

Bayou Gold

By

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Dedicated

To James R., Ph.D. candidate and alligator expert, whose insight into the world of the reptiles was invaluable. Plus, he's one hot Yankee! Thanks, James!

Chapter One

Justin dipped his pole into the dark, murky water and eased the pirogue forward. The tiny boat rocked against the waves before consenting to the turn in the bayou. With the moon almost full, the water lit up like black sunshine, glistening with welcome as he approached another bend. It would have been so much easier to use a boat with a trolling motor on it, but this was quieter. And the tiny pirogue moved much easier through the labyrinth than a larger boat would have.

The gold had to be out here. He had followed his grandmother's journals to the letter, and every instinct he had combined with that ancient knowledge to tell him he was on the right track. All he had to do was find the tree that looked like a face, kind of like Grandmother Willow in that Disney movie, *Pocahontas*. Except this tree wasn't a kindly grandmother spirit. This one held the keys to the Thibodeaux past, keys Justin needed to set his mind at ease if nothing else.

No one had questioned his ancestry. He was Cajun and proud. But everything inside him screamed out that somewhere along the lines somebody had gotten something wrong. Creole blood flowed through his veins, a fact he longed to prove. Why it was so important to him to find out, he could never quite explain. Heritage was important to everyone in LaTrece, and Justin's heritage had long been a subject of debate, something he wished to end.

The alligators bellowed at one another, signaling his proximity to their mating spot, somewhere he knew he shouldn't be. Gators mated in the water and the low sound of their moans told him he should turn around and head the other way. His fingers ran along the withered edges of the yellowed map, pointing this direction, forcing him to forge forward as he hoped to avoid any gators in the throes of passion. The last thing he needed was to bump into a lusty alligator and have his own sex life put to a decided end.

He folded the paper and tucked it back into his shirt pocket. There was no need for a map. It had long since been memorized by the twelve-year-old boy who had found it hidden in Aunt Pearle's attic. Since then, he had studied every line and curve, hoping that one day he would get the guts to go out into the bayou and put his curiosity to an end. This was the family's dirty secret, the one thing the aunts did not wish to become public knowledge. They had scolded him when he mentioned as a teenager that he might go looking for the gold.

"There's no gold out there. Nothing but fool's gold, and you be an even bigger fool for lookin' for it," Aunt Ella had said.

But the gold held the key to his heritage. If the legends were right, nestled in a mason jar, buried with the gold, was the paper he so desperately sought, the one that would prove his heritage and secure his

deed to the land surrounding his tiny shack. It wasn't much, he knew, but in a place like LaTrece, land ownership separated the classes more than anywhere else he could think of. He may be the sheriff, but that was more of a title than anything else. What he needed, what he felt deep down inside, was the connection to the land. Without it, he felt like he could never give any woman the kind of promise the ones around here seemed to need.

There wasn't a woman on his mind, though, as he trolled forward. Well, none who had set foot in the bayou in the last ten years. The only woman he had ever thought of setting up housekeeping with had left him high and dry—and bleeding—ten years ago. And she was not likely to come back any time soon.

The night birds began their song as he rounded the bend and spotted the gators off to the side. Some of them were lazing on the shore while others were well involved in the mating ritual. He eased closer, slowing the pirogue to a creep in order to move by the group of ten or so large reptiles.

A chill went up his back as he approached a tiny island, one he swore he'd never seen before though he had been all through the bayou. Legend told that on the full moon prior to St. John's Eve, Marie LaVeau roamed the bayous in animal flesh waiting for men to enchant. It was all a bunch of hoodoo hocus pocus if you asked Justin, who had never really believed much in that kind of thing anyway. He had a healthy respect for those who did believe and had seen things in his lifetime that defied explanation. But a woman who had died in the last century could not possibly be alive and wander the swamps no matter how powerful her *mojo*.

The moon wasn't full yet, he noted, though the chill that swept through him didn't offer any reprieve from the bayou ghost stories he'd heard as a kid. Instead, it worked its way into a full-blown shiver as the island approached, making him fully aware that he hadn't moved in at least ten seconds. Tricks from the swamp lights made him think the island was actually floating toward him instead of standing stationary as he knew it must be.

Dipping the pole back into the water and urging the boat forward once more, he thought he could reach the island before alerting the nearby gators. Too late, he realized three of them had already come up alongside the tiny boat and were floating like innocent logs next to him. They could capsize him in an instant if they chose to do so. Then, he'd be gator bait for sure. Stories he'd heard as a kid flooded his mind as he thought about the swamp pirates and how many of them had become food for the swamp reptiles. And if the gators didn't get them, the water moccasins surely had.

"Easy," he crooned to the gators as they came even closer, one of them slapping his tail against the back of the boat, throwing Justin off balance.

The gator growled, revealing white teeth sharp enough to tear off a man's legs if it decided it was hungry enough. Mon Dieu, but he hoped this thing had eaten tonight.

The wind picked up, blowing in his hair, disturbing the quiet ripples of the water, carrying his scent to the other gators and alerting them of a trespasser in their wake. Three more joined the first three, surrounding him on all sides. “Shit,” he muttered as he reached for the gun he kept tucked into his jeans. If he fired a shot into the air, surely it would scare them off.

He aimed the gun at the sky and squeezed the trigger. The result was not what he had hoped for. The leader of the gators, the obvious alpha male had taken offense to the intrusion. He chose that moment to buck against the side of the pirogue, almost turning it over in the process. Justin clung to the side, his gun flying from his hand. Some cop he was! Couldn’t even hold onto his gun when encountering a little turbulence.

The male bucked against the boat once more, this time managing to knock the whole thing off balance. As the island grew closer, Justin held his breath and scrambled for his gun, hoping his hands would close around it before he hit the water. The smell of gators closing in on him combined with the smell of swamp water to form a nauseating aroma. He was as good as dead now.

He took in a deep breath just before his head went underwater and said a silent prayer to St. Jude, knowing this was one hell of a hopeless cause. As his life flashed before his eyes, one vision came to him more clearly than anything else. Jean-Marie. Her laughing eyes, her hair spilled out on his bed, her body pressed softly against him. Then he saw the pain he had caused her, the glaring hatred, the shot that rang out and ripped through his body. Her face appeared before him and then disappeared into the mist, leaving his heart feeling as heavy as his body as he sank to the bottom of the swamp.

If the gators got him, he didn’t know because as soon as her face disappeared, everything went black.

* * * * *

“Wake up, boy. You don’ need to be sleepin’. You an’ me got work to do.”

The smell hit him at first. The swamp combined with some awful herb that smelled like burning Spanish moss. When it hit his nostrils and sank into his lungs, his stomach protested, threatening to spill his dinner right here, if he was still alive, that is.

From the aching in his head, he had to be alive. Otherwise, his whole body would ache, wouldn’t it? Surely, it hurt to be torn limb from limb by a mob of angry reptiles.

“You come to da swamp for answers. Now you be getting’ ‘em. Wake up.”

The voice sounded so foreign, the accent thickly French. But the timing was off, making her sound unlike any French woman he'd ever heard before. No, this wasn't French. This was a gen-u-ine Creole accent.

His eyes fluttered open, trying to concentrate on staying that way. Heavy smoke enveloped him, threatening to choke the air left in his lungs right out. He blinked and saw the night sky overhead. He couldn't possibly be in heaven if he was looking up at it, which only left one possibility.

"Where am I?" He managed, his voice sounding far off, even to himself.

"You in da swamps. Where you think?"

"What happened?"

"Gators. You safe now." Her thick accent now seemed overly done, as if she were trying to sound a certain way that went against her natural speech pattern.

"You saved me?"

"That I did. But now you owe me. So, sit up, boy, so I can collect."

Justin managed to sit up without falling over, which was what he feared he would do. The whole scene looked like something out of a movie about New Orleans, one of those that never got the facts straight. The woman who sat across from him looked like every make believe Marie LaVeau figure he'd ever seen. A turban alive with reds and greens covered her hair while her fluid skirt reminded him of the old voodoo priestess he had once seen in New Orleans. She sat with her profile to him, her high cheekbones prominently displaying her ancestry. Large gold hoops decorated her ears and arms. The smoke clouded his vision of her, making her indeed appear to be a voodoo priestess, something he knew was impossible. If he didn't know any better, he would swear she was *the* voodoo priestess, the one who made the religion notorious in Louisiana, Marie LaVeau.

"Who are you?" Confusion clouded his brain. He had fallen into the water, right? That was the only explanation for the fact that he was soaked to the bone and freezing, not to mention hallucinating. A shiver ran through him as the cold worked its way into his system, saturating his insides as surely as the water had soaked his outsides. His head ached, probably from the collision with the Cypress knee that stuck out of the water. Those things were a danger to boats and to people as they peeked up from beneath the water impeding forward motion.

"Who I am is of no importance." She turned to face him as she spoke and that was when he saw the right half of her face. What should have been skin was row upon row of golden scales. Alligator scales. It was all he could do to keep from reaching out to see if they were real or just another adornment or figment of his imagination.

“What are you?” Unable to hide his fascination with the woman, he stared as she moved across the room, holding him spellbound with those golden eyes of hers, eyes that reminded him so much of another Creole woman. Her voice, which was pure spun silk, flowed from her tongue and made its way into his system, warming him as if she had infused him with a voodoo potion.

“I am the one’s gonna give you a past. An’ a future. But you got to pay first.”

“I owe you my life,” he managed. His heart had stopped pounding as feverishly as it had been. Even as the water dripped off his hair and onto his face, he kept his gaze focused on her.

“That you do. An’ I plan on takin’ what I need from you.” Her smile was so warm and inviting he couldn’t view the words as a threat, be it shielded or outright, even though everything about this situation warned him that he was in something a lot deeper than swamp water.

“Do you need my help?” Why else would a woman like her have rescued him? His head throbbed as he still tried to piece the events together, wondering how much of this was a dream and how much was a hallucination.

She nodded, her rings jingling with the movement. “An’ you need my help. Come closer.”

Justin scooted around to where she sat and remained perfectly still as she placed a cloth necklace over his head. “What’s this?” The smell of lilacs and sage rose up to meet him as she leaned over, her fingers brushing against his chest.

“Just listen.”

“To what?” He ran his fingers along the cloth as he swallowed hard. Voodoo. The word hummed in his head and the knowledge pulsed through him, causing his heart to once again quicken and his breathing to become shallow.

“To the spirits of the swamp. Hear them? They’re calling to you, Jus-tin Thibodeaux. They tell you what you need to know.”

“I need to know about my family, about the gold.” It was the reason he was out here, after all. The reason he had fallen into the swamp and into this mystery.

“And you shall know. But you must find it first. You must protect this gold you seek.”

“Do you know how to find it?” If she did, he would be even closer to solving the mystery of his ancestors.

“No words. Listen.”

She closed her eyes and began a soft humming. Justin shot her a wary look before closing his eyes also. The bayou wasn’t saying anything to him that he hadn’t heard before. The sounds of the night filtered in through the smoke and haze. Gators bellowing, night birds singing, various assorted rodents

calling to one another, nothing he wasn't familiar with. Then, just as he was about to open his eyes, there was another sound, one he knew as well as his own voice.

I love you, Justin Thibodeaux. Jean-Marie's voice flooded his mind as clearly as if she sat right next to him. He swore he could even feel her breath on the back of his neck, her hair spilling forward to tickle his bare chest. Squeezing his eyes tighter, hoping to conjure her, he concentrated, hoping that she would appear from wherever it was she had been for ten years.

The scar below his ribs pulsed in a rhythm of its own making. Pain shot through his body at the thought of the woman who had left her mark on him in more ways than one. The sound of her voice lulled him into a comfort he hadn't known in so long. Why had he let her go like that? Why hadn't he sought her out? If he got the chance, he would hunt her down. And he wouldn't be seeking justice for her attempt on his life. He would be seeking a chance to apologize, to make things right with the one woman who would always have his heart.

"You ready yet?" The voodoo woman's voice penetrated the thick fog of his mind, forcing him to open his eyes.

"Ready for what?" The incense became heavy, stinging his eyes as the woman danced before him, her voice setting the rhythm, her eyes casting an eerie glow. Then her voice rang out like a warning.

"For your payment. There's a price you know. I can give you what you want, what you need, but you must do something for me, in return."

"I'll do anything. I owe you." He felt the words as he said them, but the haze surrounding him grew thicker, threatening to blind him.

"No. You got to do it cause you want it, not out of debt. Do you want the power I can give you? The power to find and protect the gold?"

"That's my payment? I have to find the gold for you?" Confusion vibrated through him, causing her voice to float up to him from no particular direction, making him feel as if he'd just come off a three-day drunk. The smell of sage and burning moss penetrated his clothing, wrapping him up in a blanket of incense and smells of home.

"And protect it." Again, her voice seemed far away as he tried to concentrate on her words.

"Done. Who do I make the check out to?" Her face had all but disappeared as he spoke.

"You make it out to yourself." She stood, revealing herself to him once more. "You listen to your *mojo*."

"My what?"

She approached him, parting the smoke as she moved. Her fingers closed over the bag around his neck. “This is your *gris-gris*. Don’ take it off. She be comin’ wid da moon.” She pointed above them to the moon, which was almost full. “An’ change comin’ wid her.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Shhh. Quiet now. Listen to da swamp.” She sat down next to him.

He closed his eyes, but all he could hear this time was the bellowing of the gators and the warning that echoed in his head. He was about to find out how it felt to glide along the swamp water by the force of strong legs and a belly the size of Texas.

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Jean-Marie didn’t look back when she pulled the car out of the long driveway. Gino was away at poker night and never expected her to disappear this way. His goons were off duty tonight, though God only knows why he wasn’t having her watched 24/7. She waved to the night guard who opened the gate for her. She had called ahead and told him she was meeting a girlfriend in town. The girlfriend, unbeknown to anyone else, was going to help her get the hell out of here.

Her heart pounded in her chest at the thought of leaving. Their relationship had been over for months, but she had stayed out of loyalty. That and the fact that she knew if she left he would kill her. She knew far too much about the inner workings of his business, her mistake, she knew. But when she had hooked up with Gino Hernandez five years ago, the life he led was one that seemed full of glamour and excitement. So he killed a few people. They all deserved it. Bunch of drug dealers and con artists.

Then he struck that family with the kids. When she found out about that, she about lost it. Of course, he didn’t know any of this. She let him sink himself into her body and celebrate a job well done while she was fighting both tears and nausea. She would have killed him herself if she thought she could have. Just thinking about holding a gun made her sick to her stomach.

So, she did the only thing she knew she could do. She waited, biding her time, collecting information. Her hand wrapped around the jump drive attached to her key chain. It held enough information to put Gino away for a long time. But she couldn’t do anything until she got out of Vegas. She had to go somewhere safe, somewhere far enough away from Gino that he’d never be able to find her.

Closing her eyes before pulling out onto the street, she said a silent prayer to St. Jude, knowing he was a sucker for lose causes. If Gino wanted to find her, no amount of highway could keep him away. Dirt roads, now that was another matter entirely. Gino had no idea that she was originally from Louisiana, due to her having hidden her accent so well.

As clear as the night sky, the idea formed. She could go back to Louisiana. No one would ever think to look for her there. A tight knot formed just below her heart. She hadn't been back in ten years. Not since...she didn't even want to think about what, or rather who, had driven her away. It was better to get those thoughts out of her head. She wouldn't go to Lafayette or LaTrece. New Orleans was big enough and far enough away, she wouldn't have to worry about anyone finding her unless she wanted to be found.

Tightening her hands around the steering wheel, she pulled out into the street and headed for the airport. Her friend had agreed to drive her car out into the desert and abandon it there while she caught a flight to an undisclosed location, which she knew now would be New Orleans.

One more silent prayer and her hammering heart had stilled a little, but the sick feeling that had settled into her stomach hadn't let up any. Going home. Would she ever think of it that way again? So much time and stuff had gotten in the way. And Justin. God, Justin. Her heart still pounded wildly just thinking about him. She swore if she ever saw him again, she'd kill him for sure this time. If she didn't throw herself into his arms first.

Chapter Two

Marie LaVeau's legacy still haunts the bayous of Louisiana. Truths combine with legends, creating a woman whose reign as Voodoo Queen of New Orleans still influences the Vieux Carre as well all the rest of New Orleans. To this day, both her life and death remain a mystery. Some sources say she died in her Ann Street home in 1881. Others say she continued to live in the body of her daughter, Marie II. Still others believe she performed the ultimate ritual on St. John's Eve and, sinking into Lake Ponchatrain, transformed herself into an alligator who continues to roam the bayous.

Justin flipped off the TV and placed the remote on the table next to his La-z-boy recliner. He'd had enough of Louisiana superstition to last him a lifetime. He ran his fingers along the knot on his forehead. Damned Cypress knees. The one his pirogue crashed into last night seemed to come from out of nowhere. And what came next...he shook the thoughts from his mind. He didn't want to know what came next. But the throbbing in his head seemed to sink its way down to the soles of his feet, warning him that last night hadn't been a dream.

Ya got til St. John's Day, the voice played over and over in his mind, the accent a perfect upper-crust Creole voice from days gone by.

He stood, stretching his long legs, his back stiff from his few hours' rest in the recliner. He liked his simple, ordered life and didn't need a curse interrupting anything. As the day broke, he wasn't sure if the curse existed or not. The only proof he had of last night's encounter sat heavy on his chest, the cotton brushing against his heart, vibrating in time with the rhythm.

Be ready for change, the voice warned, *cause she's comin' wid da moon. An' you be thankin' me when ya see her.*

"Shit." He knocked his knee against the old ammo box he used for a coffee table. Gritting his teeth and resisting the urge to kick the table for getting in his way, he grumbled and headed for the shower, thoughts of the moon in his head.

The smell of swamp water was thick in the cabin, proof of his midnight swim. It had been near daylight when he made it home, soaked through and through from his accidental swim in the bayou. He had changed clothes, but his aching bones refused to move toward the shower. Sometime during the early hours, sleep took over as he collapsed in the chair and dreamed of the woman with the half-moon eyes and café au lait voice.

Turning on the shower and peeling off his clothes, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. The knot on his head was already turning green, making his forehead look like something out of

one of those alien movies. He needed a shave, his three-day weekend showing on his face like something he needed a vacation from.

There wasn't much crime in LaTrece, a place that only had about a thousand people. Of the thousand, he was the law. If anything ever got out of hand, though, the citizens were more than willing to pitch in. Of course, few of them were over eighteen and under fifty since those near his age mostly lived in Lafayette. The few young kids around here lived with their grandparents. Truth be told, he was the sheriff only because of his age and because no one else wanted to interrupt their laid-back lifestyles with a badge. Fortunately, he could take as many long weekends as he wanted and no one cared. The crux of his work was going in to Lafayette every now and then to bring in a poacher.

His real focus, though, was the gold that was reputed to be buried somewhere in the swamp. Justin was not a gold digger and he wasn't looking for an easy ride. What he was concerned with was a series of papers supposedly buried in a Mason jar with the gold. The papers would once and for all settle the question of his lineage, something that concerned him more than he liked to admit.

Justin was not prejudiced. In fact, he was one of the most open-minded people in LaTrece, a close-knit Cajun community. But he needed to know who his grandmother was, what she was. His aunts would never confirm what he suspected, their prejudices running several generations deep. But when Old Man Thibodeaux fell in love with Lucille LaCour, whether or not she could pass for white was not an issue. The fact that she could made her fit easily into the little community. But there had been rumors of her heritage, rumors whose effects he still felt today. And the need to know if his grandmother really was a voodoo priestess was all-important to him for reasons he couldn't explain.

It wasn't like he was superstitious. Not anymore than anyone else here anyway. But he needed to know if he was losing his mind with the visions he'd been having lately. His swim in the swamp last night combined with the visions, making it almost more than a man could bear. Something deep inside told him he was getting close to unraveling a mystery that desperately needed unraveling.

Justin's aunts denied the fact that their mother was anything other than a Cajun by way of Nova Scotia. Their pale lips tightened when they spoke of her, the woman who had died so young, so mysteriously. Now, speaking her name seemed to be a Cardinal Sin. And Justin needed answers.

He stepped into the shower, letting the hot water run across his face and down his back. He soaped up a washcloth and began cleaning last night's slime from his body. When his hand made contact with the scar on his right side, just below his ribs, a vision of Jean-Marie danced before his eyes, so powerful, it almost slammed him into the wall.

Jean-Marie's coffee colored half-moon eyes bespoke of her Creole blood. And her waist-length golden blonde hair set her apart from the Cajuns in LaTrece. She was in a class all her own, something he should have considered before he decided to dip his rod into her honey pot.

He could still see the fire in her eyes when she'd lifted the shotgun, aimed it as his manhood and squeezed the trigger. Lucky for him, Rose Donavon had sprung from the bed, naked as the day she was born, and pushed him aside. The bullet grazed his skin, just below the ribs. But there had been enough blood he thought for a second that she'd killed him. And the fire that the bullet had caused just below the surface of his skin would forever haunt him, reminding him of how it felt to have love literally burn a hole in one's body.

She aimed at his heart next, her cold eyes staring at him as tears fell down her lovely face. Her hand shook, and in the last seconds, she lowered the gun, turned, flung it into a chair, and walked out of his life. She'd never returned to the bayou, but the curse she flung at him had haunted him every day for the past ten years.

I hope you swim with the gators, Justin Thibodeaux!

If she only knew.

He let the water slide down his body, the steam swirling around him. Jean-Marie. The woman was the most beautiful creature he'd ever set eyes on. The fact that she practiced the ancient art of voodoo had never bothered him, but she was forever concerned that it did. Her ability to accept her heritage had never been top-notch, something she reacted to by lashing out at those around her.

Voodoo was a part of life in rural Louisiana. People could call themselves *traiteurs*, healers or whatever else they wanted. The truth of the matter was, they were mixing the island practices of voodoo with their Christian practices. Whether the *gris-gris* helped a teething baby or rendered a cheating man impotent, the magick was still powerful.

