

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

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December Quinn

As the Lady
Wishes
Nine of Cups

Syneca

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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As the Lady Wishes

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Nine of Cups "The Wish Card"

It's the fairy godmother of the tarot, the card that promises success, happiness and the fulfillment of your heart's desire. The Nine of Cups stands for all of these and more, for the deep emotional happiness that comes when we are truly loved and secure.

But there can be a darker side to this, just as there is a darker side to human nature. Sometimes what we wish for harms others, or serves only our basest desires—for revenge, for money, for harm to others simply to make ourselves feel better.

In Lila Hayes' case, her "fairy godmother" is an ancient Druid, called to her one sultry spring night by the strength of her longing. Arthur of Sefyll is himself a victim of wishes—forced for centuries to grant the wishes of others while never gaining his own heart's desire.

The passion he experiences with Lila is something he never dreamed he'd feel again. But soon, a creature of blackness, caught up in its own wish to harm Lila, appears. Arthur realizes they need a third person, a third power to aid them in defeating evil and giving Lila the happy ending she deserves.

When Arthur meets Sheriff Sam Walker and senses the strength and unfulfilled desires beneath the lawman's steady exterior, he makes a wish of his own...for Sam to join himself and Lila in a triumvirate, a mystical threesome.

As Lila's dreams start literally coming true and a new, very human evil stalks her, the three of them must form a magic bond or risk losing everything they've ever wished for.

Prologue

*The Region of Silures
Celtic Wales, 48 A.D.*

Artwr of Sefyll's palms tore and bled as he fought his way up the windblown cliffs just outside Silures. The slick red fluid looked black in the dimming light and made it even more difficult to get a strong hold on the cold stones, but the pain was not great enough to slow his progress. When your very soul had been ripped from your body, a little torn flesh seemed a small matter indeed.

A wounded sound escaped his throat and was swept away in the bitter wind. His mind tormented him with visions of Brigid's bloodied face, and the haunted expression in her eyes that promised her last moments among the living were spent in unspeakable torment. Brigid, the only female Druid of their tribe, the only healer so gentle that not even the bees in the meadow would sting her, the only woman who had ever owned his heart and loved his body with every bit of her sweet, insatiable spirit.

The priests among them who claimed sex wasn't the best way to raise the magic of the soul had never slid their aching shaft into the bit of Otherworld found between Brigid's unspeakably soft thighs. If they had, they would have known that no sensation, no magic, no religious euphoria could compare to that bliss. The knowledge that he would never again know the pleasure of her body, never again see the light of passion transforming her innocent face into something darkly beautiful, made him want to rip out his heart and hurl it into the churning ocean below.

The despair pressing down on the empty place in his chest was more than any human should be asked to bear.

"First those who took you, Brigid, and then myself," Artwr grunted as he pulled himself up the last length of the cliff, within feet of the stone circle so recently desecrated by the Roman soldiers.

Emperor Claudius and his men had invaded their lands, slaughtered their people and desecrated every holy place from Silures to their landing place in Rutupiae. Yet after raping their women and ripping open untried Celtic warriors with no more than ten summers to their credit, the Romans still had the gall to call Artwr's people barbaric. It had made Artwr angry enough to violate several of his Druid oaths and lead groups of skilled Silurian warriors to attack the smaller Roman factions in the dead of the night. Together, they had picked off as many as they could manage before disappearing into the black hills as only a native Celt could.

Artwr thought nothing of using his magic to protect the warriors, to banish the fear in their hearts and guide their spears with deadly accuracy. Though Brigid herself had begged him to stay and pray with the rest of the Druids, to perform the ceremonies that

would implore the help of the gods, he had thrilled to feel a weapon in his hand. Spilling Roman blood had become an addiction, a hunger fed by a lust for justice that would not be denied.

He hadn't understood why the other Druids couldn't see that using all of their force—physical, mental and magical—was necessary if they were to keep their way of life from being wiped from the earth forever. He and Brigid had quarreled over the matter just the previous morning, her voice marked with an unfamiliar severity as she begged him not to fight. Artwr had left in anger, his last words to her spoken in the harsh tones that he knew cut her most deeply.

By the time he'd returned to the village, their homes were nothing but charred remains. He'd found his youngest brother and sister first, decapitated, their bodies left on the floor of the communal kitchen. He'd gathered their heads gently in his arms, determined to take them to the sacred circle to perform the rites of death, but he hadn't gone more than thirty paces before he slipped in the wet mud and slid down an embankment.

At the bottom, he'd found what remained of one of their Master Priests and the lifeless body of Brigid. There was no question who had killed her. The tip of a Roman spear was still embedded in her chest.

"For my family, for Brigid," Artwr murmured as he used the knife in his belt to deepen the cuts on his palms, spilling his blood over the stone in the center of their sacred circle.

Some of the smaller pillars had been overturned and the ward of protection that covered the hill violated, but the magic was still there. With the addition of the blood of one of the most powerful magicians the Druid people had known, it would be enough to accomplish the task at hand. Artwr had once been proud that he had the strength to become his tribe's Master Magician, now he would gladly sacrifice every last bit of his potential for one last earthly act of vengeance.

"Artwr, step away from the stones," came a sudden voice from the darkness, drawing his attention, but not startling him in the least. The current Master Mage always moved with the stealth of his chosen Fith-Fath, his spirit guide, the wolf. Artwr doubted anything could surprise him at the moment, was sure that nothing could penetrate the cold fury that had possessed his body and mind.

"Step inside the circle, Gollwyn." Artwr continued tracing the symbols of his chosen rite upon the stones, etching the unfamiliar characters with astonishing skill. He would never have dared take the burden of such violent magic on his soul before this day. He hadn't even dared practice the forbidden symbols in the sand near the beach where they would quickly be washed away.

"Young one, I can not allow this. No matter what we have suffered, this —"

"You will *allow* nothing. I no longer ask your permission. I simply state that if you wish to benefit from the stones' protection, you step inside," Artwr said, hardly caring if the power he was about to unleash destroyed the old one. It was his fault that Brigid

and the others were dead, that the brother and sister he had barely known would never grow up to become Druid acolytes. If the old fool had possessed the vision to see that the old ways must evolve or be forever destroyed so much death and suffering could have been avoided.

"Still your hand, Artwr," Gollwyn bellowed, unleashing a pulsing wave of his own magic in the younger man's direction.

The full strength of the Master's power slammed into Artwr's body, but the effect was different from anything he had ever experienced. Instead of blowing out the flame of his own magic, the spell was absorbed into his skin, feeding the rising darkness that throbbed through his veins, whispering a wicked promise. A promise that Artwr ordered it to keep.

The Master screamed and fell to the earth, his long, graying beard swirling around his face as Artwr's spell rushed from the stone circle, a hot, acrid wind that would melt the very flesh from his enemy's bones, leaving a skeleton army where the Roman camp had once stood. Artwr watched the yellow-green aura of the death rite throb away into the night, wondering if he would live long enough to see the legacy of this most dire magical choice.

But surely even the gods and goddesses of the land, water and sky could not seek retribution so quickly, not before he could turn and hurl his mortal body from the cliffs into the roiling tide.

"Still your hands," Gollwyn whispered from where he still knelt on the cold earth. The deep regret in his eyes was almost enough to make Artwr want to comfort him, to tell him that he had chosen death and was man enough not to ask anyone to aid him in that final task.

Then he felt the wounds on his palms grow cold and still, slowly becoming more stone than flesh, an unwieldy mass of fingers and skin that he could no longer command.

"You wouldn't dare," Artwr whispered, even as the blood he had spilled upon the altar began to shine brightly, more fiercely red than the blood of the lambs the shepherds slaughtered in the spring.

"You give me no choice."

"Damn you, Gollwyn, may the gods curse you to the end of—"

"Let the stones hold you, Artwr, and keep you until your soul is cleansed of the many trespasses you have committed this night."

The last thing Artwr remembered was the horrible sensation of trying to take a step forward and finding his feet in the same state as his hands. Then the physical world began to fade before his eyes, becoming a watery reflection in a silent pool before all went still and dark.

Artwr of Sefyll was no more.

Chapter One

French fries, ice cream, cheesecake. It all went into the freezer, all of the previously forbidden goodies she'd bought and couldn't wait to eat later in an orgy of freedom still exciting, even after two weeks. In the cabinets of the rustic kitchen were jars of popcorn and packages of candy bars.

Not that she was going to eat them all at once. Lila smiled as she pulled a bottle of vodka from the now-full freezer and poured some into a glass, then added cranberry and orange juices. No, she didn't have to eat it all at once anymore. She didn't have to shove food into her mouth, hunched over the sink, terrified that at any moment Clayton would come home on one of his surprise check-ins and...

No need to think of that now. Her drink was sharp and sweet on her tongue as she left the kitchen and headed out to the screened-in porch. It was the kind of soft Missouri dusk that seemed to last forever, hours of faintly golden light fading into soft green. In another hour the lightning bugs would be out, and she would stay here, hidden in the shadows, safe from voracious mosquitoes, watching their tiny lights dance in the trees.

Lila kicked off her flip-flops and sat down, her bare legs touching the cool wood of the rocking chair. Strange to feel the chair against her skin, against shoulders that could be shown in public now that they no longer carried souvenirs of Clayton's anger. Against thighs that could be bared without fear of being beaten for wearing a skirt too short for Clayton's taste.

She made a face. *Why waste time thinking about him? He's not here. He'll never be here again. Tonight I'm going to eat French fries for dinner and have ice cream for dessert and not worry about my weight or anything else. I'm going to drink a little too much and laugh at nothing.*

I'm going to have fun. I'm going to live my own life. Finally.

She raised her drink, toasting the trees and the lake beyond. "Here's to you, Lila Richards," she said, then paused. "No. Lila Hayes. Here's to me, Lila Hayes."

Her maiden name sounded so good, she decided to have another drink to celebrate it.

Lila loved the tiny rented house. She'd found it through a rental agency in town, the day she arrived in Burlin after serving Clayton a steak dinner and an Alabama Slammer heavily laced with painkillers. It hadn't made her feel good to drug him...but it hadn't made her feel bad, either. It never had, from the first time she did it, when she'd been desperate for one night of peaceful sleep.

As she poured more cranberry juice into her drink, Lila let herself imagine the look on Clayton's face when he woke up and realized she was gone, leaving nothing but a

few of her light brown hairs on the bathroom floor in defiance of his obsessive need for cleanliness. It made her smile, but it also broke her heart. It was unfathomable that something that had once been so good had soured so drastically. But whatever demons chased her husband had destroyed the sexy, dynamic man she had fallen in love with, twisting him into what he was now—a monster more frightening than anything she'd imagined hiding under her bed as a child.

He had no doubt been furious when he realized what his meek and mild little Lila had done. He was probably trying to trace her right now, doing his best to seek some sort of violent retribution.

Strangely though, she wasn't as afraid as she had thought she would be. Clayton didn't know about Burlin or the vacations her family had spent in the sleepy lake town when she was a child. He didn't know she'd ever been to Missouri, and with both her parents dead, there was no one to tell him. She had no credit card, no bank account. She had paid the three months' rent on the cabin in cash, and when the registration on her car expired, she would sell it. By that time, she planned to have moved on to a big city where public transportation was plentiful and she could easily teach yoga out of her apartment for cash. Getting her certification to teach the spiritual exercise she loved had been one of the few freedoms Clayton had granted her in the past few years, but even if that didn't work out, she had a few other marketable skills. She still knew how to cut hair, had six years of housekeeping for an anal-retentive husband under her belt and, of course, she still knew how to tend bar.

Lila finished pouring her second drink and walked slowly through the house, letting her fingers run over the faded wallpaper and the heavy, functional furniture that came with the place. The rag rugs spread around on the pale wood floors looked like colorful puddles and cooled her bare feet as she wandered around. It was a beautiful, soul-comforting place, and something deep inside her knew that it was the perfect setting for reclaiming the strength and peace she had lost touch with years ago. There was nothing to distract her from becoming the woman she wanted to be, a woman who was complete without a man, who would never be ruled by her desires or won by something so empty as a handsome face...except *that portrait*.

The entry to the bedroom beckoned and Lila couldn't help but answer the call. She seemed to find no end of excuses to come in and out of the small, cool room. She had even managed to change her clothes three times today just to sneak a glimpse at him, the man who had found his way into both her waking and sleeping fantasies. The Portrait Man.

She'd noticed the painting the day she moved in. How could she not? It wasn't every day you walked into a small house in rural Missouri and found a painting of an angry-looking, scantily clad hunk brooding in front of a group of standing stones. She'd loved the time she'd spent in Burlin as a child, but a hotbed of culture and art appreciation it was not.

Still, it would be a lie to say it was only the "out of place" aspect of the portrait that attracted her attention. Something about the man himself drew her. Called to her. She'd

stand in front of him for what felt like ages, memorizing every curve of his strong body, marveling at how perfectly he fit in with his surroundings. He seemed almost a part of the stones, though obviously separate. It was as if the painter had called forth some kind of guardian spirit, managed to give form to a soul that had none.

Whatever he was, whoever he was, he was sexy as hell. Just looking at him turned her on, made her body ache with a hunger she had almost forgotten she could feel.

The dream she'd had the night before came back to her in a flash. The Portrait Man, his naked chest raised above her, blocking out the moon. The glow of it caressed his shoulders and sides, outlining him in silver.

He'd been speaking a language she didn't understand, the words falling from his lips like jewels as he stroked her body, his fingers gliding across her skin and leaving trails of heat.

She'd moaned beneath him, her body moving of its own accord, urging those fingers lower, down to the mound of soft hair between her legs and even farther down to the slick, wet skin of her pussy. She didn't speak, though. It was almost as if she were afraid to. Even in her dream, she'd known that to speak might be to wake up, and she didn't ever want to wake up. She didn't ever want to leave him or the hands that touched her with a reverence that made her weep.

But she had awoken, of course, with the sheets damp against her hot skin and her pussy throbbing with unquenched desire.

Just as she had the night before.

Glancing at her watch, she realized she'd been standing and staring for a good fifteen minutes. The ice in her drink was melting, the condensation from her glass dripping onto the floor.

Strangely conscious of her actions, almost as if her dream man were really watching, Lila closed her eyes and brought the glass to her lips, slowly licking the beads of moisture away from the outside. As her tongue caressed the cool surface, her nipples tightened and a rush of heat pooled between her thighs. She suddenly wondered what it would feel like to take a piece of ice from her glass and glide it over her tightened tips and down to press inside where she was already slick and aching. Would the man in the portrait enjoy watching her penetrate herself with the swiftly melting cube? Would he wish it was his own—

"Time to lay off the vodka, and break in that vibrator." Lila laughed, her breath rushing from her body as she forced her eyes open and lowered her drink from her mouth with shaking hands.

She'd better get some food in her stomach before she let this interlude go too far, she thought with another slightly drunken giggle. Besides, she couldn't deny she was hungry for supper as well as sex. French fries, with French fries and a side of French fries. Yum.

Portrait Man would have to wait...at least for a little while.

* * * * *

With a contended sigh, Lila set the empty ice cream bowl down on the little table next to her chair, the spoon making a tiny clink against the china. Night had fallen while she ate, and the woods around her cottage rustled with life. She liked to sit out here at night, watching the leaves shift and shiver in the breeze while the sounds of the insects and small creatures surrounded her. It was peaceful, and peace was something she hadn't known in years. Not since things had soured between her and Clayton, since the day he'd hit her for the first time and the marriage she'd thought was the happiest in the world became a prison.

A shiver ran through her small frame. She didn't want to think of that. This was a good night, a night for fun and freedom and vodka cocktails. Not a night for memories of fists and shouting and pain.

It was a night for romance. Or at least sex.

Her mind wandered back to Portrait Man. The way his dark brown eyes seemed to stare right through her, as if he knew all of her secrets. She could almost feel the wind that lifted his brown hair from his broad bare shoulders, and the ancient stones under his large hands.

She could certainly imagine the way those hands would feel on *her*. She'd done it before. She'd felt them in her dreams, imagined them on her as she pleased herself in the dark silence of her bed.

Her hand fell to her bare thigh, sending little trickles of energy through her body as she stroked her skin. Up and down, from her knee to just the place where her thigh met her hip. Her legs opened a little, relaxing, as she continued her slow movements.

Her panties grew uncomfortable as her pussy swelled. Just touching herself here might be enough. No one would see, her cottage was as isolated as a hermit's cave. She could just slip her fingers down the front of her panties and —

No. That wouldn't be enough. She wanted to be filled, wanted to be *fucked*. That thought alone was almost enough to send her over the edge. When was the last time she'd craved that kind of raw, physical contact? She couldn't remember, but she could tell by the way her skin was prickling with excitement that it had been too long.

She rose from her chair and headed back inside, her mind already filled with images. With Portrait Man's face.

Biting her lip in anticipation, she made her way into her bedroom, removing the clip from her hair so it fell around her shoulders, pulling her flimsy summer dress over her head as she went and leaving it in a careless heap on the floor. There was no one here to care if she left her clothes scattered across the entire house. Besides, *he* was waiting for her. Or rather, her double-shaft vibrator was waiting for her. She wasn't going to wake up in a state of unsatisfied lust tonight, that was for sure, and she silently congratulated herself on having the guts to purchase the toy. It might not be a step toward independence that anyone else would understand, but indulging her sexual

hunger was nearly as liberating as the moment she'd pulled out of her driveway in the dead of the night, headed for Burlin, Missouri.

The bed was soft under her bare skin, and as she slid her lacy panties off, her pussy tingling with excitement. Her hardened nipples poked against the thin fabric of her bra, so she slipped it off too, the air-conditioning cold enough to give her goose bumps. She liked to sleep in a cold room, one more thing she and Clayton had differed on, one more battle she'd lost.

Screw Clayton. She smiled and looked at the portrait. No, better yet...*screw him.*

It didn't matter that he wasn't real. It didn't matter that she had no idea what he sounded like or how soft his skin really was. Tonight she would feel him, see him, smell him. Tonight he would ravage her within an inch of her life and she would scream with the pleasure of it, because tonight was her night.

Lightly, she ran her fingers over her ribs, tickling them. The sensation made her sigh with satisfaction as she leaned back onto the soft pillows. Her breasts were heavy in her hands, hot and swollen. Her head fell back as she stroked the soft skin, capturing her nipples between her fingertips and giving them a gentle squeeze.

"I'll do that," Portrait Man said.

"But I hardly know you," she replied, smiling just a little bit wickedly. The thought of having a man watch her touch herself didn't embarrass her the way it always had before. Somehow she knew she could never be ashamed of anything with him, that he would enjoy watching her own hands on her body, would think she was beautiful, sensuous, sexy.

"I know you," he said, moving her hands away so her bare chest was exposed to him. She closed her eyes so she could see him more clearly.

He was wearing only the shred of fabric he wore in the painting. It barely covered what she could see was an enormous erection.

Lila felt her heart speed a little faster as her brain processed that *she* was the cause of his excitement, her, Lila Hayes, and no one else. The realization was even more intoxicating than the vodka she'd drunk earlier, filling her with a mixture of sexual power and desire that went straight to her head.

"I know what you like." Her hands, his hands, left her breasts and moved downward, across her belly, dipping down between her legs to stroke the soft flesh of her pussy. It was already slick, and her fingers slid easily into the cleft, teasing her opening.

"I like it when you touch me like that," she said, not quite believing that she was speaking out loud, that she was talking to him as if he were really there.

"That's not all you like." His soft laugh rumbled against her skin.

Pleasure danced through her as he—she—found her clit and rubbed it lightly, tension mounting low in her body.

"No, it isn't," she agreed, reaching into the top drawer of her bedside table and pulling out her vibrator. A small, hungry sound issued from the back of her throat as she turned it on.

The silicon was cool and smooth as she rubbed it against her breasts, enjoying the gentle vibrations. Her breath hissed as she ran it across each hard nipple. Her free hand stole back down to her pussy, gathering some of her moisture on her fingertips and spreading it across one of the vibrator's two bulbous heads. The lubrication made the sensation of the vibrator against her pebbled skin even more pleasurable.

"You like it when I lick your nipples," Portrait Man said. *"When I take each one between my teeth. Don't you?"*

"Yes," she whispered. Her wet fingers slipped down, across the entrance to her channel, farther down to the puckered skin behind. The tight ring tingled as she stroked it, her fingertip just barely entering before pulling back out, the contact that Clayton had always thought repulsive exciting her more than she could say.

"Let me do that."

"You don't think it's strange? Or wrong?"

"Do you feel how much I want to claim you?"

"Yes," Lila nodded, gasping as she felt the hard length of him pressing down against her thigh.

"Then don't ask foolish questions."

God, her imagination was definitely more vivid than the last time she indulged it. She could actually feel the heat of his body, the silken skin covering his cock, and it made it impossible for her to wait any longer to imagine it inside her. Her hands shook as she took the vibrator off her breasts with her wet hand and brought it to rest between her legs. Her hips bucked involuntarily as the thicker head probed and vibrated in her slit.

Slowly, she slid it inside. It stretched her walls, its delicious vibrations spreading through her entire body. The second probe moved up into the crack of her ass, its base vibrating against her back entrance and between her cheeks. She moaned.

"Yes, sweetie," he said. *"I love to watch your face when I'm inside you."*

"I love feeling you inside me," she said, gasping the words into the empty air, too caught up in her fantasy to even feel self-conscious. His voice was so clear in her head that it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to talk to him, to tell him what she was thinking.

Her right hand worked the vibrator while her left played with her nipples, still wet with fluid from the vibrator. In her mind, it was his fingers pinching them, his cock writhing and bucking inside her.

"I know something else I can do for you," he whispered. *"Something else you'll like."*

"Oh, yes," she moaned. She pulled the vibrator out of her pussy and slid the smaller probe in, lubricating it. She was so wet, her juices had already made her rear entry slick, but she wanted more.

Her thighs shook as she spread them wider, reaching down to open her cheeks. Her entire body trembled.

"I want to do this," he said. *"I want to be the first, Lila. Do you want me to be the first man to take you?"*

"Please," she whimpered. "Oh, please..."

Her legs couldn't spread any wider. She pulled the vibrator out, pausing just a moment before aligning each head with its respective entrance, then slowly, oh-so slowly, drove both heads in.

Her pussy clenched, tightening around the larger head, while her ass clutched around the smaller. She was so full of vibrations, the walls of her pussy and ass stretching, that she almost came from a single thrust.

"Yes," he said. *"Show me your face. Let me see how much pleasure I'm giving you."*

She couldn't manage a reply as she started driving the vibrator in and out of her body, relishing the feel of both channels so full. With her free hand, she started rubbing her clit again, keeping perfect time with Portrait Man's thrusts.

Her heels were planted on the soft mattress, her back arching as she bucked her hips shamelessly upward, thrusting against the vibrator. With every fiber of her being she claimed her satisfaction, without a thought to right or wrong or much of anything else. She had never experienced such single-minded purity of pleasure, and the feeling was more intense than she could have dreamed possible.

Pressure built in her pelvis as her body desperately sought release, and Lila cried out, a tortured sound that blossomed through the room, mingling with the scent of arousal in the air. Sweet Jesus, she wanted to come, but fought the need with every last scrap of her willpower. When she came, this would end, and she didn't ever, *ever*, want this to end.

"Come for me," he urged in that deep, rich voice that seemed to vibrate over every inch of her skin. *"I want to watch you come, Lila."*

There was no more fighting it after that, and with a primal cry of satisfaction, she obliged. Her fingers pressed down on her clit and she gave one last, hard thrust with the vibrator as her world fell apart. Her vision blurred, but she knew that her back was arched so deeply she wouldn't have been able to see her hands anymore. Every muscle in her body shook as she gave herself up to the fierce fulfillment of her orgasm, and she found herself sobbing, tears flowing down her face.

"I wish you were real," she whispered into the empty room, trying to force back the despair that threatened to overwhelm her as the waves of pleasure started to fade. "I'd give anything to have you here right now...anything."

Her words were absorbed into the quiet of the cottage, soaking into the thick wooden walls and leaving Lila profoundly alone.

"Stop it," Lila demanded through her tears as she collapsed weakly back onto the bed.

Wasn't "alone" the state of being that she had longed for so desperately? Wasn't it better to be alone than to be constantly fearful and anxious, on edge and waiting for the next blow to land? How dare she start to feel sorry for herself, to ache for the comfort of another human's touch when all she'd prayed for the past two years was to never be touched again?

"You're a fool, a stupid –"

"No good was ever accomplished with talk like that."

It was a man's voice, deep and throaty, and it came from the shadowy figure standing in the corner, the shadowy figure that was watching her as she lay completely naked on her bed.

She screamed.

Chapter Two

"There's no need to be frightened." The man stepped slowly from the shadows as Lila froze with terror.

It wasn't Clayton, she knew that much. His voice, his face, were too familiar for even momentary confusion. Besides, if it had been him, there wouldn't have been any talking. Clayton was the type to strike first and talk later, once he made sure he had a captive – and usually bleeding – audience.

That didn't mean he hadn't found her, though. He could have sent someone to kill her, someone who had broken into the house while she was busy with her vibrator and her fantasies. Ridiculously, her first instinct was to grab the vibrator and hide it back in her drawer. She didn't want the police to find it next to her battered, bloody body.

That violent image drove every other thought from her mind. She grabbed the sheet and pulled it over her bare torso, and asked in a voice that trembled far more than she would have liked, "Who are you?"

"You know who I am."

The man's accent was strangely familiar. It was almost musical, with a curious lilt that poured over her like warm honey.

"I don't," she said, gaining control of her tone with effort. She suddenly wished she had brought her gun, the one Clayton insisted she learn how to use. But he had kept it locked away, and she hadn't even thought to try to gain access to the weapon before she left. She didn't want to be involved in any more violence, on the giving or receiving end, and to her guns only had one purpose – to kill.

"Get out, or I'm calling the police." Lila hoped the hard look she shot in the man's direction clearly conveyed her words were no idle threat.

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Why not?" Her heart pounded so loudly she was certain he could hear it. The phone was in the kitchen. If she made a sudden dash straight from the bed to the door, she might have a chance to get there before Mr. Frighteningly Broad Shoulders could get her in his murderous grasp. His exact features were still obscured by shadows, but there was no mistaking his size. He was enormous, highly muscled, and probably capable of reducing her to a greasy spot on the floor in seconds flat. But he was still a good eight feet away, and she knew from experience that she could move pretty fast when scared out of her mind. She could make it to the phone, she *would* make it to the phone.

But then what? Dial 911 before he managed to kill her? She wouldn't be any less dead. There was nowhere to hide in the house, and she wasn't yet familiar enough with the woods to know in which direction she might find other signs of human life.

She was totally alone. Alone except for the stranger, who was now stepping forward into the dim moonlight that shone through the curtains covering the tiny bedroom window, illuminating the curves of his bare torso. Naked, he was at least partially naked, and for some reason, the smooth lines of his chest seemed incredibly familiar.

"I cannot leave you, madam, even if I wished it. You have called me, bound me to you."

"Listen," Lila said in the soft, even voice she used for leading her yoga classes, "I won't call the police. You can take whatever you want and leave, okay? I can't identify you, the light is behind you and I can't see your face."

The man was obviously not in his right mind. Whether it was drugs or your garden-variety genetically programmed psychotic tendencies, he was a loon, and that made her situation even more difficult. It was harder to reason with someone when they weren't dealing with a full deck to begin with. She might have to resort to drastic measures if he wouldn't agree to leave. Desperately, she tried to remember exactly where the knives were placed in the kitchen, wondered if she would be able to threaten him into leaving or if he would just snatch the knife from her hand and use it to carve his initials in her stomach.

"I think you should have my face memorized by now, you've gazed upon it often enough." His tone was both suggestive and smug, the "I know you want me, woman" implication abundantly clear. So he was a *cocky*, crazy bastard – just her luck.

"Just because you watched me...you know doesn't mean I want to have sex with you. I do not know you, I do not want to have sex with you, and I'm telling you to leave this house right now and never come back," Lila said, enunciating each word so there would be no doubt of her meaning.

"You don't want to have sex with me? Next you'll be telling me the sun rises in the west."

"Stop right there, don't come any closer." Her voice rose shrilly as he moved forward, broad shoulders completely blocking out the light from the window.

"I will always obey your command. I've already told you, I have no choice. You have bound me to you, and I will serve the beck and call of your pleasure," he said, the obvious bitterness in his words sending a shiver down her spine.

"I didn't do anything to you, I promise. Please, I'm not who you think I am. I'm Lila Hayes. I'm twenty-nine years old, and I've never even met you before," Lila said, struggling to penetrate whatever madness had control of the man. If he were a true predatory psychopath, however, it probably wouldn't do much good. He'd use her to punish whatever woman had wronged him, act out his violent rage against her and move on to his next victim.

The irony of the fact that she'd escaped from one cold-blooded borderline personality only to fall prey to some deranged serial killer during her first few weeks of freedom was not lost on her. And it made her more blindingly angry than she would have believed possible. This was *not* going to happen, not if any desperate action on her part could stop it.

"I know who you are. I know what gives you pleasure, and I've watched your face glow with ecstasy when you climax. Let's cease with these games and begin the business you called me here for."

"Okay, you want to get down to business?" she asked, slowly curling her legs beneath her.

"Yes. I speak modern English, so I doubt there is a communication barrier." He was starting to sound irritated with her, which just fine with Lila. She was irritated too, plenty irritated.

"Communication barrier this!" she shouted, flinging her pillow in his face as she hurdled out of the bed.

She hit the floor with a painful thud, one hand grabbing the door as the other touched the floor, helping her balance as she shoved with her feet and flung herself into the hall. The door slammed shut behind her as she ran, stumbling on one of those damned colorful rugs, swerving into the kitchen. She spied the butcher block on the far counter and lunged for the nearest knife, getting the handle firmly in hand just as she heard the door open behind her.

There was no time to call 911. She would have to fight him off by herself.

Bracing her back against the counter, she held the knife in front of her with both hands. She was pleased to note they did not shake as she watched the entrance to the kitchen.

"I assume this isn't part of the love play?" he asked, a wry grin on his handsome face as he rounded the corner.

"Oh...my..." Lila trailed off, her mind racing in a thousand different directions as the true identity of her intruder became abundantly clear.

"You may call me Arthur, and I've already told you I'm not going to hurt you."

Lila wasn't sure what made her scream louder, the fact that his body appeared translucent in the light from the range top, or the fact that every inch of said body and face was a dead ringer for the man in the portrait in her bedroom. All she knew was that she was screaming, screaming in terror and disbelief, and even as her throat turned raw and her voice went hoarse, she kept screaming.

To his credit, Arthur, her dream man, ghost, whatever, just stood there and stared, unblinking, until finally, she started to feel a little foolish.

"Have you finished?" he asked as the last of her cries echoed off the linoleum. The night was once again silent except for the hum of the bugs through the screen door.

She swallowed. "Mostly, I think."

"You think?" he asked with what sounded like the hint of laugh. "It seems to me that you're a woman who knows what she wants, who doesn't merely 'think' anything."

"You seem like a cocky bastard yourself," she said, shocking herself with her bald words. She blinked her eyes once, twice, struggling to pull Arthur into sharper focus, suddenly dizzy from the aftereffects of so much adrenaline and fear. When she shook her head lightly, trying to clear it, her stomach heaved.

"Why don't you put down the knife?"

"Why? Are you scared?"

"Terrified. You're about two inches away from cutting open your own arm, and I doubt my knowledge of ancient medicines will be that helpful in this time."

"Fine." The knife clattered onto the counter. The cocky bastard was right, her hands weren't so steady anymore and the only person she was likely to maim was herself.

"You really are very beautiful," he said with an appraising look. "Even in this cold light, you are still lovely."

"Pretty is as pretty does," Lila said, parroting one of her mother's favorite axioms, even as something foolishly girlish within her enjoyed the way his eyes roved over her body with obvious appreciation.

"Wise words," he said, heat in his dark eyes as he stalked slowly toward her. "But I'm still grateful. Such beauty can quickly transform a duty into a pleasure."

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" Lila's voice trembled as he stopped only a few inches from where she stood at the counter, bracing his thick arms on either side of her body. Her skin prickled, and she became supremely conscious of the fact that she was completely naked.

"If that's what you choose to believe, if that's what makes it easier for you to take what you want," he said, his warm breath puffing over her mouth. A wave of need swept from her tingling lips down to knot low in her belly, sending a rush of wetness down where she was already salty and sticky.

"You were really there, weren't you? You were there when I...touched myself?"

"Not as I am now. I couldn't feel you then, couldn't smell the scent of your body." He moved his mouth within inches of hers, his breath growing as labored as her own. He smelled of pine trees, laced with a hint of ocean air. It was insanely difficult to keep from tilting her head up to find his lips, to trace the seam of his mouth with her tongue and see if he tasted as wonderful as he smelled.

He wanted her. His eyes, his breathing, the tense muscle in his jaw that ticced as she let her eyes roam over his strong face, all of them would have made that abundantly clear, even if he hadn't suddenly closed the distance between their hips.

"Oh God," Lila whispered, her throat tight as he leveraged his barely covered erection into tight contact with her bare stomach. He was as huge as she'd imagined him. Despite the fantastic nature of this entire encounter, she suddenly wanted nothing

more than to pull down his loincloth, or whatever it was, and let him show her just what he could do with all that hard, masculine need.

"You're not a ghost," she mumbled, not even needing to make the words a question. No ghost, no spirit, could feel this real, this hot and ready to fulfill every erotic fantasy she had ever had the guts to imagine.

"I am not." His lips pressed gently against her forehead, bestowing a kiss that was completely at odds with the fierce desire obviously coursing through his body. It was tender, plaintive, almost loving, and it shocked her enough to lift her eyes to his.

"I won't hurt you, Lila. I can't hurt you. I couldn't touch you in anger even if I wanted to," he said, as if he could read her thoughts, could see how strange it felt to receive tenderness from a man so physically powerful. "And I don't want to."

She never thought she'd desire a man like Arthur again. She might have fantasized about him when he was merely a man in a painting, but Lila had promised herself to choose more manageable men in her real life. She had vowed to find a loving man with a gentle heart, and learn to ignore the part of her that wanted a large, masculine alpha male who would dominate her sexually, who would show her no sensual mercy as he tunneled his cock inside her.

With Arthur, however, she might be able to have the best of both worlds, a powerful man's man who could never hurt her, who was bound to obey her every command. What could be more appealing?

