled her, but it was so unexpected coming from his mouth, and she was already so aroused that it had the opposite effect.

“Shut up! You’re going to make me come with just your words.” It was the closest Sarah had ever heard Emilio get to a whine; she couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped.

Michael dropped his forehead on her shoulder, his own shoulders shaking.

Emilio groaned. “Somebody better do something, or I’m going to make the decision for both of you.”

Sarah nodded. “Okay, but if I say stop --”

“I’ll stop immediately.” Michael slowly withdrew his digits.

“Oh!” That had felt good.

While Michael dug his fingers back into the oil, she slid down Emilio’s body and sat on his cock, rocking back and forth. Her pussy was so wet, the length of his shaft slid easily along her slit. She leaned forward so that the head of his cock rubbed against her clit.

He grabbed her hips, helping her move. “Oh, God, honey, that feels good.”

Michael came back to her, coating her and his cock with the slippery substance. She reminded herself to get some Vaseline or something. The thought of using cooking oil was ... well, if she hadn’t been so horny, the thought would have bothered her a great deal. As it was, his fingers rubbing her asshole felt really nice. She rubbed herself against Emilio again.

Michael pushed a finger in. “Does that still feel okay?”

She nodded. It was more than okay. It was nearly impossible to not grind herself down on her husband. Michael’s digit disappeared, then the blunt head of his cock replaced it. He pushed into her slowly and steadily. She felt full and it sort of stung a little, but it didn’t really hurt.

Michael’s forehead touched her between her shoulders. By the time his hips rested against her ass, he sounded like he’d been running. She was stretched beyond belief but moved first.

Michael gasped. “Oh, God, Sarah.”

She needed something more. Reaching down, she clasped Emilio’s cock and squeezed, then stroked the tip against her slit and her clit. Her husband in turn stuck his fingers in his mouth. then spread her labia open, rubbing her sensitive bud as Michael slowly fucked her ass. The sensations were so powerful, she peaked again. When she could think once more, she brought Emilio’s cock to her pussy, lowered herself on him and bent forward over him. She was so full; it was the most intense thing she’d ever felt, and she decided that she really liked it.

Emilio wrapped his arms around her. “Oh, fuck! I can feel him.”

Michael nodded against her shoulder and groaned.

Sarah wiggled experimentally. “Michael, move!”

“Can’t.” He sounded hoarse and sexy. His chest vibrated against her back.

“Michael, please,” Emilio gasped.

“I’ll come.”

Sarah rocked back in little pulses. “So will we.”

Michael gripped her hips and moved her, thrusting into her twice. She came again only seconds before both men. Emilio’s arms tightened around her, and he moaned in her ear as Michael practically roared a cross between a yell and a gasp. He fell forward onto her.

She’d died and gone to heaven. Who would have ever thought ...?

Emilio was the first to recover. “Michael, get off. You’re squishing me.” Sarah tried to laugh, but Michael was squishing her, too.

He rolled off her and flopped over onto his back. “You’re both so unromantic.”

Sarah snorted. “You mean what you just did was romantic?” They all laughed together. “And don’t you dare put that bottle back in the cabinet. Throw it away.” Sarah peeled her sticky, sweaty self off Emilio and laid down between him and Michael. She couldn’t believe what she’d just done; more to the point, she’d actually liked it. She couldn’t wait to watch the guys together ...

She shivered, feeling a pleasant twinge in her pussy at the image that conjured up.

Emilio reached over her and grasped Michael’s left hand. “Here, let me continue to be unromantic.” He put the band she’d bought onto Michael’s ring finger, then let go.

Michael looked at the ring, then sat up and hurled himself between them. His eyes were misty.

Sarah screamed.

Emilio flinched.

Michael began to cover them both with kisses. Incredibly, he still had an abundance of energy. Emilio was right: Michael was going to wear both of them out.

Sarah grinned. Maybe a baby would slow him down a little. She could just imagine him chasing after a toddler. Emilio, on the other hand, she could picture napping with a baby on his chest. “How do you guys feel about babies?”

“Hey, yeah. I like babies.” Michael nudged Emilio. “We should start working on that.”

Emilio thought about it for a few minutes and nodded. “Yeah, two or three would be nice.”

“Three. We need three; maybe a girl and two boys.” Michael looked like he had it all planned out.

Sarah opened her mouth to tell them that they didn’t have to work on it, but Emilio cut her off.

“I get to name the first one.”

Michael shrugged. "Okay. I'll name the second one. You can name the third one, Sarah." Michael turned over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, just like Sarah and Emilio.

She closed her eyes and shook her head disbelievingly. At least they liked the idea. "Um, guys, I'm --"

"How long do you think it will take?"

"Nine months, Emilio."

There was a smack.

"I didn't mean that. I meant how long do you think it will take Sarah to get pregnant if we start now?"

There was another smack. "That's not what you said."

On and on they went. Sarah grinned and rolled over. God, how she loved them. She listened to them go back and forth between planning for a baby and bickering over the details. Right before she drifted off to sleep, she realized she never did get to tell them she was pregnant. Oh, well, the announcement would make a nice little present for both of them on Christmas morning.

Epilogue

November 2, 2006

Sarah set her copy of *Gone with the Wind* down in front of the altar and stood. She'd looked around the fireplace earlier, fighting back tears as she'd spotted the smiling picture of her mother-in-law, Esperanza. She still missed the dainty Mexican woman terribly. She'd been like a mother to Sarah, nurturing and caring, and she'd always known how to guide Sarah into making the right decisions. Unlike her aunt and uncle, Espie had never batted an eyelash when Sarah had gotten involved with her son and his mate, had predicted it, in fact.