And Justin knew it coursed through his veins. He just had to find the proof.

And, something inside him warned, he had to find Jean-Marie. The desire to look for her had always been strong. In the ten years since she'd left him for dead, thoughts of killing her had been on his mind more often than not. But this morning, the urge to find her had nothing to do with Bayou Justice and had everything to do with a longing deep inside himself that he couldn't readily explain.

He *needed* her for some unknown reason. And his every instinct told him that right now, she needed him, too.

He closed his eyes, attempting to conjure her image. He could almost imagine her now, as if she were close by. Her laughter penetrated his thoughts, making him remember how it had felt to chase her through the swamp, the joys they'd shared once she let him catch her, the love lighting up her eyes when

he looked down at her. What they had shared had been magical, no *gris-gris* required. And right now, everything inside him wanted to hunt her down and force her to give him another chance. Even if she had shot him...

* * * * *

Three more nights until the moon was completely full. Justin ran his fingers along the white bag he still wore tied around his neck. The voodoo woman had been a figment of his imagination, he had decided. The bag must have come from some late night drinking binge he didn't remember having. Still, the swim in the swamps had shaken him enough that he hadn't removed the bag yet.

He stood out on his porch and contemplated the bayou that lay before him, like a mysterious dark cavern he had to find a way to maneuver; it housed secrets untouched by the light of day. Having lived here all his life, he had taken more than one dip in those black waters, but the one he'd taken last night had shaken him in a way that no other had before him. In fact, he could only recall one incident that had caused his knees to turn to wet noodles and practically fall out from beneath his body, and that was the night Jean-Marie had shot him.

For some reason, after ten long years, Jean-Marie's name and face had taken up residence in his head again, causing him to wander back to their time together more often now than he had in a long time. She couldn't possibly be coming back to Louisiana, as his instincts told him. When she high-tailed it out of here, she left everything behind and seemingly disappeared somewhere out West. The last he heard, she had been in Los Angeles, a place he swore he'd never visit.

The bayou pulsed around him, its night song whispering to him, warning him that all his hopes and fears were about to come full-circle. And he knew she would return. He could feel it in the throbbing beneath his ribs, the place where she had left her mark on him for eternity. And he could feel it in the hammering of his heart as it threatened to drive him mad. Jean-Marie's taste, her scent, a combination of jasmine and honeysuckle, still lingered all around him as if she had never left.

He leaned against the Cypress tree railing of his cabin in the swamp and looked out across the way to where Jean-Marie's cabin still stood. They had grown up just a few yards from one another in a shallow part of the swamp, but they were so different. When she was ten, Jean-Marie went to New Orleans for the first time, discovered that Creole women were highly regarded there and took on an air of superiority. That was probably what first attracted him to her—she was different.

Then, when she was thirteen and he was sixteen, she began to blossom beneath the hot summer sun. He used to climb up into the Cypress trees and watch her swim, listen to her play games that were

part little girl part woman. And he used to wonder how it would feel to run his hands through her golden hair that held a fascination for him as if it were pure spun gold.

When she turned sixteen, she finally looked his way. They had been inseparable from their first kiss to the moment before he drank too much and ended up in Rose Donavon's bed. They learned to love together, took each other to heights of ecstasy neither had known before. Her body was an open vessel for him, something he longed to sink himself into and never come up for air. Her hair smelled of sweet Carolina Jasmine and honeysuckle and her skin felt as smooth as silk.

He closed his eyes and pictured her as she had been their first time together, her legs spread wide, her eyes hungry as she pulled him down on top of her. They lay in his tiny pirogue, which he had tied to a Cypress knee in the middle of the swamp. He swore then that he would always love her, always protect her. Shaking the image from his mind, he opened his eyes and concentrated on the moon, which had yet to peek out from beneath the clouds tonight.

"Damn voodoo," he muttered, his hand closing around the bag, threatening to rip it from his neck.

That was when the pain started, beginning in his head, where the lump had been for two days now. As if that were the source of the transformation, he felt his entire head grow cold, like it did that time when he caught the flu. But the pain and the chill didn't stop there. They traveled around to his back, shot down his neck, to his stomach. The one place that wasn't cold was his scar and it was red hot. He fell forward against the porch railing and clung to it to steady himself. It was no use. A low bellow erupted from his throat and he knew the old voodoo priestess was right.

He fell to his knees and watched in horror as his hands began to change, melting away into claws. His flesh threatened to peel from his body as the intensity of the pain grew to a numbing state. He knew now how it must feel to burn alive as the liquid flames shot through his body, licking at his insides, threatening to drive him mad. The scales began at his newly formed claws and snaked their way up his arms. He watched in horror as his brown skin turned green, his flesh becoming leather. As soon as the dark green scales coated his arms, his chest began to ache with the same intensity that took over the rest of his body. Fire shot through his entire system as every human part of him gave way to something else, something he couldn't explain. The sound of his clothing ripping from his body was the last thing he heard before he felt the tail grow, his legs shrink and all hint of humanity vanish from his body.

The cold pierced his skin, warning him that if he didn't move soon, he would be unable to move. Nights in the bayou were usually warm, but to an alligator, the warmth did not transfer as easily. He ambled forward, moving one heavy limb and then the other. If he drowned in the swamp, it would be his own damned fault for being so greedy as to go out there and look for the gold. But instinct told him he wouldn't drown, and he wouldn't feed.

The bayou mud sank between his new reptilian toes. He listened as the suction broke and he moved forward, stepping slowly into the water. As soon as he entered the warmth, his body relaxed. Floating on top of the water was much easier than it looked. He imagined he would struggle, probably sink, be the laughing stock of the swamp, but he moved with an inherent grace he didn't know he possessed.

The gold was out here somewhere in the bayou. And he would find it and protect it, as *She* had asked. But his new instincts, his animal instincts, told him everything was not as it appeared. And the voodoo priestess was asking so much more of him than he realized.

Chapter Three

New Orleans. Jean-Marie looked out of her St. Charles Street hotel room window and took in the view of the city where her heart had always lived. The first thing she had done upon arrival was go to the French Quarter and find a room, then she had gone down to Café DuMonde and eaten more than her share of beignets. It felt good to be back in the city, even if it had rained all day. Now that night had fallen, she looked around at the city lights, contemplating what to do with herself.

She had ten thousand dollars, which was plenty of money for a new start, but she really didn't have any skills other than those that had gotten her this far. And to be honest, she really didn't want to return to her life as a stripper. People like Gino frequented those kinds of places, and somebody would eventually recognize her. No, she had to find honest work not that stripping wasn't honest. But she wanted to do something that didn't require her to get naked.

Her hand wrapped around the jump drive where she had downloaded all of Gino's information. She knew the best thing to do would be to find a cop and turn in what she knew. But there was the tiny fact of her prominent place on LaTrece's most wanted list, something that hadn't escaped her mind even though years had passed since she shot Justin. Going into a police station was the last thing she wanted to do for fear that she would end up behind bars. All the cops needed to do was run her record, and they would know who she was, and she would be right back where she started, in LaTrece. And God knew she didn't want to go back there.

She and her mother had never really fit in up there. Of course, this mostly had to do with the fact that her mother was fooling around with the mayor's son, who was married. Jean-Marie was a product of that relationship, which lasted a good thirty years, longer than the man's marriage. When they finally married, her mother moved up to the Cane River area, but Jean-Marie had stayed in the bayou, her love for Justin clearly clouding her good sense. If she'd had any, she would have gone, too, and gone to college at NSU up in Natchitoches. Instead, she stayed in the bayou and played house with Justin, waiting for him to ask her to marry him.

When that day never came, she did what any sensible girl would do—she left. But not before she could leave a permanent mark on the man who had taken her heart out of her chest and stomped it to dust. The hurt hadn't disappeared after ten years. He was the only man she ever really loved.

And now, as she closed the curtains and settled onto her rented bed, he was the man whose strong arms she wished she had wrapped around her right now. He would know what to do, she was sure. For all his flaws, Justin was good at figuring things out. Some would say he was a master manipulator, but

she wouldn't go that far. Okay, so he had managed to date two women at the same time for three months. But his negotiating skills sure would come in handy right now since she really had no idea what to do or where to begin.

She picked up the phone book and thumbed through it, the idea to order pizza fresh on her mind. What she really wanted to do was get dressed and go down to Michaul's for some good Creole cooking. They had the best fried catfish she'd ever eaten. And now, she could afford to splurge a little on dinner and dancing.

Changing into a copper colored sundress and some strappy black sandals, she combed her hair and grabbed her purse. She placed most of her money in a plastic bag in the toilet tank, to insure that nobody found it, but she had two hundred dollars in her wallet and intended to spend every penny of it pampering herself. The rest she would save until she figured out what to do.

She stepped out into the night air, cursing the impending rain. It always seemed to rain in New Orleans. Her dad, a man she didn't know real well, said it always rained when you went south of Lafayette. She was starting to believe him because any time she ever went to New Orleans, it rained.

The sounds of New Orleans in June pulsed through her as she walked down St. Charles. Jazz music filtered in from a little café on one side of the street. She wasn't really into jazz. What she wanted was some Cajun music, a *fais-do-do*, a handsome man with blue eyes and dark hair and...No, she didn't want Justin. She just needed a familiar face, and any would do right now. That was the only explanation for her sudden need to have him back in her life.

She stepped into the crowded restaurant and made her way through the Friday night customers. The waiter escorted her to a table near the band, and she ordered an iced tea. A strange sinking feeling began in her chest as she listened to the music, wishing she had a different place of refuge. She'd love to be anywhere but New Orleans. Images of Justin flooded her mind. His blue eyes looking down at her wickedly as he whispered *trust me* before tying her to the bed with a bandana. The way his tongue darted out of his mouth to lick the honey from her legs after dripping the golden liquid onto her skin. *You taste like honey*, he had teased. Then there were the really wild adventures when he did things to her body she couldn't even begin to explain.

She would do anything to reverse time and go back to when she felt safe, when her future was certain, when she knew that she and Justin would be together forever.

"What can I get for you tonight?" The waiter asked when he returned with her tea.

"I'll take the catfish platter."

"You alone tonight?" The Cajun accent caught her attention this time, seeming thicker than it had just a second ago.

“Yeah.” She gave him a smile. He couldn’t be more than twenty, ten years her junior.

“That’s a shame. Pretty woman like you. I’m sure more than one man here tonight would love to show you how to dance.” His handsome young face turned up in a wicked smile.

She leaned forward, exposing the rise of her chest to him. “Oh, really, now?”

“Yeah. Pretty sure. I get off at eight if you’d like to go somewhere.” He winked.

“What did you have in mind?” A little flirtation wouldn’t hurt. Besides, she was already half way there just thinking about her incredible sex life with Justin.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged and ran a hand through his Brad Pitt hair. She realized he looked a lot like Mr. Pitt had when he gave Geena Davis a hell of an orgasm in *Thelma and Louise*. Except this boy didn’t have that hick accent, instead, his was pure New Orleans. “Thought maybe we could go dancing. Unless you’d rather do something else.”

“Do you often hit on the customers?” She tried to play it cool, but her insides were quivering at the thought of forbidden, casual sex. She practically creamed at the notion, sensing he’d be a good fuck, if the swell of his jeans were any indication.

“No, ma’am, I don’t. But I can’t say that I’ve seen many come through here that look anything like you.”

She knew it was supposed to be a compliment, but her strange coloring had been a curse for longer than it had been a blessing. And it was what had gotten her involved with Gino in the first place. “I’ll take the dark one with the golden hair,” he had said to the waitress at The Havana the night he took her home for the first time. It had been as simple as pointing his dark finger in her direction and giving it a little crook. And she had fallen right into his lap, head first.

“Does your mama let you out that late?”

“Darlin,’ you hold on to that saucy tongue. I’ll be back with your order and I’ll show you what a real Cajun can do.”

A real Cajun for sure. They were all full of themselves in her book. Still, she watched as the Brad Pitt wanna-be shook his cute little ass across the dance floor and then waltzed back to the kitchen to place her order. She hadn’t been here long and already had a proposition for the night. Wonders never ceased.

She watched the band wondering if she should take him up on his offer for, um, dancing, was it? Sex. It was all about sex. And God knows how long it had been since she’d had a hell of a romp like she knew he could provide. Young men were always good in the sack. They were eager to please, ready to learn and more than willing to eat a girl out all night long, something men like Gino were never really inclined to do.

How many affairs had she had while dating Gino? Too many to count, she was sure. And she had been really sly about it, or so she thought. But when she realized Gino knew about every one of them and had even paid some of the guys to get her out of his hair and away from his business, she began keeping track of him. That's when she realized exactly what he had been doing and what she was involved in up to her ass.

Brad Pitt returned sooner than she had expected, a sly grin on his face as he placed her food in front of her. "I managed to get a break. I want to sit here and watch you eat," he announced as he sat across from her.

"Who said you were invited?" She'd love nothing more than to take him back to her room and fuck him until morning, but it would do nothing to ease the ache in her chest. A temporary relief at best. What she really wanted was someone she knew she could never have again and a feeling she hadn't felt in too damned long.

"Nobody, but I know you want to say yes. Do you know the things I could do to you?"

"Please. I would break you in half." She squeezed a lemon onto her catfish before covering it in ketchup, having no doubt that her words were true.

"I doubt that. I've had a lot of experience in that department."

"You know, I hear men who brag about it usually brag to cover up their, um, shortcomings." She slid the fish in between her lips. There was nothing quite like good home cooking, even if you had to pay fifty dollars for it! And nothing quite like a Cajun man, even if this one wasn't for her.

"I'll come alright. And so will you. All night long. You interested?"

She hated to admit that just hearing him talk was enough to turn her on, but as she looked across at his not so sweet face, she realized the longing in her chest demanded that she put the Cajun playboy on hold. He was not Justin. He may have the same eyes, but everything else was wrong, and she knew that she couldn't settle for a replacement for the real thing.

"I'll have to pass, darlin,'" she emphasized the word. "You see, I have a big stud muffin back home who's planning to really put it to me later."

"If you change your mind." He took the fork from her hand and slipped it in between her lips. "I'd be more than happy to oblige."

"Thanks, sweetie. But, really, I'll be just fine."

He fed her three more bites, moving his hand slowly, seductively. She knew this game, had played it with the master, and this upstart was not even close to taking his place, much as he may like to do so.

"You ready for dessert?"

“If you’re asking about chocolate cake, yes. Otherwise, no.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying, can you?”

“No, I can’t. And you’ve been more than entertaining tonight.”

He laughed. “I get off in fifteen minutes. You want to whirl around the dance floor once, just so I can say I know how it feels to dance with an angel?”

He didn’t give up. Tenacity was a Cajun quality even when they were fighting a losing battle.

“Okay. After I eat my cake, I’ll dance with you.”

“I can’t wait.”

* * * * *

She had managed to escape the seductive call of the wild last night, but Jean-Marie never imagined that she’d been set up. Not until she saw the Brad Pitt lookalike meet two of Gino’s goons outside of the restaurant. She called a cab and took it around town before settling back into her hotel room, her heart thundering in her chest. How soon could she be out of New Orleans and how had they found her in less than twenty-four hours? She locked the door to her hotel room and sat there, a gun in her hand, well into the night. Panic gripped her and tears threatened to spill out. She had to find a way out of this situation without going to the police. Escaping from Gino should have guaranteed her freedom, not threatened to land her in jail for something she’d done when she was twenty.

The next day, she headed out of the hotel room, determined to figure out what to do. The plan was to look up some old friends and find a safe way out of town. Of course, this was interrupted by the ever present Hispanic Mafia that had found its way to New Orleans, probably on the same flight she had taken.

Jean-Marie crouched down in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, hoping the large white tomb would provide cover for her. She’d been followed from her hotel room and into the Quarter. The men had all but cornered her in the French Market, but she managed to get away. Now, as the rain began to pour overhead, she just knew they were going to get her.

She watched the two big men in their gangster inspired suits weave in and out of the mausoleums, their large feet crunching the stones beneath them. Her breath stuck in her throat as she saw one of them signal to the other to split up. The pounding of her heart in her ears was deafening, forcing her to concentrate on the men, to listen for the warnings they may send to her through their footsteps, their almost incomprehensible Italian.

The tour group she had hidden out with had long since abandoned her to the cemetery, unaware that they were missing a tourist. Her eyes darted around, looking for shelter. The big tomb would hide

her as long as they didn't come any closer. If they did, they would be able to see her bright red T-shirt, which didn't exactly blend in with the scenery.

What had she been thinking? She should have known a woman could never leave a man like Gino Hernandez and expect to have her life stay in tact. Especially with all her newfound knowledge. She knew enough about her recent ex to put him away for life, but all she wanted was freedom from him. The jump drive that she had attached to her key chain was her only means of protection. It detailed all of Gino's illegal shipments and tax evasion methods from the past three years. And if the goons managed to grab her and it, they would surely kill her.

Her fingers clutched the granite as they drew nearer, leaving her with nothing more than her wits and a labyrinth of graves. Her breath hung in her throat when she looked up at the tomb. It couldn't be. A shiver ran through her body when the name fully came into focus. "Marie," the word was barely a whisper, but she felt the woman's presence nonetheless. Some people believed Marie LaVeau wasn't really buried here. Jean-Marie didn't care if she was or not. All she cared was that the spirits guide her to safety.

Clutching a piece of red brick between her shaking fingers, she closed her eyes and began drawing the customary three x's on the tomb. Faithful followers had been doing this for more than a hundred years, causing the tomb to be a veritable memorial to wishes from days gone by.

"Send me to safety," she whispered as she marked the final x.

It was then that two sets of big hands closed in on her shoulders and a scream erupted from her throat.

"You okay, ma'am?"

The Southern drawl was definitely *not* one of the goons'. It took a second for her to realize the men who had grabbed her were not Gino's men, who sat in a police car, already cuffed and on their way out of her hair. She hoped. She stood slowly, wiped the dust from her jeans, and tried to manage a steady smile.

"I'm fine, thank you." She eyed the two men, both of whom looked as if they spent more time at the Café DuMonde than working their beat.

"Well, if you don't mind, we'll need you to come with us to the station to file a report," the shorter one said. He would have been attractive had his belly not extended below his belt. The other one was tall and balding. Neither was her idea of what a Southern gentleman should look like. And both were closing in on her, urging her to walk toward the police car.

Her heart sank at the thought of going into a police station. "A report?"

"Yeah. Seein' as how those two were out to get you and all, we need a statement," said the tall one.

“Who said they were out to get me?” She brushed her long hair off her shoulder and raised her chin, hoping she sounded calm. Her insides felt like jelly at both the thought of how close she’d come to being captured by the thugs and at the thought of going to the police station, a place known around town at the House of the Rising Sun.

“A feller called it in. Said he saw ‘em pointing a gun at you. Looks like they came pretty close, too.” The tall one ran his hand over a chipped edge of Marie’s tomb, which crumbled a bit beneath his big hands.

Jean-Marie’s eyes widened in disbelief. She hadn’t even heard the shot. Her heart pounded at the newfound knowledge, threatening to hammer right out of her chest. “I can’t go with you.” She stood firmly planted, refusing to move another inch, unsure of what would happen to her if she was forced to go to the police station. They would call the cops in LaTrece, whoever they may be now. It never had been a place for very many officers.

“Well, if you’d like us to release them,” the other one began. He was younger than the first and seemed to have a bit of a chip on his shoulder, if his stance and the way he was narrowing his eyes at her were any indication.

“No, don’t release them.” She knew her voice sounded strained. Now that they knew she was in New Orleans, she’d never get away from them if the police freed them, and the marks on the tomb were proof that they meant business. “I’ll go with you.”

She stole a backward glance at Marie LaVeau’s tomb as she let the officers lead her to their patrol car. Jean-Marie was superstitious at heart, but she’d always managed to control the part of her that wanted to believe in the unusual. But today, there was no doubt in her mind that some kind of force had intervened and saved her from death.

A shudder ran through her body as she thought of her words. *Send me to safety*. She had a feeling her idea of safety was not the same as the Voodoo Queen’s idea.

Chapter Four

The phone hardly ever rang at the LaTrece Police Station. When it did, it was usually just one of the locals wanting to talk. Today, the incessant ringing had been enough to make Justin almost wish he was back in the swamp. At least then he could think, even if there was a curse looming over his head that he still hadn't come to terms with yet.

"Hello?" He balanced the phone on his shoulder as he reached for his cup of coffee.

"Justin, that you?" His aunt's familiar voice sounded like chalk on a blackboard.

"Yes, ma'am, it's me." She always asked that, even though she knew he was usually the only one there.

"Good. I got some pies I wanna bring down to you. You gonna be there a while longer?"

"Yes, ma'am." Great. Aunt Pearle's pies could only mean one thing: the woman was matchmaking again. Not that Justin minded, but his Aunt and her sister had set him up with every available woman under fifty and over twenty-one within three parishes. And he'd yet to find a woman who lit any kind of fire under him.

"Good. I wanna talk to you about something. You know next week is the fair."

"What fair?"

"The St. John's Fair."

"Oh." He had forgotten all about St. John's Day, in light of recent events. Now, the knowledge that it was a week away and he was under some kind of deadline hung before him like some kind of beacon, warning him that he couldn't screw this up.

"Don't you *oh* me, boy. You know what day it is. And tonight being the full moon. You oughta be ashamed of yourself."

Full moon. "She's coming with the full moon," he whispered.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. You were saying?" His mind raced as he tried to drown out thoughts of last night. People couldn't actually change into alligators, could they? There was no logical explanation for what he had seen last night, though. Marie LaVeau, as if she were alive, sat before him, smoke from incense clouding her eyes, her voice ringing out as if she were alive. As if, she'd changed into an alligator and managed to cheat death. And she had promised him the same gift, as she called it.