"I see that we begin to understand each other," he said, his eyes just the slightest bit sad as he watched her face, felt her relax against his body.

"I don't understand anything, but I believe you. I believe that you won't hurt me...that I have power over you somehow." Lila's words were halting as she slowly moved her hands away from the counter, testing how they would feel resting lightly on Arthur's bare chest.

"You called me from the painting with your magic. I am yours to use, yours to command, until such time as my obligation to you is complete." He closed his eyes as she let her hands feather across his strong muscles, relishing each curve of his perfectly sculpted form. He was achingly beautiful, a mouth-watering example of masculine perfection and more stunning than anything she could have imagined.

"I don't have any magic," Lila breathed, dizzy from the bliss of something so simple as standing pressed against Arthur's body. She couldn't believe that this wasn't where this encounter was going to end, that she was actually going to be granted the wish she had screamed into the night.

"How can you say that? When you make me shake with wanting you?" He opened eyes filled with desire, mixed with a touch of anger and a hint of fear. The emotion so exactly mirrored her own feelings that she couldn't help but surrender to the violent attraction simmering between them.

"I'm going to need answers later," Lila said, her voice husky as she threaded her hands through his shoulder-length hair and pulled his mouth down to hers, more sexual command in that single gesture than she would have believed herself capable.

"And you shall have them, but first, I shall have you," Arthur said, almost growling as he fisted his own hand in her shorter brown hair.

His lips, teeth and tongue claimed her mouth in a bruising kiss that hummed through every cell in her body, and Lila wondered if he had been telling the truth, if he was really hers to control or if the shoe might very soon be on the other foot. But as he picked her up in his arms and aimed them back toward the bedroom, she didn't try to stop him, didn't try to test his claim. At the moment, she didn't care about anything except getting all of him as close as humanly possible to all of her, and proving to herself that some wishes could come true.

Chapter Three

The bedroom was still cooler than the rest of the house, but Lila barely noticed the difference in temperature. Her body was so hot, she felt she could start a fire with her very touch. Every inch of skin that came in contact with Arthur's ethereal form tingled and itched, consumed by desire.

Her arms were around his neck, her legs wrapped around his waist, yet she couldn't remember for the life of her how she got there. Hadn't he picked her up with his hands beneath her bent knees? She couldn't say for sure, but she certainly didn't care. His erection pressed so perfectly into the cleft between her legs, rubbing deliciously against her most sensitive spot with every step, it almost made her sad when his knees hit the end of the mattress.

Holding her close with one arm, Arthur leaned over the bed. For a moment, Lila felt herself suspended in midair, floating in a weightless world of pleasure and sensation, wondering if this might really be a dream after all. A brief wave of panic clutched at her throat. What would she do if she were to suddenly wake up in her bed, alone and aching for a mysterious man she could never have?

No. That wasn't going to happen tonight. His arms were hard and strong and oh-so-very real, guiding her bottom down to the bed, his hard stomach still pressed against her belly, his warm chest crushing her bare breasts.

Slowly, he eased her down until she was lying on her back, and then pulled away, standing at the end of the bed. Lila's chest started to ache as she released her grip on him. Having the blissful warmth of his skin stolen from her for a single second was torture. She didn't know how he could have suddenly become so important, so vital to her very existence. She only knew that he had. She wanted him so badly she could hardly think. It was as if her entire body were composed of raw nerves, nerves that were dead if he wasn't touching them, bringing them to violent, joyous life.

He was beautiful in the moonlight as he removed the small loincloth, finally letting her see the part of him that she'd dreamed about all those long, hot nights alone in her bed. But no amount of fantasizing could have prepared her for reality, and Lila actually heard herself gasp when he flung the scrap of fabric to the floor.

"I've been most ready to dispose of that ridiculous costume."

"Ridiculous," Lila echoed, not entirely certain she could agree. She'd never realized she had fantasies about men in loincloths until she'd seen Arthur's painting, but she was quickly beginning to think small, brown twists of material were all he should be allowed to wear. Of course, completely naked was good too...

She'd already seen most of him laid bare, and knew he was the most gorgeous man she'd personally seen in the flesh. But his cock was more erotically stunning than she'd

imagined, even bigger than she'd guessed from having it pressed against her. The gratified look on his face as he saw her obvious appreciation made her blush. She was ogling him like a seventeen-year-old boy with a lingerie catalogue, but he didn't seem to mind.

In fact, he grew even harder and longer under her gaze. And when his hips shifted slightly forward, she couldn't resist reaching for him. Softly, tentatively at first, she began to stroke the palm of her hand gently along the swollen head of his shaft.

His breath hissed between his teeth as she explored him, letting her fingertips run from the tip, down his length to the base, tangling gently in the thicket of hair before venturing down to caress his sac. His hands were behind his back, his gaze cast downward, and his breath growing more and more shallow as he watched her hand wander. Every ounce of his attention was riveted to the way she cupped his heaviness in her hand, his muscles tensing with a restrained power that was almost frightening.

"How long has it been?" she whispered, gripping him gently in her fist and sliding her hand upward.

"Too long." His head fell back with a groan and Lila felt a rush of power flood through her. *She* was doing this to him. Just her touch was making him gasp and moan, was bringing a look of such pleasure to his face that she could see it even in the dim light.

For too long, she'd thought she didn't have the power to do this anymore. To excite a man, to please him. It had been over a year since Clayton had touched her...since he'd expressed any kind of approval for anything she did, in bed or out. It was almost a shock to realize that not all men saw her the way her husband had seen her, that not all men would call her sexual desires filthy or turn their backs on her when she reached out for them in the night.

Now, seeing Arthur look down at her with enough passion to set the entire town of Burlin alight, she knew she was desirable.

And she was definitely not going to bed frustrated or lonely tonight.

Arthur touched her hand, pulling it away from his cock. "If you keep doing that," he murmured, "our fun will be over before it's begun."

"We wouldn't want that." Her breath caught at the promise in his eyes. Passively, she allowed him to move her hand around to cup the firm muscles of his behind, but soon found she couldn't resist the urge to let her mouth do a little exploration of its own. Quickly, she slid forward and planted a kiss on his stomach, then let her mouth steal to the swollen head of his cock. She pressed her lips softly against him, silently thanking whatever power had granted her this night, even if it would be the only one she would ever have.

His hands tangled in her hair and he made a choked sound as he pulled her face away from the erection that pulsed beneath her gentle kiss.

"Would you use your mouth to pleasure me? Would you have my cock down your throat?" he asked, the surprise in his face making her wonder what kind of history he

was trying to put behind him. How could a man so achingly beautiful doubt that women would line up for the chance to kneel before him?

"I would. I'd let you come inside and swallow down every last drop," Lila said, her brazen words worth the risk when she saw his already dark eyes grow nearly black with a mixture of lust and something else she couldn't quite name.

"Is that what you want to do right now? Is that how you would command me?" he asked, his voice growing decidedly less intimate as the word "command" entered the conversation.

"I won't command you to do anything." Lila wanted no part in the pain or resentment she sensed simmering beneath her lover's words. Tonight was a night for pleasure, his as well as hers. She'd had enough of force, of feeling that her likes or dislikes were a thing of little consequence. She wouldn't do the same to another person, even if he were only a figment of her imagination.

"You would have me command you, then?" he asked, still a slight trace of tightness in his tone.

"I don't understand."

"I am here for your pleasure, I am yours to use in any matter you deem fit."

"I'm sorry, I—I thought you wanted to do this. I thought I made you shake with wanting me?" One moment he was acting like she was God's gift to mankind, and the next like she was a john who had purchased him for a night of pleasure on demand. She didn't know what was going on, but it was wreaking havoc on her plans for the evening, making her wonder if she was making a big mistake falling into bed with the first man who jumped out of a painting and into her bedroom.

"I do. I am. I can barely keep from pushing you back on that bed and driving my cock between your legs, regardless of what you have to say about it," he said through gritted teeth, his eyes wandering to her slightly spread legs with a need that shook her to her core.

"Then don't keep yourself." Lila spread her legs just a little wider, a thrill of desire pounding through her bloodstream as she revealed her slick center to his hungry gaze. "That's what I have to say about it."

With a sound of surrender, Arthur was suddenly on top of her, his hot, powerful body pressing her into the bed. His mouth found her lips hungrily, this kiss different than any they'd shared so far. His movements were more demanding, forcing her to abandon herself to the strokes of his tongue, the bruising caress of his lips. Lila squirmed beneath him, her legs dangling off the edge of the bed, knowing she should be intimidated by the force of his need. His control was obviously slipping away, but the increasing rawness of his possession thrilled her. She found herself reveling in the sensation, intoxicated by the knowledge that she was driving him into this frenzy of desire.

"We have to slow down." He pulled back from her lips with obvious effort.

"I don't want to slow down, I want you inside me." Lila lifted her hips into his, snuggling his cock against her clit and moaning at how wild the feeling made her.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, spreading her legs and kneeling between them, his powerful hands stroking her thighs in long, sure movements, though his breath was still labored. Lila was preparing to tell him that she wouldn't be hurt, that she was as wet and ready as she'd ever been in her life. But then his thumbs grazed her pussy. She gasped and arched upward, forgetting everything but the magic of his hands between her legs.

He pressed her back down with firm hands. "Stay still. I want to look at you."

With a shiver, she obeyed, watching him through hooded eyes as he regained his control. He ran his hands over her body, not touching her, just echoing the curves of her flesh with his palms. The heat from his skin radiated to hers, as if he were caressing her aura.

His hands moved lower, running lightly over the hair covering her mound. With her legs spread, she was totally exposed to him, but she still didn't feel one ounce of shame. Maybe it was the desire that still burned in his eyes, or maybe it was simply that her own desire had grown so intense that she no longer understood the meaning of such a painful emotion. Whatever it was, she realized that having him examine her most private places only drove her higher, and when his thumb slipped down to graze over her clit, barely touching it, she cried out.

"I love the sounds you make," he murmured, his voice thick with appreciation as he rose to plant a kiss on her belly. His lips were soft and firm, his kiss once more the lover's caress that had undone her in the kitchen. "For weeks I've heard them...listened to you...wanting you so badly. Wanting to touch you, no matter the consequences. I actually thought I might enjoy making your wishes come true."

"I wish you—" she started, but his hand on her lips stopped her.

"Shh." He stroked her bottom lip with his thumb before his hand moved to cradle her face. "I know what you want. There's no need to tell me."

He returned his attention to her stomach, pressing his tongue into her bellybutton, eliciting a breathless giggle that turned into a moan when he let his fingertip brush between her legs again.

"You smell so good." He kissed the junction of her thigh and hip now, his tongue darting out to swirl against her skin. His breath was warm and sent trickles of heat through her body, fanning the flames already burning within her even higher.

His strong hands lifted her legs up and over his shoulders, easily cradling one of her cheeks in each palm. The intimacy of the position made her dizzy and his breath scorched her pussy as he lowered his face between her thighs. She arched toward him and closed her eyes, shocked by how desperately she wanted him to put his mouth on her. It had been so long...oh God, so long...

She thanked heaven there was nothing tentative about the touch of his tongue to her dripping cleft. Her back arched even more dramatically, her hips lifting out of his

hands, only to be pressed firmly back down to the bed. His hands moved to her inner thighs, spreading them, holding them apart. Now there was no way she could move as he feasted on her, exploring every crevice of her soft, slick flesh with his tongue.

She heard moaning, like whispers in the breeze, and realized it was her. Arthur sped up his movements, his tongue flicking against her clit. One hand left her thigh to join in, slipping into her weeping channel and back out. Her moans turned to cries made in a voice she hardly recognized.

"Yes, yes, yes, oh God, yes..."

He added another finger, stretching her, then slid it out and slipped it into her back entrance, wriggling it slightly while his tongue still kept up its steady rhythm.

Lila screamed, a wordless shout of triumph and delight, as her entire body shook and trembled with the force of her orgasm. It seemed to last forever, that golden moment while Arthur devoted himself entirely to her pleasure, while his hands and tongue drove her even higher, higher than she'd ever been before. She thought she might die from the pleasure of it and she didn't even care. Nothing had ever felt this perfectly right, no act of lovemaking had so completely rocked her to the core of her being.

She barely had time to come back into her body before Arthur was kneeling upright in front of her, the head of his cock pressing against her entrance, rubbing her still-tingling flesh. Desperation etched every line of his handsome face and she knew how much it had cost him to give her release without taking his own. In that moment, she felt the cold, frightened place that was her heart start to thaw and she smiled up at him with tears in her eyes. She hoped he could see how grateful she was for what they'd shared thus far, how eager she was to give him a taste of the bliss he had just afforded her.

"You are unlike any that I've known," he said. Without another word, he drove into her, stretching her walls, filling her with his hot flesh.

She cried out, barely hearing his low groan of pleasure. Exactly how long had it been for him? she wondered again, before he pulled out and thrust back in, sending all conscious thought from her mind.

She was suddenly one with the pleasure, riding a lightning bolt of heat as he kept thrusting. Their passionate cries mingled in the air above the bed, a symphony of mutual delight, as she wrapped her legs around his narrow hips and urged him deeper.

His hands gripped her waist, his strong fingers digging into her flesh as he urged her body forward to meet him. She echoed his rhythm, using her thighs to pull him closer, faster, to speed up the delicious friction of their bodies until heat was rushing to her pelvis again, building into that amazing pressure that she knew would lead to her third incredible climax of the night.

She sensed him getting ready to fall apart in the way he changed his pace, his hips moving faster still, slamming into her body with an abandon that was as sweet to her as

the feel of his thick cock. She'd been dying to be wanted like this, to be taken by a man who desired her so profoundly.

"I want you to come again," he said.

"I want you to come, I want to watch your face when you spill inside me," Lila said, drunk on the anticipation of release, knowing that the second he started to spasm inside her she would follow.

"You first," he demanded, as his hands left her hips to caress her breasts, tugging her nipples between his fingers, rolling them between finger and thumb with a firm, insistent pressure. Lila cried out at the electricity of his touch and reached down to grab hold of his hips.

"Lila...Lila..." Every time he said her name, she felt the vibrations of his voice echo in her very soul. Every time he thrust into her, she felt the heat of his body spread throughout hers.

Sex had never been like this before. Even with Clayton, when things were so good between them, she'd never had the sense that he knew exactly what to do, how to please her better than she could herself. And she'd never known how to play her husband's body with the skill of a practiced musician, with the intimate knowledge that she had always assumed would naturally exist between a husband and wife. Yet somehow, now, with Arthur, she did.

"Arthur!" she screamed, and ran her fingernails down his stomach, scratching him just hard enough to feel the resistance of his flesh beneath her fingertips.

"By Danu, *yes!*" he shouted, tugging her toward him as he gave one last almighty thrust. She felt him throb deep inside her, thought she heard him sobbing into the soft skin of her neck, and let herself go, joining him on the precipice.

They hurtled over that edge, their bodies locked together, sweat glowing on their skin in the moonlight. Her muscles clenched, her hands grasping at nothing as her back arched and her legs locked around Arthur's waist and he spent the last of himself deep inside her.

Chapter Four

Arthur jolted awake with a start, the sunlight streaming in through the bedroom window hurting his eyes. It had been several hundred years since he'd seen the sun, felt its heat on his body...such as it was.

Ruefully, he glanced down. His flesh was still translucent, although less so than it had been the night before. Lila's power had made him more solid, more lifelike, and if the gods were kind to him, it would continue to do so.

He looked at her now, still asleep beside him, and his heart moved in a way that was completely unexpected. He hadn't experienced a feeling like that in so many hundreds of years that he had convinced himself the memory was nothing more than a beautiful dream. Surely there could never have been a woman as perfect as his heart believed Brigid to be. He must have been possessed by a young man's madness, succumbed to idealistic fantasies that an older, wiser soul would never have indulged. No other answer that made sense, or explained why no woman had ever come close to touching him in the same way.

Until this near stranger, who still lay close enough he could touch her with the slightest movement of his hand. Thousands of years removed from his former love, from a culture completely at odds with the ancient ways, she was still the only woman he'd met who had that same mix of innocence and wicked sensuality. Add to that the fact that he now knew her to be a generous lover and an empathetic spirit, and Arthur feared his theories on the nature of the heart were going to be sorely tested. From the moment he'd first seen her, she'd managed to make him long for things he'd lost all hope for long, long ago.

At first it was only her beauty that drew him. Her soft, barely shoulder-length brown hair had called for him to run his hands through it, to bury his face at the nape of her neck and inhale. Her piercing green eyes had made his very soul ache as she stood before his painting for what felt like hours, pulling him from his shadowy rest. He'd fought the sensation at first, a part of him determined to keep the vow he'd made when he sought refuge in the enchanted canvas in the first place. He'd been finished with the struggle for freedom, ready to claim the only afterlife that was available to him—an eternity of restless sleep, populated by dreams of the history being enacted around him.

It had been so long since he'd walked the earth, since he'd felt warm flesh under his hands and solid ground under his feet, that he had assumed he'd lost the urge to experience such basic human pleasures. But from the second Lila had entered the small dwelling where his painting now hung, every mortal craving he'd ever known came roaring back with a horrible vengeance. He'd begun to wish for a miracle, for a repeat

of the sensual magic that had last drawn him from his stony prison so many, many years ago.

When Gollwyn had trapped him, he'd been certain he would never be free again. How could he pay his debt to the gods while locked in a stone?

It was Morrigan, in the guise of her raven, who'd shown him the way, granted him the chance to truly win his freedom. She alone among the gods had seen the right in what he did. Not a surprise, really, that the beautiful but deadly goddess of war would approve of his actions. She'd whispered to him through the stones, telling him of the ways that a Druid as gifted as himself might cheat his fate. Unfortunately, she hadn't bothered to tell him the price he would pay for his freedom, or thought to share how to ensure his liberation became a permanent state.

The first time he'd been freed, it had been only a few decades after his imprisonment. Two young lovers had come to the stone circle to do what young lovers would, and Arthur, in his spirit form, had joined in their lovemaking, introducing them both to pleasure greater than two inexperienced people could have hoped to achieve. Luckily for Arthur, the young man had been gifted and his wish for the spirit who touched him to be made real brought Arthur forth from the stones.

Still reeling from the death of Brigid and his rage at Gollwyn's imprisonment, Arthur had been less than thrilled to find himself bound to the couple, strangely compelled to stay with them and attend to their every need. They'd been gentle first masters, however, and later Arthur would wish he'd been able to enjoy those years they had spent together. Years later, when the fulfillment of a third soul wish sent him hurtling back into the stones, he would ache for the comfort of the man and woman he had grown to care for, yearn to feel his body surrounded by the warmth of his lovers.

The second time he had freed himself was over a hundred years later. He'd managed to bind himself to a young shepherdess, a simpleton who nevertheless had the combination of the craving for flesh and blood-inherited magic that he could use to emerge from his prison. The decades spent with her had been monotonous and filled with despair as he repeatedly failed to convince her to use one of the two wishes he would be able to grant her to free him. But she hadn't used a single wish in over forty years, insistent that wishes were evil and that the new Christian god would not approve.

Finally, on her deathbed, she had made her wishes. A new home for her flock and for her magician had been asked for with her dying breath. But, apparently, the gods still had the same wicked sense of humor he'd known when he was a young Druid, praying not to be the butt of any cosmic jokes. His "home" had simply been a new twist on an old curse. His spirit became tangled amongst the carpet fibers on the dirt floor of the hut he had inhabited for nearly half a century. There he remained until he lost track of the time, until his awareness of the outside world, of the sun that rose and set outside the rapidly decaying structure, faded almost completely.

He'd finally managed to claim another master, and another, but all wished their wishes and he'd been imprisoned once more. He had regained enough of his own

magic that he could manipulate Gollwyn's enchantment by sending his spirit into the object of his choosing. But that was small comfort, and soon Arthur found himself losing hope.

It wasn't until Marared claimed him in the year of the Christian Lord, 1484, that he'd thought he would truly escape. She'd had such strong magic, had been so completely besotted with him in the early years of their relationship. But he'd displeased her in the end. He'd been unable to give her the love she craved, and had learned firsthand the wrath of a woman scorned. Instead of the freedom he'd longed for, she'd given him the opposite, turning him into a sex slave. She forced him to perform for the depraved people she called her friends, and earned money from his degradation.

Finally, with the aid of his own newly strengthened magic and the skill of a gifted painter he had seduced during one of the orgies Marared hosted on her country estate, Arthur had escaped into the painting now hanging on Lila's wall. He'd asked the painter to depict him against the stone circle he remembered from his youth, a circle that had been completely destroyed centuries before. He found some comfort in that, despite the foolish costume the young painter had insisted he wear. But he had paid a price for fleeing his cruel mistress before his duty to her was fulfilled. The deft brushstrokes had captured him more powerfully than any of his former prisons, making it nearly impossible to escape. Eventually he'd lost interest in trying, resigned to what he could only assume would be an eternity in the portrait, trapped there until the end of the world.

But then came Lila. And now he was free...for the moment.

Deep in his soul, Arthur knew that if he did not free himself during his time with his newest master, he never would. Magic was no longer as active in human blood. All of their progress, their inventions, the energy they expended in distancing themselves from the earth had taken a toll. There might not ever be another, man or woman, who would have the power to pull him from his confinement. Especially in this forsaken place.

His painting—a minor masterpiece that had once hung in the house of a privileged lord—had been tossed from hand to hand until ending its journey in an attic in the middle of Missouri, one of the most sexually repressed places on the planet. Arthur's image had been covered with a cloth, allowed to gather dust, and finally put out at a sale and bought for three dollars by a woman with a large and ridiculous hat.

Then he'd been placed here, on a wall in a cottage generally inhabited by people with no magic and barely a sexual thought in their heads aside from how quickly they could complete the act. There was no sensual power in the people he'd seen, no earthy, life-giving energy he could draw upon.

And no wishes made.

Until the day Lila had moved in. He had immediately recognized that she was different. Even through the dark tunnel-like vision he had when entrapped in the

painting, he'd seen a spark within her, a strength of spirit that was increasingly rare in modern people. He'd suspected she had magic, though largely untapped. That suspicion had been confirmed the first night she slept beneath his portrait. Her deep need had called him into her very dreams, her potent sensuality quickly making him wild to be free of his confines, damn the consequences.

Still, once she'd made the wish, once he was there in the flesh, ready to do her bidding, the old fears found their way to the surface. Marared and the others who had used him cruelly hadn't seemed monstrous...at first. It was the knowledge of their continued power, the unique thrill of bending another spirit to their will so completely, that seemed to corrupt even the most benign master.

Lila sighed in her sleep and rolled away from him, her hair obscuring her delicate features. She looked like an angel, smiled with the compassion of a healer and had loved him with every mind-blowing piece of her body and soul. Surely there was nothing that could turn her cold and uncaring. He would have to trust her, tell her of his powers and her ability to free him from his curse. His debt to the gods had been paid long ago. If nearly two thousand years of servitude hadn't cleared his soul, nothing would.

He could awaken the woman beside him, and test the theory right now. Half asleep and sated from a night of lovemaking more intense than anything he had ever known, she would never be more likely to do as he requested. But for some reason, he couldn't will his hand to move, to brush the hair from her face and call her name until her stunning green eyes opened.

Whether it was simple cowardice or an emotion more complex than he was willing to admit, he wasn't ready to risk losing Lila so quickly. There would be time for revelations, but right now he would attempt to enjoy the pleasures of his increasingly solid flesh.

Arthur slipped from the bed, heading for the kitchen. He hadn't eaten anything in over five hundred years, and he was hungry, although he didn't hold out much hope for the palatability of the provisions he would find. The few times Lila had brought food into the bedroom, it had been gooey mush or what looked like little brown sticks. He hadn't seen a single leg of mutton, or even chicken.

Opening the cupboards, his worst fears were confirmed. There was little to eat except those brown sticks that he was not even tempted to try. Packages wrapped in some kind of clear film attracted his interest, but when he tore open the cover, it was filled with seeds that hurt his teeth when he tried to bite into them.

Continuing on to the refrigerator, he found the selection there wasn't much better, but he did see a package of what looked like meat. His fingers fumbled with more of that curious clear substance before he managed to pull out a slice.

It didn't look like any meat he'd ever seen, and he sniffed it carefully before sticking his tongue out to taste it. Not bad, although not one fifth as good as fresh-killed boar. He finished the package in a few swallows, and continued his hunt.

There was a smaller door above the refrigerator, and he opened it to find several of the little tubs he'd seen Lila eating from. Experimentally, he sniffed at one. It smelled of milk and sugar, and when he found a spoon and tasted it, he found it was sweet. Cold blossomed on his tongue and sent shivers through his entire body. He didn't particularly like the cold, but the substance was undeniably delicious, with an oddly clean kind of taste he'd never experienced before.

Arthur finished the tub and opened another, greedily licking the spoon clean. Lila clearly had a taste for sweets, one he instinctively knew she hadn't been able to indulge in some time. Whatever past had brought her to this remote place, he suspected it had not been a pleasant one. A life filled with kindness and indulgence didn't leave that haunted look in a person's eyes.

A tentative smile stretched across his face as he thought of making her eyes glow with happiness again. It was his duty, after all, to make sure she indulged her desires, was it not?

And if he happened to enjoy himself in the meantime...surely not even the gods could fault him for that.

* * * * *

The woman's face was familiar, but it took Lila a minute to place her. Burlin was still so new to her, but after a moment she was fairly certain she was watching the checkout girl from the grocery store. Lila's view of her was blurred—seen as if through a dark tunnel that illuminated only small sections of what was in front of her—but it looked like the girl was disrobing.

What was she doing? Why were they in this dark little place together?

Lila backed away from the girl, whose name, she remembered now, was Julie. Something wasn't right here. Julie didn't seem to know she was there. Lila's bottom hit something hard and she instinctively turned around, sudden brightness dazzling her, making her eyes hurt. Her own reflection confronted her, eyes wide, her pupils so large the whites were almost invisible as she fought to keep a yelp of surprise from escaping her throat. She was in a bathroom.

That explained what Julie was doing, at least, but what was she doing? Had she become some kind of pervert? Some shady person who snuck into people's bathrooms?

A gasp tore Lila's attention away from her own reflection, and she turned to see Julie's eyes filling with tears. She held a small plastic stick that Lila recognized immediately. Hadn't she done just what Julie was doing now, so many times? Gone to the bathroom to pee on the stick, waiting with bated breath to see if this would be the month that she gave Clayton a baby?

The answer was always no, for her. It took almost a year before she saw a doctor about it and discovered the answer would always be no. She'd eventually come to terms with the fact that she would never be a biological mother.

Still, as she saw Julie's smile broaden, saw the tears fill her eyes, she couldn't help but be a little jealous.

"Congratulations," she said, but the other woman gave no indication she'd heard. Instead she got up and ran from the room, shouting "Bill! Bill! Come look!"

Lila sat alone in the bathroom. Her heart ached a little, with a pain she'd thought she'd banished forever.

Outside the bathroom, Julie's cry of happiness changed to one of pain, a shriek that grew louder and louder. Lila raced out of the bathroom. If Bill was hurting her...

She stopped short just outside the doorway. She was in a hospital room, and Julie was on a bed, her feet in stirrups, holding tightly to the hand of a gowned and masked man. Bill, Lila guessed. She had no idea how nine months had passed, but apparently they had. Julie was giving birth.

What was going on? Had she really been in the bathroom that long??

Julie screamed one last time, as the voices urging her on grew louder. Lila heard a man shouting, "It's a BOY!" She saw Julie's triumphant smile and saw Bill lean close to Julie to plant a tender kiss on her forehead.

And then she didn't see any more. Tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision. This was what she'd once wanted, what she and Clayton had wanted, before everything went so terribly wrong.

She stood in the corner, watching the happiness of the others and felt more profoundly alone than ever.

Lila's eyes were still wet when she opened them, a little shocked to find her room exactly as it had been.

It was a dream. While a part of her was relieved to know she hadn't actually taken to hanging out in other people's bathrooms, she still couldn't understand it. What she had seen had been so clear, so vivid. She'd been able to feel the cool tile of the bathroom floor beneath her feet, smell the antiseptic smell of the hospital. She'd never had a dream like that before.

"Except last night." Lila's heart plummeted into her stomach as she looked over to find no man at her side.

Dear god, what had she done? She'd hallucinated an entire bizarre and achingly pleasurable encounter with an imaginary friend. An imaginary friend from a painting, who had ruined her for any other man. She might as well check herself into the nuthouse because a part of her didn't want to be sane if it meant she would never get the chance to kiss Arthur again, to feel his skin against hers, to know the bliss of their bodies moving together toward the most perfect pleasure she had ever known.

With a heavy heart, Lila glanced at the portrait. She reached for the glass of water she kept by the bed, then froze, the glass only halfway to her lips.

There was no man in the picture.

And if her sense of smell hadn't become as unreliable as her sanity, someone was cooking breakfast in the kitchen.

Abandoning the glass, she made her way into the brightly lit kitchen, where a very real, much less ghostly looking Arthur stood at the stove. He was still naked, and the morning sun coming in the window caressed his tawny skin, shining gold light on every muscle and curve of his spectacular body.

She stared at him, breath unnaturally loud in her ears. He was completely comfortable, working the stovetop and toaster with easy familiarity, humming tunelessly under his breath. She watched his muscles move under that smooth, perfect skin and her own skin seemed to tingle and shrink, wanting to feel him against her again.

He wasn't a dream. He was real, this was *really* happening. Her legs went wobbly with relief and nerves. Part of her had been convinced he was a figment of her suppressed imagination, something she'd created to ease the loneliness she was beginning to feel, just as she'd done as a child. But this was clearly much different than the friendly monster under her bed in the third grade.

Though Arthur was definitely a creature that went bump in the night.

Lila suddenly felt the urge to laugh, a wild, excited giggle that she didn't dare let pass her lips. What was she doing? It wasn't until this moment that she realized how her emotions were already tied up in Arthur, this man about whom she knew so little. But something about him gave her a feeling of peace and safety. She was going to try her best not to overanalyze it, for now. He was here, really here, and all she wanted to do was be grateful.

As for her dream...in the bright light of the kitchen it seemed less odd or frightening than she'd thought. Besides, she was finding it very difficult to focus on anything except the gorgeous man busy at her stove. He cracked an egg into a frying pan with one huge hand and she shivered, remembering how those hands had felt on her body last night. How warm and tender, yet commanding and forceful. It was as if he'd known exactly what she wanted.

But then, maybe that wasn't entirely miraculous. If he'd really been there on the wall of her bedroom, and watched as she finally indulged her own desires, then Arthur had seen exactly what she liked. He would have known the stuff of her fantasies and, apparently, he had no problem helping her fulfill them.

"What?" she said.

Oh God, Arthur was looking at her, focusing those deep brown eyes in her direction and effectively turning her entire world upside down. She couldn't even guess how long she'd been staring or what the bronze god across the small kitchen might have just asked her.

"I said good morning," he said, smiling. "I hope you like eggs."

"I don't...really eat breakfast," she mumbled, half of her mind still insisting that she couldn't be having this conversation, couldn't have been offered eggs by a naked man who had escaped from the portrait in her bedroom.

"Nonsense," he replied, turning back to his frying pan. "You must eat something."

As if in direct response to his words, her stomach grumbled. She *was* hungry, which was strange because she usually couldn't even think of food until she'd been awake for several hours. But then, she usually didn't spend half the night engaged in the most intense and fantastic lovemaking she'd ever known. Lovemaking. She and this man had made love, or had sex, or banged like bunnies. Whatever you wanted to call it, they'd done *it* and she was suddenly more than a little shy.

"Okay." She sat down at the table and attempted to hide the blush she knew would be creeping up her throat and staining her cheeks. She hadn't slept with a man other than her husband in so long, she couldn't even remember how this "morning after" thing was supposed to go.

Arthur turned around, bringing the hot pan over to the already-set table. He scraped eggs from it on to her plate while she did her best to avoid meeting his eyes, staring instead at his flat stomach. A fine line of dark hair ran down the perfectly muscled flesh, joining eventually with the hair that curled between his legs. Lila was shocked to find that she wanted to touch it. She wanted to run her fingertips down that line of hair and keep going until she reached his cock. She wanted to make it jump to life, to see it harden and lengthen with his desire for her, then take it into her mouth until he —

Goodness. Even her interior monologue didn't sound like herself anymore. First the weird dream, then the appetite for breakfast, then lustful fantasies so intensely sexual they made her feel faint. Who knew what might be next? The thought was both scary and exciting, making her shiver as she willed her gaze to the plate of eggs.

"Sleep well?"

"Um...yes. Very well, thank you," she stammered, her throat still uncomfortably tight.

He smiled as he poured himself orange juice and brought it to the table. He took his chair with the confidence of a man totally at home in his own skin and took a deep drink of the juice, his eyes watching her over the rim of his glass.

"You're nervous." His smile grew wider as he set the now-empty glass on the table with a hearty thunk.

"I am not."

"You look like you're about to run from the room, or claim me for your pleasure here on the table."

"I do not," she said with a surprised laugh. The fact that he'd read her so accurately put her at ease, even as the way he'd so casually talked about her claiming him set her skin on fire.

"There's no need for nerves or embarrassment, Lila. I thought we discussed that last night. I'm here to give you whatever you want, whatever you need. All you have to do is ask," he said, the husky note in his voice making it clear that he meant *whatever* she wanted, absolutely *whatever*.

"This can't be real." Her breath caught as he reached out and took her hand, twining his fingers through hers with a sense of possession that made her feel strangely safe. "I had this dream, and I was sure that you were —"

"I am no dream," he said with complete assurance.

"I know...I guess. I just, I don't — I've never —"

"I understand completely. You need further convincing," he said with a wicked grin.

Lila watched him with wide eyes as he knelt on the linoleum floor in front of her. A thrill ran through her body and settled in her stomach. Heat pooled between her legs as he reached up and untied the sash of her robe, opening it so she was exposed to him. "I'm here to pleasure you," he whispered, taking one of her breasts in his strong palm and lifting it, caressing it. "I'm here to love you, to ensure your contentment. Nothing more."

Her eyes closed and she sighed. There were still so many questions, so much left unexplained. But right now, she didn't want to think about that anymore. She didn't want to think about anything except this man and his magical hands.

Gently, he eased her legs apart. "I don't believe," he said huskily, "that I have ever seen a more beautiful sight."