Sarah wiped at her eyes. *Día de los muertos* was a happy occasion, not a sad one. Espie had taught her that when they had first met. It was the same day she'd greeted her destiny and seen her soul mates. Now here she was, some thirty years and four children later. Even though her aunt and uncle hadn't spoken to her after the year she'd married, maybe she'd put some flowers on their graves as well. If there was one thing she'd learned over the years, it was that the Day of the Dead was a day to remember happier times.

Sarah went to the kitchen and stacked the last of the Tupperware containers in a box and grabbed the candles she'd placed on the counter, throwing them in as well. That should be it, except for the skull cookies, and Michael was supposed to be picking those up from Diego and Claire's restaurant. Sarah closed her eyes, trying to think. Had she forgotten anything?

Two strong arms wrapped around her from behind. "Mmm ... are you meditating?"

Sarah jumped, eyes flashing open, and swatted behind her, hitting Emilio's leg. "You scared me."

He pushed her ponytail out of the way and bit down on her shoulder. "Sorry. Let me make it up to you." He kissed up her neck, nibbling.

She shut her eyes again and laid her head back against his chest to give him better access. This was nice. Since they couldn't leave until Michael got back with the cookies --

The front door opened and shut. "Hey, knock it off. We don't have time for that. There's an hour drive ahead of us, and it's only about an hour and a half before sundown."

Emilio cupped her breast. "Bet we can distract him and shut him up."

She'd bet he was right, and it was a very tempting thought, but they really did need to go. She opened her eyes just as Michael came into the kitchen. He put down a white baker's box and a pale blue bag with little yellow duckies on it on the bar. Why did he have that bag?

She pulled it to the edge of the bar just as Emilio grabbed Michael by the arm and pulled him up against his chest and kissed him. It figured. Michael was completely without protest when it was him being groped and embraced.

Inside the ducky bag were diapers, baby clothes, and bottles. "Why do you have a diaper bag?" The men went right on kissing and totally ignored her. She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest. "Ahem."

Something tugged on her pants leg.

"Ma, ma, ma, ma, ma." Her youngest grandson sat on the floor staring up at her with big green eyes. He held his little arms up.

"Where did you come from, baby?" She lifted him and got a great, big, sloppy, open-mouthed, slobbery baby kiss right on her mouth.

Michael pulled away from Emilio and came to her and Wyatt. He kissed her cheek, then circled her waist with an arm. "Rhett's in town. She was having dinner at the restaurant with Jess and Kat. Wyatt saw me come in and tried to crawl out of the high chair. After I took him, he wouldn't go back to his mama." Michael's smile was absolutely devilish. He obviously liked the fact that his grandson wanted him over his own mother. "So I told her we'd bring him back out to the ranch tomorrow evening."

Emilio came up on her other side and leaned in to kiss his grandson. "We're going out to the ranch tomorrow?"

Michael brushed a dark lock of hair out of Wyatt's eyes. "Yep. I thought we'd spend the weekend ... in the guest house."

Hmm, that sounded like fun. They had some great memories of that place, of course. She bussed Michael's cheek. "That sounds wonderful."

Wyatt touched Michael's face, jostling his glasses and planted a big gushy baby kiss on his nose. "Pa!"

Michael grinned broadly, straightened his glasses and wiped his nose off. "Thank you." He returned Wyatt's kiss back, then kissed Sarah. "I thought so, too. Just like old times."

"Why don't we all take time off and stay the whole week? Maybe two?" Emilio clapped his hands once and held them out to Wyatt.

Wyatt reached for Emilio. "Tee."

"Oh, God." Michael rolled his eyes.

Sarah just groaned and handed the baby over. Her husband was incorrigible. It was bad enough that he had their older grandsons calling him "Uncle Grandpa." Now he had the baby doing it, too. In Spanish.

Emilio stuck his tongue out at them and glanced down at Wyatt. "Tell Grandma and Grandpa to hush and get the stuff."

Wyatt looked at them and stuck his finger straight up in the air instead of to his lips. "Shhhh ..."

Emilio grinned even wider. "Tell them they better hurry or Wyatt and *Tío Abuelo* are going to leave without them."

Wyatt stared at Emilio, then at her and Michael. "Go!" And with that, Emilio and Wyatt made a grand exit. Well, it would have been grand if Wyatt hadn't been waving to them over Emilio's shoulder.

Michael bumped her hip. "Come on, you heard the baby. Let's go. We have *día de los muertos* to celebrate. Let's introduce our grandson to his great-grandparents."

She grabbed the diaper bag and followed Michael out. "Can we leave *Tío Abuelo* here?"

Michael chuckled. "Nah, but we can make him ride in the trunk."

"Hey, I heard that!"



Jeigh Lynn

Jeigh Lynn lives with, her real life hero, her husband and their two rowdy sons. She is an ex-dance instructor and dancer of over twenty-five years. She lays claim to several National and Regional Dance Competition trophies, including Showstoppers, Stars of Tomorrow and Star Power. She was also featured twice on a variety show for the BBC. Currently, Jeigh is a stay at home mom and a writer, not to mention an avid reader of Romance and Mystery. When she's not fetching Kool-Aid and swapping out video games, she can usually be found enjoying the decadence of chocolate, in between her workouts and writing. Her hobbies include gardening, practicing her marksmanship, art, typing email to her critique partners and, of course, reading.

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