"Tis the only way to da gold, boy. You got to save it. But firs', ya got to find it."

And in order to find it, he had to allow the transformation to take place. His fingers ran across the bump on his head. That had been one hell of a fall he'd taken if he thought he was speaking to a dead

woman who had turned into a gator and disappeared into the swamps. Aunt Pearle's voice interrupted his thoughts.

She continued on for a couple of minutes, chastising him for not being a good Catholic boy like he should be. It was the reason he hadn't found a woman yet, hadn't settled down yet. She went on and on as he placed the phone onto the table and stood to stretch, wishing he could erase those words from his mind.

The words from last night hit him again. Change is coming with the moon. He picked the receiver back up, just in time to hear the call waiting kick in.

"Aunt Pearle, I've gotta get this other line, okay?"

"Okay, chér. I'll wait."

He groaned as he clicked over. "This is Sheriff Thibodeaux."

"Sheriff. This here's Deputy Rauls down in N'Awlins. I've got something here I think you might want to come have a look see."

"Okay. What would that be?" Trepidation filled his voice.

"Girl by the name of Jean-Marie LaFleur. I hear you have an outstanding warrant for her."

Outstanding is right. Ten years to be exact. "Yeah, I do."

"We've got her. Picked her up today. And she's got a hell of a story, too. How soon can you get down here?"

Justin glanced at his watch, trying to still his heart, which was racing out of control. After all these years, it was unbelievable that he had thought about her so much and now she was within choking distance. "I can be there in two hours."

"Turn on the sirens, then. And we'll see you when you get here."

Justin clicked back over to his aunt. "Aunt Pearle, I've gotta go. I've got business in New Orleans."

"Now, chile, you can't just leave. What are you going for?"

He couldn't help the smile that took up residence on his face. "To pick up Jean-Marie LeFleur." He would have loved to see the look on Pearle's face because the gasp in her voice told him she was damn near speechless, something that didn't happen often.

"You be careful, boy."

"Trust me. I'm taking a loaded gun." Not that he expected he'd need it. The truth was, after ten years, all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and start completely over. He had really screwed up with Jean-Marie. This was fate's way of giving him a second chance. He hoped.

It was all he could do to pull himself together for the ride to New Orleans. Ten years is a long time, and, to be honest, he never imagined he'd see hide nor hair of Jean-Marie again, anywhere other than his dreams. They had loved each other so passionately, so completely, about as much as kids could. And then he had done the unthinkable and taken Rose up on her offer for wild, uninhibited sex. He could've kicked himself for that. Things were fine with Jean-Marie. She was a little uptight, but hey, he could handle that, too. Nothing a little Cajun loving couldn't fix.

Shit," his cell phone interrupted his thoughts, just as he was beginning to picture Jean-Marie naked, her golden hair spread across his bed. "Thibodeaux," he tried to hide his annoyance.

"Justin, that you?"

Why his aunts always insisted on asking was beyond him. "Yes, ma'am, Aunt Ella, it's me."

"Pearle says you're headed to N'Awlins to bring back that girl." Her emphasis on the word girl bespoke of her dislike for Jean-Marie.

"Yes, ma'am. They got her down there, so I'm going to pick her up." He tried to keep his voice as steady as possible, but it was difficult to hide his anticipation.

"Humph! Better put the cuffs on that one. She likely to shoot you again, you know."

"She's not going to shoot me again."

"Humph! Better not be givin' her a chance. You know how those Creoles are. Bunch of uppity no-gooders. Don't know a good man when they got one."

Justin wanted to defend her. Jean-Marie had every right to shoot him, but there was no use telling his aunt anything different than she already believed. Her first husband had left her for a Creole up around Cane River, so she saw them all as being demon spawn for the most part. Jean-Marie's legendary temper didn't help matters any. "I'll be careful," he finally said, settling for a safe answer to his aunt's tirade.

"You best be doin' that. Can't make it around here without you."

"I know, Aunt Ella."

"You best be rememberin' that."

"I will." He pressed the end button on his cell phone and took a deep breath. Jean-Marie. The woman of his dreams. What was he going to say to her when he saw her again?

"I love you, Justin Thibodeaux," she had said, looking up at him with her innocent eyes.

If he remembered correctly, their first date had been to the St. John's Day Fair. It was nothing more than a bazaar at the church, but the churchwomen all spent the day before cooking and preparing the altar. After church, everyone would go out into the churchyard and eat under the tents. There were games and little rides for the kids, but nothing real fancy. What little money they raised went into the

church fund, so everyone was happy to pay five dollars for a meat pie.

It had been that night that he had taken her back to his cabin in the swamps, they ended up out in the swamp in his pirogue. She had mesmerized him with those golden eyes of hers and the way she seemed to glow against the night sky. Her skin was café au lait brown but looked as dark as chocolate when set against her golden hair and eyes. And it felt like silk beneath his hands, so much so that he had been afraid to touch her, afraid to mar her perfection.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a long time,” he said, looking down at her.

“So have I.” Tonight had been the first time she had ever admitted her feelings for him.

“Come here.” He pulled her to him, reveling in the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips. When their lips met, it was as if liquid fire had found its way into his system. He could drown himself in a woman like her and never think twice. “Mon Dieu,” he whispered against her. “You’re gonna kill me, chér.”

“No, I won’t.” She grazed her teeth against his bottom lip, causing him to instantly harden on contact. God, this woman was amazing!

“Then maybe I’ll be killin’ you.” He swept her up into his arms, carrying her to his loft bedroom. When he laid her against his grandma’s quilt and looked down at her, he knew she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Her eyes, glazed over with passion as she reached for him. He went to her, ready, filled with longing. Her dress easily pushed to the side. She arched her back for him as he unfastened her bra, freeing her ample breasts. Creole women have curves, and Jean-Marie had always been a prime example. For all her curvy womanliness, she fit perfectly against him. Shedding his jeans and shirt, he covered her naked body with his, reveling in the way her skin felt.

If he were to die right now, he would die a happy man. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him against her, as if she didn’t want to break contact with him. When he finally slid into her soft, wet folds, it was more than he could bear.

“I won’t last long,” he warned.

“Love me, Justin.”

He began to move inside her, filling her, feeling her tense against him. The sensation built within both of them. Before he knew it, his thrusting had gained intensity and she was arching into him, meeting his every motion. When he finally came, shooting his seed into her, she quivered around him.

“I love you, Jean-Marie,” he whispered against her neck as she lay there, holding him. And it seemed that their love would last forever. But then, he’d screwed up and fucked Rose Donavon.

Justin pulled his car into the parking lot of the police station. His stomach felt like a ball of nerves

as he wondered what he was going to say. He still hadn't figured that out. And two hours' worth of reminiscing hadn't given him the bitter edge he'd wanted. When dealing with Jean-Marie, it was always best to have the advantage. Play on your field. Otherwise, a man would lose himself in that smooth as chocolate voice and those wicked eyes of her. Then, all bets were off.

He walked into the police station and immediately recognized the man in charge. Sheriff Couvillon was not an easy man to miss at well over six feet tall and filled with broad-shouldered intimidation. When he opened his mouth, a slow, Southern drawl came rolling out.

"Justin Thibodeaux," he said, moving forward, hand extended.

"Yes, Sir. How are you today?"

"Well, I tell you, it's not too often we get some of America's most wanted in here."

Justin smiled, "Jean-Marie ain't that bad. She just talks tough."

"That little girl? She's been more than cooperative. Hear she shot you a few years back." The sheriff winked.

"I'm glad to see she's been behaving."

"Like an angel. Got her in the lounge. And I gotta tell you, boy, those men who were after her are two bad ones."

"Can you tell me why they were after her?" A sinking feeling began in the pit of his stomach. To tell the truth, he hadn't wondered much about it until right this second. He had been too hell-bent on coming down here and seeing Jean-Marie.

"Sure can. She got into a heap of trouble out in Vegas with her boyfriend, a mob boss by the name of Gino Hernandez."

"Hernandez?" Shit. What was Jean-Marie doing with a man like that?

"Sure did. And she's got enough on him to put him away for an awful long time. Called the PD out there and they're looking into it right now. Gonna go pick him up soon."

"What about her?"

The sheriff let out a laugh and shot a look over Justin's head that suddenly made him feel extremely uncomfortable. That familiar twitch was back in his side and his knees threatened to go weak. Jean-Marie had entered the room. It took him all of five seconds to regain his composure and react to the sour look she had pasted on her face. Well, well, well, it would seem Jean-Marie was as happy to see him as he was to see her.

Not much about her had changed in the years since she'd shot him. Her hair was still long and golden and threatened to cause blindness to any man within a mile of its radiance. And her skin was still as smooth as spun chocolate. Still holding a hint of her high ancestry, her yellow eyes narrowed at him,

her distaste evident.

“What is he doing here?” Her accent had disappeared, too, something he really wished hadn’t happened.

“I’m here to bring you to justice,” he managed, sucking in the smile that threatened to cover his face when he saw the flash of terror in her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you are still wanted in Lafayette Parish for attempted murder.”

Her arms, folded tightly across her chest, affording him a view of a hell of a growth spurt or a couple thousand in silicone. “I didn’t attempt to kill anyone.”

“I’ve got the scars to prove it.” He was aware of the sheriff’s eyes on him as he moved toward Jean-Marie. The man looked ready to pounce in her defense. Still, Justin advanced, hoping to at least scare her a little.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. You can’t make me go with him.” The last she directed at the sheriff who shrugged.

“We could cut a deal, I’m sure. Either way, we’ve got to get you out of N’Awlins. I figured the good sheriff here would know a place he could keep you safe.”

Safe. He’d like to keep her safe all right. Ten thousand emotions crept up on him at once as he watched her chew on her bottom lip. Apparently, she and the sheriff had already come to a decision that did not involve Justin’s approval but would involve his cooperation.

“What kind of deal you talkin’?” Justin asked, knowing he would have little to no say in the arrangement.

“A bargain of sorts. She testifies against the bad guys and you drop the charges in Lafayette.”

“And what do I get out of this deal?”

“You get to take her into protective custody.” The sheriff winked again and Jean-Marie screeched.

“I am not going anywhere with him.” Her long brown finger threatened to poke into his now tender side.

“Looks to me like you don’t have much choice,” Justin kept his voice just above a whisper.

“I’ll see you in hell.” The words came between tight lips.

“Meet you there, darlin.”

* * * * *

“I have to get my things.” She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. If Justin made her

leave New Orleans with ten thousand dollars in the toilet, she'd shoot him again. None of the emotions she thought she'd feel upon seeing him again had made their way into her body. To tell the truth, right now she felt completely numb. She felt sure it had been as a result of the gunfire that barely missed her head and then ending up "downtown" at police headquarters.

Justin walked around to the driver's side of the SUV, not bothering to open the door for her. "Suit yourself," he threw over his shoulder as he climbed in. This had not been the kind of welcome home she'd expected. What did she think, he would just throw himself at her? She half expected to throw herself at him.

"I'm staying at the Hilton." She pulled open the door and climbed in, sliding across the leather seats. Why anyone who lived in Louisiana bothered with leather interior, she'd never understand. It was too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter and stuck to your skin like melted asphalt.

"Which one?" He didn't look her way as he spoke, giving no indication of how he may feel after seeing her again.

"The one on St. Peter." She buckled her seatbelt and settled in, trying not to look at the man who had suddenly walked back into her life and now left her with an incredible case of butterflies. His scent surrounded her. It didn't matter if she didn't look at his suntanned hands while he drove. It didn't matter if she caught herself glancing at his profile every now and then, fascinated by the touch of gray at his temples.

"I hope you packed light."

"Light enough." Just two bags, one of which held her cash.

"That'll be the day."

He still hadn't looked at her. That whole shooting thing must still be bothering him. It had been ten years. And he had lived to tell the tale! He should just get over it. She stared ahead, silently fuming, hoping she could hold onto her anger long enough to move past the other emotions that were creeping up on her. His body burned into her brain in a way so that even now she could picture him vividly. Only instead of having a chest covered with thick, dark hair sprinkled with salt and pepper.

She watched his hand tensed as he shifted gears, holding onto the stick shift a little harder than necessary if the veins in his arm were any indication. So, maybe she was getting to him, sitting here next to him. It would be nice to unnerve him, to finally have one up on the man who had always had control of her emotions.

Taking in a deep breath, she turned in her seat. "What have you been up to all these years?"

"Not much." His answer was steady and cold. It gave no indication of whether or not he was married, had kids, whatever. She had looked and there had been no ring, but these days, that was never a

sure indication. Until this moment, she hadn't realized what it would do to her if he were married. Justin deserved happiness, but she had always imagined that somehow she would be the one to give it to him.

"Care to elaborate?"

"Not really."

They fell into silence again, something she didn't have the nerve to break again. As soon as they pulled up to her hotel, she bolted, almost darting out into traffic to get away from him. When the elevator doors closed, leaving her on one side, him on the other, she finally released her breath. Falling into Justin's arms would be as easy as breathing. And if wanted her, she was as good as doomed.

* * * * *

She had been silent during the entire trip, only protesting once when they made it to her hotel room. After that, she grew quiet again, folding her arms in objection and staring out the window. Justin stole several sideways glances at the woman who he realized looked nothing like the image of the girl he remembered. Jean-Marie had grown up, and the woman sitting next to him was far more mysterious and intoxicating than the girl who shot him had been.

The high hem of her shorts, affording him a view of chocolate heaven that seemed to go on forever accented her long, slim legs. He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent before shaking himself and concentrating on the road again. She still smelled like honeysuckle, a scent he would never forget. He could almost imagine how that scent had wafted up to him when she spread her legs and offered herself to him.

Like a pagan goddess, she held her regal nose high, already shunning him. He knew she hated this situation, and why wouldn't she? From what he had garnered from his conversation with the sheriff, Jean-Marie had gotten herself into a hell of a lot of trouble out in Vegas, trouble worthy of 24/7 police protection. And everyone involved, the FBI included, believed she would be better off hiding out in the bayou with Justin than taking her chances in New Orleans under lock and key.

Justin stole a glance at the clock in his SUV. Three o'clock. In the summer, dark wouldn't come to the bayou until around nine. So, they had plenty of time before he was once again forced to deal with this curse that he didn't really believe in. Plenty of time to get Jean-Marie to open up to him and tell him what, exactly she had been up to out in Vegas.

"You gonna tell me your story or not?" He turned the radio off, gaining a sideways glance from her.

“Not.”

“I see you lost your Louisiana accent.” He smiled, knowing this would set her off. She hated the fact that she never really fit in anywhere, and accusing her of losing her accent would once again set her apart.

“I became cultured,” was her only response. She was playing it cool with him, yeah. He could understand that, but he really wanted to know if the blood in her veins was as full of hot sauce right now as his was. Just looking at her after all these years had been enough to stir up feelings he didn’t realize he felt so strongly.

“Cultured, huh? Is that what they call it when you team up with the Mafia?”

“He’s not Mafia.”

“Then what is he, chér? Cause he ain’t no law abiding citizen.”

He studied her profile as she bit her lip. Her hands, still firmly folded across her chest and her legs, crossed toward the car door, positioning her as far away from him as she could manage and still be in the car.

“My past is none of your business.”

“Your past is my business. You shot me, in case you forgot. And now I’m droppin’ the charges to save your hide. So, I have a few demands I plan to make.”

“I am not sleeping with you.”

He let out a howl. “Sleeping? Trust me, there won’t be any sleeping.” This gained him a really nasty scowl.

“I wouldn’t know the difference anyway.” The long sigh that she let out, meant to stir up his ego. But he knew it for what it was, a sad attempt to hide how much he affected her. At least he hoped that’s what it was.

He and Jean-Marie had been explosive together, and that kind of chemistry doesn’t just fizzle out after a shotgun wound and a decade apart. At least for him it hadn’t, and he hoped to St. John that it hadn’t for her, either.

“Where are you taking me?” she finally asked as they turned off onto the exit.

“I figured I’d put you some place good and safe to keep you out of trouble.”

“I’m not staying with you,” she announced, her voice steady, as if she had practiced the line during the entire trip.

“I ain’t askin’ you to stay with me. I’m gonna take you to my aunts’ house.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Her folded arms dropped and she uncrossed her legs and turned toward him. “I am not staying with those two dingbats.”

“Careful, now. You’re treadin’ in deep water, yeah. Those two will keep you out of trouble.”

“They hate me.”

“You shot me.”

“You know why they hate me and it’s got nothing to do with that.”

It was her skin color, the same as with most people in the bayou. She didn’t belong anywhere. Most of the Creoles had moved to North Louisiana while the Cajuns ran the bayous. She was one of the few descendants of the early inhabitants that left in this area. And as soon as she had been able to, she high tailed it out of town, too. Jean-Marie was too proud to belittle herself by giving in to the nasty rumors about her mother and grandmother, so she distanced herself from the rest of the bayou folk, making the rumors of Voodoo in the tiny Catholic bayou grow beyond their proportions.

“You’ll be safe with them.”

“I’d rather sleep out in the swamps with the gators.”

When he laughed at her comment, she shot him another dirty look. “Sorry. I just can’t imagine you sleeping out in the swamps.”

“There’s a lot you can’t imagine about me. Now, don’t make me stay with those witches.”

“You only got one other choice then.”

They both knew what that was. She didn’t answer at first, as if she was considering the suggestion. “Fine,” she said finally. “I’ll stay with you. But only if you keep your hands to yourself.”

“I promise you, darlin.’ I have no intentions to do anything else.”

Chapter Five

Staying with Justin Thibodeaux! Of all the stupid ideas she'd ever had, this one had to be the worst. Just yesterday, she was minding her own business in the French Quarter. And now, she had been shot at, arrested, managed to talk her way out of some serious charges, and brought face to face with the one man she hoped she'd never see again. Time had been more than kind to Justin, whose face held tiny wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, making his smile seem even deeper. And something must have happened to his skin out in the bayou because he resembled a tanned god more than a Cajun sheriff.

She stole a sideways glance at her captor. Her heart hadn't stopped hammering in her chest from the second she walked in to the interrogation room and saw him standing there. Even now, it threatened to deafen her with its intensity. To say that Justin was gorgeous would be an understatement. For some reason, he looked like her salvation, and she hated that idea. The last person she wanted to be indebted to was the man who sat next to her, smelling like every wet dream she'd ever had...and looking even more inviting.

"I don't think anyone should know you're here," he began, forcing her to concentrate on his words rather than his sexy profile.

"Fine. That way, when you kill me, you can hide the body and no one will know I was here."

"I have no plans to do anything to your body."

Her heart sank even as his dark blue eyes turned on her, burning a trail straight into her soul. Justin could sit there all day and say he had no intention of touching her, but he already had with that one glance. And she felt her body react to the threat lying beneath his eyes. If he reached out to touch her right now, she knew she would welcome the embrace, would welcome whatever crumb of affection he cared to throw her way. The thought sickened her, made her feel like one of those weak women who always took back their deceitful husbands who had no intentions of remaining faithful.

"See to it that you don't."

She had barely gotten the words out when Justin's SUV collided with the substandard dirt road that led to his bayou home. The jolt of suddenly turning onto the ruts without slowing down threw Jean-Marie from her comfortable position away from him practically onto his lap. As soon as her bare legs made contact with his starched uniform, she knew there would be no staying away from him.

She watched as he swallowed a lump in his throat before his hand reached out to push her off him. He had slowed to a stop, his eyes no longer concentrating on the road. She licked her bottom lip in anticipation, hoping he would lower his lips to hers and give her one more taste of what she knew to be heaven. A flicker of desire shot through his eyes before he masked it. Then, his tongue darted out,

wetting his bottom lip just as she would like to do. His hand, which had been holding tightly to her shoulder dropped and his face, turned to stone.

“You okay?”

“Fine.” She pulled away from him, but still sat close enough to feel his heat.

“Good. Get back on your side.”

A warning traveled all the way into her system, echoing the words and making her realize if she didn’t move, she would be this close to finding out just how good Justin Thibodeaux tasted ten years after she shot lead into his system. She swallowed hard and righted herself, pulling away from his heated breath, which had bathed her face in a swirl of delight.

“Where’d you learn to drive?”

“Same place as you. We’re almost there.”

Justin pushed her away, afraid of the emotions that overtook him when he let himself get too comfortable in her arms. Marie’s warnings rang out in his head, and he knew he had nothing to offer Jean-Marie. If the old Voodoo Queen’s words held true, nightfall would bring about the change, just as it had last night. And there was nothing he could do to stop it, save for remove his *gris-gris*, which, he had to admit, he was afraid to do.

“Is this your form of revenge?” Jean-Marie’s golden eyes cut through him as she pressed her lips into a straight line and folded her arms across her chest.

“No, chérie, no revenge.” Revenge would come later. And, God, it would be sweet. He could already imagine sinking himself into her warm body, loving her all night long, the way they used to do.

“Then what is it you think you’re doing?”

“This.” To hell with the warnings. He pulled her soft body flush against his before crushing his lips against hers. The startled protest caught in her throat, coming out as a low moan when he finally sank his tongue into her warm mouth. She opened for him even as her hands flew up to push against his chest. She wasn’t fooling him; she could push away all she wanted, but while she was pushing, she leaned into him, pulling him even closer.

His hands encircled her waist, capturing her in his embrace. Then, just when he thought he would die from the feel of her crushed against him, he felt his heart begin to hammer in his chest in a primal rhythm, sending shock waves all through his body. Her struggles had died down as she reacted to his lust.

His cock was hard and ready for her, wanting nothing more than to taste what it had been missing for so long. She clung to him, her hands in his hair, opening for him.

They stumbled back against the kitchen counter, her back making contact with the wood. He heard the breath leave her body and slide into his, but he refused to release her. The counter top was at just the right level; he could lift her up there and sink himself into her, spreading her wide open, sating the desire he'd kept in check for so long.