She didn't answer. He didn't seem to expect her to as his lips tickled her knee, his tongue darting out to lick just behind it.

With only the slightest hesitation, she scooted forward in her chair, giving him better access as he lifted her leg and nibbled his way up her inner thigh. His lips and tongue traced lines of heat on her sensitive skin. She felt herself opening, felt her pussy swelling and dampening in anticipation as his mouth got closer to where she already ached for him.

He stopped, eliciting a small sound of protest, and turned his attentions to her other leg, again starting at the knee and repeating his movements.

She pushed herself farther forward, her neck resting on the back of the chair, her hips just balancing on the edge.

"That's right," he whispered. "Let yourself enjoy it. Relax."

She could barely hear him. Her blood was rushing through her veins, roaring in her ears. Every bit of her consciousness was focused on the tiny area of soft wet flesh between her legs and on the urgent desire that he touch her there. Please, please, please let him touch her there.

"I know what you want," he said, and his tongue plunged into her slick depths.

She cried out, her hips lifting from the seat, pressing herself further against his hot, busy mouth. He shoved harder into her, increasing the pace of his rapidly moving tongue, sliding it into her weeping channel. Her fingers found the top of his head, fisting in his hair, holding him close to her.

"Arthur," she panted. "Arthur, oh Arthur!"

He responded with a growl, lifting his tongue back up to the tiny, hard bud of her clit, teasing it, sucking it into his mouth. His teeth scraped it ever-so lightly, and her cries grew louder. She'd never, ever felt anything like this in her life, and she was about to come so hard she was afraid she might tumble out of her chair.

His hands pushed her thighs farther apart and the muscles low in her belly strained to keep her hips balanced on the edge of her seat. Somehow the forced tension drove her even higher. Her panting cries turned to wails. She was out of control, her entire being focused on his tongue and mouth. She was a little shocked to find her spirit reveled in her lack of inhibition, in the knowledge that she didn't have to hold anything back.

And that was what finally drove her over the edge. A pleasure too intense for words shot through her body, making her scream, making her laugh in pure delight as every last fear was driven from her mind and she found herself relaxed in her chair, with Arthur's head resting on her thigh and his dark eyes gazing up into hers.

She hadn't felt this safe, this adored, in...ever.

It was a feeling that was wholly unfamiliar, and already dangerously addictive. Lila suddenly suspected that she was in serious trouble.

Chapter Five

"Just try to act natural," Lila said, suppressing a smile as all six foot four of Arthur struggled out of her tiny Jetta with a black storm cloud of an expression on his face.

"As if any of this could be considered remotely natural," he growled, slamming the door behind him with far more force than necessary. "That conveyance reaches speeds at which no human being was meant to travel."

"You should have said you were scared. I would have slowed down." Lila looped her arm through his, losing the battle against her grin.

"This fabric chafes at my skin. It smells of something poisonous and I have no doubt it's sapping magic from my body even as we speak," he said, glowering down at her even as he pulled her closer to his side.

"Maybe, but your butt looks really great in those jeans." She'd never seen anyone fill out a pair of Levi's the way Arthur did, managing to make them look simultaneously rugged and sophisticated. No matter how much he'd complained about their texture, she knew he had enjoyed the way she'd admired him when he'd first put on the jeans and simple black t-shirt. In the three days they'd spent together, Lila had become accustomed to Arthur's sometimes brusque way of speaking. The man was all bark and no bite...except when she was in the mood for a little biting, a condition he seemed to predict with stunning accuracy.

"The attractiveness of my butt is not something with which I am overly concerned."

"Liar." Lila giggled, reaching back to give said butt a light squeeze. A thrill of desire shot through her when Arthur's breath caught and a bulge began to grow in the front of his jeans.

"Now the damned things confine my manhood," he said, the hint of a smile on his face as his hand played over her own bottom. "I fear I'll have to set him free and see how quickly he can find his way up that little white frock."

"You promised you'd behave," she said, slapping his hand away from her skirt and sighing with contentment as he placed it once again around her shoulders.

"It's not my fault you make it so difficult to remember my promises."

"We could have stayed home and stayed naked. You're the one who complained about my cooking."

"If I'd eaten another of those brown sticks you call French fries, I would have turned into one," he said with a snort that sounded suspiciously good-humored. Looking up into his warm brown eyes, Lila was assured that Arthur was feeling the same way she did, ridiculously, obnoxiously pleased with his present company and not at all inclined to hide it.

The way the feelings had grown between them in less than a week would have been frightening if the sheer happiness that had taken up residence in her body and mind had allowed her to have the sense to experience fear. As it was, she knew she was falling way too hard, way too fast for a man who was way too complicated for words, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Her magician had healed more than her body with his tender hands and talented cock, he'd begun to mend her heart, a phenomenon she would have dubbed impossible even a few short days ago.

But somewhere amidst all the sex, she and Arthur had started to make love. She didn't know if it was hearing the truth about his centuries of imprisonment or sharing some of the horror stories from her own past, but at some point they'd stopped trying to hide anything from each other. She'd exposed her entire self, body and soul, for his perusal and she knew he'd done the same. They would lie for hours in bed, just talking softly and gazing into each other's eyes with a passionate affection that was almost too good to be true. And then one or the other would take their tender touching to the next level and soon they'd be making love, rocking each other to the core with a kind of no-holds-barred sex that fulfilled all of Lila's secret fantasies.

"Stop thinking about sex, woman," he said with a laugh. "You're torturing me."

"I didn't say a word," Lila protested.

"No, but your lips are parted and the look in your eye leaves little doubt as to the direction of your thoughts. Insatiable temptress."

"I can't help it, it's been three whole hours." The naughty wink she shot in his direction felt completely natural, a direct extension of the newfound confidence that filled her, making her move with an unabashed sensuality that she knew communicated to those around her.

When she'd gone to the local "big and tall" store to buy Arthur's clothes, she'd been hit on by four men before she had the chance to get through the checkout. The grocery store had been the same story, and now, even with her massive lover by her side, she could feel the eyes of the male patrons of the Dairy Freeze on her like a physical caress. It was more attention from the opposite sex than she'd garnered in years, but it was a kind of attention she no longer craved. As long as she was the focus of Arthur's attention, she couldn't care less about any other man.

"I'll wait here. Bring what you will." Arthur stopped abruptly at the picnic table furthest from the walk-up-and-order window.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. I simply lack the knowledge to order at this establishment. I will save this seating area and you may choose our fare," he said, sitting at the bench and beginning to scan the area around them as if looking for a sniper hiding behind one of the brightly colored garbage cans.

"Okay," Lila said, more than a little confused, but willing to do as Arthur asked. She couldn't imagine how strange rural Missouri must seem to a man who had

originally been a Druid mage. She was happy to do what she could to put him at ease, and if that meant ordering for two, it was a small enough favor.

"Are you in the mood for anything special?" She reached out to smooth a hand through Arthur's hair in a casual, affectionate gesture. It was the kind of touch she'd come to bestow on him without a second thought, so it was more than a little hurtful when he pulled away from her hand as if she'd grown fangs on her fingertips.

"No, nothing, just food. But no French fries."

"Right, no French fries." Lila turned toward the Dairy Freeze's walk-up window, trying not to let the moment of awkwardness hurt her feelings. After three days of pure sexual bliss and easy companionship, surely they were due for a little bump in the relationship road.

Relationship. Were they having a relationship? Could she really call it that when, for all practical purposes, she was Arthur's master and he bound to her as a slave for her pleasure? Sure, he seemed to care for her and she had yet to take advantage of her position of authority, but could she and the man she was rapidly coming to love really have a future together?

"Two chocolate malts and two cheeseburger baskets with everything on them," Lila told the girl behind the counter, a freckle-faced redhead who looked like a direct descendant of the girl who had taken her order here when she was just a girl. Knowing Burlin, it probably was. That was one of the best things about the small town, the profound sense of continuity. It was a place where family businesses thrived and stayed in the family, where people knew everything about each other and still managed to like their neighbors in spite of their faults. It was rapidly becoming a place that Lila never wanted to leave.

"You want fries with that?"

"Fries with one basket, onion rings with the other," Lila said, returning the girl's smile as she handed over her money. Peeking over her shoulder, she checked to make sure Arthur was still behaving himself, and was shocked to find him sitting peaceably at the table attracting zero attention.

She'd been sure that the citizens of Burlin wouldn't be able to go more than ten minutes without ambling over to introduce themselves to the town's newest resident. Lila herself had attracted more attention in the first week after she'd rented the cottage than in the entire six years she and Clayton had lived in South Dakota. The locals were curious and not shy about satisfying their curiosity. She would have bet her right hand they wouldn't have been able to resist the chance to get the scoop on the tall, dark and handsome man who had moved in with the lady renting the Blake cottage.

"Good thing you're not allowed to bet things like hands," Lila sighed, her confusion complete as two teenage girls walked past Arthur without so much as a giggle.

"What's that?" the woman next to her asked, her tone light and polite as she turned her head in Lila's direction.

"Nothing." Lila laughed self-consciously, her brow furrowing as she met the strangely familiar face of the younger woman. "Julie, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Lila, right? You're out at the Blake place?" Julie replied, her smile as bright as it was every time she thanked Lila for shopping at the Stop and Save.

"Right, that's me," Lila said, unable to think of anything more brilliant to say. Ever since she'd dreamed about being in Julie's bathroom, she'd done her best to avoid her line at the checkout. For some strange reason, she was embarrassed by the dream, not sure what it said about her own subconscious.

"You get French fries with your burger?"

"What?"

"If I remember correctly, you really like French fries. Didn't you buy like five packages?" Julie asked, her smile so friendly Lila relaxed a little.

"I did. I have a French fry problem."

"Me too, girl. When I was pregnant with my son I don't think I ate anything but French fries."

"I'm afraid I can't claim pregnancy cravings, just normal grease addiction," Lila said, trying her best not to give undue attention to Julie's mention of her pregnancy. It was a small town, most women over twenty had a kid or two and they did tend to pop up in conversation. Just because she had dreamed about Julie having a baby...

"Order twelve up," the freckled girl called out from the window.

"That's mine," Julie said. "Nice talking to you."

Lila nodded, smiled and did her best not to pay attention to what kind of food Julie was picking up from the counter. It didn't matter, it was none of her business and she was moderately creepy to be so intensely interested. But when the younger woman walked by with three baskets filled with nothing but fries, she couldn't keep the question in her head from spilling out of her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Julie, but now I *have* to ask. Are you expecting?"

"I...am. I haven't told anyone yet, so don't breathe a word around town, but I took the test night before last." Julie's eyes welled up with happy tears.

"Congratulations, you must be thrilled," Lila said, her throat so tight she could barely force out the words.

"We are. My husband and I were told we wouldn't be able to have any more kids after Simon, so this baby is really a blessing."

"That's wonderful, I'm so happy for you. I won't breathe a word," Lila said, feeling like she could barely breathe, period.

What the hell was going on? She'd managed to convince herself that the vivid dreams she'd been having were merely a side effect of amazing sex, that all the hormones had kicked her imagination into overdrive. But if Julie was really pregnant, if she'd taken the test only the night before last, at least two days *after* Lila had seen her in the dream...

"Order thirteen up."

The fact that her and Arthur's order number was unlucky number thirteen suddenly took on a horrible significance. Her weirdly lifelike dreams might not be simple dreams. They could be visions, predictions of things to come. That wasn't such a scary thought when it was a surprise baby desperately wanted by his parents. But some of the other dreams that had come to her lately had been of the more nightmarish variety.

"Order thirteen, two cheeseburger baskets and two chocolate malts, your order is ready."

Lila heard the girl call out her order again, but she couldn't seem to force her feet to move toward the window. Her heart thudded unhealthily in her chest and her temples throbbed. She reached her hand up to rub her eyes as her vision blurred. She was going to be sick. She was going to be sick right here in front of the order-up window.

"Order thirteen! Isn't that you? Your order's ready!"

A hand touched her shoulder, yanking Lila back into her body. She gasped and spun around, her hands flying up involuntarily, as if to protect her head from a blow.

"Geez, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Some of Lila's terror must have shown on her face, because the girl standing behind her looked upset. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Fine," Lila replied, trying to smile. Strangely, the girl's touch seemed to have brought her back to earth. Her head was no longer full of knives, her lungs moved more easily in her chest. "Sorry. I just...remembered something."

She picked up the tray holding their food, barely feeling it in her hands, and walked across the patio to where Arthur sat. His gaze was on her, his dark eyes full of concern.

"What is wrong?" he said. "You look ill."

"If I look ill, why didn't you come to help me?" She was suddenly angry. If her discomfort was that obvious, why hadn't he come to see what was the matter with her? It showed a lack of empathy that she wouldn't have expected from Arthur, not after the last few days.

She knew all too well, however, that this was how things went wrong. If he started behaving this way after only a few days, where would their relationship be in a year? In five years?

She dumped the tray down in front of him without trying to conceal her irritation. "Here's your food, is there anything else I can get for you?"

"Lower your voice," he said.

"Don't tell me to lower my —"

"You'll look foolish."

"I don't care what I look like, I —"

"Lila," he interrupted. "Lila, they can't see me."

"Don't change the subject," she said.

"I'm not changing it," he said, more urgently. "Lila, *they can't see me*. To them, all of them, I'm not here. You're talking to yourself."

"What?"

"And, unfortunately, you're about to eat two enormous baskets of food all by yourself, as well. I suppose it wouldn't do for an invisible man to sample that lovely smelling meat," he said. He was obviously trying to lighten the moment, but anxiety was clear in every line of his face.

For the second time in as many minutes, Lila's vision darkened. She sat down hard on the bench, ignoring the hot little prick of a sun-warmed nail head sticking out of the wood, digging into her thigh.

"Oh my God," she moaned, putting her head in her hands. All the cheerful light that had filled the day, all the hope with which she'd left the house, faded, leaving her cold and alone, with only a ghost for company. Literally.

"So you're all in my head? Does that mean that this, that we —"

"Don't be ridiculous. I've told you the truth. I'm as real as any of these people."

"Then why can't they see you?"

"I don't know," he said. "I look in the mirror and I see myself. I can touch things, I can sit on this bench. But it's as if everyone but you looks right through me."

"Did this happen...before?"

He shook his head. "No, never, though there were times I might have been thankful for it." A shadow passed over his face, and she knew he was thinking of the way he'd been treated, of the things he'd been forced to do.

As hard as this was for her, it had to be a million times harder for him. She straightened her spine.

"I have an idea." She picked up her purse and rummaged through it.

"What are you doing?"

Finally she found what she was looking for, and pulled it out, determined to cheer him up. To cheer them both up.

He looked at the pocket calculator in her hand. "I don't understand."

She glanced around to make sure nobody was watching too closely, and punched a few numbers on the pad before holding the calculator to her ear, making sure her hair covered as much of it as possible. "There," she said. "Problem solved. They'll all think I'm on the phone, and we can talk."

"I don't feel much like talking," he said, twining his massive hands together as if to remind himself not to reach for the food. He looked so lost, sitting there. It broke her heart.

More than that, it scared her. What was wrong? Was it her? Arthur had told her that she had more magic in her blood than most modern humans — a fact she still found pretty hard to believe — but maybe she didn't have enough. What if she was lacking the

juice, the magical mojo, whatever it was that would enable her to fully materialize him the way others had before her?

"We need to figure out how to make this right," she said, a little desperately. "What it is I'm doing wrong, so we can fix it."

He smiled at her, sadness still shadowing the edges of his mouth. "Perhaps it has simply been too long. Perhaps I am no longer able to be seen by others than my master."

"No," she said fiercely. "I won't believe that. There has to be something we can do."

"It may not be up to us. There are some whose plans overrule those of men."

They sat in silence for a minute. Lila's heart ached, and for the first time in weeks she had zero interest in fried food. She wanted so badly to say something, do something that would fix this. She wanted to take care of him the way he took care of her.

He cleared his throat and sat up, leaning forward so that one large, warm hand rested over hers. He *felt* so real. It was almost impossible to believe he wasn't. "I think I would prefer to go."

"Me too." Besides, the calculator was starting to hurt her ear. "I'll get this food wrapped up to take home, okay? We can sit on the porch and eat it. Do you want to go wait in the car?"

He stood up, revealing the long, lean lines of his body in the tight t-shirt and jeans. She watched, letting her gaze wander over him. Just the sight of him made her feel better. Whatever happened in the outside world, they could go home and shut themselves in, get into bed naked and pull the covers over their heads. They could live in their own little Arthur-and-Lila world. The thought was enormously appealing, though maybe not the most practical fantasy she'd ever had.

He caught her looking and grinned. "I guess these modern clothes do have some advantages. I like the way you look at me when I wear them."

"I like looking at you when you wear them."

"Thank you," he said, stepping out from the table. "If you don't mind, however, I'll start walking home. I feel the need to exercise my legs. Perhaps you could pick me up as you pass me in that...car?"

Lila almost laughed. She suspected it wasn't just a desire to stretch his legs that prompted this, but also a reluctance to get back in the car. For that reason, she didn't make a big deal out of it. "Sure. Go ahead. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Be careful, I'd rather not be struck by that thing."

"I will. Just remember the other cars can't see you. Stay on the shoulder. The gravel on the side of the road."

He nodded and leaned over to kiss her cheek. She closed her eyes, savoring the feeling of him so close to her, his lips warm and soft on her skin.

He turned to leave, sliding his hand down her back to give her a pat on the behind as he walked away, leaving her feeling better than she would have expected, considering she'd just learned her boyfriend was invisible.

She took the baskets of untouched, rapidly cooling food back to the counter and asked them to box it up, ignoring the obvious curiosity of the freckle-faced girl, and turned to watch the people at the picnic tables while she waited. It seemed half of Burlin was out today, teenagers with tight jeans and loose shirts, elderly people chewing their food in companionable silence, a woman with a little girl whose pale, almost white-blond hair ruffled in the breeze...

Lila froze. She'd seen that little girl, just the night before, in a dream that came back to her in a flash of remembered horror. The car, sunlight gleaming off its windshield in a blinding spot of fire. The girl, frozen where she stood by the shiny, red metal garbage cans. The mother screaming soundlessly, holding up her hands as if to ward off the car that struck her child and flung her tiny body into the air...

Everything seemed to stop. Lila's vision narrowed to a pinpoint, focused on the little girl. It felt as if the two of them were alone in the parking lot, alone in silence and absolute stillness. The calm before the storm. It made Lila's blood run cold. Her pulse began to pound in her ears as she saw the little girl stop, bending down to pick something up off the ground. A coin or a pretty pebble? Her mother kept walking, unaware that her daughter was no longer next to her.

Lila heard the squeal of tires as if from a great distance. Before she had time to think, she was in motion, lunging forward, almost falling in her haste.

The car veered off the road, heading for the picnic area. Right for the child, who straightened up, examining her prize, not seeing the danger looming behind her.

Lila saw the car's grille, the steel grid coming straight toward her. The sunlight glinted off the windshield, almost blinding her as she ran with every bit of strength and speed she could command.

The engine roared in her ears as her hands found the child's body. She curled her hands around ribs that felt impossibly small, and hugged the little girl protectively to her chest. The onlookers' screams echoed across the small patio as Lila flung herself sideways out of the car's path, somehow managing to twist in the air so she landed on her back on the hard concrete just a second before the car plowed into the garbage can.

Chapter Six

Lila coughed, her mouth and throat filling with dust from the ground as she watched burger wrappers and cold French fries float down to the earth around her. Then, suddenly, time resumed its normal speed.

The little girl in her arms screamed. Lila prayed she hadn't hurt her. Gentle hands touched her arms, her head. A woman was sobbing words of thanks as someone took the crying child away from her.

Lila struggled to sit up. Her shoulders were scraped above her dress, her tailbone throbbed and every muscle in her body screamed in protest when she moved. She was going to be bruised to hell tomorrow. She glanced over her shoulder at the red, raw skin across her shoulder blades – which had taken the brunt of her fall – and had never been happier to see an injury in her life.

The child was alive. Clapsed protectively in the arms of her sobbing mother, she looked at Lila as if Lila was some kind of exhibit, her eyes wide. She stuck a thumb in her mouth, curling her hand into a little fist in front of her blessedly unmarred chin.

She was alive. The sickening thud Lila had heard in her dream, the helplessness she'd felt as she watched the little girl fly through the air and known without a doubt she wouldn't survive the second impact with the concrete, hadn't occurred. She'd managed to prevent the fulfillment of the vision, use her nightmare to alter the course of events.

Pulling in a shaky breath, Lila looked over at the car, where a few people were still helping an elderly man out from the driver's seat. "I don't understand," he was saying. "I want to go fishing!" Clearly, he wasn't in possession of all his faculties and should never have been allowed to get his hands on a set of car keys. It was an accident. An accident, pure and simple. But without the benefit of her dream, Lila knew this fender-bender would have taken a turn for the tragic.

Funny. Just when she'd started to fear the worst from her dreams, terrified that all the horrific things she'd been seeing would come to pass, she'd been granted the chance to change the course of events. It made her wonder if what she'd begun to consider a curse wasn't really a blessing, a chance to give back to the town and the people she was coming to care for so deeply.

But what about the other dreams? Will you always be in the right place at the right time?

Lila shivered at the thought, but tried not to let fear overshadow the moment. She'd been there this time, that was all she could handle right now.

A hand appeared in front of her face. "Can I help you up?"

Lila looked up to see a middle-aged man in a t-shirt and shorts. He had glasses and a friendly smile, and from the gentle bulge of his stomach against his shirt it was obvious he either did some kind of desk job, despite his tan, or enjoyed French fries even more than she did. She took his hand and returned his contagious smile as he helped her stand.

"Thanks." Before he could reply, Lila found herself pulled into the tight, hot embrace of the little girl's mother with such force that she almost fell over again.

"Oh my God, thank you!" the woman said, her body still trembling from shock. "If you hadn't been there, if you hadn't seen..."

"Give her some air, Amy," the kind-looking man said, pulling her off Lila. "She's injured."

"I'm not, really," Lila said. "It's only a few scratches."

The man took her arm, his grip gentle but firm. He gave her skin such a measured, professional once-over that Lila guessed who he was before he had a chance to speak.

"I'm Bob Waterhouse," he said, "the doctor here in Burlin. Does anything feel broken?"

"I don't think so."

"You can wiggle your fingers? Turn your head from side to side?" Bob ran his hands quickly across her shoulders and gently up her neck, his impersonal manner strangely calming. Satisfied, he nodded and gestured toward the woman, who still held her child close. "This here's Amy Cross and that little one is Megan."

"I'm Lila Hayes," Lila said, holding out her hand again. Bob shook it.

"I delivered Megan. I'm sure glad I didn't have to bury her. Can I buy you a Coke?"

"I'll buy you so many Cokes you'll float home," Amy Cross said devoutly, and they all laughed. The rest of the crowd, seeing that the show was over and there were no serious injuries to gawk at, dispersed, leaving Lila alone with Amy, Megan, and Bob.

"No, thanks," Lila said. "I better get going. My—" She almost said her boyfriend was waiting for her, but that wouldn't work, would it? If no one else could see Arthur, it wouldn't do to start talking about him. Invisible lovers were a good way to get branded really crazy, really quickly. "My food's getting cold," she said, remembering the cheeseburgers she'd left at the counter.

"I'll order you something else, anything you want," Amy said. "Please? Stay and eat with us. It's the least we can do."

If Arthur hadn't been walking himself home at that very moment, Lila would have happily stayed. The thought of having a new friend was enormously appealing. The thought of having three—for Bob didn't seem to be going anywhere, and Megan certainly counted as a third—was even more appealing.

But Arthur had been so upset when he left, so much more vulnerable than she'd ever seen him, that she knew she couldn't stay. She wasn't a fair-weather friend or lover, never had been.

"I can't," she said. "I've got an important call coming and I have to get home to take it."

"Rain check?"

Lila nodded. "Sure." She scrambled in her purse for a pen and wrote her number down, giving it to Amy, who recited hers back before scooping Megan up in her arms and making her goodbyes.

"I'm easy to find, just call the clinic." Bob handed her a card which she tucked into her purse before fetching the cheeseburgers from the counter.

"Two cheeseburgers, huh?" Bob asked with a twinkle in his eye as he ambled along beside her.

"One's for a stray dog," Lila said quickly, smiling as she turned to walk to her car.

"Well, drive safely. If you ever need anything, you call me, okay? And you make sure you clean those scrapes and cover them with some silicone bandages. I'd hate for you to get scars."

"Thank you," Lila said, warmed by his concern and his fatherly smile.

"And if you find I missed something and you did break a bone, you call me then too," he added with a wink. "I'm not a very good doctor."

Lila laughed, and eased into the car, setting the food in the passenger's seat. Arthur could hold it on his lap as she drove.

Speaking of Arthur...she frowned. As she pulled out of the Dairy Freeze, she had a clear view of the road ahead for at least a mile, but there was no sign of him. Trying not to worry, she drove a little more quickly, rounding the turn before slowing down again to scan the woods just past the gravel shoulder. Her heart thudded a little faster as she wondered just how long she'd been delayed.

She reached over and snapped off the radio, too nervous to handle the man screaming about the deals to be found on his car lot. She was almost halfway home. Surely even Arthur, the buff and manly, couldn't get this far, this fast, even if he was moving at a dead sprint.

"Please, please," Lila muttered under her breath, praying that he would come into view around the next turn. She struggled to keep her mind clear of visions of Arthur lying dead in a ditch, struck by a driver who wouldn't even know what the hell they'd hit. She should never have let him walk home once she'd known other people couldn't see him. It was too dangerous. Half the people in Burlin were old country couples who only took their truck out once a week to get groceries or go to church. The driving she'd seen around the country roads was, on the whole, atrocious. She should have anticipated the risk of Arthur getting hurt.

"Shit." If she didn't see him in the next few minutes, she was going to have to backtrack. She was almost to the point where the river flowed next to the pavement for several miles. After that she'd hit the bridge and it wasn't humanly possible for him to

have gotten that far. Just a little farther and she'd find a place to turn around and head back toward town...

As the car began to pass the dark, murky water of the Black River, a cold weight settled on Lila's chest. Her heart, which had been beating faster as her concern for Arthur increased, abruptly slowed its rhythm, the strange sensation making the entire left side of her body ache. She found it difficult to keep her quickly numbing fingers clasped around the wheel, and a wave of panic swept over her as her leaden foot sunk farther down against the pedal, entirely against her will.

The car sped faster along the road until the trees became a green blur outside the windows. At the same time, the woods grew darker, almost as if someone had flipped a switch. The trees made a perfect canopy over the road, which had always made this stretch shady, but never like this. There was something wrong, something horribly wrong, and Lila's panic turned to outright terror as she struggled to lift her foot from the pedal with no success.

Her body wasn't responding to her commands. It was as if someone else was powering the ship, someone or something that felt like ice water flowing beneath her skin, chilling her more deeply than any swim in the spring-fed lake outside the cottage.

The food beside her slid to the floor as the car rounded a curve way too fast, the smell as the cartons flew open making her ill. Something didn't smell right. The fried meat and cheese suddenly smelled sickly sweet, as if they had started to rot. The thought made her gag, a sound that turned to a scream when she darted a look down at the floorboard on the passenger's side. The open cartons were a seething mass of bugs, crawling over her food, their filthy black bodies making faint clicking sounds as they devoured her meal.

Lila would have been sick if she was able, but she was swiftly losing all control over her body. Her hands slipped from the wheel and her vision blurred. She felt a brief spark of hope as her numb foot slid from the gas pedal with a dull thud, but her relief was short-lived. The car wasn't slowing down.

"Stop, please stop," Lila begged, her voice not much more than a whisper. She had no idea who or what she was talking to, but she suddenly knew there was *something* in the car with her, some malignant force that might not care if she made it out of the vehicle alive. Whatever was there wasn't human. No grinning face confronted her when she looked in the rearview mirror, no voice spoke inside her mind. But there was a presence...a feeling. She wasn't alone, and whatever rode with her, within her, relished her fear.

Desperately, she tried to force her one of her feet to the brake, but only succeeded in slamming her knee into the steering wheel. She tried to scream again, to belt out a desperate prayer to whatever gods might be watching, but found not even her tongue would bend to her will.

The terror within her grew to an unparalleled peak. The darkness surrounding her was almost complete. She could barely see the road, could barely see the squirming bugs that were leaving the box to crawl over the gray cloth seat of her Jetta.

As she continued to fight for control of her arms and legs, tears began streaming from her eyes. She was trapped, and whatever foul presence directed her course definitely wanted her to die. There was no longer any doubt in her mind. The hatred, the pure venom of the being was clear as the tears sliding down her face.

Lila was positive she couldn't get any more frightened. Then she saw the black mist swirling in the rearview mirror. By the time she noticed it, it had filled the back of the car and was snaking its way over the front seats, a cold sooty fog of nightmares. As if alive, it snuck over the seats, caressing the fabric, insinuating itself toward her with the slow sureness of a snake closing in on a mouse.

She tried again to scream, but when she opened her mouth, the breath was sucked from her body. She tried to bring her hands to her throat, only to find them still lifeless at her sides. She gasped again and again, but only the faintest trickle of freezing, nasty-smelling air entered her chest.

She couldn't breathe. The fog was enclosing her, icy cold on her skin, flowing across her face and obscuring her vision.

Just before the darkness totally consumed her, Lila saw the steel-blue waters of the lake rising up to meet the front end of the car. There wasn't even time to think about the implications before she hit the water with an unholy thud, the impact throwing her forward. Only her seat belt kept her in her seat, and still her knees rammed against the bottom of the dashboard, sending pain shooting up her thighs.

Through the fog, she could still see the windshield. It was almost as if the evil presence wanted her to watch as the waters of the lake covered the car, wanted her to see death rising to hide every last trace of her mortality under its silvered surface. Water seeped in through the cracks in the Jetta's body, dripping through the doors, trickling in the air-conditioning vents. Slowly at first, then faster as they sank and the pressure increased, the car filled with water, cold and smelling of tin.

Lila suddenly knew, without a doubt, that she was going to die. Oh God, she was going to die here, alone, sucked down to the bottom of the river, and no one would ever know what happened. Bob and Amy would never know why she had left town, and Arthur...oh God, she would never see Arthur again...never get to spend another moment with the man she loved.

Love him. She did love him. The knowledge came to her with a bittersweet clarity now that it was too late for her to ever speak the words, to see the look in his eyes when she let him know how deeply she cared for him. Still, she could think the sentiment, pray that the last conscious thought in her mind would reach her magician and let him know how much she had treasured what little time they'd been able to share.

I love you, Arthur. I wish I was with you, right now, so I could show you just how much.

Chapter Seven

A strange tingling sensation crawled across Arthur's skin, a ripple of power that called to the magic within him so powerfully his knees nearly buckled.

Wishing. Lila was wishing, a soul wish that he would have no choice but to grant.

With a curse, he turned from the grove of trees that had called him from the side of the road. He hadn't seen the harm in venturing from the black trail the cars raced upon for a few moments. Lila had said the food needed to be boxed, and surely that would take some time. Besides, he knew he would hear any vehicle approaching from a great distance. Their mechanical roaring was still so strange to his ears that he would notice it in plenty of time to make his way back into sight.

He'd craved the solitude, the chance to commune with the earth so deeply that it hadn't been difficult to make excuses. As much as he'd treasured his time with Lila, it had been so long since he'd had the chance to stand alone under the trees—to find the stillness within that allowed him to commune with the deep power of the earth and draw strength from the natural world—that a part of him felt lost, adrift. Without that time to reconnect to the base of all Druid power he didn't feel whole, and he couldn't help but wonder if that was part of his latest problem.

Was that missing piece of himself the reason he couldn't be seen by anyone except the one who commanded him? Or was it something more serious? Could his debt to the gods be so great that it had not yet been repaid, that they'd found a new way to torment him? If so, he couldn't imagine that true freedom would ever be his. If two thousand years and what seemed like a dozen lifetimes of service to any who had the power to command him couldn't redeem him, he was lost.

"Lila?" Arthur called out as he reached the road, certain, for some reason, she would be parked there in the small, black vehicle she had named Jetta. She felt so close, the wish she'd made was so strong, that he expected to find her nearby. Her magic had shone brighter in the past few days than before she had called him from the painting, but he still wouldn't have thought she had the power to call upon him from a great physical distance.

Unless the wish were made in a time of great suffering. Pain and terror had their own powers, powers that boosted the strength even of people with very little magic in their veins. It was like a magical infusion, one of the reasons blood magic was so effective, although he seriously doubted Lila was in the process of offering some of her blood to the gods in return for a boon.

"Lila?" he called again, his throat tight as his eyes searched the road as it curved down toward the river. But there was no sign of her car, or any other car for that matter. The black trail was oddly silent, the air thick with an oily power that could only come

from one source. His body went cold with anger and fear, his skin pricking and crawling as if it were trying to flee, regardless of whether the rest of him went with it or not.

“By Danu, you will not have her,” he shouted into the silent air, turning to run toward the river with all the ancient power in his body.

Wraiths. At least one, possibly even more, the vile presence in the air was so strong. They were the only creatures he’d ever known to leave behind a trail of energy that clung to the skin like cobwebs, and filled the nose with the scent of flowers blooming in a rotten corpse. Why a wraith should have targeted Lila as the object of its hatred, he had no idea. Other than the husband she had told him about—a man he would gladly kill with his bare hands if he were to ever have the misfortune to come within throttling distance—Lila didn’t seem to have any lingering conflict with either the living or the dead. She was a good woman, a compassionate person, and not the type who made enemies, especially not enemies whose lust for vengeance was so strong that they would come for her after death.

Unlike ghosts or more benign spirits, a wraith was a soul who had consciously abandoned all hope for an eternity in the Otherworld. They were future demons who made a pact with the devil—an eternity of service in the hell of his choosing, in exchange for one last act of earthly horror, one last death they could claim as their own. Usually truly revolting examples of humanity in life, they were known for being even worse in the afterlife, for inflicting such painful, torturous deaths on their chosen victim that the poor soul was usually doomed to walk the earth as a spirit. Traumatic deaths weren’t easy to overcome, no matter how grounded in faith the soul had been before the event.

The knowledge that a wraith might have Lila in its clutches even now, torturing her, frightening her, maybe even permanently scarring the soul he had come to admire as much as her lovely body, made a roar of rage burst from his throat. He would destroy the creature, no matter what the cost. It would pay for daring to even *think* of harming the woman he loved.