Her hands pushed against his chest when she pulled her mouth from his. When she opened her eyes, they glowed golden with desire. Neither of them spoke for a good two seconds while he rolled his forehead against hers and tried to catch his breath. "Mon Dieu," he managed.

"Don't ever do that again." The words came out beneath her panting breath, and he knew she didn't mean them.

"Do what?"

"Think that you can have me as some sort of payment. I'm no man's payment, do you understand?"

"I don't want you as payment. I want you because you're mine." He ran his finger along her jaw. "And when you realize that, I will have you."

"I'm not yours."

"Prove it, then. Tell me that you're not wet with wanting me. Tell me your body doesn't ache for me to be inside you. Come on, Jean-Marie, tell me and I'll leave you alone."

"Go to hell."

He grabbed her hand and forced it against his jean-covered cock. "I'm already there."

"Let go of me."

Moving his hand from hers, he won a silent battle when her hand stayed pressed against him for another half second. "I want you to stay here with me. I need to keep you safe." He tried a new tactic, one she would respond to, he hoped.

"I can't stay here. Your aunts..."

"I don't care." He placed a finger to her lips. "Promise me. Until we get all this worked out. Stay here. The sun is setting now and I have to go to work."

"There are so many criminals in LaTrece." Her breath came in short gasps as she still tried to recover from the kiss that had rocked him to the core as well.

"You'll be safe here." He tried not to look at the hurt in her eyes. How many times had he hurt her in the past? The only thing he wanted to do right now was pull her to him again and sink into her soft

flesh. Something told him if he did, he would only regret it. She would never understand a voodoo curse when she had spent her whole life trying to escape her heritage as the daughter of a priestess.

“I don’t feel too safe.”

“Well, you are. Nobody will find you here. And I’ll be back in the morning.” He touched her cheek, hoping she would see the symbolism in the gesture. He had every intention of finishing this tomorrow.

“I won’t be here when you get back,” she announced.

“And where do you think you’re gonna go?”

“Somewhere far away from you.”

“You won’t make it off the porch,” he smiled.

“Just watch me.”

He planned to do just that as he stood in the shadows, watching the sun begin to set and Jean-Marie pace back and forth on the porch. As soon as the last rays from the sun hit the swampland and the full moon rose overhead, he felt the change come. And everything Marie LaVeau had told him the night before came back vividly, threatening to destroy his sanity.

His hands were the first to go. He watched in horror as green scales moved across his skin, covering it, changing his hands to claws, his nails to talons. Hammering deep inside his chest, his heart quickened, threatening to explode before it slowed to a steady rhythm. Cold swept over his body as his legs suddenly threatened to move out from under him. He sank to the warm ground, his claws digging into it as the change swept through him, taking his legs, his torso and finally his head.

The gator’s roar echoed through the swamps, a threat to all who could hear. Somewhere inside the house, he heard Jean-Marie moving around, planning her escape. He snarled and slouched toward the house, knowing that she wouldn’t leave tonight. Or ever.

Jean-Marie watched as he disappeared into the swamp. He kept a boat tied up nearby that she knew he used to patrol the bayou at night, if he was still the same man he had been ten years ago, which it appeared, he was. Concerns about poachers in the swamp had been a priority to him even before he took up the badge and she knew it would be his top priority even now.

She folded her arms around her body, trying to recapture some of the warmth he had put there. He had made it impossible to escape his smell with it surrounding her, invading her senses, causing her to feel a little dizzy by the sudden replacement of designer cologne with the smell of a real, genuine man. She settled onto the sofa and pulled a pillow into her lap. Everything here was exactly as it had been so long ago.

Justin still had framed pictures of his family on a tiny dresser in the living room. Clutter from his aunts' handicrafts littered the tables, the TV, the sofa. In fact, everywhere she looked was some sort of crocheted doily or canvas birdhouse. Those women would decorate just about anything with thread. But they loved Justin fiercely, which was why she knew she'd never be able to live in the house with them for more than a few minutes. They had never approved of her relationship with Justin and had said ten thousand Hail Mary's the day he hooked up with Rose.

If they knew she was back in town, they would run her out on the first canoe they could find. In fact, they'd probably call up Gino's men for him and do most of the work. Justin would protect her, though. She knew his threats to deposit her at his aunts' house was just that. He still loved her, he had to. If he didn't, she thought she might die from the pain. God, it had been ten long years, but she still felt the same way she had about him back when he had been the one for her.

"I've got to get out of here," she wiped the impending tears from her eyes, refusing to give in to her emotional state. Exhaustion took over, making her chest ache in a way that had nothing to do with loving an impossible man, even if she could still feel the warmth of his arms around her, his lips on hers.

She stood and tossed the pillow to the side. All she had was one bag of clothes and a large case full of money, which Justin assumed was her make-up. She could steal his truck and be out of here before he realized she was gone. Heading out to the porch, she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the bared teeth of the alligator that sat just below the bottom step.

"Shoo," she waved her arms at him, but he didn't flinch. "Go on, get out of here!" She moved forward, attempting to frighten him, but it was to no avail. He stood there, grinning at her, as if he were daring her to take another step forward. She did and he snapped his jaws together in warning.

"Oh, I get it. You must be some kind of pet. Figures. Nobody but Justin would have a gator for a pet. Something to cuddle up to that's as warm as he is." The gator let out a low bellow at her words. "Oh, I know you hear me. I know you understand me, too. You tell your owner he's a low-down, dirty, no good Cajun, you hear me?"

She swore the gator laughed at her. "I don't suppose you're gonna let me out of here, are you? Of course you're not." She looked around to see if there was another way out, but knew there wasn't.

"Fine." She sat on the top step, knowing the gator wasn't going to hurt her. "I just don't know what to do."

He blinked his eyes at her, as if he understood. "I mean, I have really gotten myself into a mess here. And now I have to stay here with Justin. I can't do that. You know? I still love him."

Her heart leapt into her throat as the gator started up the steps. "Stay back," she scrambled backward as she spoke. He stopped and let out a low moan and then came forward again, moving slowly.

“You don’t want to eat me, I promise. I don’t taste anything like chicken. Human is bad.”

He stopped again, just a few feet away from her. “You’re not gonna eat me, are you?” She swore the thing shook his head “no.” “You really are a pet, aren’t you?”

The gator climbed up the steps and placed his paws right next to her. Her heart lodged in her throat, but she had a feeling that if he had wanted to eat her, he would have moved a lot quicker. She’d watched gators feed several times and knew that they were quick about it. Warily, she stuck out her hand and placed it on his nose.

“Justin’s not so bad,” she said, stroking the reptile’s long, cold nose. “I just can’t let him know that, okay? It’s been so long and he still gets to me, you know?”

He let out a low moan and blew his breath onto her lap, against her bare legs. “You want a beer? I want one. And I know he’s got some in the fridge.”

She moved from beneath his head, which he had planted on her lap. “I’ll be right back,” she called.

Talking to a gator! Geez, she really had lost her mind. But right now, she really needed somebody, someone, something to talk to, to help her figure out all this craziness. She pulled two bottles from the fridge and opened them with the bottle opener magnet. Placing one of them against her lips, she took a long sip before heading back outside. The gator hadn’t left his perch on the top step.

She settled down next to him and held out the beer bottle for him. “You want me to just pour it in?” He opened his mouth. Never before had she shared a beer with a reptile. This would be one to tell the kids about, if she lived long enough to have kids. A pit formed in her stomach. She wanted to have kids with Justin.

“You know, it’s nice out here tonight. It’s good to be back home. I didn’t know how much I missed this place.” He placed his head on her lap again as she spoke. “It’s so peaceful, not at all like Vegas.”

She turned to the gator and gave him a good once-over. For a reptile, he sure didn’t look like the other gators in the swamp. Their eyes usually glowed red at night, but his were dark blue. She ran her hand along his side, reveling in the feel of his soft flesh, which she had expected would be slimy and cold. It was cold, but felt very smooth. “You know, I can see why people pay big bucks for alligator purses.” He growled. “I don’t. Other people do. Your skin is really soft. And you’ve got gorgeous eyes for a gator.” Her hand continued down his torso and came into contact with the large scar that ran down his side. “Looks like you’ve already tangled with somebody. Glad to see you got away. I guess you and Justin have that in common, huh? I tried to kill him, you know?”

“I regret it. Trying, not failing. It was stupid.” She took another sip of her beer, finishing it off. “You want another one?”

He raised his head to nod and that was when she saw the white bag tied to his neck. “What the hell is this?” She reached out and before he could move away from her, her fingers closed around the bag.

* * * * *

Justin had narrowly escaped Jean-Marie’s probing fingers last night. The woman was too damned smart for her own good. He should have known that cozying up to her last night was a bad idea. As soon as her fingers ran across the bag, he pulled back and disappeared into the swamp, knowing she wouldn’t leave.

He made his way back into the house, moving as quietly as possible. Seeing her lying in his bed, all curled in his grandmother’s quilt made his heart go soft for a second. The woman hadn’t even been here for a full day yet and already she had made herself at home. And looked perfectly at ease doing so.

Her naturally dark toes peeked out from beneath the quilt, the pink of her toenails shimmering in the early morning light that streamed in through the window. The urge to reach out and touch her golden hair was strong as his fingers stopped mid air, just short of running along the silky strands. His breath caught in his throat and he exhaled long and slow, hoping to breathe out the desire for her that swept through his body. Having her here was not a good idea.

Just as he was about to turn away from her, she moaned and rolled over, her tank top twisted around her torso, pulling one of her lovely breasts free of its restraint. She had removed her bra last night and now lay there, oblivious to the fact that his mouth had gone completely dry just looking at her.

A long leg followed, wrapping itself around the quilt, exposing flesh all the way up to the top of her hip. He remembered nights of tracing circles on those legs with his tongue, branding her skin with his heat. Her lips parted, and he shifted, adjusting himself against the sudden strain in his jeans. After a night of swimming in the swamp, he would have thought exhaustion would have taken over. Instead, his body was alive with energy and more than willing to spend the next several hours using it in the most creative ways possible.

She moaned again and rolled over, this time, her eyes opening. “Shit,” the word came out as a groan.

“Good morning to you, too.”

“I had hoped it had all been a bad dream.” She was still oblivious to the fact that her breast and thigh were exposed. Then, she followed Justin’s gaze and quickly covered herself. “Pervert,” she hissed.

“You’re the one who had it all on display.”

“And you’re the one who slipped in unannounced. What do you want?”

“It’s my bed.” He kicked his boots off and began unzipping his pants. “I thought I would get a few hours’ sleep before I have to go in to work again.”

“Oh, no, you’re not.” She moved to the center of the bed and threw her legs over the side. “There’s no room.”

“I guess I’ll have to lay on top of you then.” He shed his jeans and pulled the shirt over his head. Her intake of breath was audible. Suppressing a grin, he climbed into bed with her.

“I said there’s no room.” Still, she moved to the side.

“And I said I’d just as soon be on top of you as beside you.” His eyes met hers as he spoke, challenging her to protest. Her lips formed a perfectly straight line, her irritation with him obvious.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” She pulled the quilt around her body and attempted to move, but he caught the edge of the quilt, holding her firmly into place. “Let go,” she warned.

“You’re not taking my quilt.”

“Fine,” she flung it off and stood, giving him a nice show of lace covered wonder as she did so.

“Suit yourself,” he shrugged as she folded her arms across her chest.

“You haven’t changed in ten years.”

“Neither have you. Still as stubborn as you always were.”

“Stubborn! I call it determined.” Her eyes narrowed as she spoke, but she hadn’t taken another step toward the living room.

“No. It’s just plain mule headedness.”

“What about you? You’re not Mr. Perfect, you know.”

“There’s a whole passel of girls who’d disagree.”

Her face flamed red. “Girls. Humph! Probably not even old enough to date.”

“What do you care?” He fluffed his pillow and got comfortable, enjoying watching the color light up her face.

“I don’t.”

“Suit yourself. But your cheeks sure are red. You sure you’re not jealous?”

“Of you? Hardly.”

She was. He could see it in the way she avoided his eyes as she spoke, as if the painting on his wall suddenly was the most interesting thing in the room. “Then you won’t mind sharing the bed. I mean, if you’re not jealous.”

He made room for her, knowing Jean-Marie couldn’t resist a challenge. “I’m not.”

When she sank down onto the bed, she was careful to stay to her side, and he was aware of the way she held her body so rigid, as if she were afraid she might touch him. “Nice underwear,” he whispered low, knowing his breath was close enough to brush against her shoulder.

“Go to hell, Justin.”

“I’m already there,” he mumbled, trying to ignore his aching cock. God, but he longed to bury it deep inside her and love her until neither of them could move.

“Good,” was her only reply, her oblivion to his hard-on obvious.

Jean-Marie shifted, trying to avoid contact with Justin’s skin. His breathing had been steady for about ten minutes now, yet she had remained firmly planted on her side of the bed. She was afraid to breathe for fear that she may come into contact with his flesh. The heat radiating from his body was enough to drive her mad with longing. After all this time, she still wanted Justin as badly as she had when she had been young, naïve and in love.

The weight from his body threw her off balance as she moved and caused her to brush against his torso...and his cock. Heat immediately swept through her body as she felt his rock hardness press against her. She reached for the corner of the bed, hoping to pull herself away from him as her lower half seemed unable to move without force. Sleeping in the bed with him had been a stupid idea.

“Goin’ somewhere?” he murmured.

“Away from you.”

“You’re awfully warm.” His arms snaked around her waist, pulling her against him, firmly planting his cock against her core. “Mmmmm. Real warm.”

“Let go of me,” she clawed at his hands and writhed against him, attempting to free herself. It was no use. The struggle only led to more contact, her pussy rubbing against his cock in the most erotic way. And all she wanted to do was shed her underwear and take him deep inside her.

“Uh-uh. Not yet.” He ground against her. “Not ‘til you say please.”

“Justin...” God, if he kept this up, she would come without penetration.

“Jean-Marie,” he mocked. “One word.”

She bit her bottom lip. “Please.” It wasn’t a plea but a word said in disgust, she hoped.

He laughed low. “Say it like you mean it.” His breath was hot on her skin.

“I don’t mean it.” Yes, she did. *Please, Justin, sink your big, hot cock into me. Yeah, like that. Love me all night long baby.* She quivered beneath his touch, and he let out a low moan, obviously aware of his affect on her.

“You could fake it.”

Fake it. With him? Not likely. Not while her panties were growing wetter by the second and her pussy was quivering against him. She knew he could feel it. "Leave me alone."

"You want me." His hand rested just above her mound, teasing her as she could feel the heat from his fingers. All he had to do was move South an inch and slide her underwear to the side. She was already primed and waiting, her clit swollen and ready to be rubbed. She pushed against him one last time and he released her. "Keep your hands and everything else to yourself."

"You never could fake it with me, could you? That's why you're wet right now. Why your body quivers against me. You know you want me." His soft, sexy voice penetrated deep inside her, resonating somewhere between her legs and sending with it a shiver that caused her to physically shake in his arms.

"Tell me, Justin, do you know what Cajuns use for birth control? Their personalities."

"You know what Creoles use?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. She'd give anything not to want him as she waited for his attempt at a joke. "What?"

"They use condoms. They take one and slowly unroll the end, stretching it to fit a long, Cajun cock. Then they slide it over the head, moving their fingers gently as they unroll it down his long length. Then they roll him onto his back and raise themselves above him, sliding his long, hard cock deep into their tight, wet..."

"Enough!" If he kept on talking like this, she was likely to do just as he said. And she didn't like that idea at all. Her blood was already pulsing between her thighs and her nipples were hard, puckered, begging to be touched.

"You still want me." He ran his fingers along her jaw line as he spoke. "And I want you, too. Why are we fighting this? Just lie back and let me love you."

"I can't."

"You know how good it is between us." He moved on top of her, his cock firmly planted against her wet panties. She didn't protest as his hands held hers above her head in a mock surrender. "I missed you."

"No, you didn't. You just want to punish me for shooting you." Pain gripped her chest as she spoke. This was what she didn't want to share with Justin, but she knew that the only way to deal with all this was to be honest.

"Why would you think that?" The sound of his voice combined with the feelings swirling around in her stomach, were more than she could handle.

Tears threatened to spill, and the softness in his eyes told her she was wrong about him. She knew he wanted to love her, to take away her pain. Justin Thibodeaux was ten thousand things, a liar among

them, but right now, she could see the sincerity in his face and felt proof of his desire planted firmly against her.

“I don’t know.” She exhaled, hoping to hold the tears at bay. So much had happened and she wasn’t too sure about how much longer she could remain strong.

“Are you okay?” He rolled off her but still kept his arms around her.

“So much has happened, Justin. And I’m...” She choked on her words. Could she be completely honest with him?

“Scared?”

“A little.” The admission was enough to cause the impending tears to flow.

“Oh, honey.” He pulled her against him. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. Please believe me. I will protect you.”

“I’m trying to believe you.” She clung to him, not wanting to ever let go. His scent enveloped her, causing her to become light-headed for a second.

“Then do it. Let me prove myself to you. All I want to do is take care of you.” His lips came so near her as he spoke.

The temptation was too strong. All she wanted to do was lie back and do exactly what he told her to do. Biting her lip, the temptation enough to kill her, she opened her mouth to respond just as she heard the most awful sound in the world.

The aunts were here. Ella and Pearle had never been ones for knocking and today was no different. She could practically smell their overpriced perfume as they walked through the front door, the pitch of their shrill calls like nails on a chalkboard.

“Justin, you here? You catch that criminal?” Pearle’s unmistakable squawk interrupted the silence. Jean-Marie pulled the covers around her body just in time to hide herself from their view.

Justin threw his head back and laughed. “I caught her all right.”

She could have killed him when he practically invited them in to see exactly where he had caught her. Unable to move, she waited for the inevitable, knowing they would charge into his room and start spouting Bible verses about sin and killing and whatever else they could come up with.

“Justin, I brought you...” Ella was the first to walk in. Her lemon meringue pie hit the floor with a decided plop at the same time that her glove-covered hand went to her mouth. The string of French the woman unleashed was incomprehensible. The bottom line was that Jean-Marie was the devil and had snared Justin in a trap of lust.

“Oh, Dear Me.” Pearle crossed herself and then reached out to clutch Ella’s shoulders. “How dare you?” Her eyes narrowed at Jean-Marie, as if Justin had nothing to do with their current state.

“Now, calm down,” Justin held out his hands, but the damage was already done. “It’s not what you think.”

“Are you wearin’ clothes under there?” Ella had covered her eyes with her prim and proper hand.

“Not too many. You know, you two should call before you come over.”

“Well, I’ve never!” Pearle began.

“I have no doubt about that,” Jean-Marie said under her breath, too embarrassed to care if she offended them any further. They certainly hadn’t been worried about offending her with their string of insults.

“Is the jail full or something?” Ella had uncovered her eyes and was now focusing on the painting by the bed.

“Jean-Marie is under house arrest.”

Oh, she’d kill him for that one! She wanted to reach over and punch him at the thought, but held back, not wanting the aunts to see their precious Justin harmed at her hands. As soon as they were gone, she would lay into him.

“Well, she can’t stay here with you. What’s wrong with that place across the way?” Pearle had always been the logical one.

“That house ain’t been lived in in ten years. She can’t stay there.”

“Well, jail is too good for her,” Ella added. “I say we take her out into the bayou and...”

“Ella!”

“Well, she did *shoot* him.”

“Enough. She’s not going anywhere. It’s a long, complicated story that I’m sure you don’t care to hear. Now, I’m not wearing much, so unless you want a full show, you’d better leave the room.”

Jean-Marie’s heart raced as she listened to him put them in their places while still managing to remain the light of their lives. Never before had he taken up for her like that. So, he hadn’t said anything *nice* about her, but he also hadn’t joined in the witch-hunt. She watched as the aunts shuffled out of the room, their voices trailing into the next room, their hearts having had enough of a shock that they’d be on their knees in church for the next week.

She stifled a laugh at the look Justin shot her, which was half apology, half something else. The something else removed the smile, replacing it with pure heat. For the first time ever, she was thankful for his intruding aunts.

Chapter Six

“Your aunts really like me.” She had sat on the bed the entire time they were there, listening to the tirade, which they peppered with religious references. Ordinarily, she would have been upset about the whole thing, but the way Justin had stood up for her had started a whole other series of emotions, none of which she was ready to explore.

“You know how they are.” He shrugged and shot her a smile. “Now, where were we before they interrupted us?”

She climbed off the bed just as he threw himself onto it. “We weren’t anywhere. I’m going to clean up this pie.” Grabbing a towel from a laundry basket near the door, she ignored the smile still plastered on his face.

“I’ll just lay here and watch, then.” He folded his arms behind his head and focused his attention on her, something that unnerved her even worse than his arms around her had earlier.

“Don’t you have a job to do, citizens to protect?” Trying to concentrate on cleaning up lemon meringue while Justin Thibodeaux’s lazy stare was piercing her back was damn near impossible. Still, she tried to focus on what she was doing rather than who she’d like to be doing.

“Yep. I do.” She listened as his feet hit the floor. “You need the shower first?”

“No. Go ahead. You need it worse than I do.” So bad that she had to step away from him for fear of jumping him right here. He had no right to walk back into her life and shake it up.

“Is that so?”

She bit her lip and turned to look at him. Damn but the man was sexy with his shirt, unbuttoned to the waist, and his jeans hugging his hips in the way that only Levi’s could. “Yeah, it’s so.” Before she had time to react, he had joined her on the floor, scooped up a handful of pie and smeared it onto her leg. When his fingers made contact with her skin, her breath caught in her throat. Oh, to have him cover her whole body in lemon and lick it off! It took a second for her to realize she was supposed to be offended. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Now you need a shower, too.” His eyes laughed down at her, making her wish she could summon the energy to push him over. She was afraid that if she touched him, she would end up pulling him to her instead. And that absolutely would not do. So, she did the next best thing.