Love her. He loved her. By the gods, the feeling was so clear now, now that it might be too late to do more than hold her in his arms as her spirit slipped from her body. He could only pray that the soul wish she made would help him save her, or at least give him the ability to enact justice on her behalf, to ensure that the wraith was doomed to a fate much worse than even the devil himself could imagine.

His lungs ached as he ran, the muscles in his legs screaming by the time he reached the place by the river’s edge where her soul, calling to his, had led him. He saw the bent and ruined grass leading to the water, and knew with a certainty that made his spirit scream that Jetta was in the water, with Lila inside.

He stopped, his chest heaving, and raised his arms. He would grant her wish. He would use the connection between them, the pure *awen* of their souls, and force the river god to give her back to him.

Fighting his panic, he reached for her in his mind, searching with all of his power for that tiny spark of life that was his Lila. His eyes burned as he found it, relief flooding through him at the knowledge that she was still alive, quickly overwhelmed by the grim determination to make sure she stayed that way.

It had been so long since he'd done magic like this. For a second he was afraid he wouldn't remember how, until the ancient words came back to him, flowing from his mouth the way the river before him flowed, matching the rhythm of the tides that still ruled even in the middle of Missouri.

The power swirled around him, gathering in his body, touching his skin, a whisper that grew louder as he reached his soul into the earth and pulled. He was the power and it was he, there was no difference between them, and he felt that tiny part of Lila that he held respond to it, strengthening. As if their hands touched and her grip around him grew tighter, he wrapped her around him, wrapped her around the power coursing through him so fast and strong he wasn't sure he could hold it much longer.

He heard shouts in the distance and realized it was his voice, his shouting, echoing off the hills and trees, sending birds from the trees in fearful flight. Their wings beat the air, disturbing it, lending even more strength to his. He felt their feathers brush against him. He was them and they were him, and his shout turned into a scream as the river god recognized him and answered his plea.

The power of the water was so strong, too strong. Arthur buckled under its weight, sinking to his knees in the purest awe. It was all he could do to keep his arms up as he started to cry at the sensation of being one with divinity in a way he had never before experienced.

He felt the wraith disappear. The river and Arthur ejected it together as easily as he would have brushed a fly off his robes, without a thought or any awareness of the effort. As much as he regretted not having the chance to battle the creature, he was grateful, could only be grateful, as slowly the Jetta appeared, sliding backward out of the water, mud and silt streaming from its black body, until the water only reached the middle of the doors. He saw Lila in the driver's seat, her face pressed up against the car's window.

"Thank you," Arthur sobbed, feeling the river leave him, feeling his power starting to ebb. He stumbled as he reached the car, sinking thigh-deep into water, meaning to wrench Lila's door open and yank her from the car.

The plan changed slightly when it flung open itself, slamming him in the knee. He howled and collapsed, the cold river reaching his chest and making him yelp.

"Arthur!" Lila screamed, flinging herself from the car and into his arms. She was choking and gasping, spitting water out of her mouth as she buried her face in his neck.

The pain in his leg disappeared. Everything disappeared, except for the feeling of holding her cold-but-alive body close to him. Her breasts crushed against his chest, her arms so tight around his neck that he thought he might lose consciousness, knowing in

the same moment that he didn't care if he did. He just wanted to hold her, to press her to him, to join the *awen* with another connection, a physical connection.

Power still flowed through him. He'd gathered so much of it inside himself it would be hours before he managed to get rid of it all. No matter. He shared it with her, feeling her skin warm against his.

"Arthur," she kept saying. "Arthur." Her fingers dug into his back, holding him so tightly he feared her bones would break.

Something else was breaking too. His own heart, as he realized just how close he'd come to losing her. "Lila," he whispered into her wet skin. "Lila, I love you."

"I love you too," she sobbed. "Oh, Arthur, I love you too."

Unable to wait even another second, he found her lips with his, taking her in a soul-shattering kiss that ripped away the fine veneer of his control. With a growl, he lifted her in his arms, carrying her out of the river, keeping his lips fastened to hers. Even with the cold water streaming from their bodies, he was hot, his cock straining against the sodden fabric of his jeans. Her skin through her own soaked clothing radiated warmth. Her passion beat against his skin with tiny, furious wings.

He spirited her away from the riverbank, deeper into the forest, where the trees could shield them from the road and the sun dry their clothes and warm their skin. When they were safely concealed, he sunk to his knees, bringing her around as gently as he could to lay her on the ground beneath him. Their eyes met and held, and Arthur's breath caught with the power of their connection, a connection he'd never expected to feel again, no matter how many lifetimes he lived.

"I love you," he said. "No matter what happens, no matter how many years may separate us, I love you."

"I love you too. So much." Her eyes were filled with tears, and when Arthur reached up to wipe one away with his thumb, he realized his were, as well.

He kissed her again, opening her mouth with his tongue, slipping inside the warm softness. Their shared emotions added a new depth to the kiss, something rich and strange that made Arthur's heart leap painfully in his chest. It had been so long, so many centuries since he'd felt this. The bond he had with Lila was so amazing, so strong. In it was the ghost of Brigid, the whisper of her memory, and he recognized her with him and felt her let him go, disappearing into the clean, summer air in one moment of pure, beautiful sweetness.

"Arthur?" Lila was looking up at him, the perfect trust and love on her face bringing him back to her, his heart filled with hope. He smiled.

"Just remembering something," he said, kissing her again, before taking his mouth down to her neck, to taste her skin. His fingers fumbled with the wet fabric of her dress, lifting it, letting his hand roam across her cool, bare belly and farther up to cup the soft fullness of one breast in his palm. She laid her head back on the grass, watching him through half-closed eyes as he stroked her reverently. Her skin was so soft, so smooth.

Lila shifted position slightly, Arthur's hands on her skin sending shivers of pleasure through her body. She was so alive, alive with desire and the fire of his touch, a fire that countered the cold chill of the river, banishing pain to the furthestmost reaches of her awareness. There would come a time when she'd have to wrap her mind around everything that happened, but right now was a time for thanksgiving. She could feel the very blood racing through her veins praising the power that had lifted her from the darkest moment in her life, vanquished whatever evil force had tried to destroy her. Her heart beat a rapid tattoo of thanks in her chest as Arthur held her close and kissed her, setting her body aflame.

She wasn't sure how her clothes came off. Somewhere in the fevered daze that had taken her over, Arthur had removed them, stripping his own from his hard, wet body as he did so until they were naked together in the soft, sweet-smelling grass. It clung to her rapidly drying skin, cool and slightly prickly. There was something quiet in the grass, something quiet in the earth, like a benediction of what she and Arthur were doing. The universe saw them making love, and it approved.

He slid into her, his hard heat stretching her walls, making her back arch with pleasure as a groan escaped her throat. His mouth captured her right nipple, sucking gently. She gripped the back of his head, his hair damp against her palm and slippery between her fingers, and held him even closer to her as he slowly withdrew and plunged into her again.

His cries were muted against her skin, but she felt the heat of his breath, his voice vibrating against her. His hands clutched at her behind, lifting it slightly, changing the angle of his thrusts so he could tease that tiny spot inside her that brought her the most pleasure, concerned with pleasing her even in this moment when their coming together was about so much more than multiple orgasms.

Lila clutched at him with a sound of abandon, wishing she had words to tell him how much he meant to her, how much this meant to her, but she was quickly moving beyond speech. Her fingers scratched against the thick muscles of his upper arms and she lifted her face to his again, desperate for his kiss. Her lips were hungry, devouring his, her breath coming in short sharp pants into his mouth. He answered her both in passion and in need, their tongues twining together in a crazed, urgent dance.

She started to spin out of her body as Arthur's steady rhythm increased. She moaned as he swelled inside her, thrilling to hear his cries grow louder as they both neared the peak.

"Arthur," she whispered, opening her eyes, suddenly needing to see him, to look into his face, so perfectly framed by the green leaves of the trees around them, so sharp and beautiful against the cloudless blue sky.

The second his eyes met hers, Lila's orgasm hit, sending her screaming into some other place. Arthur was with her, never leaving her, his soul taking the same journey as hers, though their bodies still lay fused together under the trees. She felt him in the clouds with her, his arms so tightly around her that she knew he would never let her go. She was wrapped in his love for her and the sensation made the delicious spasms of

her orgasm more intense than any she'd ever known. This was so much more, so far beyond what she'd dreamed sex could be. She felt whole and right and safe, safe in Arthur's arms, safe with him in her body, safe in the knowledge that he would never let anything hurt her if any sacrifice on his part could prevent it. He would never lie, he would never leave...he would always be there for her, just as he had been today.

As their bodies stilled, their breath still coming in soft pants, though without the desperation of moments before, something inside Lila eased. All of the terror of the car, of the lake...it would never leave her, but she could deal with it now. Arthur had saved her. Somehow, some way, through a kind of power that she couldn't begin to understand, he had reached out to her beneath the cold water and begun to pull her back into the world of the living. Then he'd finished the job with his body and soul, making love to her with enough passion to help her to come back to her center after an experience that made even Clayton's worst beatings look tame in comparison.

"I can't believe what you did. I know you're a magician, but I never imagined you could do something like that," she murmured, as Arthur turned to lie on his back and she snuggled up next to him, resting her head on his chest. The sun warmed her skin.

"I am only a conduit, an incredibly grateful conduit," he said, hugging her tightly to him.

"Conduit. I can understand that," Lila said, remembering the energy that had filled the car, a warm, timeless energy that reminded her of the few times she'd managed to get her entire yoga class into a deep meditation. "But I still can't believe you found me. There were so many places I could have gone off the road, and I didn't even see you. I actually thought you were hurt, I was so worried—"

"Shh." His big hand rested on top of her head, stroking her hair. "I'm sorry I ventured from the road. If I'd been where I said I would be, the creature might not have found you. Or at least not alone."

"Creature," Lila echoed, shocked that he'd known about the black presence in the car. "What's going on, Arthur? Did it come out of the painting too? Is it—"

"No, it's a wraith, a spirit that has abandoned all hopes for eternity in exchange..."

"In exchange for what? Arthur?"

"Don't worry. You have the power to stop it," he mumbled, his eyes starting to look heavy, almost as if he were going to sleep. "I will not let it have you. If my magic alone can not destroy it, you will use your last wish to ensure your safety."

"My last wish," Lila said, almost wanting to laugh. Arthur wasn't some genie from a lamp. But then she remembered the last thought she'd had before the car filled with water, a thought that was almost a prayer and had most certainly contained the word "wish". "You're not joking, are you?"

"Three soul wishes, the first to draw me from the object of my enchantment, the second two to grant your deepest, most profound desires," he said, his voice more than merely weary. The man sounded like he was ready to pass flat out in the grass. Lila sat

up just in time to see his eyes close and his face take on the stillness it had when he was on the edge of consciousness.

"Arthur, don't you dare fall asleep. You can't drop a bomb like that and then think I'm going to let you take a catnap," Lila said, her voice harder than she could remember it sounding in a long time. "Arthur!"

"I love you, Lila. The magic has drained me, but we will talk about this very soon," he said, obviously having to struggle to keep his eyes open.

"You're right, we will talk about it very soon. Very soon, like right now!" Lila leapt to her feet and nailed her lying lover with a look that he would be wise to realize signaled she meant business. She wasn't a fan of violence, but right now the temptation to give Arthur a swift kick in the ribs was almost more than she could resist. And if he dared to finish falling asleep, Lila knew she would probably lose the urge to try.

Chapter Eight

The black Jetta stood with its driver-side door wide open, the interior still half full of river. Sheriff Sam Walker pulled his cruiser up onto the soft bank and got out, sighing as he did so. Another drunk running off the road, he guessed. The only type of crime he really dealt with out here in Burlin, save for the occasional theft of lawn decorations. Though not a big fan of concrete deer or garden gnomes himself, he usually tracked down the teenagers responsible and gave them a slap on the wrist.

That was what he liked about Burlin. After spending five years on the force in East St. Louis, he'd been happy to come here and live a quieter life, although the woman he'd planned to share it with had decided she didn't like either him or the town enough to stay.

Most nights he thought the tradeoff was worth it.

Still, something about this accident didn't seem quite right. There was silt and bracken on top of the car, as if it had been completely submerged and then pulled back out of the river. He couldn't for the life of him understand how that could have happened, at least not without some heavy equipment. But only one set of tracks led to the river's edge.

He shook his head. Figuring out *how* it happened wasn't his biggest concern at the moment. Finding the unfortunate driver was. He headed back to his car to call in the plates, maybe get his deputy that owned a boat out here to help him search. They might end up dragging the river before the night was over, a thought that made him turn away from the water, desperately searching for some sign of life along the bank.

There weren't any houses or buildings along this section of road, but the woods were thick, thick enough that the driver could have wandered into them and disappeared from view. The idea that some injured soul was wandering around out there—possibly in a drunken stupor, possibly with a concussion or other injuries from the accident—worried him.

Especially if that wounded person was a stranger in the area, which is what he or she seemed to be. The car was licensed in South Dakota.

He'd just picked up the radio receiver when he heard a scream.

It was a woman, her voice high and angry. Instinctively he dropped the radio and started running, heading for the voice. She didn't stop shouting, her words carrying through the trees, muffled at first, but becoming clearer as he neared her location.

"I trusted you!" she was yelling. "How could you lie to me? No, a lie of omission is still a lie. You intentionally kept things from me, lied about the whole reason you're here, your whole purpose!"

She fell silent, as if she were listening to someone else speak. Though he couldn't hear the other person's voice, Sam already had a pretty good idea where the yells were coming from. The clearing the locals knew as Idho's Circle, a stand of centuries-old yew trees, always drew more than their share of strange activity. Betting on his hunch, he headed for them.

Sam was glad the woman hadn't gone too far from the scene of the accident, but wondered what exactly he was getting ready to walk into the middle of. It sounded like a domestic conflict of epic proportions, and the suspicion made him unsnap his holster, freeing his weapon for easier access. Anyone who thought a lovers' quarrel wasn't as serious as a drug bust or a bar brawl hadn't worked enough house calls, as the cops on his old beat had called them. There were a hell of a lot more emotions involved in domestic disputes than in most crimes, and they had the potential to get really ugly, really quickly.

"No, you listen!" she shouted. "It does matter! You lied to me, how can that not matter? From the second you walked out of that painting, everything you've said, everything you've done has been a —"

She stopped abruptly when Sam entered the clearing. So did he. The woman doing the shouting was in the center of the circle of trees, yelling at nothing. The sun shone on every inch of her bare skin as she stood, completely naked, not ten feet away from him.

He tried to avert his eyes from the sight of her perfect form, slightly dirty from what he guessed must be the water of the river. Her light brown hair was still damp, and the breeze blew it gently away from her face, emphasizing the delicate structure of her bones.

She was beautiful. Beautiful, and clearly upset. She'd stopped shouting when she saw him, but there were tears in her eyes and running down her flushed cheeks.

"Ma'am," he said, taking a cautious step toward her, "can I help you?"

"No." She stepped back from him. One hand instinctively rose to cover her breasts, making their fullness rise over the top of her arm, while the other shot down to hide the hair of her mound. She looked like Botticelli's Birth of Venus, standing there, and Sam's breath caught in his chest.

Do your job, he commanded himself. You're not here to gape at her, you're here to arrest her if she needs arresting and help her if she needs help.

Still, he could think of some ways he could protect and serve her that had nothing to do with his job.

"Ma'am," he tried again. "Is that your car? The Jetta back there at the river?"

She kept glancing off to her side, like she was looking at someone, giving them a signal. Sam didn't like it. There was nobody there that he could see, but anyone could be hiding in the trees with a high-powered assault rifle. Thoughts of her attractiveness fled as he slowly lowered one hand to his holster, closing his fingers around the handle of his weapon.

"I'm fine," she said. "I had a little accident, but I'm not hurt. Okay?"

"It might be okay. But I'm going to need to ask you some questions."

"What kind of questions?" Was that fear in her eyes? She wasn't being hostile, exactly, but Sam had been a cop long enough to know when someone was hiding something, and this woman was definitely hiding something. Was she drunk, or crazy, or both? She was standing naked in a field, yelling at nothing, while her car sat half submerged a hundred yards away, and she seemed more concerned with getting back to her imaginary conversation than dealing with an officer of the law. Not rational behavior, not by any stretch of his own fairly active imagination.

"Have you been drinking?"

"No," she said. "I have not." She glared off to her side again.

"What are you looking at, ma'am?"

"Nobody. I mean, nothing."

He took another step toward her, close enough that he could smell the faint tang of the river water still on her skin. "I think you'd better come with me."

That was definitely fear. "No, officer —"

"Sheriff."

"Sheriff, I'm sorry," she said. She was looking right at him now, staring with green eyes that shocked him with their intensity, but he could still feel her trying not to look to her side. "I'm fine, really, I had a — a bee flew into the car, and scared me, and I ran off the road, and it...it chased me and got caught in my clothes. So I took them off, and I was just, you know, letting off some steam."

"To the trees?" he asked, raising one eyebrow in his otherwise expressionless face. Cop face, it was a useful thing to have, especially when you didn't want the woman you were questioning to realize you still couldn't stop thinking about her state of undress.

"Um...yes? You gotta love nature." She tried to smile at him. It wasn't convincing.

"I think you need to come with me," he repeated. "Why don't you go ahead and get dressed and come back to my car, and we'll figure out what to do next."

Please let her get dressed. The curves of her body were incredibly distracting.

Not that her clothes were better, he realized as she scooped a piece of fabric from the ground and pulled it hurriedly over her head. Her white dress was still damp, and clung to her breasts like tissue, emphasizing their fullness. Sam had a sudden, violently sensual image of his hands cupping her through the damp fabric, of falling to his knees in the grass to suckle her nipples, warming them with the heat of his mouth.

"Listen, there was no one else involved in the accident, Sheriff."

"You can call me Sam, Sam Walker," he said, clearing his throat and offering her his hand.

"Lila Hayes, nice to meet you, Sam," she said with a smile that warmed something deep inside him, and made him reconsider his former opinion of her beauty. She wasn't just beautiful, she was stunning, magical, easily the most captivating woman he'd ever seen, bar none.

"A pleasure, Ms. Hayes. Now let's go get you a blanket from my car, and I'll get your official statement."

"Please, call me Lila. But do I really need to give a statement? I mean, I'm not going to press charges against anyone or anything. And I was the only one hurt, so there won't be any insurance—"

"If there's more than five hundred dollars damage, I'm going to be obligated to write you a ticket for reckless driving. And from the looks of things, your car is totaled, Lila," he said, forcing himself to ignore the startling intimacy of feeling her name on his lips. He would continue to act professionally, he would deal with this woman just as he would any other person, male or female, he found in a similar situation. He would not be convinced to compromise his professional integrity by a pretty smile or a body created for temptation.

"Sam, a bee flew into my car. I don't understand how that qualifies as reckless driving." She put her hands on her gently swelling hips, drawing his gaze to the apex of her thighs where he could clearly see the thatch of hair that covered her sex through the damp fabric. Didn't she have any underwear? What kind of woman wore a white dress without underwear?

The kind of woman he'd been looking for since he moved to Burlin, a woman with a raw sensuality, a woman who could match the passion he had kept tightly under lock and key for the better part of five years.

"Sometimes the law doesn't make sense, but it's still the law," he said, thinking about other things that didn't make sense. Like the fact that he was getting hard, losing the fight against the erection that had been threatening since the moment he'd discovered her in the clearing.

"What?" Her gaze darted to her side with a look of stunned surprise before she forced her eyes back to his with obvious effort.

"I said that sometimes the law—"

"I heard that part. I just— I was just...making sure I heard you correctly," she said, her brow furrowing and her eyes closing as if she were trying to concentrate on talking over a crowd of people. Or maybe the voices in her head were just fighting for attention. The only woman who had sparked his interest in months was nuttier than a fruitcake— just his luck.

"Lila, are you okay?"

"I'm fine...I'm— No, I'm not okay. I had a horrible wreck, almost died, and now he's—I mean, you're—threatening to give me a ticket. Aren't you supposed to be protecting and serving the public? How are you doing that by trying to intimidate me and—"

"I'm not trying to intimidate you, I—"

"You've had your hand on your gun for the last five minutes. How is that *not* trying to intimidate me?"

"I thought there was someone else in the area. I was only trying to do my —"

"And you haven't even asked if I was injured."

"You don't look injured," Sam said, realizing it was a stupid thing to say as soon as the words were out of his mouth. He might as well confess outright that he'd let his eyes rove over every inch of her sinfully soft-looking bare skin.

"I could have internal injuries. I could have a bleeding liver or kidney or a — Will you just shut up?" she said, turning to yell the words into the air at her side.

"Lila, you're going to have to come with me, right now. Or I'm going to be forced to cuff you and take you back to my car by force." Sam wondered if the local clinic was going to be able to deal with Lila or if they'd need to transport her to a larger hospital. Whether she had a habit of talking to imaginary people or if this was a relatively new development related to the crash, he had a feeling it might be more than Dr. Waterhouse could handle solo.

"I'm not crazy and I'm not injured and I'm not coming with you." She turned a fiery gaze back to him that held a heavy sexual overtone he couldn't begin to understand.

He couldn't understand it, but he could feel it ripple over his skin, making his breath catch and his traitorous cock thicken. As she stalked toward him with unmistakable intent, he took a nervous step backward, then stopped. Why was he nervous?

Maybe it was the abrupt change in her attitude, or the serious ethical consequences of letting her get much closer. Or maybe it was simply the fact that she was looking at him like he was dinner that warned something deep inside him to use a healthy dose of caution. There was still anger in her eyes, a deep rage he didn't understand, and her face was set in defiant lines that he sensed didn't have much to do with him. It was almost as if this performance were for someone else's eyes, a sensation that was troubling on several levels. The fact that there was no one else in sight was part of it, but more disturbing was the realization that a part of him wanted the sexual energy that radiated around her to be for him and him alone.

"Is this what you want?" she asked, stopping inches away from him, until he could feel the heat of her body stroking his skin like a physical caress, feel the warmth of her breath on his lips.

"Hey, Lila, I—" Sam tried to speak, to tell her he didn't know where she'd gotten the idea he wanted her to come on to him, despite the fact that the bulge in his pants was most definitely not his gun. But before he could speak, her mouth was on his, hard and hot, her arms circling his neck to bring him closer.

God, she tasted sweet. He registered it immediately, even while part of him was panicking at how completely unprofessional this was. He'd just blown whatever chance he had to bust her, and possibly paved the way for a lawsuit by committing the single most unethical act of his entire career. The other part of him, however, couldn't give less of a shit. Every hungry, aching, sexually denied cell in his body crowed in triumph as

her breasts crushed against his chest and her stomach pressed the hard ridge of his cock, sending heat rushing through his entire body.

It was such a deliberate seduction. The angry motions of her lips against his, the pressure of her body, all seemed calculated to demonstrate something Sam didn't understand. He didn't know what she was trying to prove. There was no doubt that he wanted her. He'd wanted her the minute he saw her, but until a few seconds ago, she couldn't have known for sure, couldn't have realized how hard and ready he was.

He hadn't given out any signals, hadn't said a single word to her that wasn't professional in nature. No matter how much he might have been tempted, he wasn't the type of man to indulge his baser instincts. More to the point, he wasn't that kind of cop.

But apparently she thought he was, and he wasn't doing much to discourage her. The evidence of his baser instincts pressed against her stomach and his arms were wrapped around her thin body, pulling her as close as two people could get, close enough that he could feel the dampness of her clothes starting to soak through his uniform. The way she encouraged his lips to open and slid her tongue between them, exploring his mouth, was like a professional hit, leaving him filled with a reckless passion even as something within him became...offended.

So she thought he was some hard-up local yokel who could be won over with a few begrudging kisses? It was insulting, and so much less than he was willing to settle for.

No matter what went down between the two of them in the next few minutes, he couldn't let it affect his professional decisions. He might not give her a ticket, but he would certainly get the answers he needed, one way or another. In the meantime, however, he was determined to prove that he could give as good as he got, and that Sam Walker might have a thing or two to show her about seduction.

Deliberately, Sam squeezed Lila's hips and pressed her closer, one hand sliding down over the curve of her ass to the hem of her flimsy dress. Grass still clung to her bare thigh beneath it, and it fell to the ground as he ran his fingers over the soft skin. He let his touch be gentle, teasing as he traced a path from the inside of her thigh up toward her sex, waiting until he felt her relax slightly before he drastically altered the quality of his caress. She gasped in surprise as he roughly lifted her thigh, wrapping it around his hips and pressing his cock into more intimate contact with her center.

He felt the hesitation creep into the kiss as she realized she no longer controlled it. Ruthlessly, he took advantage, dipping his tongue into her mouth, lifting his hand to caress one swollen breast through the damp fabric.

As he brushed his thumb over the hard bud of her nipple, she moaned softly, and in that tiny sound Sam knew he'd won. The problem was he didn't really care anymore. Whatever game they'd been playing seemed insignificant at the moment, because somewhere along the way, this kiss had become real. Their desire had become real. He felt it in the desperation of her lips, in the tiny movements of her body as she rocked her pelvis forward to grind against his. For his part, the sexual craving that had consumed

him the minute he laid eyes on her shifted, transforming into a yearning for something more, a something more that he hadn't ever expected to long for again.

But there it was, that ache, that lust for an ineffable experience that he'd always felt, but never known how to fulfill. This was not just a kiss, not just a game. This was far more important. He knew she felt it too when her fingers curled in the short hair at the back of his neck with a soft sigh that took his breath away.

Sam suddenly felt more attuned to her body than a few seconds before. He could feel her body temperature rise, practically hear her heart race faster and knew that the nipple under his palm was becoming painfully erect. He tore his mouth from hers and lowered it, the dizzy memory of his vision somehow mingling with what was really happening until it seemed there were two Sams who flicked their tongues lightly over the hard little peak, two Sams who felt a thrill go through them at the way she clasped his head and pulled him more tightly to her.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, teasing it gently with his teeth through her dress. The whimper she made in her throat produced a corresponding groan from him. Heat radiated from between her legs, scorching his stomach even through his shirt. He lowered his hand, sliding it reverently down across her ribs and stomach before he lifted her skirt and delved into that slick heat. Her hips bucked forward against his fingers when he found the hard little bundle of nerves that hid in her folds and began to circle. The warm, musky scent of her found him and held him, enrapturing him with her unique fragrance.

Their lips met again, with less skill and finesse this time, but with so much more passion. Their breaths mingled, panting in unison. Her fingers dug into his back and she shifted her weight, spreading her legs wider so he could fully explore every inch of her sex. It was an invitation that he couldn't resist. Slowly and thoroughly, he teased through her slick folds, his fingers dripping by the time he was ready to finish what he'd started, coming back to stroke her where he knew she would appreciate it most. He slid his index finger into her weeping passage, supporting her with his other fingers while at the same time flicking his thumb over her clit with the softest, lightest touch he could muster.

In response, she lowered one hand to his hard cock, stroking it through his pants. The firm pressure of her palm and the friction caused by the fabric against his heated, sensitive skin sent him out of his head. He was so hot, he was ready to explode. When Lila started to come, drenching his hand with her hot juices, it was everything he could do to keep from coming with her, in a way he hadn't done since he was a teenager.

She cried out, a wild, abandoned sound that called to everything male within him, making him feel oddly victorious and completely enraptured. He watched as her head fell back, and lowered his lips to her neck. He kissed her with all the hunger surging through him as her body throbbed around his finger, and when the throbbing started to fade, he inserted another, practically howling his satisfaction when she jerked in his arms and cried out again.

Something was happening here, something beyond an outrageously erotic meeting in the trees. Sam felt himself losing control, as if the incredibly charged energy of her orgasm had entered his body, filling him with a strange power even as it stole his equilibrium, making him dizzy, almost drunk with the raw electricity of her touch. Every time her intimate muscles squeezed his fingers, he inched closer to some dark abyss. He wasn't sure if he was going to come or completely lose consciousness until she snaked one small hand down the front of his pants to encase his red-hot cock in her soft palm.

To his embarrassment, he knew he wouldn't last, couldn't last, as her fragrance assaulted him and her hand moved quickly, efficiently, bringing him to a point well beyond stopping. He wanted to rip his pants open and sink himself deep into the slick channel that begged him to fill it, but her hand moved so fast, her grip was so firm, he didn't think he could move. He was caught by her as surely as a fish on a line, and the last thing he was able to think was how poorly that analogy suited her before the pressure building in his pelvis exploded and he came in a blinding rush.

Chapter Nine

Lila wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, with his wet fingers now on her thigh and her hand still shoved down his pants, coated with the evidence of his pleasure. But by the time she recovered enough to look around the clearing, Arthur had disappeared. She thought he had backed away into the trees sometime after Sam's tongue had found her nipple, but she couldn't be sure. She'd been too distracted, too busy coming on a stranger's hand to realize exactly when her other lover had walked away.

She suddenly felt physically ill. God, what had she done?

No matter that Arthur had practically ordered her to engage Sam in a little late afternoon delight, there was no excuse for the way she'd acted. She loved Arthur, in spite of the lies, and she had never been a two-man kind of woman. Once her heart was involved, her body seemed to shut down when it came to anyone but her chosen lust-love object.

At least, that's how it had always been before and how she'd assumed it would be when she'd forced herself to take on the role of sexual aggressor with a perfect stranger. Sure, he was a wildly attractive stranger, with black hair that set off eyes as hauntingly blue-gray as the lake outside her cottage. But she wasn't the type to get turned on by looks alone and she *definitely* didn't get turned on by the idea of her boyfriend watching her get it on with another man.

In fact, the very suggestion had hurt her more than she would have believed possible. The entire time she'd been trying to explain herself to the sheriff, Arthur had been urging her to have sex with him. Apparently, the head of local law enforcement had some untapped magic of his own, a power she'd be able to use to protect herself from the wraith until Arthur was once again battle ready.

At first, she'd been sure he was talking out of his head. He certainly seemed off-kilter, barely able to stay awake even when she was reading him the riot act. But he'd kept repeating himself, and by the fifth or sixth time he'd ordered her to make a move on the sheriff, she'd been upset and angry enough she'd decided to call his bluff.

Only to find there was no bluff.

Now here she was, embarrassed by her own wanton behavior, wishing desperately this hadn't happened. She didn't even want to look Sam in the eye, so she had no idea how to gracefully remove her hand from his pants. Somehow she didn't think she'd be able to pull off a quick "thank you for the orgasms" and be on her merry way. He was a cop, he'd been questioning her, and now, somehow, they had ended up in a very post-coital kind of situation. It was completely beyond her realm of experience and Lila half

hoped that the earth would open up and swallow her whole. It seemed preferable to dealing with the aftermath of her most recent poor judgment call.

Sam pulled away slightly and Lila forced herself to meet his gaze, shocked to see that his eyes had seemed to change color. Now they were a deep soft blue, almost innocent-looking, and strangely incongruous with the rest of his slightly hard-bitten appearance. The wrinkles around his eyes made him look older than she guessed he was, and the military-short black hair did nothing to soften the sharp planes of his face, but those eyes... They were haunting, drew her in with a mesmerizing power that was unexpected and whose effect on her was anything but innocent.

Of course, his body didn't help matters much, either. As mortified as she'd been to be found buck naked and yelling at her invisible friend, she'd still noted how tall and lean he was, how well he filled out the tan shirt that was part of his uniform. The man was walking feminine temptation, and certainly no innocent when it came to the ladies. He'd proved that.

So maybe he'd know how to handle this awkward moment a little better than she would. With a held breath, Lila slowly, and as casually as possible, withdrew her hand from the front of Sam's pants. She knew she was probably blushing bright red as she crossed her hands in front of her in a gesture that was ridiculously demure for a woman who had done what she'd done, but it was the best she could do. Now she'd just wait for Sam to talk first, and hopefully be able to follow his lead to a smooth conclusion to their erotic interlude.

"Lila." The way he said her name was strangely intimate, making her breath catch. She suddenly wanted to say his name back to him with the same softness around the edges, and maybe ask him if he wanted a hug.

Jesus Christ. What was wrong with her? Was she starting to fall for every guy she fucked, or fingered, or whatever? What did that mean for her and Arthur? Was the powerful emotion between them real if she could feel even the hint of something more than lust for another man? Could Arthur forgive her for something like that? Where the hell *was* Arthur anyway?

"Do you mind telling me who you're looking for?" Sam asked, a harder note to his voice that made Lila pull her eyes back to him, away from the line of trees where she suspected Arthur was hiding.

"No one, I just...I'm just—I'm not sure where to look," Lila said, the words grounded in truth. She didn't know where to look, but most certainly didn't think it was safe to keep staring into the blue eyes in front of her, eyes that were now taking on an edge of gray, an impending storm in a summer sky. "This was very...unexpected."

"Why don't I take you home?" he asked, once again the kinder, gentler sheriff, so kind and gentle, in fact, that Lila wouldn't have been surprised if he'd taken her hand in his to lead her back to the cruiser.

"No, thanks." She darted another quick look to the trees, still seeing no sign of Arthur. "It's not that far, I can walk."

For a second, he looked surprised and maybe a little hurt, but as she watched, the expression disappeared, replaced by the professional calm she'd seen earlier. She noted, however, with a strange burst of female satisfaction, that it was harder for him to remain detached when the front of his trousers sported a large wet spot. "Fine," he said. "Where are you staying? I'll drive by later and make sure you got home all right, make sure that you haven't noticed any injuries once the shock wears off."

"I'm not in shock."

"I'd feel better if I could stop by and see that for myself."

Something about the tone of his voice alerted her that he still didn't trust her. Fine, two could play that game.

"I'd rather not tell you. I don't know you that well."

"If you'll remember, ma'am, I wasn't the one who instigated anything more than a professional relationship."

"So now I'm ma'am again?"

"Just give me your address and I'll let you go."

"You can't seriously still be interrogating me," she snapped.

Sam's eyebrows rose for a second before dropping back down. In that movement, Lila realized what she'd said and how a police officer would take her words. "Did you think giving me a hand job would mean you wouldn't have to answer any more questions?"

"I didn't mean it like that," she said quietly, her cheeks burning again. This was, without a doubt, the most embarrassing encounter of her adult life. She was ashamed of herself, and deeply saddened that Sam Walker thought she was the kind of woman who would use sex to get herself out of trouble.

"Seems like an awfully long way to go to avoid getting your driver's license run through the system." The voice that had been so breathless with passion only a few minutes before was now cold, professional. Lila's heart sank. "Is there something I should know?"

"I wasn't trying to manipulate you. I kissed you for reasons that have nothing to do with the accident," she said, startled to find tears threatening. She must be more traumatized by the last half-hour than she realized. She certainly couldn't have let a total stranger hurt her feelings, no matter how intimate they'd been only a few minutes past.

Sam was silent after that, letting her words linger long enough that she was forced to look up into his eyes. The sadness she saw there threw her even more than her own odd emotional state. She had to fight harder than she would have believed possible to keep from reaching up to touch his face, to ease away the confusion she saw there.

"I would ask you what those reasons were, but my gut says I won't get an honest answer."

Lila could only return his stare, knowing that he was right, but almost wishing she could tell him about Arthur, an urge that made absolutely no sense and would probably get her locked away in the nearest loony bin.

"Sam, please trust me," she replied. His gaze was unnerving. "I haven't done anything wrong, I just —"

"You're going to have to do better than that, Lila. I want to help you, I really do, but you're going to have to give me more than that to go on."

"I can't. Really, I can't. I would, but —"

"Then let me see your license," he said, obviously losing patience with her. He turned and started to walk back toward the riverbank, forcing Lila to run to catch up with him. "Is your purse in the car? Let's go get it."

"Look, Sam, please..." She swallowed. She'd have to trust someone, sometime, and this looked like the time. If she didn't explain, he would haul her in and her name would be on the public record. She wondered how long it would take Clayton to find her if that happened.

"Sam, I...please don't do that. Please don't run my license." Seeing the stubborn, set look on his face, she held out her hands. "It's not like that. I didn't do anything wrong, I swear it. But my husband, my soon-to-be ex-husband is, well, he's not a very nice man."

"I'm listening." Sam turned to face her, his features still controlled, but something about the way he looked at her making her feel she could trust him, that he really did want to help her if she'd let him.

"I left him. And he's a cop. If you run my license, he'll see that you did and he'll find me. I don't mind telling you that scares me to death." Tears started in her eyes, and she didn't bother to brush them away. "Please. Please, Sam. I swear I haven't been drinking, I swear I didn't do anything wrong, in fact —" She couldn't believe this hadn't even occurred to her before. "Ask the town doctor, Bob Waterhouse. And his friend, Amy, the one with the little girl named Meg. I was with them at the burger stand just before I got in the car and came back here. They'll tell you."

"Bob and Amy?" To her relief, Sam's expression cleared a little. "You were with them prior to the accident?"

"Yes. They'll know I was fine when I left, that I wasn't drunk, and that I'm not a lunatic or anything either. It was just a bee in the car. I promise you."

Sam thought about it for a minute. She could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he decided what to do, and she knew what the problem was. He wanted to find out more, wanted to press her for more of an explanation. He didn't really believe her story about the bee, and her behavior in the clearing hadn't exactly made her seem like the most trustworthy person in the world. His cop instincts were telling him to take her in, no matter what his more sensitive side might have in mind.

But what had just happened between them put him in a very awkward position. If he took her in, there was a very good chance she would tell everyone what they'd done, and that could mean his job.

She could see he believed her about Clayton, however, and knew from the look he gave her now that, more than fear about his ethical misconduct, he was nodding his head because of it. If he thought she was lying, she sensed he would have taken her in anyway, no matter the consequences for him. The integrity he displayed surprised her even as she admired it. Sam Walker was a good cop. It had been a long time since she'd seen one.

"Okay," he said finally. "But I'm going to take you home." He held up his hand when she opened her mouth. "No, you're not walking. I'll take you, and then I'm going to talk to Bob and Amy, see what they say. If they support you, we'll forget about this accident. If not...well, we'll talk more about it then."

"Thank you, so much."

"Don't thank me yet, I still want your driver's license."

Mystified, she waded through the shallow water over to her car and pulled out her purse, wincing at the destruction wrought by the river. She had no idea what she was going to do about the car. She couldn't put in a claim to the insurance. Clayton would find her. It looked like she was without transportation, and to top it off, her dress was now wet up to the middle of her thighs again.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she waded back to where Sam stood on the bank. She'd been doing so well. Now she'd lost her car and Burlin had nothing resembling public transportation. She wouldn't have a way to get into town to get groceries or to get out of town if Clayton somehow came looking for her. She'd lost a vital part of what made her feel safe and independent. Combined with Arthur's abandonment, it felt like she'd lost everything. Even as grateful as she was to be alive, that hurt more than she wanted to admit.

She just needed to get through this encounter, get home where she could fall apart in peace. Then she could try to figure out how to deal with this latest massive pothole in her already bumpy road.

Lila fished out the license and handed it to Sam. "Why do you need it? You're not going to run me through the system, are you?"

He shook his head. "No. You have my word on that. But I don't want you skipping town right away, either. I figure it'll be hard for you to do that without your ID. If everything checks out with Bob and Amy, I'll give this back to you, okay?"

It wasn't, really, but Lila didn't have much choice. She nodded, even as she wondered where the hell he expected her to go with no car.

"Good." He walked over to the back of the police cruiser. Lila noticed he was careful not to touch her again. She wasn't sure why this made her sad, but it did. As he popped the trunk and rummaged around inside, she scanned the woods in the direction of the clearing one last time. Arthur was still nowhere to be seen. He could have joined her, could probably have snuck along for the ride back to the cottage without Sam being any wiser—one of the few pluses to him being invisible to most of the world—but he

hadn't even bothered. He'd just told her to bang another man and left, maybe never to come back again.

God, the very thought felt like it would rip her heart out of her chest. She fought to listen to the voice inside her that told her this couldn't be the end, that he'd meant his words when they made love under the trees.

"Here," Sam said, shocking her out of her thoughts by holding out a bottle of water he'd pulled from somewhere in the trunk. The plastic was misty with cold, and she realized she was thirsty. "It's pretty hot out and I think you could use it."

The water was delicious. She drank half the bottle before she even realized it. "Thanks. That's nice of you."

"Sorry I didn't offer it sooner. And sorry you had to get wet again to get your license."

"You're apologizing?"

"Don't sound so shocked. I'm not all bad."

"Then maybe you could give me my license back?" Lila asked, fighting the urge to relax her guard. She didn't know him, not really, not enough to trust the sudden friendliness in his tone.

"I can't right now, but I believe this is all going to check out. In the meantime, I can make you a promise," he said, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Keeping you safe is going to be one of my top priorities. I won't do anything to put you in danger and that includes running your license or letting anyone else get a look at your plates. I'll get a friend of mine out here to pull your car from the water. He owns a tow truck and the body shop in town. He'll be able to tell you the extent of the damage."

"Thank you, but I don't have a lot of money and —"

"He always does a free estimate and I'll cover the cost of the tow," he said, opening the passenger's door to the cruiser and helping her inside.

"Thank you, very much. But you don't have to do that for me."

"Don't sound so suspicious. I know I don't have to do that for you. I want to do that for you, for my own reasons," he said, leaning down to look her straight in the eye as she fastened her seat belt.

"Sam," she said, wondering why her voice sounded strangely breathy when she'd already half convinced herself she wasn't still attracted to this man, not in the slightest, "I'm not going to tell anyone about what happened."

"Lila, I'm not concerned with who you might or might not tell," he said, his changeable eyes now a shade paler than the sky behind him.

"You're not?" Lila asked, knowing her lips were parted and her breath coming faster, her body sending out signals that her mind didn't want to be making. But it seemed her mind wasn't calling the shots today. She should have learned that the second Sam Walker slid his hand up her skirt and made her entire body come alive.

"Nope, I'm just hoping you'll let it happen again sometime." He flashed her the barest of smiles before he closed her door on her, no doubt, incredibly startled-looking face.

Lila was quiet as Sam got in and started the car, turning down the police radio before he pulled up to the road.

"Right or left?" His face was completely pleasant, as if he hadn't refused to give her back her ID and then, if she wasn't completely missing something, openly propositioned her.

"Left," she said, every muscle in her body tense. Did he think she was going to have sex with him in order get her driver's license back? He had seemed so nice a minute ago, surely that couldn't be on his agenda. So what else could he have meant?

"If you're not interested, that's okay too. I'm not trying to do anything except get to know you better," Sam said, almost as if he was reading her thoughts. Or maybe it was the hands clasped in her lap with whitened knuckles that tipped him off. "Though I've been told I grill some mean steaks. I could make you dinner."

"So you were...asking me out on a date?" Lila said, feeling weirdly shy saying the words, especially considering that she'd already had her hand down the guy's pants.

"Well, technically, *in* on a date. We could go out if you'd prefer, but as I'm sure you've realized, Burlin has rather limited options when it comes to fine dining."

"I don't know, the Dairy Freeze has really great—"

The words she was going to say died on her lips as she remembered the food in the car, the Dairy Freeze containers filled with writhing bugs and the evil presence that had accompanied them. How she could have let it slip her mind for a moment was truly a shock, and she suddenly wondered if maybe Arthur *hadn't* simply walked away. What if the wraith, or whatever it was, had found him? He'd said it was after her, but maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe he was, even now, battling the dark creature and failing.

"What's wrong, are you okay?"

She almost wanted to tell him to turn the car around, to race back to the river to find her friend who might be in trouble, but she knew she couldn't. No matter how nice he seemed, or how much he might want to help her, there was no way a small-town cop was going to believe that she had an invisible lover who might be in danger from a ghost with a vendetta against her. She'd just have to hold it together, get home and then run back to the river as soon as Sam was out of sight.

"I'm fine. I guess I'm just exhausted from everything that happened. It's the Blake house, the last house on the right on Cedar Lane," she said, her throat tight as the turn to the cottage came into view.

They were almost there, it couldn't be more than a mile and a half back to where the car had run off the road. If she could get there before Sam brought the man with the tow truck, then—

"Son of a bitch," Lila muttered as the cottage, and the man sitting on its front porch, came into view. From the look of the bowl in his hands, it looked like Arthur was eating ice cream, and he actually had the balls to grin and wave as Sam pulled up the driveway.

"Excuse me?"

"I just realized I forgot my keys. I left them in the car in the river," Lila said. The words were not only true, but gave her a truly fabulous idea. "Would you mind driving me back to get them?"

"Not a problem," Sam said, shifting the car into reverse and backing down the driveway and out into the road once more.

"Thanks," Lila said, peeking in the rearview mirror, satisfied to see Arthur running down the stairs with a confused expression on his face.

Good. Let him have a turn being the one who wondered where the hell she had gone. It served him right, and would give her a chance to collect her thoughts while she collected her keys. And in the meantime, she could get to know a little more about Sam Walker. Not that she really cared, not that she was thinking about taking him up on that date, but she could use all the friends she could get. Surely Sam would be willing to be a friend when she made it clear she wasn't interested in anything else.

But the rest of the way back to the river, Lila found herself staring out at the scenery, the trees lit with the magic light of late afternoon, not across the car at the man next to her. It was always so much easier to lie to herself when the subject of her deception wasn't sitting close enough for her to smell his unique scent, to see the hands that had worked her body with as much skill and tenderness as the man she'd professed to love not more than an hour past.

Confusing, life was getting very confusing, and not likely to be getting any less so if the sight that met her eyes as Sam pulled the car down to the riverbank was any indication.

"What the hell?" Sam muttered, and Lila couldn't help but agree.

The Jetta, which had only been submerged in two, maybe three feet of water, was gone, seemingly swallowed up by the calm, slow-moving river.

"You don't have any explanation for this, do you?" Sam asked, his tone a little spooked.

"No." Lila's blood ran cold. She didn't have any explanation, at least none that would make sense in the real world. In the crazy, enchanted universe she seemed to inhabit lately, however, anything was possible.

Chapter Ten

She barely heard a word Sam said as he drove her to the rental office in town to fetch an extra key to the cottage and then back home. When they finally got there, she practically leapt from the car, scribbling her phone number down for him and agreeing to see him later. At that point, she would have agreed to give him a pint of blood if it meant he would leave. She needed to talk—no, she needed to *yell*—at Arthur, the bastard. He had a hell of a lot of explaining to do.

She waited until the police cruiser disappeared around a curve before going inside. Arthur, obviously sensing her anger, had prudently gone back into the house while she was gone. But he was crazy if he thought he was going to avoid a confrontation that easily. It was at least partly his fault she was in this mess. She'd always been the type to take responsibility for her own actions, but nothing even remotely like the events of the past afternoon had happened to her in her entire life. Arthur had to be involved somehow, and it was high time he started spilling every last bean he'd been keeping from her since the day she'd wished him from his painting.

"What the hell were you thinking?" she shouted, flinging the door open. He sat on the couch, looking for all the world like a contented man. "Wait, how did you get inside the house?"

"I took the keys from the car. While you were busy with the nosy policeman."

"You took the—the nosy—the car," she spluttered. "The car is gone, you ass, and I thought you were dead!"

"My enchantment doesn't allow my death. Don't worry about me."

"Urgh!" Furious, she picked up a pillow from the couch and flung it at him. He caught it easily, the look of surprise on his face almost comical. "Weren't you worried about me? Didn't you even care what was going on? How can you say you love me and then just, just, throw me at some other man and take off like that? And *eat ice cream*?"

"Wait!" He stood up and crossed to her in three long strides. Even through her anger, his nearness excited her, made her skin tingle. Something must be wrong with her. She was becoming a nymphomaniac. There could be no other explanation for the way her body responded to Arthur, then to Sam, and now Arthur again. She was starting to feel like the ball in some strangely sexual game of tennis and it wasn't an enjoyable sensation, not by a long shot.

Arthur took her by the shoulders, his dark eyes staring into hers. "If you think for one minute that I didn't care that another man was touching you, then you are not the woman I thought you were," he said. "I thought you understood. I love you, Lila. Nothing changes that. But love does not mean possession, and even if it did, do you think I would hesitate to encourage you to do whatever needed to be done for you to

protect yourself? Do you think I would let feelings of jealousy interfere with keeping you safe?"

She was stunned. Her mouth opened, but she couldn't think of a single thing to say.

He continued. "There is a force that connects us, the *awen* of our souls joined. The *awen* is not jealous. The *awen* does not possess. It is only made stronger by love in its purest form. I saw in that policeman a strong spirit, a power that I could not deny. His magic still clings to you, binding you more firmly to this world, helping keep you beyond the reach of the spirit that seeks your death. I know that magic was gained through sexual contact, and a part of me hates that another man—a man who doesn't love you as I do—had his hands on your body. But I will stop at nothing to protect you, Lila. If that bothers you, I am sorry, but it does not change my feelings either about you or about your safety."

"It's hard for me to believe that," she said.

"How can it be? I can see in your eyes that you know I speak the truth, that you—"

"It's ironic that you should mention the truth. You lied, a lie that could have had serious consequences. What if I'd wished for something that would hurt someone else? What if I'd unintentionally done something horrible and—"

"I knew you, I knew from the first morning we spent together that you would never use your wishes for harm. If you made a soul wish, it would be an unselfish one, a pure wish. I knew it without a doubt," he said, his eyes begging her to believe him.

"Then why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"I think a part of me was afraid, afraid to have you start thinking about which wishes to make, afraid that you would wish them and I would be forced to leave you. At first, I wanted you to wish for my freedom, but as I grew to care about you, I began to doubt the wisdom of that longing. The gods are so fickle, Lila. If there's one thing I've learned in my long life, it's that. Today the river spirit helped me save your life, but tomorrow another spirit might decide to interpret your wish in a way neither of us could expect. What if my freedom meant I would be kept from you? I didn't want to risk that. I would rather be your slave than a free man to anyone else in the world," he said, his voice thick with the effort it took to say the words. They were hard words to speak, and Lila knew deep in her heart that they were true.

"I believe you. I don't know what to do about all this, but I believe you." Her voice was small, as her anger faded away.

"We'll do nothing until we make sure you're safe," Arthur said, pulling her into his arms. "I love you, Lila, please never doubt that."

"I love you too, but it hurt...when you left."

"I thought it would be easier for you that way, I thought you would be embarrassed to know I was watching," Arthur said, a question in his eyes that Lila wasn't quite ready to answer, even to herself. What would she have felt if he'd stayed to watch what happened between her and Sam? Would she have been embarrassed, angry or aroused?

Or maybe a mixture of all three? It seemed best not to force herself to come to terms with those feelings right now. The day had been trying enough already.

"Maybe, but I was worried about you. I didn't know where you were, if you were lost..."

"I can never be lost," he said, smiling. He reached one strong hand up to stroke her cheek. "The trees show me the way home." His lips, still cool from the ice cream, brushed her forehead. "Besides, I paid attention when you were driving."

"Driving...oh, the car," she moaned. "Arthur, my car is gone. It's gone and it was everything I owned, and...I don't understand why this is happening. It's starting to feel like the universe has it in for me."

"Not the universe, just one violently lost soul," Arthur said, his tone grave.

"You think it's going to come back for me, don't you?" Lila knew the answer before the words were even out of her mouth from the chill that ran the length of her spine. Her body already knew the truth, even if her mind was still doing its best to achieve denial.

"Without a doubt," Arthur said. "It will only be a question of when."

The tears that had been threatening since the moment she saw the placid surface of the water where her car should have been finally fell. She felt his arms strong around her as he picked her up and carried her to the couch, cuddling her as he would a child, and she felt like a child, like a little girl who had finally found a safe place. The fact that Arthur could still be that place, that person, to her after everything that had happened in the past few hours, spoke more eloquently than any of his sweet words. He was hers. He would love her the best way he knew how, and Lila knew, somehow, his best would be enough.

* * * * *

By the time they'd finished exploring the woods around the cottage, she felt better. Arthur had let her cry, then sat quietly with her listening to the birds outside the open window and finally suggested a walk.

She had never been out in the forest with someone who knew nature so well. He knew the names of every plant and tree and showed her things she never would have noticed without him. A tiny ladybug on the bottom of a leaf. A praying mantis on a bunch of wild roses. A flock of bats emerging from the narrow entrance to a hillside cave, a quiet cloud flying into the dark blue of the eastern sky. It was fascinating and, as always seemed to happen when Arthur was around, she found her spirits lifting.

They would find a way through their present difficulties. She could find a job in Burlin, and stay a little longer than she'd planned. She could easily save enough money to buy an old car, while still keeping the two of them in groceries. The transportation issue didn't seem that overwhelming when she thought about the rest of their troubles. But even taking into account the wraith and the visions, the challenge of finding a way

to make Arthur a visible, viable person in the modern world, and what to do with her last remaining wish, Lila still felt strangely at peace. There was something right about these woods, about her hand in this man's hand, and no obstacle could seem insurmountable right now.

The sun had set and the sky was streaked red and gold by the time they walked up the gravel driveway. It was going to take time to figure out exactly what needed to be done, but being out in the fresh air with the man she loved had certainly helped her feel ready to start tackling their many problems.

Not to mention tackling him. She couldn't wait to get Arthur back in the house, into the cozy little bedroom and out of his new modern clothing.

"Why do I think the hunger in your eyes has nothing to do with what you want for dinner tonight?" he joked as they reached the porch.

Lila laughed. "Maybe because you know me a little too well for a man I just —"

She stopped in the doorway, the words she'd been about to say leaving her as she took in what lay inside the open door.

"Lila? Lila, what's wrong?" Arthur caught her as she swayed backward, her eyes never leaving the wreckage of the inside of the cottage.

The intruders had been thorough. Every piece of furniture was overturned. The floor was strewn with papers and pictures, taken from the few boxes of personal belongings Lila had brought with her. Her landlady's knickknacks were smashed on the boards, pieces of china and glass scattered everywhere.

"By the gods," Arthur breathed behind her. His fingertips dug almost painfully into her arms. "What happened here?"

Lila was too terrified and upset to answer. Her first instinct was to run, but there was nowhere to go. The nearest occupied home to hers was over a mile away. The other places on the lake were empty, probably would be for several weeks, until the summer season really got underway. Besides, she had to let someone know what had happened. She had to at least call 911 in case the burglar was still inside or in case the one person she feared most had somehow found her hiding place. If there was one little bit of horror that could put the finishing touches on this day, having Clayton come stalking out of the bedroom ready to dispense her punishment for leaving him would most certainly do the job.

"Someone broke in," she choked out past the fear that tightened her throat. "I have to call..."

Damn. She had to call Sam. She really wasn't ready to talk with him again, or try to explain that she was already romantically involved with an invisible man. But she was even less ready to be chopped up into little pieces, thrown into a cooler and sunk to the bottom of the lake. She had to get to the phone and get Sam out here before anyone else. He already knew some of the story when it came to her husband and she really didn't feel like letting anyone else in town in on her secrets.

Arthur spoke as if reading her mind. "You must call the policeman."

She nodded, trying to steel herself to step into what had been her comfortable little house. It was violated now, raped by unseen hands whose goal was to take from her what little she had left. But the mess they'd left behind had no rhyme or reason. She even saw her wallet tossed to the ground by the door, apparently unopened. Why would a thief come in here and not take her money? Even Clayton wouldn't trash the place, would he? What she knew of her husband made her think he would have crept silently inside, waited for her to walk into the bedroom unsuspecting and then made his move. So maybe this was something else, something inhuman, but if her experience in the car were anything to go by, even more terrifying.

"Was it...the wraith?"

"No. It doesn't feel like that type of energy."

"So it was a person?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," Arthur said, moving past her into the space.

Well, that was delightfully vague.

"Can you tell if they're still here?"

He was quiet for a minute. "No, I don't sense anyone."

She nodded and took a deep breath. "Okay."

She trusted that Arthur wouldn't let her walk inside if it weren't safe. Trying not to disturb anything, she made her way carefully through the wreckage of her living room and into the kitchen. Fresh destruction met her there. Every drawer was open, yanked from the cupboards and turned upside down, leaving a pile of utensils and silverware in the middle of the floor.

The refrigerator door hung open, as well, displaying empty shelves. The food joined the other items on the floor, jars smashed and containers opened. Coffee grounds and sugar dusted the countertops. Who had done this, and why?

Fighting a fresh wave of terror, Lila picked up the phone as carefully as she could and dialed 911. She'd meant to dig out Sam's card, to call his personal cell phone, but she was just too scared. She'd have to take her chances with the 911 operator. "This is Lila Hayes out at the Blake cottage on Cedar Lane," she said when someone answered. "12 Cedar Lane. I've had a break-in."

"Is someone in the house with you, ma'am? Are you safe?"

No. "I think so," she said. "I mean, I think they're gone and I'm safe."

"We'll send someone right out," the operator said. "Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?"

This gesture of kindness almost made Lila lose the little control she still had. "No, that's okay," she said, her voice breaking. "I think I'll be okay."

The operator signed off and Lila went back out to the porch, Arthur still following right behind.

The evening cool was starting to set in, and Lila wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. She looked out over the calm lake, over the trees that had so recently given her hope.

Now it was gone. In the blink of an eye, with one act of destruction, she was once again scared. Maybe Clayton had done it. The way the food had been strewn around the kitchen made her rethink her previous assumption. He'd always found her eating habits disgusting, filthy. Maybe he had found her somehow. Maybe Sam had betrayed his word and run her license through the system.

But she couldn't believe that, it just didn't make sense. First of all, it was too fast. Only a few hours had passed and unless Clayton had already been in the area, he never could have made it to her cottage that quickly. Secondly, she knew in her gut that if Clayton had been the one to find her, he wouldn't have been gone when she arrived. If it had been Clayton, she wouldn't be standing on this porch. She would be dead or, at the very least, lying battered and wrecked in the backseat of his car as he took her back to South Dakota.

At least, that's what she had to believe right now, because the alternative—that this was all part of some plan of his to brutalize her mind before he brutalized her body—was too horrible to contemplate.

Arthur put his arms around her, adding his heat to hers. "I am sure the policeman can solve this. I know he can help you, he can help us."

"I wish I could agree. You haven't been in this time very long. Most crimes like this go unsolved. Stalkers escalate and escalate and nothing can be done to stop them until they cause physical harm. I could be dead before the law is even allowed to lift a finger."

"You're assuming it was that man you married who did this," Arthur said. "Don't. There are plenty of other explanations."

"Like what? Like some random thieves just happened to pick this house, when the others nearby are empty? I can think of at least three places that are filled with expensive televisions and appliances. Why choose a tiny cottage, smash things instead of stealing them, and then not even bother to take my wallet? I can't help but feel this was personal."

"Lila," Arthur began, but before he could finish, they were interrupted by the flashing lights of the police cruiser. It roared up the road and into Lila's driveway, sending gravel shooting out from under the tires as it skidded to a halt.

"I see the cavalry has arrived," Arthur said dryly, as Sam Walker leapt out of the car and ran up the porch stairs two at a time.

"Lila, are you all right?"

She hadn't expected to feel this glad to see him. In fact, she'd thought it would be awkward and uncomfortable, given that she'd decided she didn't want to see him romantically and her number one love-lust object was standing right beside her. Instead, a rush of warmth flowed over her, a feeling of safety and comfort too deep for

words. In an act that shocked her more than she wanted to admit, Lila let him take her into his strong arms and hold her close to the solid heat of his chest.

* * * * *

It took a long time to get things tidied up, but with Sam's help, they managed it. Lila finished sweeping up the last little bits of crushed glass and put them in the trash, then started running a damp paper towel over the floor.

"What's that for?" Arthur stood by watching. He'd tried to put some things away, but after Lila shot him a look, he'd gotten the point. Having things floating around the room was not the best way to hide his presence from Sam.

"It will pick up the last little pieces of glass," she muttered when Sam's attention was turned.

"What?" Sam turned around. How good was his hearing, anyway?

"Just talking to myself," Lila replied.

"You do enjoy your own conversation, don't you?" He was smiling, taking the sting out of his words.

She shrugged. "When you're alone a lot, I guess you get in the habit."

"I'm alone a lot too. So it makes sense to me."

Sam was like a different person, or maybe simply a kinder, gentler version of the strong man he'd been earlier in the evening. After briefly questioning her, he'd given her the rundown on his chats with Bob and Amy while he dusted the cottage for prints.

"I don't think it's your husband who did this," he said. "Nobody in town's seen anyone new in the area, except you. You made quite an impression."

"That's me, the impression maker." The admiration in his eyes made her a little uncomfortable, nervous.

Well, no, not uncomfortable. More like...attracted. She liked the way he looked at her, the way his eyes seemed to take in more than just her surface appearance, looked past that to something inside her he seemed to like a whole hell of a lot. It made her feel special, just as he made her feel safe. Butterflies were dancing in her stomach and she was acutely aware that Arthur was standing in the corner watching them both. She wondered if he could tell that a part of her wanted to close the distance between her and Sam Walker, to feel the warmth of his mouth on hers just one more time.

"Don't try to downplay what you did," he said. "Amy's a friend. I remember the day Megan was born. It means a lot to me that you saved her. Not everyone would do something like that."

"You would," she said, aware that the sexual tension in the air was growing thicker with every moment. Why was she making such personal assessments about the man's character without a second thought? Why did she feel sure that Sam was one of the best people she'd met in a long time? It was as if some connection had been forged between

them under the trees that afternoon, one she couldn't understand, but felt the power of nonetheless.

"It's my job," he said. "It isn't yours."

"But you wouldn't have taken the job if you weren't the kind of person who —"

"Will you stop arguing with me?" He'd been stepping toward her while they spoke, and now he was close enough that she could smell the clean scent of his skin. "Why can't you just take a compliment?"

"I'm not...used to them."

"You should be," he said, taking her face between his hard palms and bringing his lips to hers in an action that should have surprised her, but didn't. It felt right, familiar and more than welcome.

It was just a short kiss, the lightest touch of his lips to hers, but it made Lila a little dizzy. How was it possible that she could be so attracted to him? To him and Arthur both? Her body was in overdrive with both of them here, so close, both of them sensing her arousal and returning it to her. It was like the air in the tiny house was thick with gooey honey, charged with musk and sex, and she was swimming through it, almost certain she wasn't strong enough not to be sucked into the depths and drown.

Sam's gaze traced the lines of her face, his smile a little shy. "Are you hungry?"

"What?"

The smile grew broader. "Are you hungry? I see you don't have any food and apparently you didn't eat much this afternoon, either. You must be starved. I could order a pizza."

She nodded, relieved that he'd changed the subject, but also incredibly frustrated. She usually loved a man who loved food, but her appetite had taken a turn for the carnal. She wasn't even all that interested in her former best friend, the carbohydrate. Still, she didn't want him to leave just yet, and pizza was as good an excuse as any. "That sounds great."

He ordered and they moved into the kitchen, throwing away food and wiping things clean. Arthur went into the bedroom to do some cleaning up in there, and Sam and Lila worked together in companionable silence. They were washing silverware when the pizza came and Sam went to get it, refusing to allow her to pay.

When she came into the living room, drying her hands on a towel, Sam was sitting in the middle of the floor, the pizza box open on the floor in front of him. He'd had the pizzeria bring a two-liter of soda and some plastic glasses too, along with a bottle of wine. She indicated it with the towel.

"Since when will they bring wine with a delivery?"

"Since I'm the sheriff," he said, smiling. "Sit down."

"Nice to see you taking advantage of your position," she replied, then bit her lip. She hoped he wouldn't think she was alluding to what happened between them earlier.

Thankfully, he only laughed, opening the wine and pouring some. "Actually, I know the owner. He's a friend. Nothing to do with the law, ma'am." He tipped an imaginary hat.

She smiled back. "Are you friends with everyone in town?"

"Just about. I've been here for a few years. It's a pretty friendly place and the best thing about my job is I get to meet almost everyone."

"Have you always been a cop?"

He nodded. "First in East St. Louis, then here."

"Why Burlin? I mean, East St. Louis must have been more exciting."

"Exciting doesn't always mean fulfilling." A shadow crossed his face, so fast Lila wasn't sure she saw it. "I'd work my ass—sorry, my hands—off on a case or a bust, only to have the perp right back out on the street doing it again the next week. I make a difference in Burlin."

"That's an interesting way to look at it."

He shrugged. "I don't know if it's interesting, but it's true."

Lila took a sip of the excellent wine and smiled. "You do know how to choose wine. This is lovely."

"Actually, I don't. My buddy picked it. I'm not a wine expert."

Lila liked that. It wasn't what he said, it was what he was saying about himself. Sam wasn't afraid to appear less than perfect, or unwilling to admit he might have faults. It made her feel good. Here was a man who wouldn't expect perfection from her, either.

If she got involved with him, which, of course, she wouldn't.

"That pizza smells good," Arthur said, reentering the room. "Save some for me."

She nodded slightly and took a bite of her own piece. "This is really good," she said, for both of their benefits.

"I'm glad you like it," Sam said. "Actually, the restaurant does a lot more than pizza. Maybe you'd like to go there with me sometime?"

"Yes, you would," Arthur said, before Lila could speak. "And you can bring some back too. I miss Italian food."

"Have you ever been to Italy?" It was the only way Lila could think to phrase the question so that Sam wouldn't wonder who she was talking to.

"Yes," Arthur said, at the same time Sam said, "No." This was crazy. It was like trying to listen to two different radio programs at once.

"Did you hear something?" Sam said, looking around. "I thought I heard a voice."

"No," Lila said. "I didn't."

"I'll just go check. Stay here."

As soon as he was gone, Lila spun around to Arthur. "Did he hear you?"

"It's possible," Arthur said. "I told you he was powerful."

"If he sees you, he's going to think he's going insane," Lila said. "Or he'll try to shoot you. You should go in the kitchen or something, or at least be quiet."

"I'll go in the kitchen. Lila...do not forget I love you and I want you to be safe."

"I love you too," she said, glad he'd said it, feeling the rush of happiness the words sent through her body.

He leaned over to kiss her softly on the lips, sending warmth through her body, and left, taking a piece of pizza with him.

Lila finished her wine and poured another, waiting for Sam to get back, wondering if Arthur's words were meant to reassure her that the way she was feeling for Sam was all right or to remind her she was his and nobody else's. Did he want her to do what her body was practically begging her to do? Did he want her to resist? Hell, what did *she* want to do? How could she be so desperate to have them both, especially when there were so many other things to worry about?

She sent out a little prayer that this night wouldn't get any more complicated. She would have assumed that was a given, but she was learning not to take anything for granted.

Chapter Eleven

Sam reappeared from his search, confident they were alone, but Arthur never came back out of the kitchen. Finally, Lila faked the urge for a glass of water and went to check on him, only to find no sign of him and the screen door ajar. He'd gone out into the woods. Because he was angry? Or because he wanted her and Sam to have time to be alone?

Or maybe he was just scouting for wraiths, bogeymen and bears. Oh my.

Whatever he was doing, whatever he wanted, Lila sensed pretty soon it wasn't going to matter. She stopped in the doorway to the kitchen, a deep warmth filling her body as she looked at the second virtual stranger she was falling for in less than a week. From the way Sam looked up at her from where he still sat in the middle of the living room floor, it seemed he felt the same way. The knowledge took her breath away. All evening had been leading to this. The wine, the food, the conversation that grew more and more personal until it seemed the only way they could possibly grow any closer to sharing their souls was to strip naked and share their bodies as well.

But did she dare take him up on the silent invitation that hung in the air? As she settled down onto the floor beside him, she sensed she would have to be the one to make the first move. The forceful man she'd first met in the clearing had softened in their time together. He was still deadly attractive and exuded an undeniable sensuality. But other than the one gentle kiss he'd given her, he'd been a complete gentleman. He would probably let her walk him to the door and say her goodbyes without any attempt at seduction if she could find the strength of will to put such a conservative end to their first impromptu date.

"Did you get your drink of water?"

"Yep," Lila said, folding up the pizza container and wondering if she should save the last two slices for Arthur. She was doing her best to concentrate on anything but the sexual tension humming between her and the man not five inches to her right.

"You're finished?" Sam asked, brushing his hands off on a paper towel.

"Couldn't eat another bite." For a person who hadn't been hungry, she'd done the majority of the damage to the extra-large pie.

"Good, because I've been waiting for your mouth to be free," Sam said, closing the distance between them with one, unmistakable intention.

The moment Sam's lips touched hers again, she realized how wrong she'd been to think he'd gone soft on her. Far from the sweet, tentative kiss of earlier, he was assured, blatantly sexual. His lips moved over hers with the confidence of a man who knew how to get what he wanted. Lila found it impossible not to respond.