“Oh, yeah? It’s on now.” She took a handful of the pie and smeared it on his face, wishing she could ignore the fire in his eyes as she did so.

“Want me to roll you in the pie, Jean-Marie?” The wicked look he shot her direction was enough to send liquid fire straight through her body.

Yes! “No.”

“Come here.” His hands closed around her arms and he pulled her into the middle of the spot, which was only inches away from his body, his mouth. That fire danced wickedly in his eyes once more just before he shifted positions and joined her.

She looked down at the pie that coated his jeans and her shorts and legs. They looked like a sinfully sticky mess, and she wanted nothing more than to lick the sweetness from his body. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to shower. I figure first you’ve gotta get dirty, sweaty, you know, so you need it real bad.” His lemon-coated fingers tipped her chin so that her eyes now met his.

“Justin...” Her teeth clutched her bottom lip, and she was afraid if they didn’t pose a barrier, he might devour her with his mouth, and she tried to remember why that would be a bad thing.

“Do you need it real bad?” The low, soft tone of his voice sent a shiver straight through her body. She swore she visibly shook at the thought.

Yes, she did. “I need you to go away.” She tried to push against him, but her arms were suddenly weak. And all she could think of was pulling him into her and feeling his cock pressed against her the way it had earlier. Two days back and she was already at his mercy, remembering all the reasons why she had loved him so much so long ago.

“I think you got pie right here.” His fingers brushed against her lips, depositing the lemon meringue right there. “Let me get that for you.”

She licked her lips, tasting the lemon flavor, preparing for what she knew would come next. When he pulled her to him, his lemon coated hand in her hair, she opened her mouth for him and let him inside. Kissing Justin right now felt like the most natural thing to do. Their bodies molded against each other, a mixture of cotton and lemon and hard muscle and soft curves. She instantly quivered with longing for him. If he were to lay her back right now onto the hardwood floor, she would give in to him, do the thing she had wanted to do ever since he came back into her life yesterday.

He rolled his forehead against hers, ending the kiss, keeping his breath against her face. “Lemon pie is so much better like this.” His mouth moved lower, placing small kisses on her cheek, the hollow of her throat and then moving down to her chest, a place as of yet untouched by the pie. She held her breath as he scooped up a handful of lemon filling and rubbed it along her exposed skin. “And like this.” When his head dipped down onto her chest, her breasts ached to be freed from her shirt, longed to have his hot tongue on them, licking, lapping, reveling in her body.

Her hands went into his hair, pulling him closer, giving in to the sensations, and allowing him to lay her against the floor. Her legs spread for him, inviting him to press against her denim shorts, against

her very core, which lay beneath them. When his cock made contact with her, she swore flesh on flesh had never felt as good as a dry fuck like this. His jeans rubbed against her shorts, causing a myriad of sensations to sweep through her body at the pressure.

Justin was rock hard and more than ready for her, just as her wetness was coating her panties, her pussy quivering, wishing he would rid himself of his jeans and thrust deep inside her. Already, his thrusting was causing her shorts to bunch up, the sensation against her clit, both heavenly and torturous.

“You want me to fuck you? Take your sweet body like you know I can?” Never had dirty talk turned her on so much as it did this very moment. She wanted that and so much more from Justin, which was what made this moment so dangerous for her.

She nodded. Yes, she wanted him to fuck her. She wanted nothing more at this very moment while the lemon pie squished against her bare shoulders and caused her shirt to stick to her back. The heat coming from his body was more than she could bear. If he didn’t crawl deep inside her body soon, she would die from wanting.

“Then what, Jean-Marie? Then we go back to being friends? Lovers? Or will you hate me even more?” She couldn’t read his eyes, didn’t really want to, didn’t really care about the consequences of what she wanted to do.

“I don’t hate you.” But it was hard to speak as his hands covered her breasts and his hot breath swept against her neck.

“But you will. If I take you here on the floor with no talk to tomorrow, no promises. You’ll hate me because you’re not made that way. You want promises.”

His hands slid under her tank top, making contact finally with her swollen breasts, her aching nipples, which wanted so badly to be bitten, twisted, tormented. “No. I just want you.” Her breathing was ragged, uneven, matching the pounding rhythm of her heart. She swore if he would just make love to her, everything would be okay. She didn’t need promises, didn’t need forever, especially not from a man like him, someone who didn’t know the meaning of forever.

He raised his head up and moved his hands from her shirt. “Look at me,” he coaxed, running his hand along her jaw line. “I will fuck you, Jean-Marie. And when I do, you will never want anyone else. When I finally sink my body into yours again, you will be mine in every sense of the word. And I will never let you go. Are you ready for that?”

His blue eyes held the promise she heard in his words. Was she ready for forever with a man like him. “Get off of me,” she pushed against his chest.

“Why?”

“Because your sweet words won’t work. You’re so full of lies, just like always.” She managed to scramble from beneath him. Her hair felt sticky against her back as she moved, still he managed to grab a handful of it.

“I’m not lying to you. You will be mine again. And when I take you, you’ll scream my name for the whole bayou to hear.”

She pulled her hair from his hands and stepped into the adjoining bathroom, refusing to look into his eyes as he spoke to her. Every part of her body wanted nothing more than to be Justin’s girl. But surely there was more to life than being somebody’s woman. It’s not like she would know. She had bounced from one guy to the next ever since the day she had left Justin. And now, alone finally, she wanted nothing more than to know how it felt to be *his* girl again.

She closed her eyes and stepped into the shower, wishing she could erase the past ten years and all the pain they had caused. The second Justin strutted back into her life, she knew that she wouldn’t be able to escape the strong tugging at her heart. Everything inside her wanted to scream out to him, to tell him that she still loved him and didn’t care what they had done to each other in the past.

The warm water washed over her, sweeping away all the sins of the past and sending them down the drain and out into the bayou. If she could redo anything about their past, she would take back the hurt that she had caused him when she shot him. At the time, it seemed like the only thing to do. The gun was there, the pain in her chest felt like a thick, black acid. So, she had picked up the handle and held it between shaking fingers. In the final moments, as Justin sprang from the bed, she aimed, closed her eyes and squeezed the trigger.

The sound that erupted was one she would never forget. Not only was it the sound of her sending a shot of lead into Justin’s body, it was the sound of her breaking heart.

The past was in the past and best left there. She didn’t need fairy tales of happily ever after, and she didn’t need to stay here with the man who threatened her sanity. Turning off the water, she made a vow to herself. Leaving LaTrece was the only thing she could do. Her eyes opened and Justin stood before her, his cock hard and ready, his jeans gone. Nothing but rock solid, completely naked man. And the smile on his face indicated that he had been watching her.

“What are you doing?” She pulled the shower curtain back, hoping to shield herself from his smoldering gaze. It was no use. The lazy smile covering his face told her he had already seen more than enough.

“I was coming to take a shower, what I thought you were doing. You’d been in here an awful long time.”

“Get the hell out.” She tried to avoid looking the one place she wanted to look, the one place her eyes wanted to stray to. Justin was more than impressive in that department.

“You sure you don’t want company?”

“No! Now, go!” Her heart was hammering in her chest, threatening to beat right out of it. Every nerve ending was on fire as she waited, wondering if he would leave or not. The look on his face indicated that he was weighing his options, too.

“Fine,” he finally said. “But hurry up. I’ve got to go to work.” He turned to walk out of the room. Just before he made it to the door, he called out, “Oh, yeah, and don’t wait up for me. I’ve got a date tonight.”

She sat there for a second, stunned by his words. A date? After what he had seen, after what he had so obviously wanted to do, he had a date? Her heart sank at the thought, making her wish he was still standing there so she could throw something at him. A date? She’d show him. Two can play that game. To hell with whether or not she was supposed to be here. She knew people in this town, and it was about time they learned she was back!

Chapter Seven

He began counting to ten and almost made it before she closed in on him, a towel wrapped around her head, his robe covering her body.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

Her fingernails dug into his arm as a look of something akin to terror took up residence on her face. Justin shrugged her off, trying to ignore the sensations sweeping through him. “I’m going to work,” he lied.

“Now?” Panic again crossed her face. He had never seen Jean-Marie afraid, not even when she waved the shotgun in front of his face, but now, his brave beauty was cowering, which made him realize just how bad things were for her.

“Yes, now. I have things to do other than hang around and baby-sit you. There’s criminals to catch, poachers to ward off...” he let his voice trail off, unwilling to let her know exactly what he was doing out in the bayou.

“Criminals more dangerous than me?” There was a challenge in her eyes, one that made him recall every heated moment they’d ever shared. Oh, yeah, she was dangerous alright, but so was he.

“There should be enough food here. I’ll be back by morning.”

“Justin, wait.” Again, panic. The woman was a myriad of emotions, most of them expressed all at the same time.

“What now?”

“What about your aunts? Won’t they be coming by?”

“I’ll call them on my cell. They won’t come by unannounced, I promise.”

She muttered something under her breath that he couldn’t quite make out. Her bottom lip stuck out in the most adorable pout. Was this the same woman who only hours ago he had wanted to flog? Right now, it seemed as if time had stood still for them, and they had just been waiting to find one another again.

“What if I decide to leave?”

“You won’t.” He turned on his heels, determined to make it to the door this time. Daylight was fleeting and he needed to at least get his head on straight and decide which direction to look tonight. The map tucked in his shirt pocket contained all the areas in the bayou where the gold might be. All he had to do was cross them off one by one as he searched, letting his new instincts guide him.

“How can you be so sure I won’t leave?”

Her arms folded in challenge, it took all his control not to laugh. She was the damnedest woman!

“You won’t leave because if you do, you’ll never see how this story of ours ends.”

She opened her mouth and then snapped it shut. Speechless. Thank God. Miracles never ceased.

A dip in the swamp was the only thing he thought would control his raging hormones. It hadn’t. He had spent another hour out there, going over plans for finding the gold, recalling places from his past, wondering where it may be buried. Of course, there was no way to do any real searching with Jean-Marie weighing so heavily on his mind. Things hadn’t been the same since she came back into his life, guns blazing, just as they had been when she left. And now, he was sitting at the police station trying to get the image of her naked body, covered in water, out of his head.

What had given him the idea to go in there in the first place? It was his stubborn streak, he knew. He had banged on the door and assumed she was ignoring him. Well, he was right about that. He had opened his mouth to call out to her, to warn her that he was there. When she didn’t even look up at his intrusion, he couldn’t help but watch as she lathered one breast then the other, moving her fingers in slow, circular motions. His fingers ached to be the ones brushing against her nipples.

Oh, he had wanted to shake her up a bit, stalking into the shower butt-naked. But, no, once again, she had been the one to surprise him, to shake up his world like she always seemed to do. And heaven help him, but all he could do was stand there, dumbfounded and wish he had the guts to do what he had been threatening all along.

He shuffled papers around on his desk, almost wishing he had something to do. When the fax machine went off, he strolled over to pull the incoming paper from the machine. Shit. A man fitting Gino Hernandez’s description landed at the New Orleans airport less than an hour ago. Justin hoped he was here to try and bail out his men, not knowing what fate awaited him. Of course, if he had talked to the men, then he knew Jean-Marie was here. A man like Gino would be able to track her down in no time.

Justin grabbed his keys as he watched the sun begin its movement across the sky. In an hour, it would be dark, and he would be useless to her. Marie’s words echoed in his head. The whole reason for his transformation was so he could protect the elusive bayou gold. If that were the case, he could just as easily protect the woman he loved.

His heart pounded at the thought. It was one thing to admit his feelings to himself and entirely other thing to tell her how he felt. Especially since she had just come back into his life and didn’t appear to be too interested in love or anything like it. Just sex.

Her body had burned itself into his brain, though, the image of her dark skin haunting him even now. Several times today, he had found himself wondering what she was doing, if she had continued her

self-love after he left this morning. She had been out on the deck then, refusing to meet his eyes when he came out to tell her good-bye. He couldn't blame her because he *had* intruded on her privacy.

Instead, he had walked away, teasing her with a nonexistent date. Why he had done that, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that his arms ached to hold her and protect her. And all he wanted to do right now was get back home and make sure she was safe. If Gino found her and harmed her, he would kill the man.

The need to get back to the cabin and check on Jean-Marie was suddenly the strongest desire he had. He'd get her naked later, but for now, he had to make sure she was safe. Grabbing his keys, he hoped he could make it back home in time. He wanted to warn her before the gator took over, before he was left helpless until morning.

As he rounded the last turn coming up on the cabin, he saw the sun sink into the horizon, affixing his fate. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and stepped from the truck just as he felt the gator take over his body again. With each change, he wondered if he would become human the next morning. Earlier, he removed the bag and contemplated tossing it into the swamp before he shoved it into the back of his dresser drawer. He couldn't take the chance on being a gator as long as Gino was near. But something inside him had protested and insisted he replace the bag and let fate step in and guide him. He had always believed in fate, but right now, she sure was asking a hell of a lot from him. Forcing himself to believe, he decided voodoo was more powerful than the mob. At least he hoped it was.

The murky swamp water enveloped him as he sank into its depths. He wouldn't go far tonight, determined to watch her, to keep her safe. Then she had done the unthinkable. Well, okay, for Jean-Marie, just about anything was possible. But he didn't expect her to steal his Jeep or to head out to the swamp bar, the one place he knew she shouldn't be.

Crawling from the swamp, feeling the mud squish beneath his toes, he pulled his body into the darkness near his cabin. There had to be a way to pull the bag from around his neck and change back to his regular form. He refused to leave Jean-Marie to her own devices with whoever ended up at The Blue Moon. He couldn't take that chance. His alligator bellow rang out, echoing in the swamp as he sought a means of freeing himself from his bondage for tonight.

The mist swirled around him as the woman appeared. Marie looked exactly as she had on her island. Her flowing brown and gold robe only accented her high cheekbones and golden brown coloring. "You in a bind tonight, huh?"

He ambled up beside her, hoping she would understand. Running her hand along his nose, she gave him a wink. "That gal of yours is a lot of trouble, yeah. You go an' stop her from bein'

bullheaded.” She pulled the bag from around his neck and stood back, arms folded as she watched Justin transform once more.

“Thank you,” he managed once the transformation was complete.

“The danger is near, boy. You keep her close.” She shoved the bag back into his hand. “Keep yourself safe, too.”

“I will. And thank you.”

“No thanks. Now go an’ cover yourself.”

* * * * *

The Blue Moon was little more than a swamp shack, just as Jean-Marie remembered it. Justin had never returned from work, so she took it upon herself to relieve him of his Jeep. She left a note telling him she was going out, not to wait up, and to enjoy his date. It was all she had been able to do to even write the note, especially the last part. The last thing she wanted was for him to enjoy his date. Especially after the way he had left her high and dry. Why he insisted on spouting words of love and forever was beyond her. Those kinds of things didn’t last with men like him. And her heart couldn’t take another break like the one he would certainly give her.

She walked up to the shack, noting the fence surrounding it, which usually served to keep the drunks from falling into the swamp. Tiki torches, which served to keep the mosquitoes away, lined the walkway. Cajun music met her as she approached. Not really her scene, but tonight anything would do. She would not stay cooped up in that shack of Justin’s while he was out on a date. So, she’d done what any self-respecting girl would do.

Smoothing down the black and white striped skirt, she stepped out of her heels and walked across the sand, which had been placed in front of the shack and certainly wasn’t natural to the area. A couple of drunks stumbled past her, already having had their share even though the sun had barely gone down. Carrying her heels in her hand, she paid her money to the guy at the door and made her way through the crowd to the bar.

“Hello, Chér. Lookin’ mighty fine tonight,” the bartender winked. He was another smooth Cajun man with dark brown eyes and chocolate skin. He looked all of about twenty-one, barely old enough to drink. In these back bayou swamps, nobody seemed to care. Especially, when the only law is out on a hot date.

“Thanks. I’ll have a Jack on the rocks.” She placed a ten on the bar and shoved it toward him, winking. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you, darlin,’” he smiled as he handed her the drink. “You here by yourself?”

“Yep.” She climbed up onto the barstool. “You keep the drinks comin’ and I’ll be sure and treat you right.”

“Sure thing, Chér. I gotta say, though, you too pretty to be alone.”

“I’m fine, I assure you.” She sipped the whiskey, enjoying the burn as it went down her throat. It did nothing to ease the pain in her chest that she had tried to ignore all day. Damn Justin Thibodeaux.

“Well, you let me know if you need some company, hear?”

“I will, darlin.’”

She turned back to the band, trying to get into the music. Trying not to look at the door. She knew instinctively that if Justin did have a date, this was the place he’d be. There wasn’t another joint like this anywhere nearby. Closing her eyes, she let the rhythm take her as she sipped her drink, imagining how it would feel to open her eyes and see Justin standing there, his hand held out, the offer of a dance a peace offering between them.

This time, she downed the drink and turned back around to the bartender. All she had to do was crook her finger to make him come her direction. If only it were that easy with the man she really wanted to make come.

“Take it slow, now,” he said as he placed her next drink in front of her.

“Don’t you worry about me. I’m a big girl.”

“You wanna dance, sugar,” a big, burly man with long blonde hair walked up to her. He smelled like tobacco and whiskey. His glittering blue eyes warned of mischief, something she couldn’t resist tonight.

“Sure thing. But I might step on your feet. It’s been a while since I’ve danced with a partner.”

“Well, now that’s a damned shame,” he smiled as he placed his arm around her waist and led her to the dance floor.

She fought the butterflies in her stomach as she wrapped her arms around the man’s neck. Memories flooded her mind as she thought about Justin and all the times they had spent together dancing with one another on his front porch. No matter how much she wanted those times back, so much had happened between them. And she knew that there really was no such thing as going home.

“You here by yourself?” her partner asked.

“All by my lonesome,” she smiled up at him, wishing the whiskey could get her drunk enough to go home with this man. Maybe he could ease some of the hurt in her heart.

“Well, now. That don’t mean you have to leave alone.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.” She rested her head against his chest and listened to the thumping of his heart beneath his shirt. Inhaling his scent, all she could think of was Justin and how much she wished he were here holding her.

“We could leave this party early, you know.”

A shiver ran through her. No, she couldn’t leave with him. As much as she wanted to be that kind of woman, she knew that she wasn’t. “Let’s just dance for now.”

“Whatever you want.”

Three drinks and several dances later and she was just about falling on her ass. And was more than ready to go home with whoever asked. She leaned on her dance partner, very much aware that she was intoxicated beyond the point of caring. He had his arm wrapped around her waist and was leading her to the door just as she heard an all-too familiar voice. It was just business and completely took her off guard.

“Jean-Marie LaFleur.” The man approached them as she raised her head.

“What do you want?”

“You’re under arrest.”

“Hey, now, buddy, she’s been with me all night. She ain’t done anything,” the man with his arm around her said even as she felt herself pulled from his hold.

“Sorry, Lance, but she’s under arrest. For stealing a vehicle. And now, for public drunkenness.”

“Come on, Justin. I’ll take her home. I’m sure whoever’s car she stole will understand when we call and return it.”

Jean-Marie felt the cold metal cuffs slipping around her wrists and then felt herself being pulled into Justin’s embrace. “I highly doubt that,” Justin said. “She stole my car.”

“Well, hell, I don’t guess you can just let her go, huh? We have plans for later.”

“No plans, Lance. She’s coming with me. Now, if you’d like to join her, feel free, but I’m warning you, your wife won’t like it much.”

“Sorry, darlin.”

If she mumbled something in return, she wasn’t sure. She knew that the one set of arms that carried her out, were the ones that she wanted around her tonight. But she hadn’t counted on the cuffs.

* * * * *

“Come on, Jean-Marie, help me out here.” She was like deadweight in his arms as he carried her into the house. He would love to wring her neck for what she had done. She scared the daylights out of

him by disappearing that way. He knew it was all his fault for pretending to have a date. He was just thankful that he had taken off the voodoo charm tonight. Otherwise, Jean-Marie would have ended up in Lance Brezeale's bungalow, a thought that drove Justin to near insanity.

He pushed the door open with his knee, shifting Jean-Marie onto his shoulder. Lord, the woman was nothing but trouble. That knowledge didn't do anything to settle the still pounding of his heart as his arm lay firmly against her round bottom. She had worn a red thong tonight beneath her black and white skirt and he saw a red bra peeking out from her black tank top. He tried not to concentrate on the rise and swell of her breasts as she breathed, sleeping off her intoxication. She was going to feel like hell in the morning, he was sure.

"Almost there, darlin'." He maneuvered her through the house before placing her back onto his bed. If she hadn't been drunk and passed out, she would be the picture of sexy perfection with the rosy glow to her dark cheeks and the kiss of alcohol on her lips. Her long legs beckoned him to join her on the bed, to cuddle up next to her, wrap his arms around her and sleep with his head on her chest.

"Mon Dieu." He raked a hand through his hair and sank down into the chair next to the bed. Tomorrow night was the full moon. If Marie was right, everything would change as soon as the moon was full. His heart beat wildly at the thought while his every instinct told him that Gino was not far behind. Taking his gun from his belt, he settled back into his chair, knowing he wouldn't get much sleep tonight.

As he dozed off, he imagined Jean-Marie stirring, realizing she was in his bed. In his mind, she sat up, her tank top slipping down her thin arms, revealing the ample swell of her chest.

"You want me, Justin?"

His mouth went dry as she pulled the tank top over her head and let her golden hair spill out across her breasts. "Yes, I want you."

"You like watching me, don't you?" Her fingers reached up to remove her bra, revealing her beautiful breasts. Then they closed around her nipples and gave them a squeeze. "Did you like the show earlier today? I can do a lot more, you know."

He nodded. Yes, he had enjoyed watching her, had wanted to join her, had wanted to turn off the water and run his tongue along her wet breasts. Then he wanted to climb in with her, run his cock along her clit, rubbing it until she came. Then he would rise above her and stroke himself until his come coated her breasts. Only then would he bury himself inside her.