His hands searched her body, pausing to caress her breasts, undoing the buttons of the soft shirt she'd put on and reaching inside. His hot fingertips on her skin made her sigh, and when they found her nipples, she gasped out loud.

"Oh God, Lila," he murmured, his voice muffled by her lips against his. "I've been thinking about this all night. How much I wanted to touch you again."

He kissed her throat, tracing a path of fire with his lips down her skin to her collarbone, pushing her shirt open further as he did so. She shook her shoulders, letting the fabric slide down and Sam helped her remove it completely.

Again his hands were on her body, warming the skin of her back. He unfastened her bra and slid his hands forward, under the cups to cradle the soft weight of her breasts. Her entire body tensed, waiting for him to touch her, for him to transfer the wet heat of his mouth to her tingling skin.

She didn't have to wait long. His tongue moved to caress her taut nipples, sending fire shooting through her body to pool between her legs. She wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled him closer, pressing her stomach against the luscious bulge of his erection.

She wanted him. Oh God, she wanted him so badly, wanted more than what they'd done earlier in the woods. She wanted his skin hot and naked against hers, wanted his mouth to leave her breathless, wanted his cock to fill her body.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he pulled away. "Where's the bedroom?" His blue eyes were dark now, midnight blue and glazed with desire.

She took his hand and led him toward the darkened room. They were going to do this, there was no longer any uncertainty in her mind. She only wished she could say the same about Arthur's. Where was he? What was he thinking? Surely he wouldn't have left her alone with Sam if he hadn't been giving his unspoken permission for them to explore their feelings, both sexual and otherwise. He'd openly encouraged her to accept Sam's dinner date invitation, hadn't he? That had to mean something.

"Be here with me, Lila," Sam suddenly said, pulling her tightly to him before backing them both toward the bed. "Whatever it is that steals your attention from me, from us, let it go. Just for a little while."

As his lips crushed against hers once more, Lila felt her mind obey his command. She was here, she'd made her decision. Sam deserved all of her focus, all the attention of her body and mind.

She'd put clean sheets on the bed earlier, and was glad of it as they sank into the fragrant softness together. Sam's shirt was quickly unbuttoned and she helped him pull it off, their lips still hot on each other's in a kiss so ferocious, her lips hummed with energy and colors flashed behind her closed eyes.

Feverishly, she ran her hands over Sam's bare chest, over the hard muscles and the soft skin, tangling fingers in the small patch of hair over his pecs. He sighed against her mouth, his hands growing bolder, unfastening her jeans and sliding them off.

Her panties were already soaked with excitement when he touched her through them, making her whimper. Her hips lifted of their own accord, the combination of his touch and the memory of his hands on her earlier in the day already sending her near the edge.

"Sam," she gasped, her desire making her bold. "Get your pants off, Sam. Hurry."

He smiled at her, his lips bruised from the force of their passion. "In a minute," he said. "Good things come to those who wait."

"Oh God." Her hands fisted in his hair as he trailed slow, soft kisses down her body, nibbling the undersides of her breasts, tickling her ribs with his tongue, then dipping it into the small well of her bellybutton.

The heat between her legs was unbearable and it grew hotter with every inch his mouth traveled down her body. Her heart was pounding. She could feel the blood rushing through her veins, racing to the surface of her skin and to the tiny bud nestled between her legs that screamed for Sam's touch. He hooked his hands under the waistband of her lacy panties and slid them off, exposing her to his gaze.

He didn't waste any time, but zeroed in on where she ached for him, his tongue hot and wet, delving into her folds with one long stroke that made her entire body tense.

"Aaaah!" she cried. Her legs spread wider, helped by Sam's strong hands. His tongue was a deadly instrument of pleasure as he explored her, licking every inch of her sex, circling around her entrance and sliding inside.

Lila's hips bucked forward, urging him deeper, straining toward the fulfillment that was oh-so close, but he pulled back. "Patience is a virtue," he chuckled.

"Please, no more clichés," she moaned. "I can't take it."

"I bet you can," he said. His tongue flicked against her clit again, softly, then harder, then soft again, setting up a steady rhythm that threatened to drive her out of her mind.

Her eyes were closed, her head shaking back and forth as her body became Sam's to manipulate, Sam's to use as he wished. She felt the pressure building in her pelvis, more heat rushing to where she was already engorged and wet.

Her body trembled as she neared the peak, every muscle shaking, building to what promised to be an orgasm of epic beauty. "Yes," she moaned as Sam, sensing her urgency, sped up his movements. "Sam, yes, yes, yes..."

It hit her, sending her spiraling, eradicating her awareness of everything but the pure pleasure throbbing through her body. Her back arched, her body thrumming with an energy, a power, she could not believe. A power she could not control.

But Sam could. Sam's hands held her in place, reassuring her that she was safe, that she would come back to earth. She slid back into her body, still weak from the delicious aftereffects of Sam's talented tongue, and looked down between her legs. She had thought to thank him, to profess how amazing he'd made her feel, but the words died

on her lips as she looked past his hungry blue eyes, over his shoulder, to see Arthur watching them.

Her first instinct was to leap from the bed, to run to him and apologize. Whatever he might have said he wanted her to do, whatever he'd give up for her safety, this could not be an easy thing to see. She'd been screaming another man's name while his mouth brought her to orgasm right in front of him. Surely that couldn't have been what Arthur had had in mind. He was probably furious with her, hurt and outraged, ready to call her a million names that she had to admit would be totally deserved.

She started to sit up, but Arthur must have read her thoughts on her face. He put out a hand, stopping her sudden movement. "Don't stop, Lila." His voice was husky, low with an emotion Lila could not define until she glanced down his body and saw the hard ridge of his erection under his jeans. "Keep going."

"Lila?" Sam reared up over her, the triumphant expression of his face fading to concern. "Are you all right?"

"Do not stop him," Arthur said again. "Let me watch you, Lila. Let me watch him pleasure you. He cares deeply for you, I can feel it in the air between you. There is no need for jealousy when such love is involved."

Love? How could Arthur think Sam loved her after one night of wine and conversation? But then, could she deny that she felt loved, that she felt waves of comforting, accepting energy flowing from both men?

This couldn't be happening. This could *not* be happening.

But it was happening, and the strangest thing of all was she wasn't embarrassed. Not the way she always thought she would be, anyway. She did feel a little unsure, and more than a little shy, but also incredibly turned on. Deep inside herself, where she kept all her darkest secrets, hadn't she always wanted something like this, maybe something even more intimate than this?

"I'm fine," she said to Sam, doing her best not to look at Arthur, though she could feel his eyes burning across her skin, making her nipples harden to the point of pain. "Just give me a second."

"Take your pants off," Arthur said. There was a commanding tone in his voice that Lila hadn't heard before. She shot a quizzical look at him as Sam kissed her neck, trying not to be too insanely distracted by the way the wiry hairs on his chest brushed against her tightened tips.

"Testing a theory," Arthur said. "His guard is down. I think he might be able to hear me." She raised her eyebrows and he shook his head. "His mind tricks him into believing it's his own thoughts he hears, not a separate voice."

Sam lifted his body from hers, smiling at her in a way that was dangerously sexy. His hand slid down to the waistband of his jeans, unbuttoning them with a confidence that said he had no doubt about his ability to give her just as much pleasure with his body as he had with his mouth.

"Take your pants off," Arthur said again, and Lila watched as Sam did, lowering them off his hips and down his muscled thighs, revealing a large, thick cock that made her pussy clench of its own accord.

"Touch him," Arthur said. Lila hesitated, glancing over at him. His eyes were fixed on her, on Sam's cock. "He wants you to touch him."

She reached out a tentative hand, circling it around Sam's shaft, and gave a gentle squeeze. Sam groaned. His head fell back, his hands dropping to his sides. Arthur echoed the sound of need, drawing her eyes back to where he stood at the end of the bed.

She felt her breath grow even more shallow as she watched Arthur unfasten his jeans and remove them, freeing his own hard-on, letting her see just how aroused he was.

"Lila," Sam gasped. She started stroking him slowly, catching the bead of moisture at the tip and using it to lubricate the motions of her hand. "God, I love the way you touch me. It's like nothing I've ever felt, ever."

"Sam," Lila murmured, hoping the way she said his name let him know that she felt the power between them too, was as overwhelmed by him as by the other man he had no idea was in the room.

Arthur's shirt was off by the time she tore her gaze from Sam again. His naked form was so beautiful, so strong and completely masculine. They were both breathtaking, achingly perfect examples of how sensual the male body could be. Seeing them both at once, knowing both of them were swollen with desire for her, was overwhelming, made her dizzy with a pleasure she wasn't entirely sure she deserved.

"Take him into your mouth," Arthur said, and Lila didn't need him to say it twice. She slid her tongue along the bottom of his cock, finding the thick ridge of skin and flicking it lightly, eliciting another gasp from Sam. His hands found her hair, his fingers twining into it, not tugging or forcing, just resting, connecting with her, his fingertips caressing the back of her neck letting her feel how deeply she pleased him.

She glanced at Arthur. He was stroking his own cock now, slow, even strokes as he watched Sam disappear into her mouth and come back out. Watching him made her throb, made her ache between her legs and circle her hips in the air, a secret part of her wishing he would take her from behind while Sam was still in her mouth.

God, she wanted one of them to fill her, was half mad with a kind of raw need she'd never known before, not even with Arthur. With a feral sound, she pulled Sam down onto the bed, laying him flat and scooting him forward so his head rested on the pillows before she took him in her mouth once more. She'd never been so daring in all of her life, but something about this night—how safe she felt, how incredibly filled with desire—made her daring.

"That's right," Arthur gasped. "Show me."

She knelt sideways on the bed, letting her ass rise into the air so Arthur could clearly see her sex, wet and swollen.

"Lila," they both said in unison. Her breath hissed in through her teeth around Sam's cock.

"Touch her," Arthur said. "Stroke her."

Sam's hand rose, running gently up the back of her thigh. His fingertips brushed against her clit, making her gasp around him, and she heard Arthur's groan of satisfaction behind her.

She increased her pace with her mouth as Sam inserted a finger, then another, and started sliding them in and out of her heat. She bounced backward slightly, encouraging him to go deeper, finding his rhythm and matching it. Sam moaned, his pelvis rocking forward as she loved him with her mouth.

Dimly, she heard movement behind her, circling around the bed, and saw Arthur walk up to Sam's head. He looked at her with eyes dark with passion. "You look incredible," he said. "I love watching you."

She closed her eyes in reply, then opened them again to find Arthur leaning close to Sam, whispering in his ear. Sam's fingers slid out of her body and moved upward, running her moisture along the tiny puckered entrance above her pussy.

She gasped and moved her hips again, encouraging him. Arthur was gone, back behind her, his voice coming in slightly faster gasps. She took her mouth from Sam's cock just long enough to glance back at him, to see him still touching himself, his strokes slow and sure along the length of his engorged cock.

Sam slipped a finger into her ass and she cried out. Arthur grunted in satisfaction as she started to lower her head to Sam again, but was stopped by his free hand.

"Come here," Sam said, urging her face back up to his. She obeyed, letting him kiss her, kissing him back, his fingers still buried in her, moving, sending thrills of deep pleasure through her entire body.

He helped her slide on top of him as she rocked forward, letting his wet cock slip against her soft folds. His palm gripped her ass, his fingers still working inside her, and she lifted up, guiding him into her.

"Ride him," Arthur said, walking around to stand by the head of the bed, and she did.

"Oh, Lila," Sam cried. "Oh, Jesus, you feel so good."

"So do you," she whispered, moving faster now, as fast as his fingers, as fast as she saw Arthur's hands moving on himself.

She leaned back, shamelessly thrusting her breasts forward, thrilling to feel Sam's cock buried deep inside her, creating a delicious friction against her inner walls.

"Yes, Lila," Arthur said, his voice low and intimate. She felt her connection to him, their love for each other like a living thing in the still, cool air of her room. It flared out over Sam, enclosing the three of them in its glow, a glow she could not see, but felt deep inside her very soul.

She moved faster, hearing Arthur and Sam gasping, moaning in unison, feeling primal and wild and more desirable than she'd ever felt in her life. When she opened her eyes, she saw both of them, Sam's blue eyes staring at her with a tenderness that mirrored the look in Arthur's dark ones, as the three of them moved together toward their climax.

She was full, her body and heart and soul, every bit of her on fire. Sam's hips rose to meet her, stoking that fire until she knew it was going to explode.

"Sam!" she shouted, throwing her head back, shattering apart on top of him. He was right there with her, his pelvis lifting them both off the bed as his cock throbbed inside her. She heard Arthur's voice join them, looked over to see him coming, exploding in his hand. His gaze was still on her as he watched her, watched them both, his open, vulnerable look making her wish she could pull him into the circle of warmth on the bed.

The power that surrounded the three of them flared one last time before it was swept away by a breeze of softness and love that brought tears to her eyes.

"I love you," Arthur said.

Lila smiled at him, a smile she hoped conveyed everything she felt. She looked down at Sam with the same feeling and her heart filled when he returned her smile, his eyes overflowing with so much more than passion. Why she felt so close to him she did not know, but she did and that was all that mattered. With a contented sigh, she disengaged their bodies and curled up in the crook of his arm, her head on his chest, more deeply grateful than she could express when Arthur lay down and snuggled against her back.

Chapter Twelve

The distant roar of thunder woke Sam in what looked like the earliest hours of morning. The light filling the small bedroom was gray, and even the birds outside the cottage hadn't started to sing, but the clock by the bed told him it was almost eight. The space was quiet except for the quiet hum of the air conditioner in the window and the slow, rhythmic breathing of the woman still curled close to his body.

Sam liked to think the absolute peace he shattered was the reason his shout was so piercing, not that he had really awoken after the best sex of his life screaming like a boy not long out of junior high school.

"What, what's wrong? What happened? Where is it?" Lila bolted into wakefulness beside him, vaulting into a seated position with her hands fisted in front of her. He would have laughed at how cute she looked, her hair sticking out in ten different directions and her eyes still bleary from sleep, if he hadn't just watched another man's hand vanish from where it was clasped possessively on her hip.

"There's someone in the room," Sam said, easing from the bed and wishing he'd thought to bring his weapon into the bedroom.

It still sat on a chair in the living room, abandoned there because he sensed seeing the gun in its holster while they ate dinner had made Lila nervous. He should have known better than to leave it out where anyone who broke in could find it and use it against them. Now he was probably getting ready to face the man who had destroyed Lila's cottage without so much as a tire iron for protection. He'd risked both of their lives with his foolishness and there was no excuse. Not even a night of passion beyond anything he'd dreamed possible should have so clouded his judgment.

"You saw someone? You're sure?" Lila said, fear on her own face as she scrambled out of bed and pulled on the soft, button-up shirt she'd had on the night before. "Where?"

"In the room. Get behind me," Sam said once he'd made sure the area behind him was clear. Nothing but a tiny closet filled with clothes, much too small a place for a grown man to hide, especially a grown man with a hand big enough to completely cover the swell of Lila's hip. What kind of psychopath would sneak in on two people in bed, then have the balls to lay his hands on Lila while she was asleep with another man? Her husband? From what she'd told him last night, Sam figured that monster wouldn't be satisfied with anything so relatively harmless.

Then who? And how in the hell had they managed to vanish so quickly? Sam had never claimed to be a morning person, but when he woke up, he woke up fast, especially when he thought he was getting ready to do battle with a criminal.

"Did they run out? Did you see them?" Lila asked, moving behind him as she scanned the room, her eyes lingering a bit too long on the area between the window and the bed.

Sam squinted in the direction and, for a moment, thought he saw a thickening in the air, a blur that made it harder to get a clear look at the painting hanging above the bed. But as his eyes tried to focus, to narrow in on the area for a better look, the shape vanished.

"Who's there?" Sam asked in that direction nonetheless. There was something, someone, in the room with them. He could feel it in his gut, and Sam was the type of man who trusted his gut a hell of a lot more than his eyes. Eyes could play tricks on you, but in his experience, the gut never lied.

"Can you...see something?" Lila asked, that certain note in her voice that told him she was keeping things from him. The woman had a secret, he'd known that from the moment they met, but he'd done his best to make excuses for her odd behavior.

She'd saved a little girl from being killed and then, not half an hour later, nearly died herself. Surely she had the right to yell at the air, to take out her frustration on the yew trees or whatever the hell she'd been doing. But that didn't explain the rest of it, the way her eyes lingered on empty space, the way she tilted her head as if listening to someone speaking when the air was completely silent. It was as if she were talking to spirits, communing with ghosts.

He'd seen some strange things since he'd come to Burlin, a lot of things that weren't easily explained by logic or science, but he wasn't ready to believe in ghosts. Or invisible people who he could practically hear breathing, though a snapshot of the room would reveal nothing more than one man and one woman in an otherwise empty space. And he certainly wasn't ready to think about last night, about the energy that had lingered around the bed, almost as if a third person had been involved in their lovemaking.

"I think a better question is if you see something." Sam struggled to keep his mind on the issue at hand, not veering off into old, painful memories.

A third person in their lovemaking. Is that what this was all about? Was he imagining another man's hands on Lila because of what had happened with Jenna? His former fiancée had told him the first night they met about her fantasy of sharing her bed with two men at the same time. She'd mentioned it at least a dozen more times before he'd finally, after a great deal of drink, let her drag him to a special party, a party where they would find a third man to help fulfill the fantasy that had become an obsession for her.

A part of Sam had believed that sharing Jenna with a stranger was the only way to keep her. He could tell how powerfully she wanted to experience two men loving her at once, and he was surprised to find how much he'd enjoyed himself once the initial shock of finding himself naked in bed with another man had faded. It had almost been enough to make him question his own sexual preferences.

Was he really the raging heterosexual he'd always assumed if he could look upon another man's body with admiration? If he could get off on watching another man's cock sliding in and out of his lover's slick heat? Sure, he hadn't touched or been touched, but he'd watched, hadn't been able to tear his eyes away from the bed, and had come harder than he ever had in his life when the other man had found release in Jenna's body.

It had been the most profound release he'd ever experienced...until last night.

"Sam, have you ever..."

"Have I ever what?" Sam asked, his tone harsher than he'd intended as he shoved all memories of Jenna to the back of his mind.

She was long gone, and that one night was the major reason for her departure, no matter what excuse she'd eventually given for leaving Burlin and the life they'd started to build together. He couldn't start thinking about her or the questions that night had roused in his own mind. He had a chance at something real, and more sexually and emotionally powerful than anything he'd had with his former fiancée. He couldn't fuck it up by letting his mind play tricks on him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to snap." He let his hand wander around in back of him, relieved when Lila placed her hand in his without a second's hesitation.

"I know you didn't," she said before she grew silent again, her head cocked and her brow slightly furrowed.

"You're listening to the ghosts again."

Lila's attention shot back to him, her eyes wide and her mouth parted in an "oh" of surprise that would have made him want to kiss her if he weren't so damned confused. And spooked. He was man enough to admit the strange feeling that someone, or something, that he couldn't see was in the room was starting to get to him. It reminded him of when he was a kid, and his dad had taken him to get his eyes checked after Sam started seeing brightly colored blurs around people walking down the street. But there'd been nothing wrong with his eyes, and when he'd seen the obvious concern in his old man and the doctor, Sam had done his best to pretend that he didn't see those colorful clouds anymore.

Later, he'd figured out that what he'd seen were what the New Age types would call an aura, a person's individual spiritual energy. By that time, he'd been a lot older and the phenomenon occurred far less frequently, but it had still spooked him. He didn't want to be that guy, didn't want to think about things that had no basis in logic. He especially didn't want to think that those dark, bruised clouds he'd seen floating around people had anything to do with their souls. A soul shouldn't ever look like that.

"Can you trust me? Just for a second?" She looked so frightened that Sam felt his heart twist. He squeezed her hand.

"I trust you all the time, Lila," he said softly. "I thought you knew that. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

She looked doubtful. "Really? Because yesterday —"

"Yesterday, I was doing my job, being a cop. Last night...today...I'm just me."

She took a deep breath and exhaled, her fingers tight around his. "Okay. Just listen, and promise me you'll —"

The loud beeps from his pager startled them both. Sam cursed and let go of her hand.

"They only page me if it's really important," he said. "I'm sorry, I have to call in."

She nodded faintly, disappointment on her face.

"Hey, it'll just take a minute," he said. "Then we'll talk, okay?"

Lila watched as he left the bedroom to go make his phone call. Damn! She wasn't exactly eager to tell him about Arthur, but the moment had seemed so perfect. It would have been easier to spill the beans with such a smooth lead-in. Besides, having made the decision to come clean, she wanted to get it done. She *needed* to get it done. She was starting to care about Sam way too much to stand being dishonest.

Not to mention the fact that if Sam couldn't handle the truth, she wanted to know now, before she fell too hard for him.

"Why such a sad face?" Arthur's voice echoed through the room, which seemed strangely empty without Sam in it. She walked over to the closet and opened the door, not quite ready to talk about the way she felt with Arthur. Not now, not just yet. Besides, she had to get dressed sometime.

"He's making a phone call," she murmured, sliding a light blue cotton dress off the hanger and tossing it on the bed. The storm clouds and the absolute stillness of the scenery out the window told her it was going to be a miserable, sticky day until the rain finally started.

"He saw me, at least for a second," Arthur said. "If his rational mind hadn't been fighting his magic, he would have been able to see me as well as you do. I think he might be able to help us, to enable me to be visible to others. Would you speak with him, see if he might be willing?"

"How could he help?" Lila asked.

"There are spells, ceremonies. After what we shared last night, I have no doubt that our power can form a triad, the strongest base for all magic. The initial connection has already been made."

"Arthur, Sam didn't even know —"

"He knew. In his heart, he knew. And he loved what we did together as much as you did, as much as I did. I hope you know how special that was, Lila. I've never seen three virtual strangers' magic come together so beautifully. It made it easy to share you, easier than I would have dreamed possible. The way he made love to you only added to our bond. Couldn't you feel it?"

"I did," she said quietly.

"Then you'll speak with him?"

Lila crossed to the dresser and took off her blouse, then pulled out a clean bra and panties and slipped them on before returning. She really didn't know how to answer his question. How could she ask Sam for that kind of help without it seeming that was what she had been after from the start? Even assuming he could be open-minded enough to admit the possibility of Arthur, it was a big favor to ask. Before she had the chance to respond, a subtle change in the quality of the air let her know Sam was near. The strange connection she'd sensed between them last night was now even stronger, strong enough that she felt she would know exactly where he was, even if he were miles away.

"Sam, I— What's wrong?"

Sam stood calmly in the doorway, but tension and anxiety rolled off him in waves. Even if she hadn't felt the palpable emotion, one look at his face was all she needed to know that something was horribly, horribly wrong. Was he seeing Arthur again? Had he heard her talking and guessed her secret?

"Lila," he said, so softly she had trouble hearing him. "Lila, sit down."

"What's wrong?" Her skin felt cold. She wished she'd put the dress on. Somehow standing in front of Sam in just her underwear made her feel vulnerable, not to the man himself, but to whatever he was about to tell her. It was going to be bad, she had no doubt, and a little fabric between her and that bad news would have made her feel a hell of a lot better.

"Sit down," he said again, taking her hand and leading her to the bed. He sat down next to her and put his arm around her, but didn't look her in the eye. Why wouldn't he look her in the eye? What could have gone so terribly wrong in less than two minutes?

"Sam, please tell me what's wrong." Tears were in her eyes and she wasn't sure why. He was scaring her. She could feel how troubled he was, almost as if the emotion were her own.

"I saw your married name on your driver's license yesterday."

"Okay," Lila said cautiously, the ghost of a suspicion taking root in her mind. He wouldn't have, couldn't have run her license. He'd promised.

"I didn't run it, I keep my promises," he said, as if he read her mind. "But when you told me your ex's name last night, I called a buddy of mine while I was outside. I asked him to see if he could sniff out the location of a Clayton Richards, see if he might have called in sick to work, but to be discreet about it. I wanted to make sure Clayton wasn't the person who'd broken in."

"So it was Clayton, he's here?" The immediate fear choking her throat was enough to trigger a wave of nausea.

"No, he's not." Sam said, meeting her eyes with a strange, assessing look.

"What, then? Sam, you're scaring the hell out of me. Can you please just tell me what's wrong?"

"Lila, your husband...your husband was Sergeant Clayton Richards of Watertown, South Dakota PD?"

Lila's blood ran cold in her body. "What do you mean...was?"

Sam once again lowered his eyes to his hands. He took a deep breath. "Lila, I just need to confirm that Sergeant Richards was your husband, your Clayton Richards."

She wanted to swallow, but couldn't. Her throat was so dry, she thought she would never swallow again. Finally, she managed to say, "Yes."

Sam squeezed her hand, enveloping it in both of his. "Lila...he's dead. He was found murdered two days ago."

Lila didn't know how to react. For one moment, much to her eternal shame, all she felt was a kind of bright, hot joy. It was quickly replaced by horror, by sadness and pity.

She did not mourn what Clayton had become. She could not mourn a man who beat her, who called her names, who turned her home into a prison and her life into a nightmare.

But it hadn't always been like that. As Sam held her hand, she remembered the Clayton she'd married, the handsome, smiling man everyone liked. She saw his face the day they met, introduced by a mutual acquaintance whose name Lila had long since forgotten. She saw him on their wedding day, the tears in his eyes as he said his vows. The jokes he used to make, the silly songs he sang...before. Before his job or his drinking or life or whatever it had been got to be too much for him and he'd turned into a stranger, a monster who only looked like her husband and had introduced her to a life filled with fear.

But she didn't have to fear him anymore. He was gone.

"Are you sure?" she choked.

Sam nodded. Finally he looked her in the eyes, and she felt her heart clench at the sympathy and love in his. "I'm sorry, Lila. I'm so sorry."

"How did it happen?"

Sam shook his head. "My deputy didn't have any details yet. He put in an inquiry about Richards last night and got the email from the Watertown PD this morning. When I get in, I'll—"

"Wait, what do you mean he put in an inquiry last night?" Lightning flashed outside the window, followed by thunder. The storm was getting closer.

"He sent an email to the chief in Watertown."

"He made contact with my husband's chief? A deputy in a small Missouri town? That would have looked pretty suspicious, Sam." Lila said, starting to get angry. Clayton was dead, so the possible implications of what Sam had done were a moot point, but what if he hadn't been? How long would it have taken Clayton to put two and two together and figure out where his wife had run? Not very damn long if she knew her husband. He had a long list of undesirable qualities, but he wasn't stupid.

"No, no," Sam said. His eyes widened. "It wasn't like that. The location of the inquiry wasn't made available. If he'd been alive, there's no way he would have made the connection, I promise."

"How can you promise? You don't know Clayton, don't know how he works. He would have sensed that something was up, and stayed at it until he figured out what. You took a risk with my life, with my safety, after I trusted you."

"Lila, please, that's not true. I don't want you to think —"

"Don't tell me what to think!" she shouted, standing up from the bed, suddenly needing to be in motion. Her hands were shaking, the full impact of the danger that had only narrowly been averted hitting her full force.

"Calm down."

"I told you what he was like. I told you things I've only told one other person in my whole life. And you used that information against me. I begged you not to run my license —"

"I didn't run your license," Sam said, standing up, his voice tinged with a hint of frustration.

"But you drew attention to my location, it's the same thing."

"Hey!" She saw he was trying to keep calm, that he was trying to remember she'd just had some shocking news. Deep down, she suspected the knowledge of Clayton's death might have something to do with why she was getting so angry, but she couldn't seem to help herself. The fear of Clayton had become such a part of who she was, it felt almost impossible to let it go. It was as if her gut couldn't really believe that he was gone, that she was safe, and was doing its best to keep protecting her, even if that meant pushing away a man she was coming to love. "I was just doing my job, trying to help."

"By leading him straight to me?"

"By knowing his whereabouts," Sam said. "By keeping an eye on him and knowing whether or not to consider him as a suspect in the break-in."

"So your investigation was more important to you than my safety?"

"Lila, please, that's ridiculous. You know I would never put you in danger."

"I don't know any such thing," Lila said, the horrible tightness in her chest almost overwhelming. Why was she doing this? One part of her screamed for her to let this go, to realize that Sam was on her side, no matter the wisdom of what he had done. The other part, however, the Lila who had learned to treat the constant threat of violence as a way of life, wasn't so sure.

"That's not fair," he said. "I think I've proven that I have nothing but concern for you. I've trusted you more than most people would say is rational."

"Rational?" Lila spit the word in his direction.

"Hey, when I first met you, you were naked and talking to yourself, remember?"

"I wasn't talking to myself," Lila said. She'd backed away while she spoke and now stood just in front of the closet door, affording her a clear view of the man she hadn't

been talking to. Arthur still stood across the room by his painting, his face filled with concern. When her eyes met his, he began speaking soundlessly. He was obviously trying to avoid Sam's notice, but she couldn't understand what he was mouthing, and didn't have the luxury of staring at empty space in front of a man who thought she was nuttier than a fruitcake.

"Then who were you talking to?" Sam asked, a challenge in his voice.

"I was talking to someone. You'll just have to trust me on that," Lila said, not at all ready to share the truth about Arthur now, and starting to think she'd been crazy to contemplate it in the first place.

"I do trust you, damn it. Don't you see how much? Don't you understand what kind of questions I should be asking you right now? Questions I can't bring myself to ask because I care for you, and believe you were sincere when you seemed shocked that your husband was dead?"

"What are you saying?" Lila asked, the meaning behind Sam's words finally soaking through her thick skull. God, this was so much worse than she, in her shock and anger, had realized.

"You know what I'm saying."

"Fuck you," Lila said, white-hot anger overshadowing the hurt she knew was going to hit as soon as she realized the depths of this betrayal.

"Lila—"

"Fuck you," she repeated, tears in her eyes. "Get out, get out of my house."

"Lila, I'm trying really hard to understand what's going on here. I know you've just had a shock, but you need to calm down."

"Calm down? You basically said that you suspected me of murder."

"I didn't say that, I said the exact opposite," Sam yelled, running one hand through his short hair in frustration. "Listen, let's start this over. Sit down, let's talk and —"

"What?" Lila snapped, darting a look to Arthur, who'd been clearing his throat loudly for at least the past minute. It was distracting, and starting to make her even angrier. Couldn't he see she was in the middle of a serious discussion?

"Damn it, Lila, I'm talking to you! First you start accusing me of trying to get you killed, then of suspecting you of your husband's murder, and now you can't even pay attention when I try to defend myself?"

"You didn't pay attention to me!" she shouted, knowing even as she said it that she was being ridiculous. Sam hadn't done anything wrong. Even checking up on Clayton was really nothing more than she should have expected. Sam was a good man and a good cop, and he'd only been doing what he thought he had to do. She should listen to him, should try to relax and talk about this like a rational adult.

But she couldn't seem to help herself. The fear had control of her, and it was so much more powerful than any impulse toward rationality. She'd thought the time with Arthur had helped her heal, that she wasn't as controlled by fear as she had been for the

past six years, but for some reason, hearing of Clayton's death had brought it all back to the surface. Hell, maybe it had never been gone to begin with, only hiding inside her, waiting for the circumstances to be right for it to reemerge, like a cancer coming out of remission.

"You can go fuck yourself, Sam Walker. All you care about is the law, right? The law might not always make sense, but it's the law. Isn't that what you said? You probably think I should have stayed with my lawful husband, tried to work things out through the legal system instead of—"

"Stop it. I never said or did anything to make you believe that."

"If I had killed Clayton, he would have deserved it, but you wouldn't even—"

"Lila, friend or not, you can't talk that way in front of a cop. I'll pretend I didn't hear it once, but that's all that I can do," he said, his face a warning she knew she should obey, but she couldn't. Something perverse within her insisted she push him as far as she could.

"I mean it, and I'll say it again. If I had killed Clayton, he would have deserved it. And I wouldn't have felt guilty about it for a second," Lila said, knowing the words were insanely foolish and not even true. The frightened part of her wanted to prove she was stupid to have trusted Sam, to have trusted anyone.

"Fine, if that's the way you want it. Where were you two nights ago?"

"You're serious." This was what she'd been trying to force him to say, but only when the words were actually spoken did their implication penetrate her fear. What was she doing? This was her life, her freedom that she was playing with, and no amount of emotional pain justified such stupidity.

"Serious as a heart attack," he said, and suddenly his face wasn't so concerned. He looked cold, detached, the lightning outside highlighting the bones of his face in the gloom of her bedroom. He'd become a cop once more, and she was now looking a hell of a lot like a suspect.

"I was here."

"Got anyone to verify that?"

"You can't really be saying..." Lila tried not to start crying again. Of course he was angry. He'd tried to be comforting, he'd tried to help her and she'd lashed out at him, pushed him into a corner and then been surprised when he acted in the only way allowed by his job.

"You gave me no choice."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He was silent for a long moment, his expression forbidding. "Yeah, me too," he finally said. Then he picked up his clothes and started putting them on.

"Sam, don't go. Please."

He finished fastening his pants. "I'll let myself out."

"Sam, wait..."

But he was already out the front door, his shoes in his hand. She watched the first raindrops fall on his dark hair as he got back in the car and sped away.

What had she done? How could she have put herself and him in this horrible position? Especially considering she liked him so much and he seemed to care about her?

How could Clayton do this, how could he ruin things again, even from beyond the grave?

Her breath caught as the phrase seemed to echo through her mind with a strange importance. Beyond the grave. That was what Arthur had been saying, that's the message he was trying to give her. She knew it was true even before he came up behind her, laying gentle hands on her shoulders as he said the words again. "The wraith, Lila. I'd bet my eternal freedom that it's your husband."

It was too horrific to be real, but she knew she shouldn't be surprised. If there was anyone she'd ever known who would gladly make a pact with the devil, it had been her husband. What that said about her, she had no idea, but at least that fearful part of her had something to be proud of. It had been right to be afraid. She wasn't safe from Clayton because he was dead. She was probably in more danger than she had been before he had passed over. He'd been terrifying as a flesh-and-blood man. As a vengeful spirit with supernatural strength, he was the stuff nightmares were made of.

Chapter Thirteen

Dalton Prior watched the police cruiser pull away from the cottage. Lila Richards emerged from the door a minute later, calling a man's name, obviously upset, but the cop didn't slow. Lila stared after him for a few moments, then went back inside. Trouble in paradise, Dalton thought with a grim smile. Still, she'd let the cop spend the night, which was more than he'd anticipated.