"What do you want me to do, Justin? You want to watch me fuck myself?"

This had to be a wet dream. Never before had he felt so turned on by a woman offering to fuck herself for him. "Yes. I want to watch you."

“What do you want me to use? Do you have something special you’d like to see shoved up inside me?”

Her words were making his cock hard. He ached to move across the room, to touch her, to taste her. When he started to move, he realized she had cuffed him to the chair. “Let me go,” he demanded.

“No.” She stood and walked toward him. Just when she was within reach, she turned her back to him. He watched as she slipped her skirt down, bending over, showing him a view of her ass, of her g-string covered pussy. God, she was incredible.

“You want to watch me make myself come?”

“Let me go.”

“No, Justin. You cuffed me. You held me prisoner. Now it’s your turn.”

He was naked now. This had to be a dream. She backed herself into him, sitting on his rock hard cock, running her lacy underwear against him, causing evil sensations with the lace. His breath caught in his throat. “Let me go,” he managed again between clenched teeth.

“Not until you tell me what you want me to fuck.”

“Me. I want you to fuck me. Ride my cock.”

She laughed. “That’s too easy. It’s right here, ready for me.” To prove her point, she ground herself into him again. “I want something hard.” She stressed the last word before pulling her pussy away from him. “Now tell me what you want to see.”

“Top drawer,” he managed.

She shot him a wicked smile before making her way across the room to his dresser. “A night stick, Sheriff?” She pulled the toy from its hiding place. He had gotten the police toy set last year as a gag gift and had wondered what to do with it. “I don’t know, Justin. It’s not very big. Do you think it will be enough to satisfy me?”

She walked back over to the bed and then bent over, once again showing him the outline of her pussy against the tight lace underwear. Slowly, she pulled them down, revealing her pink inner lips to him. Her ass winked at him as she leaned down to pull the underwear from around her ankles. “Now, tell me what you want me to do with it?”

His cock jerked in reaction, as she stayed bent over, her pussy just a foot from his face. Her scent wafted up to him, causing his mouth to once again go dry. All he wanted to do was reach out and lick her from hole to hole and then submerge himself deep within her body. “I want you to fuck it,” he said once he found his voice.

“Now, that’s not very sexy. Just a bad word. Surely you can talk sexy.” She held her lips open and ran the toy all around her opening. The view from here was incredible as she spread her legs wider, leaning on the bed to keep her balance.

“Take it and rub it along your clit. You feel that cold plastic? Is it hard? Are you wet?”

“I’m wet.” Her words sounded like a gasp.

“How wet are you? Why don’t you touch yourself and see?” He watched as she slipped two fingers into her hole.

“I am so wet, Justin. So wet you could slide right into me. You want to see?” She moved back toward him and sat on his lap, her pussy barely missing his cock. “Does it feel wet to you?” She ground herself against his balls, coating them with her juices.

“Yes,” he managed as he leaned forward to sink his teeth into her shoulder. She quivered against him.

“Mmmm. I like that.”

“I know.”

“Now what?” She moved, going back to the bed, bending over again.

“Now I want you to stand there. Don’t move.” Suddenly, with his hands freed, he moved across the room slowly, as if he was in a daze. Her body called out to him, the toy, forgotten in his urgency to have her, dropped against the hard wood floor. “Don’t move,” he warned again as he pressed his cock at her opening.

“Justin, oh, God!” she writhed against him, her head pressing down on the bed while her ass raised itself even further, showing him her clit as she moved.

“Be still.” He gave her ass a light slap.

“Justin...” she pleaded with him.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to fuck me.”

He gasped as her wet warmth opened for him, allowing him in. Gripping her hips, he drove into her over and over, feeling his balls slap against her clit, which had been angled so that it was very accessible to him.

“Oh, God, oh, God,” she moaned.

“Jean-Marie,” he called out as he felt his orgasm build.

“Oh God...” the moan sounded different, came from somewhere else. “Justin...what the hell happened?”

He jerked himself awake, his cock primed and ready, remembering how it felt to be deep inside her. Shit. Sunlight streamed in through the window, and Jean-Marie, severely hung over, sat up.

Chapter Eight

“Thank you,” she managed as he handed her a glass of water.

“No problem.”

“I’m sorry for last night. I don’t know what came over me.” She shoved her tangled hair out of her face. With the sunlight shining in, he thought she looked more beautiful than ever, but he knew she probably felt like hell.

He shifted in his jeans. Damn. He should have realized sooner that his thoughts about her were nothing but a dream. He had gotten carried away thinking about her, and now, seeing her dressed in sweat pants and one of his Ragin’ Cajun T-shirts, he felt a twinge of guilt. “Obligated to help.”

“Is everything okay? Shit. I bet I interrupted your date, didn’t I?”

He sank down next to her and ran his hand along her fleece-covered leg. “There was no date.”

“So you lied?” Her disappointment was clear in her voice.

“I wouldn’t say it was a lie...” He shot her a crooked grin, thinking that what he had done in his sleep last night was better than any date he’d ever had.

“You’re the same as always.”

“Would you rather I did have a date? Would that make you feel better?” He sure hoped not. He thought he was making some headway with Jean-Marie in spite of her stubborn streak.

She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. “No, but it would at least make you honest.”

“I don’t want to fight about this.” He let out an exasperated breath.

“Then take your hand off my leg.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Honesty, Justin. I want honesty. You disappear every night and say you’re going to work and I don’t know where you’re going or what’s going on. And I’m scared.” Tears glittered in the corners of her eyes, and he fought the urge to pull her to him.

“I’ll protect you,” he promised, smoothing her hair down.

“How can you protect me when you disappear?”

He swallowed hard. “I swear I can.”

“How?”

“Nightfall. I’ll show you then, I promise.”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she stalked into the kitchen, filled up a dish towel with ice and propped herself up in his recliner.

“Look, I have to go in to Lafayette today. You wanna go, too? You know, get out of here, do something?” He let the words hang between them, hoping she’d see this for what it was, a peace offering. The last thing he wanted to do was fight with her about last night. He’d forgiven her temper fit and the fact that she had stolen his Jeep, all this while they slept. The dream, still fresh on his mind was a sign, warning him that he was not over her, not even close to being over her. And what he wanted more than anything was to keep her near.

She had one leg thrown over the arm of the La-z-boy chair and the other planted firmly on the floor. An ice pack covered her face while her head rested against the other arm of the chair. Justin tried to ignore the inviting pose and the miles of exposed skin leading up to her short denim shorts. When she raised her hand and shot out her middle finger, he smiled.

“Hangovers are a bitch.”

“Go to hell,” she muttered.

“Already been there. You going with me or not? I can always just leave you here and...”

“Don’t you dare.” She sat up, plopping the ice pack onto the coffee table. “I’m so sick of the swamps, I’ve gotta get out of here.”

“So you’ll play nice and go with me.” He folded his arms and shot her a lazy smile. This was going to prove to be an interesting day.

“I’ll go with you.”

“And you’ll play nice.”

She shot him another dirty look before swinging her legs around and sitting up in the chair. “I’ll be civil.”

“Good enough. This time, I get the shower first. Wait your turn and I’ll take you to lunch.”

He had a feeling his shower would be a long, cold one, though. Memories of seeing her naked, of feeling her body against him, of the wild, wet dream he’d just had flooded his mind. What he needed today was to put some space between them, not to invite trouble with her in his truck with her all day, licking her soft pink lips and shifting her golden legs this way and that.

Turning on the cold water, he stepped into the shower, hoping the water would wash away his desire for her, but fearing that it would only make things worse. How many times had they made love in the shower? How many times had he run his tongue along her body, making promises of love and forever, things he never thought he’d have to fess up to? When she cornered him with his flowery words and empty promises, she had sent hot lead into his system. As he was bleeding and watching her walk away, he knew she was the only one he wanted forever with.

He rinsed the soap from his hair and wondered how things would have gone had he been man enough to admit how much he loved her. He'd probably never know, but he swore that today things would be different. Fate had decided they needed another chance. Starting right now, he was going to prove that to her.

* * * * *

Oh, she'd go with him to Lafayette all right, and in the meantime, she would find out what was going on here, why there was so much mystery. If he knew anything about her money, he hadn't said. She had a feeling there was a lot more to Justin's mysterious behavior than money and Gino. There was something hanging in the air between them that he hadn't revealed yet, something big.

She glanced out at his truck, wondering if the answer was out there. Men usually hid their evidence in places where they thought women wouldn't look. If it was one thing, she had learned it was that trucks and limos made good filing cabinets. Listening for the water, making sure he couldn't see her, she slipped out into the yard, cursing the dew on her bare feet. As much as she loved the swamps, she really hated getting her feet wet. There was something about getting her feet wet that always made her uncomfortable. She ignored the squish of the grass beneath her feet as she made her way out to the truck.

He hadn't even locked the doors. She pulled on the handle and climbed inside. There were no attempts to hide anything, either. The map lay right on the passenger side, in plain view. A quick scan told her it was the area all around the cabin, an area riddled with legends, many of which were about her and Justin's families. The x's he had placed over certain areas made no sense to her. What was he looking for out there?

"Find something?"

She raised her head up too quickly and ended up hitting it against the doorframe of the truck. "Shit." That was going to leave a hell of a lump. She turned around and shot him a dirty look as she replaced the map.

"Don't you ever warn people?"

"It's part of my police training. Never let 'em see you coming."

"Well, you could warn a girl." Turning around in the seat, she attempted to jump down without falling right into his arms. "Could you move?"

"After you tell me what you were doing. Not planning on running away again, were you?"

"No, I wasn't. Now move so I can get down."

“There’s plenty of room here. Let me help you.” He reached up to put his arms around her waist, but she pulled back, this time hitting the back of her head.

“Shit.”

“You need to be more careful.”

“If you’d move, I wouldn’t have to be careful.” He stepped aside and she jumped down, her foot landing on a rock. “Oh, great. Now look what you made me do.”

“You are the damndest woman,” he laughed. “You’re the one doing the sneaking around, but I get the blame for everything. How typical is that?”

“Go to hell, Justin.”

She turned to walk away, but his fingers caught her arm, holding her in place. “What were you doing in my truck?”

She resisted the urge to fall into his arms and instead met his gaze with a fiery one of her own. “I was trying to find out your secret.”

“Which one would that be?”

“Where it is you go? What it is that takes up all your time? Come on, we both know the criminal element in LaTrece is basically me. I know you’re looking for Gino, but do you really think he’s out in the swamp?”

He released her and stalked to the truck, picking up what she knew to be the map. “Are you talking about this?”

“Yes.”

“Shit, Jean-Marie, this is no secret. This is a map of the swamp.”

“I can see that.”

“I’m looking for my family heritage.”

“The gold? You’re looking for the bayou gold?”

“Yes. I am. And I think I’m damned close to finding it.”

He was still looking for the gold. God, when they had been kids, they used to go out searching for it. She remembered them dreaming about how they would spend it, what they would do, the places they would go. Knowing that he still held on to those childhood dreams warmed her heart and made her feel suddenly close to him again.

“I’ll help you.”

“You’ll what?”

“Come on, Justin. It’ll be like old times. I’ll help you while you look.”

“No. I can do this alone.”

“No you can’t. You’re missing three of the outlets near Pierre.” She snatched the paper from his fingers.

“No, I’m not. Those aren’t important.” He took the paper from her and folded it, stuffing it into his back pocket.

“How do you know?”

“Because I know. Now, are you gonna go shower or not?”

“Not.”

“And why not?”

“Because we’re not going to Lafayette today. We’re going to the swamp. You’re going to take me out there and I’m going to help you look.”

“No.”

“Yes. Now, come on. I’m sure you have to work tonight. We’re burning daylight.”

* * * * *

“How do you know you’re getting close?” She leaned over the edge of the pirogue, her hand dipped in the bayou water, as if she were feeding off the energy here. She looked like a river goddess with her hair tied up in a ponytail and her golden bikini top glowing in the sunlight. He had let out his breath and a silent prayer when she strolled out of the bathroom, the gold glowing in the cabin, her lower half covered in denim. If she had on a thong under there, he would surely lose his mind.

“I just know.” Every muscle in his jaw twitched at the thought of spending the day with her. Lafayette was so much safer than out here on his boat.

“Oh. Is this what you’ve been doing all these years? Why you never married?”

No, it wasn’t. How could he tell her, though? He had forgotten to breathe for the first two weeks after she left him. Thoughts of marrying someone else just didn’t have any appeal. What he wanted was to go after her, to apologize, to beg forgiveness. She may have shot him, but he knew he deserved it. Then his aunts began their plight to fill his head with evil thoughts about the woman he loved. After a while, he gave up looking for her. But he never stopped loving her.

“Do you see this place here?” He pointed to a fork in the bayou.

“Answer me.”

“You answer me. Do you see it?”

“How can I not? It’s right there.”

“On the map. Where is it on the map?”

“It has a big red X on it. Now answer me. Why didn’t you marry?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Who says I didn’t?”

“Your records. Do we need to go right or left?”

“You ran my records!”

“Right or left?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“The map.”

He took a breath while she scanned the map. “Left.”

Finally. God, this was going to be a long day.

“Answer me. Why didn’t you get married?”

He swallowed hard. This was not how he wanted his confession to come out. She peered at him with those yellow eyes of hers, as if she could see right into his soul. “I never married because in my heart I was already married.”

Suppressing a laugh, he watched as her mouth formed a perfect “o.” If he counted right, he had made her speechless twice now. Pretty damned good. She pushed the map forward. “You guide us.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t feel so good.”

Chapter Nine

Justin dreaded the moon's rise over the bayou. Fear gripped his heart as he thought back over the fax he had received earlier today. Gino Hernandez was in Louisiana and on his way to Jean-Marie. The man had been able to track her to New Orleans and probably knew she had come back here. It wouldn't be a stretch for him to learn where Jean-Marie lived before going out to Vegas, or to discover that she was wanted in LaTrece for attempted murder. The thoughts sat like acid on his stomach. If Gino came to LaTrece while Justin was in his gator form, he wasn't sure if he could protect Jean-Marie.

Just days ago, his only thought had been to find the gold and prove his heritage, but now, as the moon threatened to rise, he knew there was something far more important than his bloodline. The day's excursion out in the bayou had not ended the way he had hoped, but he had said the words he had wanted to say for so long. So he hadn't admitted to his love, not exactly. But he had told her how important she was to him in his confession. She hadn't responded, though, and he knew why. So much had happened so quickly, it was hard to get a handle on everything. And on top of that, her life was in danger.

Jean-Marie sat on the porch swing, her arms folded across her chest, staring out into the bayou, avoiding him as he moved past her. He had promised he would show her how he could protect her, but the thought of becoming a gator in front of her eyes was something he wasn't sure he could do. She knew all about voodoo, knew the power that mojo held. But had she ever been face to face with the truth of shapeshifting? Did she realize ordinary men could transform with the help of the right kind of magick?

Jean-Marie had heard enough of his promises. How many had he made over the years? And now he was avoiding her, once again with work. He had been locked up in his office all day, ever since this morning when she'd found him sleeping in the chair next to her. And she knew he was hiding something.

She pulled herself off the porch swing and crept into the house. Standing at the door to his office, she listened to be sure he was still in there. The sound of his scanner was enough proof. Slowly, she moved into his bedroom. Something was going on, and she was determined to find out what it was.

He had promised to tell her the truth tonight, just before he had disappeared. The moon distracted her as she sneaked into the room. It illuminated the swamp, which she could feel pulsing through her blood, as she smelled the water in her hair. She was as much a part of the swamp as the Cypress trees. Then she saw Justin. At first, he was standing on the edge of the water beneath the full moon. Then he crouched down to the ground. Before she knew what was happening, the change had begun.

Her heart stopped in her throat as her fingers clung to the curtains, threatening to pull them from their rods. Justin let out a yell unlike anything she had ever heard as his head rose to face the moon. His fingers clutched his chest before ripping the cotton T-shirt from his body. His exposed chest began pulsing as if thousands of tiny fingers were inside his skin, threatening to come out. Her hand went to her mouth to stifle a scream as his chest erupted into thousands of small green scales.

The horror didn't end there. His legs, covered with denim just seconds ago grew in size before they too had scales, like those on his torso. His hands and arms were next, they shrank and then widened, both growing the scaly exterior. In the midst of the change, he raised his head and their eyes locked. She watched in horror as his dark eyes became alive with the red glow of the gator and his hair melted away to become dark green scales.

Her entire body shook with the knowledge of what had just taken place. Justin became an alligator right before her eyes.

This was his secret, his means of protecting her. Who knew what kind of pact he had made with what kind of devil to be able to transform such as this. Only the most skilled voodoo priestess or priest could render such a change, and Justin was not a voodoo expert, which meant he was, cursed. By whom or for what reason, she was not sure, but she had a feeling deep in the pit of her gut that she had something to do with the reason that he had changed.

She released the curtains and forced her legs to move forward, to go out into the yard and face Justin. This was what he intended to show her, but she needed more than a display of his animal instincts. She needed answers for why this had happened at all. And something told her that the white bag hanging from his neck, the one that practically shined in the moonlight, held the answer to her questions.

* * * * *

There was no explanation. No way to avoid the horror he had seen in her eyes. His transformation had frightened her, as it should. Men did not usually change into alligators and then ease their way into the swamps. Justin made his way to the edge of the bayou, feeling the mud sink between his toes as he moved. Jean-Marie would never understand, would never accept who or what he was. And she never needed to know that he had done all of this to find the elusive bayou gold, something that was so far from his mind now, he had hardly thought about it since she'd come back into town. Tonight, the need to search was strong. There were still so many questions in his mind. He needed to answer, and there was no way of getting to Jean-Marie and explaining what she had just witnessed.

His only choice was to go out into the bayou and wait for morning. Then, he could explain, could remove the bag and pretend that his life was normal.

* * * * *

Jean-Marie knew she shouldn't be snooping around in Justin's room. When he had come in early this morning, he crashed on the sofa, obviously avoiding her. There was an explanation to be had, though, and she felt like all the answers were somewhere in his room. After making sure he was sleeping soundly, she began rifling through his drawers, hoping to turn up some piece of evidence to explain what she had seen last night.

It was there, tucked safely behind a row of socks. Her hand closed over the white bag, the one she had seen glowing in the moonlight last night, the one she knew was his *gris-gris*. Closing her eyes, she imagined him in the swamp, patrolling the waters, searching for something. Heat radiated from the bag, causing her fingers to burn, causing it to slip from them and fall onto the floor. She quickly scooped it up just as he walked in.

"What are you doing?" He folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes at her, as if he had nothing to explain.

"I could ask you the same thing." Her hand clung to his charm. "What is this?"

"Give that back." He moved forward, but she danced away from him, avoiding the heat she could feel from across the room, the heat she knew would brush against her skin if his fingers made contact.

"No. Not until you play it straight with me. What is this?"

"It's nothing. Give it here." He swiped at the bag again, but she held it just out of his reach.

"Nothing? Where did you get it?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you." His impatience was obvious as he raked a hand through his hair and stalked forward, his eyes locked onto hers.

"Try me. I saw you out in the swamp. I know..."

"It's okay. Give me the bag back."

She clutched it in her fist. "Hell no! What are you, Justin? What happened to you?" She was on the verge of tears, unable to understand all that had happened in such a short period of time. There was no explanation would have satisfied her, as nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Justin had been cursed and hadn't seen fit to tell her about it even though he insisted on guarding her like a watchdog.

"I can't explain. I have to have that bag." The severity of his tone made her cringe. *What if he really did need the bag? What if harm would come to him without it?*

“Why? So you can sneak up on me and hear my secrets? Is this some kind of voodoo?”

“Jean-Marie, give me the bag.” She shoved it down her shirt. “Don’t think I won’t go after it.”

“I don’t care if you go after it. But you’ve got to explain this to me because last night, there was an alligator and then it was you and now I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

“Shit,” he raked a hand through his hair.

“That was you, wasn’t it? The other night? Shit. You are an alligator.”

“I can explain.”

“Why are you doing this?” Ten thousand thoughts ran through her head, but the one thing that stood out were his words. *I can protect you.* “Gino is coming after me, isn’t he?” Tears blinded her.

“Yes, he is. That’s why I did this. That’s why I’m here. To protect you.”

“And you became a gator...”

“To protect you, love. To keep you safe.” His hand brushed her cheek.

“Don’t move,” she warned.

“Why not?”

“Because of this,” she fell against him, her hands on his shoulders, pulling him into her as she closed her mouth onto his. She opened her mouth, inviting his tongue in to explore. He delved inside, offering her his soul with every breath he poured into her.

“Woman, you don’t know what you do to me.”

“Justin,” she moaned.

“Come to my bed.” He pulled her with him.

“You heard my confessions.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And...?”

“And there’s a lot you don’t know. A lot I can’t promise.”

“I don’t need a promise. You were never very good at keeping them anyway. I just need to be with you. You know, you really need to do something about the damned gators around here.”

He laughed. “I told you, you are safe here.”

“Well I don’t know any man stupid enough to fight a gator to get to me.”

“You might be surprised what some men would do to get to you.”

His hand, the one that had been a claw just hours ago, reached out to touch her soft shoulder. When his fingers grew warm against her skin, she turned, her gold eyes cutting deep into him.

“I suppose you’d like to pick up where you left off earlier?”

"I just want to touch you."

"I'll give you my body, but you can't have my heart."

"And why not?"

"Don't you know? Can't you see? You broke my heart. And I have no intention of going down that road with you again." She didn't look at him when she spoke, as if it hurt too much to see him. Then, she raised her face, letting her eyes cut into him. "Do you understand?"

"I won't hurt you." Even as he spoke the words, he didn't know if they were true.

"Well, chivalry is dead. I have no intention of getting mixed up with you again. So you can wipe those fantasies from your mind."