She must have a thing for men in uniform, even small-town hicks without the sense to lock up their cruiser for the night before they went inside to get their rocks off. But maybe Lila was that good, the kind of woman who did more than just spread her legs, who made you stop thinking with any head but the one in your pants.

"Could be," Dalton muttered to himself as he eased from the thick foliage at the side of the road and moved around to the back of the house.

He'd spent the better part of the night sacked out in the weeds, being eaten alive by ticks and mosquitoes made especially bloodthirsty by the change in air pressure from the coming storm. The rain would feel good, but he really wanted to get a shower and maybe a little pussy before he made sure his former partner's wife kept her mouth closed on a permanent basis. The thought hadn't crossed his mind before last night, until he'd watched Lila on all fours, sucking cock like she deep-throated for a living. But now he was curious. He half wished he'd stuck around to watch more of the unexpected sex show, maybe reconsidered his plan to wait until the cop left to take care of his unfinished business. But killing a cop wasn't on his agenda, not even to take his place in bed with a wildcat.

Who would have thought little Lila Richards had such a wild side? She'd always been quiet as a mouse, one of those faded women who sat on the sidelines at the Watertown PD's annual Memorial Day barbeque knitting or sipping iced tea. He'd never seen her in a bathing suit, and even in the dead of summer she was always covered from head to toe in dresses that would do a Jehovah's Witness proud.

He'd thought she was modest, but maybe Clayton had been a bigger bastard than he'd assumed, maybe there had been some truth to the rumors that Clay was only an emergency room visit away from domestic abuse charges. He had certainly been livid when Lila had left him, consumed with a kind of rage that made him unnecessarily violent with the perps and quickly earned him a ten-day suspension from the force. Dalton had been grateful for that suspension and for the distraction Lila's disappearance had caused. It made it easier to do what had to be done.

Stealthily, he snuck along the side of the house and found the thick phone line leading through the wall. He tugged it quickly, efficiently, pulling it from the pole in the corner of the yard, and smiled. They'd think the wind blew it down when they

investigated her death. No evidence of foul play. He was really pretty good at this stuff. He should have been a professional hit man, not a cop.

Even Clayton hadn't suspected what he was planning until Dalton's gun was cocked and aimed directly at his drunk buddy's forehead. He hadn't even had time to scream, let alone draw for the shotgun under his desk. It had been an easy kill, the easiest in ages, though even Dalton had been surprised that he didn't feel the slightest remorse for taking out the man who'd been his partner for nearly seven years. But then, remorse had never been Dalton's strong suit. He was more the premeditated, calculating sort, and his best buddy's hit hadn't been an exception to the rule.

He'd waited until late one night, after Clay returned from one of their "extracurricular meetings". He'd given him six or eight beers and put a bullet in his brain, putting an end to their short, but incredibly lucrative criminal career. He and his partner had been "liberating" confiscated firearms and other black market goodies from the Watertown police department for nearly four years. It had started as a way to fund their recreational cocaine use, but turned into a profitable business that had put them both in new homes in the best part of town.

It had been the easiest money either one of them ever made. With the help of a few other members of the force who were bought and paid for with a small share of their proceeds, they had become wealthy men. They'd covered their tracks with investments and successfully hidden their activities from their captain and other goody-goodies on the force who might have disapproved. They would have been ready to take early retirement in a few years if Clayton hadn't gotten greedy.

Getting involved in a crystal meth lab operation had been incredibly stupid, even for Clayton, whose recreational use had turned into a pretty heavy habit. By becoming a producer and supplier, Clay put them on the radar in a way they had never been before. It was only a matter of time before the rundown trailer where the lab was housed was discovered, the people working inside arrested and questions asked that started to point the drug enforcement officers of their own department in their direction.

Clay had taken out the couple who had worked the lab, eliminating the witnesses, and Dalton had taken out Clay. He'd made it look like a suicide, even left a note in which Clayton explained that his criminal activities had finally made him hate himself, that he didn't want to live to be convicted in the case he knew was being formed against him. Dalton was already on leave, on his way to take care of one last loose end, when he'd learned that the investigating officers weren't buying the suicide, that they suspected murder.

"The phone isn't working, there's no dial tone. Must be the storm," Lila's voice floated to him from inside the house, bringing a smile to Dalton's face. He'd meant to cut the phone last night, right after he'd sliced the cop's brake lines, just enough to give him a few pumps before the line snapped. This was even better. She thought the storm knocked out the phone.

He'd intended to use a pound of sugar to deal with Lila's car, but the black Jetta was nowhere to be found. Odd, considering the plate number he'd found in Clayton's papers had been the key to finding Lila. Still, Dalton wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Lila, alone in her cottage with no mode of transport, worked for him. And an unlocked police car had allowed him to easily dismantle her boyfriend's CB radio so he wouldn't be radioing for help when his car bottomed out. The house phone had been next on his list, but then the screen door had opened and he'd been forced to take cover. He hadn't seen anyone come through the door, but it had been dark and he wasn't about to take any chances.

He'd figured morning would be soon enough to do in the phones, make sure little Lila stayed helpless after her cop boyfriend left. Dalton didn't want there to be any chance the cavalry would come riding to the rescue. He needed to get rid of Lila Richards, cleanly and efficiently. This time, he'd make her write the suicide note herself, confess that she'd killed her abusive husband and tried to make it look like a suicide. But now, with Clayton's death on her hands, she couldn't live with herself.

Dalton had intended to kill Lila in any event. Clayton had mentioned on several occasions that he'd told his wife everything, that upon his death she would release a letter to the police incriminating Dalton. He'd also claimed the executor of their wills had a similar letter in case they both met an untimely death at the same time. When no letter had appeared after Clayton's murder, Dalton figured at least the second letter was a lie. The first, he wasn't so sure. Lila must have wondered how her husband managed to afford their fancy new house on a cop's salary. Clayton had to have told her something, not that it mattered.

Lila's death was now imperative for other reasons. The confessional suicide note he wrote for her was his last chance to make sure he got off clean. Everyone knew he and Clayton were as close as brothers. The other members of the force had even made fun of their names, how similar they were, like the men themselves. No one believed that Dalton was innocent of knowledge of Clayton's illegal activities. There was already an investigation being formed, an investigation that was going to get a whole lot more active if Lila didn't take the rap for Clayton's murder.

Which she would. Dalton had an unregistered gun in his backpack that guaranteed that.

* * * * *

Heavy raindrops spattered the windshield of the cruiser as Sam sped down the road away from Lila's cottage, more torn up inside than he would have believed possible. He hardly knew the woman, how could he feel like his heart was breaking? So they'd had amazing sex, so he'd felt things for her after twenty-four hours that he'd never felt for another woman. So what? Had he really expected that he and a virtual

stranger who might very well have serious mental problems were on their way to small-town happy ever after?

"Damn it," Sam cursed, bringing his hand down hard on the steering wheel, hard enough to bruise. The problem was he didn't think Lila was crazy. She was probably one of the most grounded, sane people he'd ever met, though she hadn't acted very rationally this morning.

But what did he really expect? She'd just found out her husband had been murdered. Whether she had feelings for the man other than hatred or not, that had to be earth-shattering news. Still, what had she wanted from him? He'd tried to be understanding, he'd tried to be kind, he'd even tried being a hardass, since she'd seemed determined to force his hand.

She'd made him angry, so that last part wasn't difficult to do.

Even if he already regretted it.

Sam tapped the brakes as he rounded the first bend, taking the curve a little too fast. He was driving like an idiot considering the rain was starting to fall harder, pushing the speed limit by at least twenty miles per hour. But he couldn't seem to help himself, aware that, deep down, he was fighting the urge to turn the car around and go back. Lila's anger hadn't really been meant for him, and even as his brain processed the thought, he felt his own anger fading.

Lila was special, too special to let an argument build a wall between them. He'd bet his own life that she'd had nothing to do with her husband's death. She couldn't possibly have accomplished the murder, for one thing, not the night before she showed up at the Dairy Freeze at one o'clock. It was physically impossible.

And nothing could make him believe she was the type of woman who would hire someone to commit such an act. He'd kissed her, made love to her and slept with her at his side. He knew those things weren't the best basis for character analysis, but he felt like he knew her, damn it. He'd felt a connection between them, something more profound than mere sex, or even making love. It had been...oh, might as well admit the truth, at least to himself.

It had felt like he'd touched her soul. He'd felt something deep inside her, some hidden piece, brush up against him and hold on. It was like she fit into that empty place inside him, eased the aching that he'd always realized was there, but never known how to heal. He felt as if he knew her as well as he knew himself, and he knew with an implacable, unshakeable certainty that she had not committed murder, was not even capable of contemplating the act.

The city limits sign flashed by outside the window. A few more minutes and he'd be driving into town and that was a mistake. He needed to go back to Lila, to tell her he was sorry before the rift between them had time to grow. It had been stupid of him to run away like that to begin with, something a coward would do. Sam had been waiting too long for a chance at what he felt with Lila to turn chickenshit now.

He slowed the car on a straight stretch of road, making a quick three-point turn, heading back in the direction of Lila's cottage. The rain seemed to hit harder as he headed south, so he switched the wipers on high. The blades whirred and clicked in front of him, beating like furious metronomes, barely clearing an inch of windshield before it was covered with rain again.

He was forced to ease up on the gas. His visibility had dropped to about fifteen feet in front of the car, and he knew the population of Burlin well enough to slow down. Despite the fact that all he wanted was to get to Lila, to run into the house and take her to bed, convincing them both that what they'd felt last night wasn't a one time event, he didn't want to cause an accident. He'd worked too many reckless driving calls to ram his cruiser up the back end of some ancient pickup truck whose driver had slowed to ten miles per hour because of the rain. He would get there eventually, and he and Lila would be okay. At least he knew she wasn't going anywhere in this nasty weather.

As he neared the river, there was a break in the downpour, showing him a straight stretch of highway. Sam sped up, but not to nearly the speed he'd been risking earlier. He wanted to get to Lila alive, after all. He'd only hit about thirty-five when he reached the bend in the road in front of the Travers place, but still had to brake since the turn was a sharp one.

The action was so familiar, the cause and effect of foot to brake something so taken for granted, that it took a second for him to realize that his foot was sinking all the way to the floor with no resistance.

Spinning the wheel, Sam pumped the brake pedal, panic rising in his chest as he realized there were no brakes. The retaining wall that protected the Travers land from flooding loomed in front of him as the cruiser raced forward, gaining speed as it jumped the road and started down the embankment. With a grunt of effort, Sam slammed the car into park as he forced the wheel sideways, managing to avoid a head-on collision at the last second.

As the passenger side of his car connected with the wall forcefully enough to knock the breath from his body, Sam wondered if his efforts would be enough to save his life. Then the car rebounded from the initial impact, slamming him into the driver side window. Pain exploded in his head and darkness bloomed in front of his eyes. Sam heard the sound of glass shattering, a sharp pop that he prayed had nothing to do with his skull. Then the world short-circuited and the force powering Sam Walker went out.

* * * * *

The sun was shining as Lila walked along the lake, white light glinting off the ripples of the water's surface like diamonds. She could almost reach in and pick one up, they looked so real.

She laughed at the thought, suddenly wondering what would happen if she tried.

She stepped closer to the shore and crouched by the water's edge. Now it looked like the stones were under the water, little sparkles on the sandy bottom here at the shallow bank. She

remembered her mom telling her settlers used to pan for precious metals in this area, but she'd never heard of diamonds.

Still, it was worth a few wet fingers.

The water was cool against her fingers as she reached in. It felt almost as if it were tickling her skin, bringing welcome relief from the heat of the day. When she reached the silt, she ran it through her fingers, letting it fall between, trying to grab the clear, shiny stones, but she couldn't seem to catch one.

Slippery little suckers.

Growing more engrossed in her task, she leaned farther over, switching position to kneel in the damp soil. It squished slightly under her knees, not the most pleasant feeling in the world, but not too unpleasant either. It hardly mattered, she wasn't wearing anything she cared too much about.

The tangy metallic scent of the water was strong, seeming to course through her entire body as she started digging with her hands to reach the gems. Her efforts disturbed the bottom, sending dirt swirling up into the water, clouding her view. With one hand she tried to clear it, but only succeeded in making it worse, until the entire river in front of her was dark.

It was a little disappointing. She'd been so sure they were real...one more try. One more try and she would give up.

She dug her hands in the soil, both of them, the water swirling into the holes she created in the riverbed. It was so dark now she couldn't see her hands. Anxiety washed over her, anxiety that turned to terror as something came floating up from the darkness, swimming up, something big. When it grabbed hold of her arms and pulled her in, she saw Clayton's face, his skin peeling away from his scalp, his eyes glowing with hatred.

Lila didn't even have time to scream before he grabbed her by the neck and pulled her under, into the darkness, his screams of triumph echoing in her ears as she struggled to get away.

There was no escape. There was no way out. She knew that, knew it as he dragged her to the bottom. She saw herself there, tied to a chair, her skin pale and lacerated, her dead eyes open and staring at the fish that swam by.

Terror made her freeze, her muscles seizing up as the Clayton-thing laughed at her, his old laugh mixed with something far deeper and more darkly evil than she had ever heard. She was dead. She was dead and he had won and Arthur...

Oh god...something had happened to Arthur. She had a vision of the painting, but it was changed. Arthur was back in front of the stones, but he wasn't standing tall and vibrant. His eyes were closed, and he was slumped against the rock table as if in a deep sleep. Lila suddenly knew he was gone, trapped so deeply in his enchantment that he'd never be free again. She hadn't had the strength to liberate his soul and there would never be another with enough power to do so, not if he returned to the painting.

But if she could free him, if these events were still visions of things to come...

"I wish for you to be free, Arthur, I wish for you never to have another master, to be able to live in the world as any other man."

The wish left her mind without the power she'd felt that day in the car, and Lila somehow knew that it wasn't enough. Whatever had to be done, she didn't have the magic, the juice, the will, something was missing.

Suddenly the vision changed again, and she was back at the bottom of the lake, staring into her own vacant eyes, wondering if the reason she couldn't make this wish for Arthur was something more serious. Maybe she couldn't make a soul wish because she had no soul, because she was no longer among the living. A shiver passed over her body, chilling her more deeply than the cool waters of the lake could ever accomplish. There was only one thing left to try, one way to try to save Arthur from the fate in this vision, even if she couldn't save herself.

Sam, she thought. Sam, set Arthur free. Please, for me...please...Arthur, I wish Sam could be your master, the last master, who would set you free...

This time, there was a hum of power that filled the water around her as she made the wish. It was only a pale glow, a weak flare of magic that was only a shadow of the vibrant flame that had surrounded her, Arthur and Sam when they'd been together in her bedroom. But it was the best she could manage. She could only pray that it had been enough, and somehow learn how to live here under the dark water, lost in a nightmare that had no end.

Lila came back to her body with a strangled gasp, blinking her eyes and reaching out to brace herself on the bathroom sink. She'd been brushing her teeth when the vision overtook her, pulling her under and rolling her consciousness like a child lost in a strong current.

"Arthur!" she screamed as soon as she was capable of drawing a deep breath. She was alive, maybe he was too, but for how much longer? The incident with Megan had brought home how dead on her visions could be. There wasn't a second to waste.

"Arthur!" she shouted again, running out into the bedroom. Why hadn't he come when she screamed? "Arthur!"

Silence. There was not a sound in the little house except the air conditioner and the whirring of the refrigerator. Even the rain that had been pounding on the roof when she went into the bathroom had stopped. Summer storms in Missouri came and went quickly, but from the looks of the sky, the weather wasn't done with her yet.

But maybe that was a good thing. The day in her vision had been sunny, beautiful. Maybe there was more time to spare than she assumed.

Still, she couldn't keep herself from running into the kitchen, praying that she'd find Arthur there, leaning against the counter eating peanut butter straight from the jar. But the kitchen was quiet and empty, and Lila felt the anxiety within her skyrocket.

Hands shaking, she tried the phone. Still dead. She'd hoped it would be fixed by now. Phone lines went down a lot out here—she remembered her landlady had mentioned it when she'd given her the key—but she thought the phone company would have been aware of the problem by now.

"Arthur?" she called again. Where had he gone? She'd only been in the bathroom a few minutes, hadn't she?

It was possible he'd gone out into the woods. He'd said something about the energy of the storm, but she hadn't really been paying attention, she'd been too distracted by her fight with Sam. The memory of it still made her ill. She wanted to talk to him so badly, to tell him that she'd been a fool. She needed him, as a friend, as a lover, as a cop and as a gifted person with the kind of power that might be able to keep her and Arthur safe. But here she was, no phone, no car. No nothing. Nothing to do but wait and see if he would come to her, if he would reach her before the vision became a prophecy.

"No way," Lila said aloud, grateful that her voice sounded stronger than she felt. It was only about a five-mile walk into town. She could probably do it in an hour and a half or so. She didn't know what she would do once she got there, what step to take if Sam wouldn't see her, but anything seemed better than staying here, so close to the lake where she'd seen her own corpse.

She would look for Arthur on the way. After yesterday, she thought she could find her way around the woods, and had an idea or two where he might have gone. At least she recalled the path they'd taken and knew she could follow it again. Not bothering to change out of the blue summer dress she'd thrown on earlier, Lila grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

She couldn't remember exactly what she'd been wearing in the vision, but she was pretty sure it hadn't been pale blue and knew that it hadn't been sleeveless. The knowledge gave her some comfort as she closed the door behind her and headed down the steps, determined not to take the crack of thunder that greeted her as a bad omen.

Dalton swore under his breath as he watched Lila leave the house. Where the hell was she going? He didn't want to kill her in the woods. It would be harder to buy suicide if she was found shot in the trees. He would have to take her back to the house, and the investigating officers might be smart enough to realize the body had been moved after death. He couldn't risk that.

Besides, it sounded like there was someone else staying at the house. Who the hell was Arthur? She kept calling for him and Dalton could have sworn the cop's name was Sam. It would be best to follow her, make sure she was really alone before they got down to business. Picking up his backpack, Dalton set out to follow her. If she was taking some kind of shortcut into town, he wanted to know about it. If he had no other choice, he'd kill her before she got that far. It wouldn't do to have her go stay with a friend or make up with her cop boyfriend before he could get to her. The Lila problem had to be taken care of quickly. He needed to be back in Watertown by tomorrow morning at the very latest.

Still, there was time for a little tracking. There was still a chance this could work out to be a nice, clean kill. There might even be time for a little fun. She'd fucked her boyfriend last night, as long as he used a condom and made sure not to leave any DNA evidence behind, it wouldn't seem out of the ordinary for there to be signs of intercourse before death. He hadn't had this much of a hard-on for a woman in a long time, and he was sure the excitement of stalking her through the woods would only make it worse. It seemed a shame not to give himself the chance to indulge his appetite.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam groaned. His head was killing him and even the weak sunlight coming through the blinds hurt his eyes.

The blinds...? Where was he?

His body jerked as the images came back to him. The wall...the rain...the brakes. Mercifully, he didn't recall the actual collision, but he knew he'd crashed. He'd crashed his car. Even though he hadn't been going that fast, it had been fast enough to almost kill him.

How could he have been so stupid?

"Shhh," said a smooth female voice from behind him. Soft hands gripped his shoulders and gently pulled him back down toward the bed.

For one wild, happy moment he thought it was Lila, before he remembered the fight, and recognized the woman in his room as Amy. He turned to her as his head hit the soft pillow once again.

"How do you feel?" Her smile was warm and full of concern.

"I've been better." He tried to smile back, but his lips were too dry. Besides, smiling didn't feel right, not when there were so many unanswered questions racing through his mind.

Amy handed him a plastic cup of stale hospital water, and he drank it greedily, shocked by the violence of his thirst. He wondered how long he'd been out.

"How did they find me?"

"The Travers were home," she said. "They called. Bob was pretty worried about that head injury. He'll be awfully glad you're awake."

"I'm awfully glad myself," Sam said. He looked at her for a minute, wondering why her eyes kept darting around the room like that. It was almost the same way Lila looked, like she was listening to a voice only she could hear, looking at someone he couldn't see.

"What are you looking at?"

"I think she's looking for me," said a voice. Sam almost dropped his cup. He turned toward the window, where a tall, dark-haired man stood watching him.

"Who are you?" he asked, though deep down he thought he knew. The man felt too familiar, even *looked* familiar, though Sam had never seen him before.

The man bowed stiffly. "I am Arthur of Sefyll. At your service."

"Who is it, Sam?" Amy's voice dragged Sam away from the man, and he turned to look at her with wide eyes.

"I think he...I think he knows Lila." It didn't sound like his voice that spoke.

"It's a man? Do you know him?"

"Can't you see him?"

Amy shook her head and smiled.

"And you don't look bothered by that," Sam shook his head, wincing at the pain the involuntary movement brought him. "Great. This head injury must be *really* bad."

"It isn't the head injury," Arthur and Amy said simultaneously. It was like hearing things on some bizarre stereo system. "I can sense him," Amy continued, at the same time Arthur said, "I think she can sense me."

"Listen, this is about to blow what's left of my mind. Could you give me a second?" Sam said to Arthur, before turning back to Amy. "Talk to me, Amy, what the hell's happening here?"

"I sense a presence," Amy said. "A powerful one too. Old and magical. A witch, or maybe a Druid of some kind."

"The witch is very good," Arthur said. Then, in an entirely different tone, "Who is she? She doesn't feel like your woman, but if she is and you have no intention of treating Lila as she deserves to be—"

"That's none of your goddamned business and Amy is not a witch," Sam said, but Amy stopped him.

"Sure I am," she said. "He knew that? He must be really good."

Sam shot her a look.

She laughed. "Sam, a lot of us here in Burlin are witches, didn't you know?"

His stunned expression must have spoken for him.

"We are. Burlin is a very powerful place. A lot of us are drawn to places of power."

"She's right, Sam," Arthur said. "I believe that's why I ended up here."

"I don't know who you are, exactly, Arthur, but you can stay out of this," Sam snapped. "Amy, I'm not sure I understand this, but if the entire town's a goddamned episode of *Bewitched*, I don't understand why no one bothered to tell me about it."

Amy shrugged. "You didn't seem to accept your own powers very well. At least, not your non-job-related ones. So we decided not to mention it."

"We?"

"Me, Bob, Ted..." Amy named several other of Sam's friends, while his jaw dropped in amazement. She giggled. "Don't look so surprised. We're not nose wigglers. Paganism is a religion, you know, and it's a growing one too."

"So everybody in town..."

"Not all of us, just quite a few. It's not like the island from *The Wicker Man* or anything."

"This is all very interesting," Arthur said, "but can we get back to the subject?"

"What subject is that?" Sam studied Arthur as the latter walked closer to the bed, his eyes staring into Sam's own, his body moving with a stealthy grace. Yes, Sam definitely knew this man, knew his presence. He'd been in the bedroom last night. "It was your hand, wasn't it?"

Arthur nodded. "Yes."

"You were there last night." Sam didn't know if he was angry or aroused by the realization that it was this man who'd watched him with Lila, this man who'd lain in the bed next to her while they slept. He remembered the incredible energy that had filled the room, remembered how it had reached deep into his soul. It wasn't just Lila there, it was Arthur too, and Sam really had no idea how to handle that piece of information. "You watched us."

"Watched you? Last night? Where?"

"Amy, please," Sam said.

"Watched...oh," Amy said. She grinned.

"Seriously, Amy."

Amy's eyebrows rose so high they disappeared under her bangs. "I'll just go get a drink," she said, getting up. "But I will want to know more about this, you know. Seems to me there's some serious soul magic happening here, Sam, and whatever happens..." she reached out and touched his shoulder. "You know we all understand. We just want you to be happy, okay?"

Sam watched her leave, a puzzled expression on his face, wondering what the hell she was trying to say. He'd have to get to the bottom of that later. Right now he had more pressing issues. "What are you doing here?"

Arthur sighed and sat down. His energy caressed Sam's skin, drawing him to the man. It wasn't lust, exactly, although that was part of it. Sam wasn't having fantasies about tugging the dark t-shirt off Arthur's chest and licking his way up to the other man's mouth—though the idea wasn't totally unappealing.

No, he was having fantasies of watching Lila take off Arthur's shirt and lick up the man's chest. Fantasies of watching Arthur bury his face between Lila's legs. Fantasies of Lila with Arthur's cock in her mouth while he, Sam, buried himself in her body.

Even, if he was really honest, fantasies of touching Arthur, touching the soul within Arthur and feeling the other man's body close to his as he came inside Lila.

This was so not the day he had planned. Blood rushed to his pelvis, his cock hardening and lengthening as he thought of being entwined with Arthur and Lila, naked.

His face was hot, and it grew even hotter when Arthur glanced down. Sam was sure he could see his erection through the sheet and the thin hospital gown.

"Relax," Arthur said. "It's happening to me too. It's part of our connection. Our three souls are entwined, our powers joined. The connection is often a sexual one, and it has nothing to do with your actual sexual preference. There's no reason for shame."

"I'm not ashamed, I'm losing my mind," Sam said, his face growing even redder when he glanced down and saw that Arthur did indeed have a large bulge in the front of his jeans. He swallowed.

"You aren't mad, and neither is Lila. You're a smart man, you should know better than to doubt—"

"Where is Lila?" Sam asked, his voice growing stronger. Here was something he could latch onto. Whatever this strange reaction in his body might mean, right now he cared more about Lila than anything else. She'd been upset, and now she was alone out there in the woods with no one to watch over her. The thought made him insanely anxious, leading him to believe that somewhere, deep in his mind, he had realized Arthur was there with her before, that he was the other power trying to keep her safe.

Arthur shook his head, gravely. "Lila wished me to be here."

"Is she okay?"

"I assume so, she made this wish," Arthur said, the frustration in the other man clear to Sam for the first time. "One minute she was weeping in the bathroom, the next she was making a wish for me to come to you. I think that is why you can see me now when you couldn't before. At least, not unless your guard was down."

"You left her alone? After someone broke into the house?"

"I had no choice." Quickly Arthur explained the three wishes to Sam. "And she wouldn't be alone if you hadn't left the cottage. She was distraught, you should have realized that she—"

"I did realize. I was on my way back to her when the brakes on my car gave out," Sam said, matching the irritation in the other man's tone. That irritation quickly gave way to a fresh wave of anxiety, however, as the implications of his accident finally penetrated his concussion-fogged brain.

"Someone at the cottage must have tampered with my brakes. We have to get out of here, we have to go to Lila," Sam continued, struggling to get out of bed and cursing as the world spun around him. Arthur's hands were on him in a moment, helping steady him, and sending a rush of desire spiraling through him that did nothing to help the state of his mind or his body. "Don't touch me."

"Stop reacting like a narrow-minded bigot and start thinking with your power," Arthur demanded, pulling him closer rather than obeying his order. Sam sucked in a breath as the hard planes of another male form pressed tightly against his own. They were nearly the same height, Arthur only the barest of inches taller, and every erogenous zone in Sam's body hummed as something seemed to sync up between them.

His lips grew numb with a strange electricity, his nipples hardened against the other man's chest and his traitorous cock grew even thicker, longer, until it strained against Arthur. The other man's erection grew equally rigid. He pressed his hips forward, bringing their two shafts impossibly closer, until they throbbed against each other, the two similar energies making the area around their hips glow with a soft light.

"You can feel it, don't pretend that you can't," Arthur said, his voice husky with a need Sam had never expected to hear in another man's voice. "If Lila were here, if her magic were here to ground our raw power, there would be no end to our possibilities."

"I don't give a shit about possibilities, I just want her safe," Sam said, working harder than he would have believed possible to hold back a groan as Arthur smoothed his hands around to his buttocks, digging his fingers into the thick muscles of Sam's ass. The movement created friction between their cocks and sent heat spiraling through Sam's body.

"Our possibilities are what can keep her safe," Arthur growled. "They may be the only thing that can. There's a wraith, a death-seeking ghost with the power of hell behind him, looking for her. We can't waste any more time. We have to go to her, have to find a way to solidify the bond between us before it's too late, before we lose the chance to protect her."

"Fine, I'll wish us there," Sam said, trying not to pull away from the other man, though the part of him that was his father's son was screaming for him to use his fists to liberate himself if that's what he had to do.

But Arthur was right. That part of his mind wasn't authentic to Sam, it was the bigoted product of years of hearing about "dirty homos". His dad hadn't been a big fan of anyone but the snow-white good old boys who called their suburb of St. Louis home. He'd been livid when Sam had taken a job working in East St. Louis, one of the only Caucasians on the force. But Sam had tuned out his tirades about working with "niggers". He'd never shared his father's views, not on race or sexuality.

He still couldn't honestly say exactly what he himself thought about homosexuals. He certainly wasn't ready to come to terms with how much he ached to have Arthur lift up his hospital gown and take his pulsing length in his large hand, but he knew he would do whatever it took to protect Lila. She was even more important to him than he'd realized before the accident. He was already in love with her, no matter if the phenomenon made sense, and the idea that anyone or anything would try to take her away from him made him ready to kill first and ask questions later.

"No, we'll take the witch's car," Arthur said.

"Didn't you say I had three wishes? I'll use one, I just want to get to Lila," Sam protested.

"You have three soul wishes. It's a deeper matter than a mere longing or want. No matter how much you ache to be with Lila, the wish wouldn't be powerful enough to transport us both. Maybe one of us, but —"

"Fine. Since you seem to know what the hell's going on, I'll wish you there first, and then —"

"No, we must arrive together. We'll need all the magic we can get, but I thank you for the sentiment. I'm glad you would trust me to protect the woman we love," Arthur said.

Before Sam could reply to that, the other man's lips were on his own. They were rougher and so much larger than a woman's lips, but they were warm and soft at the same time. He found himself responding before he could think, taking and giving comfort from the movement of their mouths on each other, a wave of contentment washing over him as their tongues began a tentative exploration. He'd never thought kissing another man could feel so...right. So normal. But it did, and as Arthur's tongue stroked his own, he realized somewhere deep inside him that he wanted this kiss for more than just Lila's sake.

"I could come to love you," Arthur said, his breath coming a little faster as they pulled away from what had been so much more than a brief meeting of their lips.

"Maybe I'll know what to say to that someday soon," Sam said, shocked at the rich emotion and raw need in his own voice. "Right now, all I can think about is Lila."

"We'll reach her in time, we must. If not, there is no reason for me to seek the end of my enchantment," Arthur agreed.

They were in Amy's car not ten minutes later, speeding toward the cottage at the edge of town. She'd smuggled Sam his clothes and helped him sneak out of the clinic without bothering for an official release, then handed him her keys without wasting a precious moment asking questions. If there had been any doubt in Sam's mind about his friend possessing power outside the realm of average human experience, those actions had banished it.

Outside, the day had lightened and brightened considerably, but the sky to the south remained dark, the area above Lila's lakeside home nearly black. Sam hoped it wasn't a sign that they were too late, that whatever evil hunting Lila hadn't found the woman who had quickly become the most important person in his life. He knew he wouldn't want to live without her, and sensed that Arthur wouldn't either. If the wraith succeeded, it would claim three lives, not merely one.

* * * * *

Lila had never been so happy to see the roof of her little cottage through the treetops. She'd been searching for Arthur for almost two hours, two fruitless hours in which she'd shouted herself hoarse and still found no trace of him. She'd long given up on her plan to make it into town. The five miles that had seemed a small matter earlier suddenly took on new significance when she thought about walking them by herself. Passing by the river where she'd almost died would have made her nervous, even if Arthur were by her side. Alone, she would just be too spooked.

Especially considering she was already scared and worried sick about Arthur. She couldn't imagine where he'd gone, but she had a bad feeling about his disappearance. He wouldn't leave her alone of his own free will, not when he knew she was in imminent danger. There was something wrong, something horribly wrong. She was finding it harder and harder to believe that everything was going to be okay, that she would find a way to prevent the horror of her vision.

The time alone in the woods had made her even more conscious of how isolated she was out here in the trees, at the edge of the lake. Her shouting hadn't drawn any attention whatsoever. No one had seemed to hear her. There had been no answering cries from any of the other houses around the lake, no friendly voice asking if they could help her look. The woods had been eerily silent, and the absence of so much as a single singing bird had taken its toll on her nerves.

Then there was the lake itself. She'd found herself unable to even look in the direction of the still, black water without recalling her vision. Her skin prickled with fear at the memory, growing cold, as if already submerged in the spring-fed waters.

Lila hurried toward the house, practically breaking into a run, refusing to spend another second indulging her fear. She had to try to focus on the positives... whatever the hell those might be.

"Stop it," Lila admonished herself. There *were* positives. It hadn't rained on her since she left the house, there was one. And maybe the phone would be on when she got inside. Maybe she'd be able to reach Sam and apologize, tell him how scared she was and ask him to please come be with her or pick her up and take her as far away from Spring Lake as possible.

If the phone was back on, she'd be okay. Then she wouldn't feel so alone, so isolated from the real world, where things like wraiths didn't exist. And there was always the chance that Arthur would be inside the cottage. It was possible they'd spent the last two hours walking in circles, just missing each other as they trudged through the woods. Stranger things had happened. Maybe Arthur had decided to go back to the house and wait for her to come to him, knowing she'd make her way back to the cottage sooner or later.

The thought made her spirits lift. Arthur had to be inside, there was no other explanation. He wouldn't have left her. There had to be some kind of misunderstanding, a simple miscommunication.

With a small smile, Lila raced up the steps to the porch, so focused on the thought of Arthur and Sam that she didn't pay attention to anything but the door in front of her, and pulled out her keys.

They rattled as she turned the doorknob, swinging it open. First thing would be a drink. Her throat was so dry.

"Arthur?" she said, before she noticed the blackness inside the house, the black mist that smelled of death.

Oh god...the wraith.

Her heart stopped and the world seemed to move in slow motion as she spun around, acting purely on instinct. She knew she had to run, to get back outside, head for the road and a chance at safety. The need was so strong, every cell in her body so focused on flight, that it took her mind a moment to register the man standing in the open doorway.

She screamed when she did and ground to a stop, suddenly trapped between the evil force behind her and the shadowy outline of the stranger in front of her.

The stranger laughed in response, a low, malicious sound that would have made her certain he meant her harm, even if the dim light hadn't afforded her a clear view of gun in his hand.

"Hey there, Lila." The voice was familiar, but in Lila's panic, she couldn't place it. "Why don't you get back inside. We have some talking to do, you and I."