"Jean-Marie," his voice lodged in his throat. "I want to protect you."

"I don't need your protection."

"That might be true, but you've got it." He let his lips trail down her neck.

"You're driving me insane." She pulled him closer to her, her body belying everything she had said to him.

"You're driving me crazy." His tongue lapped at her collarbone.

"You're already crazy. What do you want from me, Justin? An apology? I'm sorry I shot you. I should have aimed lower," a moan colored her voice as she spoke. He sank his teeth into her flesh, causing her to jump in his arms, squirm against him.

"You did aim lower."

"Oh, yeah. I had forgotten. Tell me, why didn't you marry Rose Donavon? Make an honest woman out of her?"

"We were kids. All of us. I couldn't no more marry her than..." He reached the opening of her tank top and pulled it down, revealing the breasts he now knew had been enhanced. He'd have to send a thank you card to her plastic surgeon. They were incredible!

"Than you could marry me."

"I wanted to marry you," he murmured against her.

"You wanted to control me. Me and my hoodoo ways. Change me. That's all you ever wanted. I was some prize to you."

"You still are, *chér*. The best prize of them all."

Before he could give her a chance to protest, he took her breast into his mouth. She didn't protest as her body went flush against his, pressing into him in all the right places.

"Perhaps you and I should just get on with it then," she whispered low against his forehead.

"Get on with what?" He shot her a teasing smile.

“If you have to ask, Justin Thibodeaux, then maybe you don’t know how to do it anymore.”

“Oh, I know how to do it alright. I just don’t know if you realize what doing it, as you put it, will do to me, to us.”

“I know what it used to do to me.”

“You want to give it another shot?” He smiled at his irony.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Loving Jean-Marie was as easy as breathing. They stumbled backward against the bed, tearing at one another, running their hands along each other’s backs. Justin’s breath caught in his throat when she looked up at him with her golden eyes and then took his mouth with hers. Her lips were soft and warm and sent a shiver of wonder down his back. He breathed in her scent, knowing he would never get enough of the woman who had occupied his mind for so long. How he had ever let her go, he wasn’t sure. All he knew was that now that she was here with him, he would do anything to protect her.

When his back made contact with the bed, he wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her on top of him. Her breasts teased him from beneath her thin tank top and her jeans rubbed against his cock in a sinfully erotic way. Everything about her, from her jasmine scent to her silky skin turned him on, made him long to be inside her.

“I want to see you.” He rolled over so he now lay on top of her. Slowly, he pulled her tank top over her head to reveal the two magnificent globes he had longed to touch earlier. His breath caught in his throat as he looked down at her, taking in their perfection. “You are amazing.”

“So are you,” she ran her hands along his chest as she spoke, her fingernails tracing a trail of fire across his skin.

“I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

“You’ve never been to Vegas, then. It’s full of beautiful girls.”

“I bet none of them looked like this.” His hands covered her breasts, reveling in the perfect shape.

“They all look like this.”

“No, they can’t possibly. You drive me crazy.”

He dipped his head down to take one tight nipple into his mouth and then the other. She arched against him, making him thankful that the surgery hadn’t destroyed their sensitivity. Jean-Marie’s breasts had always been sensitive, had always puckered beneath his touch. Tonight, they didn’t disappoint as her nipples hardened, begging for his tongue to wrap around them, to suck them, to bring her entire body to ecstasy.

Her hand went into his hair, holding his head steady against her as she pressed her nipple into his mouth even further. His tongue busily lapped at her body while the rest of him reveled in the way she shook against him, the way her soft moans caught in her throat, the way she arched and bucked against him, begging him to take her.

Her legs wrapped around him and she ground her denim-covered crotch against him. He could feel the wetness slide out from beneath, coating his cock as her heat sought out the one thing that would give her a release. Not yet. He wasn't ready to be inside her yet. First, he wanted to taste her, wanted to touch her, wanted to bring her to a place he hoped she hadn't been in a long time. Justin wanted to be the one to leave a mark on her tonight just as she had marked him so long ago. But tonight would be all about love and not about hurt or revenge.

"I need you inside me," she begged.

"Not yet, chér. Not until you come for me."

Her nails bit into his shoulder as his tongue made a trail down to her navel and then teased along the waist of her jean shorts. Slowly, he unbuttoned the shorts and then slid the zipper down. His hand delved inside to reveal that she didn't have on underwear, making everything accessible to him. To know that his head had been so close earlier, so close that his tongue, reptilian as it was, could have reached out and brushed against her lips was enough to turn him on. And his animal instincts seemed to tell him that she wouldn't have minded had she known it was him in that disguise.

Working to slide her shorts down her hips, he froze at the sight of her golden hair. Her pussy looked shined golden, glowing in the moonlight like a sacred goddess. The way her juices covered her lips, coated her hair, teased him, begging him to enter her body. He had always loved the way her lips were so pink on the inside and so dark on the outside, the way she looked like a chocolate covered cherry when she held her pussy open for him. All the delights in the world rested in this woman's body and he intended to taste every one of them.

"You're so amazing," he crooned against her as his fingers ran along her pubic hair, which was almost as soft as the hair on her head.

"Justin," her voice held an urgency he couldn't deny.

"Shhh. It won't be long, I promise. But first, I want to taste what I've been missing for so long."

He spread her legs, holding them open with his hands and watched as her lips parted for him. Her juices ran along her opening, teasing him, making his tongue hard just thinking about going inside her. Slowly, he leaned forward, letting his tongue run along her slit, just enough to get a taste of her. She quivered beneath him, tried to buck against him, but he held her firmly in place. "Not yet."

"Justin, please."

“No. Not yet.”

This time, he teased her clit with his tongue, rubbing along the hardened bud until it stood at attention, threatening to send tremors through her body. He wanted her to come and come hard, but not yet. First, he wanted to tease her, to drive her to the edge of sanity, to make her his in every way possible.

His tongue flicked against her clit, then slid lower, licking at her opening, sliding down to her anus and then back up. Finally, he slipped it into her warmth and moaned against her. God, she tasted like honey. If she had been coated in the stuff, she couldn't be any sweeter than she was at this moment. Slipping a hand under her ass, he raised her up so he could cover her pussy with his mouth and suck on her lips while his tongue probed and searched for the sweet nectar he longed for.

She flailed against the bed, her head moving from side to side, her moans sounding primal, animal-like. He glanced up at her and saw her running her fingers along her still-hard nipples, delighting in the way her own body felt. “Justin,” she moaned as he continued to feed off her, continued to take her into his mouth, to suck, to lick, to bite.

When she came, it took every ounce of strength he had not to bury himself inside her. He held her in his mouth while the waves shot through her body and rested his tongue inside her while she squeezed and pulsed. As her come dripped out into his mouth, he lapped it up, running his tongue along her opening while her moans died down.

“Are you ready for me?”

“Yes,” her voice seemed to come from somewhere far away as she looked down at him.

He rose above her, settling his cock against her warm, wet sex. Already, it pulsed with need, the need to be inside her, the need to be buried the one place it knew it belonged. Slowly, he gave them both what they wanted, the one thing they needed. He slid into her, joining their bodies, melting away the past ten years, the hate, the hurt, the scars. Everything from this moment on would be different for them, he swore it. He would protect her from whatever evil was after her and he would give her his life, his name, anything she wanted.

She opened for him, spreading her legs, holding them open for him with her hands. She arched her pussy so he could go in even deeper. He angled himself so that he filled her completely and his balls rested against her anus. Then, he stayed perfectly still, looking down at the woman with the golden hair, the wild eyes, the lusty lips, the one who had stolen his heart in a matter of hours.

“Stay still,” she warned as she reached down and began stroking her clit.

“Do you know how hard that is?”

“Mmmm. I know how hard it is. But don't move.”

He looked down as her long fingers worked to torture her already tender bud. He watched as she pulsed against him, quivering, her lips opening and closing under the strength of their own ecstasy. She continued to rub, to play, to tease at a frantic pace. Her nails scratched against the base of his cock as she roughly moved her fingers across her clit. She threw her head back and arched against him when the waves of her orgasm shot through her body. And he tried like hell to stay as still as he could.

“Chér ie, I can’t...” he managed through clenched teeth.

“Then fuck me,” she urged.

He took her ankles and pulled her into him as he began driving his cock into her. The bed creaked and groaned, protesting the sudden movement. His breath came in short gasps to match hers as he continued the frenzied assault on her pussy, wanting to make it come for him, wanting again, to brand her with his desire. The sound of their bodies joining set the pace for their moans, which echoed in his tiny cabin.

He looked down to see himself sliding in and out of her pink hole, her dark lips squeezing and releasing as he moved. He watched his pink cock take her over and over as her moans filled his ears. Illuminated by the moonlight her come coated his cock and had his heart threatening to hammer right out of his chest. When he finally came, he shot his seed deep inside her, holding his cock against her walls, feeling the come shoot from his body to coat her insides and then slide against him to coat the sheets.

Unable to move, he just looked down at her, reveling in the desire that had swept through their bodies that still shone on her face. Her lips remained bruised and swollen from his kisses, but they turned up in a smile even as her eyes lazily grazed over him.

“You’ve still got it, Thibodeaux.”

“God, Jean-Marie, so do you.” Sweat dripped off his forehead onto her chest. She moaned again and arched against him as she rubbed the droplet into her skin.

“Now what?”

“What do you mean?” He was out of breath and having difficulty thinking as she continued to use her muscles to squeeze against him, threatening to cut off the circulation to his cock.

“I mean, now what? Are you gonna tell me your secret?”

“And that would be?”

“Why did you turn into an alligator? Who gave you the *gris-gris*?”

“Is that why you fucked me, so I would tell you my secret?” He knew it wasn’t true and smiled to indicate this to her.

“No. I fucked you because that’s all I wanted to do since I landed in New Orleans. And then when I saw you...well, I think you know.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“So...”

“Mon Dieu, if you don’t stop squeezing me like that, I’m not gonna be able to talk.”

“You know how to keep a Cajun quiet?”

“How’s that?” he smiled.

“Tie his hands behind his back.” He raised an eyebrow at her latest Cajun joke. “You know, so he can’t talk.”

“I don’t talk with my hands,” he argued.

“You did tonight.” She arched against him as she smiled and then ran her hands along his chest.

“So, you gonna talk, cowboy?”

“You’ll never believe me.”

“I believe a lot of things that don’t make sense. You know that. And I know that somebody gave you the voodoo. I want to know who and why. Are those old swamp stories true?”

He pulled her into the circle of his arms and settled next to her, his cock still embedded in her, half-hard, ready to go again at the slightest encouragement from her. She rested her head against his shoulder and continued to touch his chest with her soft hands.

“I don’t know how to begin.”

“When did this start?”

“Last night. Well, two nights ago, I guess.”

“And?”

“And I don’t know. Sleep now. I’ll tell you about it in the morning.”

“Sleep?” She settled against him, causing his cock to fully awaken with the movement of her hips. “I’d rather do something else.”

“Lusty Creole.”

“Fucking Cajun.”

“Damn right.” He smiled down at her before rolling her over and taking her again and again.

Chapter Ten

“Marie! Marie!” Justin stood in the pirogue, urging it forward to the place he had been only a few nights ago. It seemed like forever now. Jean-Marie had fallen asleep in his arms after they made love again, and he knew he had to find some answers to the voodoo woman’s riddles. If Marie LaVeau was out in the swamps, he intended to find her. With his *gris-gris* tucked into his pocket, he moved forward, this time unafraid of the gators who swam next to the tiny boat.

“Marie! Where the hell are you? Get out here, woman! Show yourself!”

The night answered back, its usual call doing nothing to show him the way to the tiny island that was no longer where it had been two nights ago. The full moon hung overhead, shining the way for him, and he knew this was the right spot. But the voodoo priestess was nowhere to be found.

“Marie!”

He dipped the pole back into the murky water. What the hell was happening to him? There had to be an explanation for what was going on. “I’ve got your damned spell!” he called out. “I’ve got it right here!”

Reluctantly, he slipped the charm back around his neck. If this was the only way to find the answers he sought, he would do it. He would become the gator again if it could tell him what Marie meant by the gold, and what the hell he was supposed to do with Jean-Marie in the meantime.

As soon as the moonlight shone onto the white cloth, the change came. The boat capsized under his new weight and his body sank into the black bayou water. The other gators bellowed, but they all stayed out of his way as he ambled forward, more determined now than he had ever been. Marie told him he was supposed to remain a gator to protect the gold, gold he hadn’t even found yet, gold that was supposed to need him on the night of the full moon, which was tonight.

It couldn’t have been long past midnight when he left the cabin, so he still had several hours of darkness left. In that time, he could find what he needed, do whatever the hell it was he was supposed to do and get back to the woman he knew he had fallen in love with all over again. He hadn’t uttered the words yet, but he felt them deep inside his chest. And the truth was, he had never gotten over Jean-Marie, no matter what he may have wanted to think.

But right now, he was in the bayou with no clue about where to go. All he needed was a sign, some kind of direction, anything to tell him where he needed to be when all he wanted to do was go back to Jean-Marie, crawl into bed beside her and revel in her warmth.

* * * * *

The sounds of the night woke Jean-Marie from the most peaceful sleep she'd had in a long time. She rolled over, hoping to find Justin lying next to her, naked. She knew exactly what she'd do with him. Starting slowly, she would ease the covers back to reveal his amazing cock. Then she would run her tongue along it until it awoke, hard and ready for her. When he was hard enough, she would rise above him, slide him into her, and ride him until he woke.

Maybe she should tie him to the bed. She smiled and stretched. If she did, he wouldn't be able to move and she could ride him at her own pace, as slowly or as quickly as she wanted all night long. And he would be at her mercy. She knew how to tease a man, how to keep him hard all night, how to keep him from coming until she was ready. And she would use this as sweet revenge.

But his side of the bed was cold. The bedside clock told her it was one o'clock. She had no idea what time it had been when she finally drifted off to sleep, but Justin couldn't have been gone too long. Maybe he had just gotten up for a beer or something. She lay in bed and waited, but he never returned. Finally, she reached for one of his shirts that he had flung over a chair. Pulling it on, she stepped out of the bedroom, hoping to find him somewhere in the tiny cabin.

Jean-Marie stepped out onto the porch, half expecting Justin to be keeping watch over her just as he had been earlier. He still hadn't answered her questions about the curse, but she knew that only the most powerful voodoo could control a charm such as the one he had around his neck. And very few women throughout history had been able to concoct such a spell. In fact, only one that she knew of, and Marie LaVeau had long been dead.

"Justin," she called out to the night air. There was no reply except for the wind, and the feeling that something was very wrong. She stepped carefully in her bare feet across the porch and to the steps. "Justin, are you out there?"

The frogs replied, but nothing else. Her heart leapt into her throat when she heard the familiar sound of footsteps. She smiled and ran down the steps, knowing he had come back to her. Even though this was not how she had planned their next encounter, she was not opposed to a night out in his pirogue like they had done so long ago.

"Justin, where did you go?" She asked as she rounded the cabin. Only Justin wasn't standing there.

Wrapping her arms around herself, warding off the cold, she sat and looked out over the bayou. Who would have known that in twenty-four hours, she could find contentment in a place she once loathed. And it all had to do with the man she always knew she loved.

So much had happened between them, though. And now there was this curse, something she didn't understand. She knew all about voodoo, having grown up in the swamps, the daughter of a dabbler in the arts. But she hadn't practiced herself in so long. She wasn't even sure if she remembered the words to any of the old incantations. It was just like mass, she thought, recalling the books by Anna Riva, modern day voodoo expert. Jean-Marie knew she held the magick inside her, that it was as easy as lighting a candle. But there were so many more complications.

Thanks to her voodoo ancestry, her mother never fit in out here in the Northern bayou. Sure, everyone around knew a thing or two about voodoo, but they called themselves *traiteurs*, healers, not priestesses like her mother had. And they were Cajun, not Creole. Her ancestry had always been a curse as well. Too many of the Creole women had married all the good available Cajun men in this area, making them appear to have cast a spell over the *menfolk*. She thought the Cajun women here were just superstitious, shunning anyone who was a little different, just as Justin's aunts did with her.

Looking up at the moon, she lifted her arms, her desire to draw out all the negative energy she had collected as tangible as her desire for Justin. She felt it pulse through her body, causing her spirit to feel as if it were floating above the bayou. The words had barely escaped her lips when she felt the wind pick up. There was danger on the wind. She could taste the vile evil around her. Gino was not far behind.

A shiver went through her, having nothing to do with the chill of the night air. She could almost feel his breath on her neck. "You will never escape me," he had said. At one time, she had believed him. But right now, everything seemed possible, even if he were lurking about just on the edge of her consciousness. Justin would keep her safe. He had vowed that he would, and she believed that he wouldn't break this promise, even if he had a record of breaking them in the past.

This was too important. It wasn't about remaining faithful or keeping his dick in his pants. It was about her life. And she knew that more than anyone else, Justin would do anything he could to protect her life. Her hair whipped around her shoulders as the night birds called. Their song was the answer to her unspoken questions. *Yes, he loves you.* More importantly, she loved him, too.

Leaves crackled behind her, warning her of company. "Justin," his name was barely a whisper, but it was enough to have her heart thumping in her chest. She turned around to see the man she'd hoped to never see again.

Gino looked down at her, his usually tailored body covered in camouflage, his hands wrapped around a silver gun. "Expecting someone else?"

"Gino." Her heart hammered in her chest and she almost lost her breath for a second. How could she have ever thought this man with his cold-blooded killer face was handsome? "What are you doing here?"

“Looking for you. You have something of mine and I want it back.” He stepped forward and her eyes darted around, hoping, praying Justin was just waiting for the right moment to jump out and shoot this man.

“What would that be?”

“My files.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play stupid with me. You are smarter than that.” He closed the distance between them as she collided with one of the poles holding up the house. His fingers took a handful of her hair and used it to pull her forward. “Now, give it to me.”

“I don’t...” The force of his hand against her face almost took her breath away. She recovered from the sting, refusing to let her tears flow. He had hit her before, and she had crumbled in front of him. Not this time.

“Tell me, you bitch or I’ll kill you.”

“If you kill me, then you’ll never know.”

He smiled. “If I kill you, then it won’t matter.” One hand held her chin firmly while the other held the gun, which he now pressed against her chest. “Would you like for me to spread you all over this bayou?”

“Go to hell, Gino.”

“I’m taking you with me if I go. Looks like you’ve already been spreading it around, doll.” He slid the gun underneath Justin’s shirt. A chill swept through her as she wondered what he intended to do to her. Gino had brutalized her before, but not again. She wouldn’t let the power he held over her just days ago get to her. She was a new woman and would fight him this time. And if he planned to rape her, with his cock or with his gun, so be it. But this time, he would not have her soul.

“You want me to spread it back to you? Is that what this is about? My golden pussy?”

“If it were about your pussy, you’d already be on your back. I’ll get to it later. I’ve got all kinds of plans for it. Right now, I’m talking about my disk. I know you have my files and I know where you put them. I know everything you’ve ever done. Every move you’ve ever made, every dick you’ve had. I own you.”

She swallowed hard at his words. There was no doubt that he knew everything about her. She had been foolish to think otherwise. A man like Gino had connections that went so far and so deep, there was no doubt in her mind that he had known where she was going before she even arrived in LaTrece. And she knew now that the only way to escape him was to kill him.

"I have it. And I'll give it to you," she sweetened her voice, hoping he would remove the gun from under her shirt. He did, but he replaced it with his hand, which moved up to squeeze her breast. The cool swamp wind blew against her body, sending a shiver through her, which she wished she could have suppressed.

"Tell me, did he fuck you tonight?"

"Who?"

"The man whose scent I smell on you. Did he fuck you?"

"I don't know..." God, the pain shot through her body as his fingers dug into her nipple. They had been so sensitive since the surgery, and he knew that. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Yes," she said finally, hoping he would release her. "Yes, he fucked me."

"Was he any good?"

"Not as good as you," she said her practiced answer.

"We'll have to see about that. But first, I want the disk."

It's not a disk, you idiot, she wanted to yell. Instead, she softened against him. "Then you promise you'll give me what I want?"

"Fucking whore. You think I'm gonna slide my cock in where some stupid Cajun has been? No. Not this time. But, believe me, I have plenty of men dying to get a taste of your sweet ass. All willing to pay me for it, too. And that's what I plan to do with you. You want to be a whore? I'm gonna make you a whore." He pushed her backward with a force that, again, almost knocked her breath right out of her chest. God, he was such a big man. How she ever thought she could handle her own with someone like him was beyond her understanding.

"I'll take you to it."

Please let Justin be in the swamp, please let him...

"Where is it?"

"I hid it in the swamp. We'll have to go in the pirogue."

His fingers closed around her arm and dug into her flesh. "No tricks or you'll wish I had killed you out here. I know men who bring pain to a whole new level. And they would love to get their hands on a woman like you."

His words sent a chill through her body, and she had no doubt they were true. She remembered a place not far from here where the gators mated. If she could remember the way, she could take him out there and knock him out of the boat. Of course, she might end up in the swamp with him, but at this point, it didn't matter. All she knew was that she had to find a way to free herself from this madman.

“No tricks,” she managed with a smile. “But please don’t send me away. I’ll do anything you want.” Gino loved agreeable women.

“You’re good at sucking cock. Maybe when we’re through tonight, I’ll let you suck mine.”

“Mmmm. I’ve missed yours.” Her stomach turned at the thought, but it was best to play herself up as a sex-starved woman. She knew how to manipulate him, even if she didn’t know much else about him.

“Take your shirt off,” he demanded as soon as they stepped into the pirogue.

“Why?”

“Don’t question me. Do as I say.” He took the pole into his hand and dipped it into the water, guiding the boat forward. “Which way?”

“That way,” she pointed toward the East as her fingers worked on the buttons to her shirt. Without it, the night air wrapped around her, making her wish this was one of those sultry summer nights instead of a chilly one. She tossed the shirt onto the floor of the pirogue.

“Now, come here.”

Her breath hung in her throat. What was he going to do to her? And where was Justin? She fought the tears that stung her eyes. She would not let Gino see her cry, would not show him the pain he was causing her. Trying to focus on Justin’s face, the smell of his body on hers, she moved toward Gino and hoped he didn’t touch her.

“I want you to guide this boat to wherever you took the drive.” He placed the pole in her hand. “And if you don’t, I’m going to ram this thing into your body and fuck you with it until you bleed.” The blackness in his eyes was enough proof that he was telling the truth. And any man who could kill children would certainly have no problems raping her with a cane pole.

“I’ll do what you ask.”

“You sure as hell better or I promise you, you will live to regret it. I won’t kill you, Jean-Marie. But there are far worse things for a woman. You want me to tell you all about it?”

She glanced down at his crotch, where his cock was hard. God, he got off on this kind of torture. How could she have not seen it before? Bile threatened to rise and spill out. How many times had he come home and fucked her brutally after killing someone? She’d never know and wasn’t about to ask.

“Tell me about your Cajun,” he began. She wished he’d just shut up.

“Not much to tell,” she stuck the pole into the water and eased the boat forward. Her arms ached from the effort, but she didn’t want the pole back in Gino’s hands. He was likely to follow through on his threat just for the sheer pleasure of making her bleed.

“I doubt that. How did he take you?”

“Gino...”

“How?” His voice was hard, bitter. The gun lay on the floor next to him. If there were any way for her to reach it and shoot him before he had a chance to react, she would do it. Except this time, she would aim for his dick and would shoot the thing clean off.

“Hard. He did it hard like you do. But he wasn’t as good, wasn’t as big.”

“Did you come for him?”

“Yes.”

“I thought I smelled your come.” She ignored him, or tried to, until he stood and moved toward her.

“Gino, the boat will rock if you don’t be still. Then, we’ll never get your files.” She tried to steady her voice as his hand reached out for her. Her stomach knotted up. “We’re almost there. Then you can do whatever you want to me.”

“Damn you, woman. Everything I want to do to you makes me sick. I don’t want to want your sweet pussy. You make me crazy.” He ground his cock against her ass, threatening to throw them both overboard with his movements.

“Please...”

“Yeah, beg me,” his breath was hot against her ear. If she had the nerve, she would play into his fantasy, suck his cock and then shoot him.

“Please sit down,” she managed, hoping her demand wouldn’t anger him.

“Come sit on my lap.” He pulled her backwards and the pole slipped from her fingers.

“Now, look what you’ve done,” she tried to smile, tried to sound sweet as her bottom came into contact with his pants. His hard cock pressed against her, threatening to fill her even though he was fully clothed.

“You dropped it.”

“I think I can reach it if you let me go.”

She scrambled to stand, to move out of his lap. Just as her hand reached the water, the gators’ head appeared, his blue eyes shining in the moonlight. She had to get to the gun now. If Gino saw the gator, Justin, he would shoot him for sure. And she couldn’t risk that.

“Did you get it?” He called from behind her.

“Almost.” She reached out and stroked Justin’s nose. He raised his head up, the pole between his teeth. She shot him a smile as she took the pole from his mouth. He swam forward, leading the way for her. “Got it.”

She stood now, hoping Gino would keep his hands off her this time.

“Take me to the disk,” he said.

“We’re almost there,” she promised.

Saying a silent prayer to St. Christopher, she hoped he would protect her and Justin as they traveled forward under the moonlight.

* * * * *

If that man touched Jean-Marie one more time, Justin would capsize the boat and kill him with his teeth. Instead, he moved forward, guiding Jean-Marie to the place where the gators nested. It was a dangerous move, but it was his only hope. He had to find a way to get the man away from her so she could escape. This had to be the infamous mob boss. And from the parts of the conversation he had heard between the two of them, the man deserved to die for no other reason than the way he was torturing Jean-Marie with his threats.

Justin moved forward, sure to keep the boat at a safe distance behind him. If Marie LaVeau ever heard his curses tonight, she gave no indication. He was on his own, and he had to save the woman he loved.

Everything happened so quickly. The gators sensed the approach of the boat and were on alert, just as they had been the night Justin encountered Marie. With Jean-Marie naked, there was no way for him to pull her to safety, as he had planned. He had to trust his instincts, had to trust that the gators would not fight him for her. He took a deep breath and rammed into the side of the boat, knocking it into the area where the gators were mating and courting. Suddenly, time sped up.

Gunshots rang out as three of the bigger gators approached the boat. Justin took that moment to rock against the boat, throwing both its passengers into the water. Jean-Marie disappeared beneath the murky surface, just as he’d hoped she would. He swam under the boat, hoping she would be there, hoping she would place her arms around his neck and ride on his back to freedom.

Something was wrong, though. She hadn’t held her breath as he had hoped. A stream of blood rose up from her head as he swam underneath her, taking her hair into his mouth and dragged her away from the gators who, from the pitch of Gino’s screams, had closed in on him.

Justin didn’t have time to look back and see the man being ripped to shreds. Urgency drove him forward. The swamp water was cold and Jean-Marie was bleeding. He heard her gasp for air when he brought her back to the surface. At that same second, he heard the nearby screams stop. His heart raced as he wished the island would magically reappear. He needed to save her, needed to warm her. And right now, he was helpless until morning.

Pulling her to shore, he lay her body on the bank and covered her, knowing his reptilian skin would not provide the warmth she needed. His fierce desire to protect her overrode any doubts that he had about covering her body. She needed to be safe. She needed to be okay.

He blew his warm breath across her face, moving her hair with his claw. The blood came from a cut on her forehead, not a gunshot as he had first thought. She had hit her head when she fell out of the boat, probably on one of the Cypress knees that stuck out about the water's surface. He lay his head in the crook of her neck and listened to the rise and fall of her breath. And prayed that she would survive.

* * * * *

Marie had seen the whole thing, having known the exact moment when it would happen. Her clairvoyance went beyond her death. She had known for decades that Jean-Marie would need protection in the swamps and only a man of pure heart and good intentions could give it to her. But the mission was not complete. The cycle had not come full circle because right now, Justin's cold body covered her descendant and the life threatened to seep out of her chest.

Jean-Marie had to live. She held the gift deep inside her and had not yet discovered how to use it. To keep the voodoo alive, one had to use the gift, to pass it on to her daughter. Jean-Marie's mother had failed them all by moving to North Louisiana, giving up her heritage. Only through her descendants could Marie stay alive. Their power that kept her free, roaming the swamps, defeating death at every turn. And now, that power was in jeopardy as Jean-Marie lay dying.

Chapter Eleven

Justin looked up as the mist swirled around them. The woman appeared from out of nowhere, the gator scales covering half of her face when she turned to him.

“You saved her,” her voice rang out. “But it is not done yet. Come.”

Justin moved forward and watched as Marie took Jean-Marie into her arms. He followed her into the water as the tiny island appeared and then he joined her as she entered her home, the place where the curse had began, and placed Jean-Marie by the fire.

“I suppose you wanna be human again?” She looked down at Justin as she placed a blanket over Jean-Marie’s body. “You done good. You deserve it.”

She pulled the charm from around his neck and tossed it into the fire. “Tis done.”

Justin let out one last growl as the gator skin once more replaced by his human skin. As soon as his hands formed, he reached for the woman he loved and pulled her close to him. “Will she live?” his voice was strained from his time in the swamp.

“Don’ know. I says she must live. What do you say?”

“I love her.” He rocked her back and forth, covering them both with the blanket, hoping the chill would leave her body, hoping she would wake up.

“Can you accept who she is?”

“What do you mean?”

“That gold you lookin’ for. It’s been here all along.” She pointed a long brown finger to the woman who lay cradled in his arms.

“Jean-Marie?”

“She’s the one. She holds it all in her body, boy. Your past, your future. My fate. She is the one you needed. You don’ need no gold.”

“What are you telling me? That’s she’s my family?”

“You love her?”

“Yes.”

“She’s the only family you need. What does it matter who loved who so long ago? You tink you’re African? You tink you got the magick in you?”

“I don’t know.” Tears threatened to spill out as the woman’s riddles made no sense to him.

“Touch her. Tell me what you feel.”

He closed his eyes. “She feels so cold.”

“Not dat. Touch her. Look into her heart. What you see there?”

Again, he closed his eyes and placed his hand over her heart. Life. She was full of life. He smiled and opened his eyes. "She'll live."

"Yeah, but there be tests to come. People don' take to hoodoo. It is who she is."

"I was just swimming in the swamp as an alligator. You think I'm gonna question her interest in magick?"

"Not question. Accept. She is a powerful priestess. But you gotta give her room to grow. Been nigh on ten years since she done voodoo. Done it on you all right. An' now, she need your hand, your strength."

"She's got it."

Jean-Marie stirred in his arms as the tears fell down his face. Men weren't supposed to cry, but he had almost lost everything tonight. If she would have died in that swamp, if Gino would have harmed her, he wouldn't have been able to live.

"Call me when she's ready," Marie said before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

"Jean-Marie, honey, are you okay? It's me. It's Justin." He ran his hand along her cheek, hoping she would open her eyes, willing her to do so.

"Justin," her voice sounded strained, far off.

"Yeah. Oh, Chér ! I'm so happy to see you."

"What happened?"

"You fell into the swamp and hit your head."

She strained against him, tried to sit up and then he felt her muscles relax. "What was I doing in the swamp?"

"You don't remember?"

"No, I don't remember. I know that we were in the pirogue and..."

"It's okay. You'll remember. Just relax. Let me hold you."

"You're so warm." She nestled against him as he pulled her close and wrapped his legs around her.

"I love you, honey."

"I love you, too."

The words went straight to his heart when she said them. Love. Who ever thought he would hear that sweetness from her again? Her breath steadied against his chest and he knew that she slept now. He listened to the steady rhythm and counted each heartbeat as it drummed against his chest.

Sometime in the night, he drifted off to sleep, too.

* * * * *

Jean-Marie could not believe the events of the past few days. Gino was dead, his body, what was left of it, having been recovered in the swamp. His goons were now in Vegas, where they should have been in the first place. And she was getting dressed for a meeting with Marie LaVeau, her ancestor who had been dead for over a hundred years.

“Do you think she’ll like me?” She asked Justin for the tenth time tonight.

“She’ll love you. She does love you.” He pulled her into the circle of his arms and rested his head on her shoulder.

“And your aunts? You think she can give me some kind of charm to make them like me?”

He laughed, his breath warm against her skin. “They’ll come around. They’ll have to if they wanna come to the wedding.”

“We’ll see about that.” She turned in his arms and took his face between her hands. God, but she loved this man. To know the extent he had gone to in order to protect her was amazing. He had told her everything. She knew all about him falling into the swamp, the search for the gold, the meeting with the voodoo priestess. And it was all beyond belief.

“So, do you think we have time to, uh...” he smiled.

“No. We have to be at the church in an hour so we can do the fair thing. And then tonight, under the St. John’s Moon...” She squeezed his hand.

“You’re going to love her, too. She speaks in riddles, just like you.”

She gave him a playful punch before he hauled her flush against him. “I love you.”

He covered her mouth with his, sealing the love she felt for him. Being with Justin was like getting her life back. Even if she had to turn in the ten thousand dollars, it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered to her was this man and this moment. He lifted her against him, deepening the kiss, probing her mouth with his tongue, lighting a fire deep within her belly and lower. Her body shook with anticipation, wanting him deep inside her. Not now, though. There was too much to do.

She pulled away from him. “Later, love.”

“Damn straight. And I have a little surprise for you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Close your eyes.”

She covered her eyes and listened as he rummaged through his dresser drawer. She felt the plastic package lay against her bare legs. “Can I open them now?”

“Your eyes or legs?”

She swatted at him. "My eyes."

"Yeah, go ahead."

This was not what she had expected. "A toy police set? Are you trying to tell me something?" She flipped the package over.

"Not right now, I'm not. But later tonight," he slipped his hand under her dress, finding her underwear and pulling them aside. His finger brushed against her already wet opening. "I plan to show you something I dreamed."

"And it involves handcuffs?"

"Mmm-humm. Sure does. And this." He pressed his finger into her, causing her breath to catch in her throat.

"And what do you plan to do to that?" She clung to his shoulders as his fingers continued to work their magic on her.

"I plan to make it scream out my name before the night is through. I just wanted you to have something to think about, a reason to leave the swamps before morning."

Too soon, he pulled his fingers from her warmth. She watched as he stuck them into his mouth and slowly pulled them out. Her heart raced, wondering what he had planned for tonight, anticipating exactly what he wanted to do with his toy police set, which included a pair of plastic cuffs and a plastic nightstick. She could only imagine the wicked things he had planned, and her body responded at the thought.

"Let's get this over with," she said, pulling her dress back down and standing. The fair could not be over soon enough for her.

"Not yet. I want to eat you first." He smiled down at her as he gently pushed her back against the bed.

"We'll be late."

"I don't care."

He raised up her dress, letting the cool air hit her skin. Slowly, he guided her thong down to her ankles and tossed it aside. She grabbed a pillow and placed it under her head, setting in to enjoy the sensations she knew his tongue would send through her body.

Rather than teasing and tormenting her, he dove right in. His mouth made contact with her mound causing her to gasp for air as his teeth raked against her clit. Taking all of her into his mouth, he sucked on her skin as if he were coaxing her cream to spill out into his mouth. His fingers kneaded into her thighs before sliding around to hold her lips open. Flicking his tongue back and forth across her clit, he

sent wave after wave of liquid fire through her body. She arched against him, welcoming his touch, begging for more.

When his fingers finally slid deep inside her, she cried out. He moved slowly at first, filling her completely and then holding his hand still. Finally, he began moving his fingers in and out at a frenzied pace. She bucked against him, clinging to his shoulders as he continued to drive his fingers into her. God, she could imagine his cock loving her like this, taking her, pounding inside her. She liked it rough, and Justin knew just how to be rough while still remaining loving. She had always loved sex with Justin because he knew how to teeter on the edges of both love, lust, and never push her further than she could stand.

Her orgasm built and her pussy quivered against his fingers, squeezing, pulsing, throbbing, wanting more. “You like that?” he teased, blowing lightly on her clit, which responded once more.

“You know I do.”

“There’s more. Tonight. I’m going to do things to you that you can’t even imagine.”

“Your dream, huh?”

“Damn right.” He pulled his fingers from her body and ran them under his nose. “You smell incredible.” Then he placed his fingers against her lips. “Taste yourself.”

She licked her honey from his fingers, reveling in the salty taste as her come coated her tongue.

“I love you, Justin.”

“I love you.”

Chapter Twelve

Marie watched the young lovers approach. She had been waiting for them, knowing that Justin would bring Jean-Marie to her tonight. It was St. John's night, the night when so long ago, she had first sank into the swamp, taking on the reptile skin, making pacts with the gods and devils of the swamp. And tonight, it had all come full circle. Her legacy would live on.

* * * * *

"It's just up ahead," Justin dipped the pole into the water and eased the pirogue forward. Tonight, he would pay back his debt, bringing Marie the one thing she sought, her blood. And he would also discover the secret of the elusive gold. He had searched the bayou time and again since last week and still had not turned up the gold, which he still felt was out there in spite of Marie's insistence that it no longer mattered. And his desire to spend time with Jean-Marie overruled every other adventure he thought to take. He'd much rather spend his time with her than out in the swamp looking for something he wasn't even sure was there.

"Oh my Gosh." Her fingers dug into his arm as the island seemed to appear from out of nowhere. Mist swirled all around them, illuminated by the moonlight.

"This is it," his words were barely a whisper as he looked down at the woman who had changed his life. He gave her hand a squeeze and then guided the pirogue to the island. "She'll be here."

"I can't believe I'm going to meet a legend."

"A dead legend," he reminded her.

"Whatever. She's still amazing. Even more amazing."

He watched as she climbed from the pirogue, unafraid. Her long legs filled his head with wicked thoughts. For some reason, it no longer really mattered who his ancestors might have been. All that mattered to him was the woman who was now standing on the island, waiting for him to climb out behind her. Her hand shielded her eyes from the moon, which had grown even brighter tonight than it had been the night of the full moon. Legends said that Marie LaVeau had taken her leave of the human world on St. John's Eve, and tonight's moon reflected those legends.

"Are you ready?" He stood next to her and guided her into the small line of trees. The hut where Marie had first met him was part of the island, part of the flora and fauna. It was completely natural and completely hidden within the maze of trees and vines, but Justin was able to maneuver the trail as if he had cut it by hand.

"I'm ready." She clung to his arm as he led the way. Her scent drifted up to him, reminding him of what he wanted to do later on tonight. When they were alone.

"I want you to know something." He stopped at the opening. "I want you to know that I love you. And nothing that she tells me tonight will change that."

"I know, Justin. And I love you, too. I don't really know why I ran, why I waited so long to come back. I just know that when I found that low place in my life, I wanted to be near you."

He reached out to stroke her cheek. "Even if it took getting shot at to figure it out?"

"You know, sometimes it takes a bullet."

"I know that, yeah. I got the scar to prove it."

"Come in, young ones," the voice drifted out to them just as Justin was about to lower his mouth to hers. He shot her a smile.

"Come on."

"Sit," Marie instructed them. Justin took his place on a straw mat and Jean-Marie sat next to him, taking in the surroundings. Everything was exactly as Justin remembered it. Herbs lined one wall while ritual items covered the other. The hearth that sat off to one side burned an odorless fire. As they sat, speechless, the rhythm of the night surrounded them. "You come here for answers tonight, no?"

"Yes," Justin managed to find his voice.

"An' what difference will it make if you get these answers? Will they change who you are? Who you love?"

He looked down at Jean-Marie. "No. It won't change anything."

"So why do you insist on learning?"

"He needs to know," Jean-Marie interrupted. "Just like I needed to know. Just like you need to know."

"'Tis the family bond. The blood. You got to know your blood." Marie waved an incense wand over their heads. "An' you tink you need to know."

"Yes." Justin closed his eyes as the smoke made its way into his face. The incense went in through his nostrils and into his lungs. Visions of the past came upon him at once, only it was a past, he had never seen before. He knew the faces from family photos, the stories from legends. And he suddenly knew that everything he ever thought about his family was true. Creole blood did run through his veins.

"What about his aunts? His family? Do you think they'll ever accept me?" Justin reached out and grabbed Jean-Marie's hand as she spoke. He knew this bothered her more than she'd like to admit. From the corner of his eye, he watched her chew on her bottom lip.

"Do you wanna be accepted by them? Does their like or dislike matter so much to you?"

Jean-Marie nodded slowly as the voodoo queen's words sank into her system. Yes, it did matter. For the first time in her life it really mattered. She squeezed Justin's hand and looked down at the mingling of their flesh together. He was a bronzed god and she was nothing more than a dark skinned woman with a tainted past. But he loved her. She felt his love radiate out to her. And more so, he trusted her. He had shared his secret with her when doing so could have put everything at risk.

"It does matter because I want them to be able to be part of our lives."

"Then you gotta forgive, chile. An' wait for forgiveness. They don't wanna cause no more pain, but they love their Justin here, just as you do. You'll all come together, you'll see. But you gotta be patient and you gotta start." Marie waved the incense above Jean-Marie's head as she spoke. This entire moment felt like nothing more than a surreal dream. Any second now, she would wake up next to Justin, thoughts of the swamp in her head.

Yet, she believed the moment as it was taking place. She knew the magick of voodoo, knew that the impossible took place every day out in the swamp, a land where life and death lived side by side, taking the same breaths together. She closed her mind to all doubt and concentrated on the rhythm of her beating heart, on the sound of Marie's voice as she chanted an ancient ritual above them.

"Now, you wanna know your payment, your reward?" This she directed at Justin.

"I don't need a reward." His fingers drew tiny circles on the back of Jean-Marie's hand. "I have everything I need."

"Ah, but you don' have the gold, now do ya, boy?"

"No, but I never wanted the gold. You wanted it, remember. You wanted me to protect it, to bring it to you."

"An' so you did. Do you ever wonder why your girl has golden hair? She is the one, the thing you must protect. She is what you have sought for so long. Join hands now."

Jean-Marie listened to her words, not sure whether or not she believed all of this had been staged to get her to be here in this moment. But she knew deep down inside that it had. Once again, nature and magick had worked their way into her life, bringing her to the destiny she so wanted. She turned to face Justin and looked up at him as he took both her hands in his. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too."

"Enough of those words," Marie said, a laugh in her voice. "What you got don' need no words. Just listen. Just feel each other. An' feel the one that be joinin' you soon."

As Jean-Marie closed her eyes, she listened, she felt Justin's blood rush into her system, as if he were a part of her. Then she realized that he was a part of her. Even as they sat here, hands joined, she

felt his blood mixing with hers, his body joining with hers, and she knew that their love would live on beyond the two of them. She was going to have his baby.

They didn't need words. She knew he felt it, too, just as easily as she did. Marie's light humming faded into the distance. The smoke scattered, and the sounds of the night once more infiltrated into their sanctuary. They sat there, looking deeply into one another's eyes, knowing that their future was now sealed. And knowing that they would do anything for one another.

"Thank you," Justin looked up, but Marie had disappeared. "Wow," he smiled down at Jean-Marie. "That was, wow."

"Yes, it was." She leaned forward and covered his mouth with hers, pulling him into her. "And so is this," she whispered against his lips.

"I need to get you home."

"Soon," she agreed.

"If I don't, we'll be makin' this place our own little love nest."

He pulled her to her feet and led her back to the pirogue, moving slowly, as if she were some precious object. Her heart soared thinking about the future they would have, the children they would raise. She leaned against him as he led her back and helped her into the boat. When she looked up at him, her heart felt completely full. And for the first time in a long time, she was very glad to be back in Louisiana.