Chapter Fifteen

It felt like forever that she stood there, with the wraith at her back and the equally sinister man in front of her, out of options, but refusing to admit that she was trapped. There had to be a way out, there had to be another alternative other than the death behind door number one or the death behind door number two.

Think, think!

Her mind raced as her eyes darted around the room. Close, they were both so close, and there was nowhere to run. Lila tried to swallow, but couldn't. Her throat was absolutely dry, her heart pounding in her chest so loud she was certain the man could hear it.

"Come on now, Lila. Turn around, go back inside."

Suddenly, she recognized the voice. It was Dalton, Dalton Prior, Clayton's partner from Watertown. The realization was so shocking that she spoke before she could think better of it.

"Dalton?" she croaked. "Dalton, what are you doing here?"

She knew it was a stupid question the second the words were out of her mouth. The gun in his hand made it pretty obvious what Dalton was doing here, but every second gave her a little more time to think, to try to figure out some method of escape. Distracting Dalton might be her only chance. She knew from experience that the wraith was beyond reason or distraction, a single-minded death dealer who didn't understand things like questions or answers.

"I've come for some lemonade and gingerbread," Dalton said. "Why don't you go on in and make it for me?" He stepped closer to her, and she smelled the sweat and dirt on his body. "Stop wasting time, Lila. Get inside. Go sit down. I've got a few questions for you."

"I didn't kill Clayton. So if you're here for revenge, you're wasting your time." Her voice trembled.

"Hell, I know that," he said. "I killed him, bullet through the brain. And I'll do you too, if you don't get a whole lot more cooperative, real quick."

The words heightened the terror already coursing through her body. This couldn't be happening. Dalton and Clayton had been like brothers, thick as thieves. They'd been partners ever since Clayton had joined the Watertown PD, and spent more time out drinking beer together than either one did at home. What horrible thing could have happened to make Dalton murder his best friend?

"I'm sorry, Dalton. I don't know what Clayton did, but I promise —"

"Oh please, shut the fuck up and go sit down." Dalton sighed and jerked the gun sideways.

"Please, whatever it was, I didn't—"

"What part of shut up and sit down don't you understand?" he shouted with enough volume to make Lila wince. Clearly, he was getting impatient, but even the gun in his hand didn't make her want to turn around, to come face-to-face again with the awful mist. The thought of walking through it to the couch was unbearable, intolerable. She felt like she would lose her mind if she had to feel it against her skin. Sweat ran down her body, itching and tickling its way down her back and sides, as she fought to think clearly through the panic that filled her.

She had two choices. Walk into the foulness of the wraith or stand there and let Dalton kill her. Neither was particularly appealing, but at least if she did what Dalton said, she might live long enough to save herself. That's what her rational mind told her, now she just had to find some way to ignore the primal part of her that insisted she take a bullet instead. She wasn't an animal, she wasn't ruled by instinct, and she had to remember that if she wanted any chance at getting out of the cottage alive.

So she turned, even though every nerve in her body shrieked in protest, and faced the mist. She risked a quick look over her shoulder to see what Dalton thought of the horror, but he didn't even seem to notice it, looked through it without recognition as he gestured toward the couch. The evil was, evidently, for her eyes only.

As she moved forward, the blackness swirled in front of her, solid in some spots, more transparent in others. It moved like a living thing, reaching out to her as she walked past, caressing her arms with icy cold misery. The skin it touched numbed immediately, the sensation nearly enough to make Lila turn and run. The numbness promised death as surely as the gun in Dalton's hand, a death more prolonged and miserable than any bullet could deliver.

But the mist pulled away, keeping its distance as she hurried past with Dalton close on her heels. When she reached the couch and sat down, he was already looming above her.

"Where are the letters?" he said.

"What letters?" She was trying to focus on Dalton, but it wasn't easy with the show going on behind him. The mist was starting to take on more concrete forms, shapes that looked like Clayton's face or hands, but twisted and decayed. It was terrifying, making Lila's heartbeat accelerate until blood was pounding through her ears.

"Don't play games with me. Clay said you had a letter to be opened in the event of his death. He told me about it quite a few times. So where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The gun hit her across the mouth, so hard and fast she didn't even see it coming. She cried out and fell on her side on the couch, her knees hitting the floor as she flipped over.

"Get up."

Dalton didn't sound winded, but Lila heard something, almost like the man in front of her was panting for breath. But it was faint, background noise that gradually grew louder, drawing her gaze up and over Dalton's shoulder. There, the mist was growing, strengthening, and she realized with horror that the sound she heard was Clayton's laughter.

Tears streamed down her face as a despair unlike anything she'd ever known wrapped itself around her body and mind. She wasn't getting out of here. This was it, this is where she was going to meet her death. She might be able to escape Clayton. She might be able to escape Dalton. But to escape both of them...

What would happen to Sam and Arthur when she was gone? Would Arthur go back into the painting? Would Sam even think to make a wish like the one she'd –

It suddenly hit her, in a flash of inspiration that made her feel insanely stupid and hopeful at the same time. Arthur was with Sam. She'd been a fool not to realize it sooner. She'd wished him to Sam in her vision, then come back to herself to find Arthur missing. That had to be the reason for his disappearance. He had a new master now. But surely, once Arthur made Sam understand what had happened, they would come looking for her. Arthur knew about the wraith, and would explain to Sam that they had to go back to the cottage, had to make sure she wasn't alone.

Just hang on, she told herself. Hang on for Sam. Hang on for Arthur. They'll be here. You know they'll be here.

"I said get up!"

Lila obeyed. She ran the back of her hand across her split lip, wincing at the pain, but she stared Dalton right in the eyes as she stood. She'd learned quite a few things about how to deal with angry, violent men in her years as Clayton's wife, but she was not going to obey those lessons now. Fuck Dalton and fuck the mist behind him. She would not let either of them see how scared she was, she would not let them win that victory. If they wanted to kill her, they'd have to do it without the added aphrodisiac of her fear.

"Where's the letter?"

"There is no letter," she said, surprised at how strong her voice sounded. "Clayton lied to you. He never gave me any letter."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care what you believe."

"You've got a smart mouth, you know that?" Dalton said quietly, the softer tone doing nothing to conceal the threat clear in his words.

"Yeah," Lila said, shooting a look at the writhing mass of smoke and twisted body parts that was what remained of her former husband. "Clayton used to tell me all the time."

This time she was ready for the hit, and ducked before he could get to her. Dalton was a big man, and tough. He was even taller than Clayton had been and had a good thirty pounds on him.

But he hadn't been taking care of himself and wasn't nearly as quick. Her reflexes were much faster, and the knowledge helped fuel the spark of hope within her. She still might not be able to get away, but neither did she have to stand and take the abuse. In fact, she might be able to dish out a little abuse of her own.

Not stopping to second-guess the impulse, Lila lashed out at Dalton with her foot, landing a kick to the balls that would have made any self-defense-class teacher proud. He was already off balance from the punch he'd thrown and missed, and the added impact sent him spinning to the floor. The gun flew from his hand, but in the opposite direction from where she stood. There wasn't time to try to grab it.

He was down, but he'd be back up in a second. If she was going to run, this was the time. There wouldn't be another chance. Quickly, she turned and started toward the door, realizing a second too late that the wraith had moved to block her exit. She collided with the mix of mist and horror-movie flesh dead on. The numbness she'd felt before immediately skittered across her skin, but this time she also sucked it into her lungs as she tried to scream.

She suddenly couldn't draw a breath, couldn't move, and was forced to stand completely still as something wet and oozing slid up the inside of her leg. It might have been a hand, or what was left of a hand, but she couldn't be sure. All she knew was that it was the most horrible thing she'd ever felt, so horrible she was almost glad when Dalton leapt upon her from behind, knocking her to the floor and out of the wraith's black cloud.

They landed on the hardwood with enough force to bruise her knees, but Lila immediately started to struggle, kicking at Dalton's legs, trying to wriggle her way out of his arms. It was no use. He held her so tightly she almost couldn't breathe, easily pinning her arms to her sides as he recovered his gun and tucked it into his holster. He then picked her up by the waist like she weighed not much more than the damn weapon and carried her into the kitchen.

Lila tried to tangle her feet in his legs to trip him. Dalton retaliated by walking sideways, shuffling his feet across the wooden floor, making it impossible for her to stop him.

"You like to struggle, Lila?" he grunted. "You like to wiggle? I know how much you like to wiggle. I saw you last night with your boyfriend. It made me pretty hot, I'm not ashamed to say."

His words only served to make Lila angrier. "You're the bastard who broke in last night, aren't you?" Had that really only been last night? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I'm not a bastard, Lila, honey. I think you met my mom and dad at the picnic last year," Dalton said, an almost pleasant note in his voice that scared her more than his anger.

"Let me go, Dalton. There's no letter. Just let me go and I swear I'll forget this ever happened," Lila said, even though she knew in her heart that they were way past the bargaining stage.

"You're smarter than that, Lila. You know you're going to die. The only thing left to decide is whether you want to enjoy getting fucked before you do."

They'd reached the bedroom now, and Lila wasn't surprised to find the wraith was waiting for them, spreading its darkness through the room, hovering by the ceiling. She could feel it watching her, feel its glee as it realized what was going to happen to her. It made her sick, as sick as the thought of having Dalton Prior working his body into hers.

Dalton threw her onto the bed. She rolled across it, trying to get to the other side. There was a window there. She might be able to get out if she could distract him. If he dove across the bed for her, she would smash him over the head with the lamp and pray that she had enough strength to knock him unconscious.

But she had obviously underestimated Dalton's reflexes. By the time she got to the other side of the bed, he'd pulled the gun on her again, aiming it right for her head. "Back on the bed, Lila," he said. "Let's see how smart that mouth is when it's wrapped around my dick."

Clayton's laughter grew loud again in her ears. Slowly, the mist near the ceiling grew thicker, blacker, the twisted limbs arranging themselves to form an almost-human shape next to Dalton. Shadowy features emerged, Clayton's features, his grin so reminiscent of the vision she'd had that Lila felt gorge rise in her throat.

The vision. She was dead, at the bottom of the lake. Sam and Arthur wouldn't get here in time. She would die, she would be raped, cut, tied to a chair and thrown in the water. She was getting ready to die, exactly the way the vision had predicted only a few hours earlier.

No! Remember Megan! You can change things. The visions don't have to come true.

"On the bed!"

Her numb limbs barely obeyed, but somehow she managed to get on the bed. She didn't want to do this, but neither did she want to be shot before she had another chance to try to escape.

"Take off your dress, slowly."

Lila fought to keep from crying. There was no time to cry, no time for emotions like fear and sadness. She had to get out. She had to escape.

She grabbed the hem of her dress and started lifting. Dalton smiled coldly, his eyes watching her with an air of detachment. He didn't look like a man who was anticipating getting his rocks off, but she could see the bulge in his pants. Seemingly detached or not, he was going to rape her, there was no doubt in her mind. The thought made her head spin and she felt dizzy for a moment, as if a part of her consciousness were trying to leave her, to flee her body before Dalton joined her on the bed.

Her hands froze with her dress bunched up around her waist, her body refusing to obey, as if by keeping her clothes on, she might somehow prevent what was going to happen.

"Not that slowly," Dalton said with a little laugh. "Keep going."

Lila swallowed hard and tried to force her hands to lift the dress over her head, but the sudden movement of the cloud that was Clayton drew her attention. She watched, transfixed, as the column grew thicker, more substantial. Within seconds, Clayton stood there, so real Lila gasped.

"Get that dress off," Dalton said, cocking the gun. "I'm not going to ask you again."

"I—"

Lila had no idea what she was going to say, but she didn't have the chance to find out. Clayton suddenly stepped forward, his ghostly form seeming to disappear into Dalton's body. Dalton's eyes widened dramatically and then he began to scream, long, loud, agonizing screams that left little doubt that he was in tormenting pain.

For a second, Lila sat, frozen, watching as Dalton struggled against the wraith that moved within him. The gun went off, shooting the ceiling fan. The sound of the shot in the small room was deafening. Lila screamed and ducked, tearing her gaze away from the howling Dalton.

She dove off the bed and headed for the window, scrambling with the lock and throwing it open with shaking hands. Glancing quickly behind her, she saw Dalton's skin start to bubble, as if his blood were boiling inside his veins, the features of the living man's face beginning to change, evolve, becoming the exact replica of the man he'd killed.

"Lila!" It was Clayton's voice now, Clayton's face and voice, somehow alive in Dalton's body.

Lila pulled herself up on the windowsill, one leg already dangling outside, but was still unable to pull her eyes away. It was Clayton, no doubt about it, but a Clayton come back straight from hell. His face was tinged yellow and green, his teeth covered in black rot. When he spoke, it was in a voice thick with effort and disease.

"Come on, Lila, how about one for the road?"

Lila heard a strangled sound escape from the back of her throat as she shoved away from the window, falling three feet to land in the soft, cold grass. One for the road. It was a joke from early in their marriage, code for a quickie before work. The monster, wraith, whatever it was, had Clayton's memories as well as his face, and for some reason, that scared her even more.

Scrambling to her feet, she took off running, flying down the soft slope that led out the back of the cottage and off toward the lake. Clayton's voice roared out of the window behind her, wringing a fresh sob from her body as hysteria threatened to take her over.

"Get back here, Lila! You're my wife. You owe me one for the road!"

Lila didn't waste time looking back again as she ran into the trees, headed for the path that ran alongside the water and from there to the main road.

* * * * *

"Lila!" Sam leapt from the car, not bothering to close the door, and ran up the driveway, gravel spraying out from under his feet. He heard Arthur right behind him, calling for her too, as they sped up the stairs to the porch.

The door hung open. This wasn't right, something bad had happened here. Lila would never leave the door unlocked, not after the break-in the night before. Arthur confirmed Sam's feeling of unease as they raced through the empty house to the bedroom. "The wraith was here," he said. "Lila's husband was in this room, the air is thick with the energy of death."

"Does he have her?" Sam's heart was beating in his stomach. He felt like he was going to vomit. How could he have left Lila alone, let her become prey to some monster straight out of hell?

Arthur was pale, his eyes like black smudges in his face. "I don't know, but I can feel her fear. She was so afraid."

"Let's go," Sam said, motioning to the open window behind Arthur. He couldn't stand there beating himself up for his mistakes. There were signs of a struggle near the end of the bed, but the window was open. Lila had to have escaped, and maybe, if they were fast enough, they'd be able to reach her before the creature who hunted her.

Chapter Sixteen

Lila ran faster than she'd ever run in her life. Her lungs ached and a metallic taste filled her mouth, but she didn't stop, didn't dare stop. She could hear the thing behind her gaining faster than she would have thought possible. In the brief look she'd gotten from the window, Clayton had seemed rotten, putrid, more a corpse than a man. She'd been certain she would be able to outrun him, but by the sound of the leaves crunching on the path behind her, he was getting closer and closer. Pretty soon she'd be overrun, and he'd kill her, she knew that without a doubt.

He might rape her first, might try to slide that thick black tongue into her mouth, or he might not. Either way, she knew she was lost if he got his hands on her. Even if Sam and Arthur managed to save her before he finished his work, she knew her mind wouldn't survive an up close and personal experience with Clayton the wraith.

"Lila," he called her name for what must have been the tenth time, and Lila couldn't hold back the sob that rose in her throat. Even the sound of her name on his lips felt like an invasion, a violation of her basic human rights.

She tried to run faster, but found she was maxed out. Her muscles screamed in protest, no amount of adrenaline able to make up for a lack of prior physical fitness. In the back of her mind, Lila vowed to take up marathon running if she survived.

"You want to go swimming? I might let you wear a suit this time," Clayton called out from behind her, following the words with a liquid sounding laugh.

Swimming. The vision. He was going to kill her in the water, just like in the vision. She'd thought she could outrun him. She was wrong.

But what about the chair? You were tied to a chair, remember?

For some reason, the thought gave her strength. Foolishly or not, she suddenly felt like she would be okay. If she could just avoid getting anywhere near a chair that Clayton could tie her to, then she'd be safe. She even managed to pick up speed as the assurance filled her. She rounded the corner at the far end of the lake faster than she would have thought possible, bringing her within five hundred feet of the road on the other side. If she could just get to the road, flag down someone, anyone, to help her...

"Oh god," she moaned, the sound filled with more defeat than she wanted to admit.

There it was, coming into sight as the path curved, the yellow chair from her vision, sitting at the end of the fishing pier. There was a blue chair and a brown one as well, all arranged around a festive picnic table that she remembered hearing about from her landlady. A great spot for lunch and some fishing, that's what she'd said. Now it looked like it was going to be a great spot for murder, but not without a little torture first.

Lila's eyes were immediately drawn to the fishing pole stuck in the mud by the water, seemingly abandoned there along with a black and red flannel shirt. Both were hauntingly familiar. She suddenly knew that the lacerations she'd seen in her vision were from the fishing hook and the shirt was what she'd been wearing under the water. That dirty flannel was going to be her death shroud. It made sense in a horrible kind of way. After all, Clayton had never let her wear revealing clothing in life. The same rules would apparently apply in death.

He was right behind her now. His panting echoed in her ears, his footfalls impossibly loud on the path. With the sick feeling that she was probably helping to precipitate her own death, but unwilling to go down without any kind of fight, Lila grabbed the fishing pole and yanked it from the mud, finishing the movement by spinning around and slamming Clayton in the side of the head with the heavy reel. It hit him with a sickening squelch.

"You bitch!" he shouted. His rotting fingers lifted to touch the wound, the black liquid dripping from the cut in his greenish skin staining them as he moved his hand away.

Lila didn't wait. She swung the rod again, hitting him, feeling the fishhook at the end fly into her cheek. *One cut down.*

He grabbed for the rod, grabbed for her. She ducked away from him, almost falling in her haste, but her hand on the ground helped her keep her balance. "Help!" she screamed, using every bit of strength she could muster. Her voice echoed in the silent woods, rising above the still treetops into the dark clouds above.

"No one can hear you," Clayton said, his hand closing over her wrist, pulling her back. She kicked at him, her foot hitting flesh so spongy and loose it turned her stomach. His fingers felt like bone encased in moss. Bile rose in her throat, sour and acidic.

Fighting to stay conscious, she kicked at him again and again, using his arm to help keep her balance. His free hand grabbed for her and she twisted away, leaning to the side in a desperate attempt to avoid his grasp.

It failed. In one swift movement, he grabbed her arm and pulled her close to him, pressing her chest against his. The fishing rod was caught between their bodies, its hook scraping the skin on her bare legs as it swung on its thin line. The smell of Clayton's putrefying body was overpowering, his skin cold through the thin fabric of her dress.

She stamped on his feet, pounding her heels into him, but the heavy shoes Dalton had been wearing protected his toes. She tried kicking him some more, but he didn't even move. His laugh in her ear smelled of death and made her skin crawl.

"I always did like it when you wriggled like that," he said, and she could feel the truth of his words hard against her.

"Fuck...you," she panted, still struggling, refusing to give up, refusing to let him win, even though deep down she was certain he would.

"Lila!" Nothing had ever sounded as sweet as Sam's voice shouting her name.

"Sam!" she shrieked, before Clayton spun her around and clamped his foul hand over her mouth. The fishing rod fell from her fingers as he wrapped his arms around her, crossing them just under her breasts. Her first instinct was to bite down on his hand, but she couldn't, she *could not*, force herself to put that fetid thing in her mouth.

"Lila!" Oh God, he didn't sound any closer to her.

"That your boyfriend, Lila? Is that the man you left me for?" Clayton shoved her forward, hard, and she fell on the path, making her already bruised knees scream in agony.

She didn't even have time to try to get up before he was on her, wrapping the fishing line around her body. The strong, almost invisible thread pinned her arms to her sides, making it impossible for her to get up.

The vision flashed through her brain again. There was no escape. She'd tried to change it, tried to give her story a different ending, and all she'd done was hand Clayton the weapon he needed to fulfill her terrible destiny.

He flipped her over, shoving her skirt up her legs to her waist, tearing her panties off. She heard Sam call her name again, so faintly, and tried to scream a reply, but then Clayton's horrible mouth covered hers.

* * * * *

"We have to find her!" Sam was shouting, his fury at Lila's husband making him lash out at Arthur as he vaulted out the window behind him.

"The wraith's energy is everywhere," Arthur replied. "I can't follow his trail."

They stopped in the tidy little yard, the breeze off the lake cold on Sam's skin. "Wait a minute," he said. "Why can't I wish for her to be here? I wish for her to be here, Arthur. Safe. With us."

For a moment they stood, chests heaving, staring at each other. Then Arthur shook his head. "It won't work, Sam."

"What the fuck do you mean, it won't work? You're supposed to grant my wishes, now grant my fucking wish!"

"You aren't wishing with your soul," Arthur said. He reached out to take Sam's hand, but Sam snatched it away.

"Don't you dare tell me I don't want her safe!"

"You want her safe, yes," Arthur shouted back. His eyes gleamed. Sam had the impression that the other man was looking right through him, all the way into him. "But you want to catch him, Sam. You want to kill him. That's what your soul wants, and—"

"Help!"

Their heads snapped in the direction of Lila's scream, but it seemed to echo over the woods. It was almost impossible to determine the direction, but Sam knew he couldn't just stand there, not when she sounded so fucking close, and so completely terrified.

He started to run. "Lila!" He motioned to Arthur. "I'll head to the right, you go left. We can cover more ground that way."

"Sam!" Lila's voice rang over the treetops again, maddeningly close, but still impossible to trace.

"Lila!" He just wanted to let her know they were near, they were looking for her. *Just hang on, baby*, he thought. *Just hang on.*

Arthur stayed running by his side. "We can't split up. We both need to be there."

"You're really pissing me off, you know that?" Sam fought the urge to punch the other man. Every fiber of his being wanted Lila, wanted to find her, to save her. Something deep inside him was already screaming in pain just from the thought that he might lose her. However it had happened, however crazy it seemed, he loved Lila with every bone in his body, and if they couldn't find her in time...

"You can't fight the wraith," Arthur panted. They were running along the road, skirting the edge of the woods that surrounded the lake. "I need to do that. He's too powerful for you, he may even be too powerful for me. I sensed two presences in the house. If the wraith has taken over a human body, we both need to be there."

"Sam!"

"The lake," Arthur said. "He tried to drown her once before, he may try it again."

Sam wanted to ask what he was talking about, but saved his breath. There would be time for questions later.

He hoped.

Tree branches caught his face and tugged at his legs as he ran through the woods, his feet sliding on the grass and sticks that covered the forest floor. Behind him Arthur started shouting, his words ringing out through the air, some language Sam did not understand, but which made his soul vibrate.

The light in the air changed, going from dark and gray to a faint green. Around them, the trees started to move, their branches lifting, the greenish glow strengthening as Arthur repeated his incantation, his prayer, his spell. As his voice grew louder, Sam couldn't seem to help himself. No matter how urgent the need to reach Lila, he felt compelled to turn around, to see the other man. The sight that met his eyes sent shock waves of reflected energy through his entire body.

Arthur's arms were raised, his face transformed by anger and power as he shouted his words to the sky. His shirt was torn, ripped in two by the strong wind that swirled around him. Sam couldn't feel the wind, couldn't see it, but Arthur's hair rippled with it, his body swaying.

There were sudden rustling noises behind Sam and he turned around, tearing his gaze away from the incredible vision of Arthur in full communion with the gods. The trees were moving.

Bending, swaying, they seemed to be remaking the topography of the forest, leaning away from the tiny path, widening it. Sam could suddenly see clearly through them, all the way down to the water's edge, where two forms struggled on the path.

"Lila!" He shouted, and started running. He heard Arthur's footsteps behind him, slower, but still managing to keep up. The Druid's voice continued to echo through the woods, calling the very force of nature to their aid.

Sam thought for one sickening moment they were too late. Lila's eyes were closed, her dress up around her waist, as the obscene thing holding her struggled with the fastenings of his pants. Sam let his instinct take over, rage clouding his vision as he finally reached them.

With all of his might, he shoved, sending the evil zombie-thing sprawling. He spared a glance at Lila and saw she was not moving. Something in his chest squeezed, the pain fierce and immediate.

If she was gone, nothing mattered. Nothing mattered at all, and that meant he could try to slaughter this thing, this wraith, and not have to give a damn if he didn't have the power to get the job done. If Lila was dead, his own death might as well come soon after.

He pulled his gun from its holster and aimed it. Behind him, he heard Arthur shout, "Not a killing blow, Sam! You'll only hurt the human host. Do not kill him! We don't know who the creature's possessed!"

He heard the words and the part of his mind that was still sane, still thinking like a cop, knew what they meant. He adjusted his aim and shot the man's knee.

The wraith screamed, its decayed-looking hands reaching for its leg, its voice high and terrible in the clearing. Sam moved the gun to the left and shot the other knee, a grim pleasure rising in his body as the wraith screamed and writhed in pain on the path in front of him.

Arthur spoke in the foreign language again, his shouting growing stronger. Sam felt the wind blowing from Arthur to the wraith, and knew without understanding the words that Arthur was challenging the thing, goading it into battle.

So did the wraith. It grinned, its lips stretching wider than any human mouth should have been able to. "Sounds good to me, asshole." Its voice made Sam think of maggots, of serpent-like things sliding through filth. It made his skin crawl.

Sam felt Arthur's hand on his shoulder and rolled his body to the ground as the other man shoved him out of the way. He came to a stop at Lila's side and immediately ran a gentle hand over her forehead, trying to wake her. She was bound with fishing line, the pole it was attached to still at her side, Sam grabbed the army knife from his belt and began cutting it, freeing her. He noticed the light dimming, but couldn't pay attention to anything until he had Lila freed, cradled in his lap. It seemed imperative

that he touch her, hold her, and he trusted that Arthur would be able to hold his own against the monster he battled.

Arthur risked a glance at Sam and Lila, glad to see him cradling her in his arms, as the wraith began leaving its human host, forming the black sucking mist that Arthur had seen before. That was good. He could fight the spirit form without harming the living being. But what magic should he use? The gods of the green had helped him find Lila, but they didn't have the raw power he needed. He'd called the river god once before, but the gods of the water were nothing if not changeable. The mist was moving faster now, there wasn't time to doubt. He could only pray that the magic would come when he called.

In the words of his ancient people, Arthur beseeched the gods of the Water, of the Earth, of the Air, the spirits of the trees and the souls of the animals to help him, to aid him in defeating the evil that threatened the woman he loved.

The power rose within him almost immediately, and he praised the gods that it had. The wraith had now left the human body entirely, and loomed above him. It could no longer speak clearly, but Arthur felt its malicious intent as clearly as he felt his love for Lila.

"In the name of the gods I banish you, by Earth, Air and Water I banish you, in the name of Danu, in the name of Macha, in the name of Badb, in the name of Nemain, in the name of Brid, in the name of Lugh..." he kept chanting, calling to his gods, directing as much of their power as they would give him into the energy that swirled around him. And they gave freely. Soon raw power was pouring from his hands, building into a tower of white light above his head.

The water behind the wraith swirled and rose. The trees whistled and shook behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sam huddled protectively over Lila, keeping her safe, as Arthur called Nature's terrible fury into his body to banish the evil that threatened them all.

The wraith screamed, and the black cloud rippled as it tried to take form. But the magic in the air was too strong, and Arthur knew it would need a human host if it hoped to survive. He was ready when the mist suddenly darted toward Sam, and sent a bolt of the white light pouring from his hands to hit the foul blackness dead on. The wraith shrank back. Arthur felt its rage, its mindless fury. It was losing what little humanity it had left, what little it had gained from the body it stole.

Arthur's swallowed, his throat starting to burn. He was hoarse from shouting, but he dared not stop. He had never fought such a powerful spirit and he knew he could not lose any of the intensity of his spell. It was not only Lila's life he fought for, but Sam's. He had come to care for the other man so quickly, so deeply, their souls forming the perfect fit together around Lila's.

A triad, three souls. The most powerful number in existence. Three elements, three souls, three people.

As the realization hit him, Arthur dared something he had never done before. He used the connection between Sam, Lila and himself to reach into them, both of them, to pull some of their power into his body, even as he donated some of his own strength. Lila's soul was still there, reassuringly strong and the flame of her life force burned brighter at his touch. He felt her essence jerk through his body, hardening his cock, setting him afire. The light surrounding him changed, turning pinkish at the edges, then orange with passion. The wraith shrieked in agony as it touched him.

Sam's power was even stronger, glowing, calling to him. Arthur felt the other man's hesitancy as Arthur entered his body, a brief resistance that was replaced immediately with acceptance, with permission, which quickly evolved into desire and then pleasure. The fire of Sam's body was nearly strong enough to burn, and Arthur let it wash over him, changing the color of the energy yet again.

His cock throbbed with the power the three of them created. Bliss washed over him, intense pleasure and an even stronger love, a love pure enough to send evil back to the Underworld forever.

With a final shout, he sent all of the magic into the wraith, sent that pure energy straight into the heart of evil. Sam and Lila screamed behind him, their voices joining with his own as a flash of light bright enough to blind caught them all in its intense glow and the wraith disappeared, leaving the three of them on the riverbank with the cool breeze blowing over their exhausted bodies.

Chapter Seventeen

Lila's eyes opened. She gasped, feeling arms around her, and started to struggle, trying to get away. Her arms were free now and she used them, scratching, pushing away the man that held her. She didn't know how long she'd been out, but it couldn't have been long, she still felt whole, unviolated, if she could just get—

"Lila, it's me. You're okay," a hauntingly familiar voice whispered into her hair. Haunting in the best sense of the word.

"Sam!" She turned in his arms and clung to him, tears welling in her eyes and running down her cheeks. She squeezed him tight until she could barely breathe, hardly able to believe that he was real, that she was safe.

"Lila," he mumbled against her neck. "Lila, I love you so much...I thought you were gone, that you'd left us..."

Another hand found her, stroking her back with slow strokes. Arthur. She knew his touch as surely as she knew her own name, and the knowledge that both of them were there, with her, holding her, made her cry harder. The love she felt coming from both men was the antithesis of the hatred and violence she'd been feeling when she lost consciousness, blacking out as the monster that had been her husband tore at her clothes.

"Clayton, he was inside Dalton, he was—"

"We know. You don't have to worry anymore," Arthur said. "Clayton's spirit is gone. It will never come back."

"And the other guy is gone too," Sam added. "They're putting him in the back of the ambulance right now. He's going to spend a few days under guard at the clinic until we can get him back into the custody of the state of South Dakota."

"He killed Clayton. He was going to kill me," Lila said, eyes flying to the ambulance parked in the gravel drive of her cottage. Dalton was already inside, but she heard moans coming from the vehicle, making her wonder what the hell her men had done to the monster.

"Yeah, he spilled everything. I guess between being possessed and the bullets I put in both of his knees, he wasn't thinking clearly enough to ask for a lawyer," Sam said, hugging her closer.

"Then, everything's okay. You found me in time," she said, hardly daring to believe what they were saying.

"Just barely," Sam said, the look in his eyes letting her know how frightening the close call had been for him, as well.

"Sheriff? You want us to come back after we drop this guy off or not?" The ambulance was already running, and the man who stuck his head out the window looked ready to roll.

"No, I'll bring her in later if she needs to come. Deputy Smythe is going to meet you at the clinic," Sam said.

"You two going to be okay out here? You sure you don't want to ride back with us?" the man asked as he turned on the flashing lights above the ambulance, but left the siren quiet.

"We'll be fine and I'll be in touch," Sam said.

Lila watched the ambulance pull away and felt something ease inside her. It felt good to know Dalton was being carried farther away from her with every passing second.

"How do you feel?" Arthur asked, smoothing the hair away from her face.

"Good, really good," Lila said, feeling a small smile twitch at the edge of her lips.

"The healers bandaged your scratches —"

"But they were worried about you possibly being in shock," Sam said, easily finishing Arthur's sentence. Something had happened between the two men, a bonding that was more than she would ever have expected. For two people who had known each other less than a few hours, they seemed incredibly close, like old friends.

"I'm not in shock, but what about you?" Lila asked Sam as she shot a meaningful look between him and Arthur.

"Him, you mean?" Sam laughed. "After the last half-hour, an ancient invisible magician who can grant a few wishes seems like tame stuff. At least he's not dripping black rot everywhere." Arthur smiled in response to Sam's words, a warm, almost affectionate look that Lila soon felt settle on her own face.

"But you shouldn't have wished me to Sam. You put yourself in danger," Arthur admonished, scooping her up and pulling her into his lap, obviously wanting his turn to hold her. Sam helped hand her over without comment or resistance, an act that made Lila more than a little curious what the boys had been talking about while she was passed out and they'd been carrying her to the lawn in front of her house.

"You both saved me, that's all that matters."

"Arthur saved you," Sam said. "I just helped clean up the mess afterward."

"I cannot take all the credit," Arthur said. "I could not have done it without Sam. His weapon made all the difference in detaining the living villain. And his energy — and yours, my love — were what defeated the wraith. I simply helped focus our power."

"Our power," Lila repeated, remembering the warm feeling that had come to her when she'd been unconscious, almost as if someone were reaching into her body and connecting her to a life force more powerful than anything she'd ever known.

"We're a triad, a power composed of three souls. The connection began the night in your bedroom and has deepened since," Arthur said, his arms tightening around her as

he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Lila shifted in his lap and felt him grow hard against her hip. She lifted surprised eyes to his, only to find her magician sending a heated look toward the other man in her life, one Sam didn't seem overly dismayed to receive.

"So you know that Arthur was there? When we made love?" Lila knew she was blushing, but couldn't say whether it was embarrassment over keeping Arthur's presence from Sam or her increasing awareness of the hard length pressing into her that made her cheeks heat. After surviving an ordeal like this afternoon's, she knew people tended to want to reaffirm that they were alive, but the raw desire bolting through her body, heating her sex until she couldn't help but squirm in Arthur's arms, surely wasn't natural.

She suddenly wanted to come to her knees in the grass between her two men, to press her lips to Sam's as Arthur knelt behind her and trailed kisses along the bare skin of her neck. She wanted to rub herself against both of them like a cat, to relish the feel of their energy against hers. And Lila knew she didn't want it to stop there, she wanted all three of them naked, wanted their skin bared to each other. She wanted Sam to suckle her nipples while Arthur took her from behind in the late afternoon sunshine that now shone on the cottage. For the first time all day, she was glad that her new home was so isolated, because she wanted them to take each other here, now, in the warm light that made her feel so grateful to be alive and have two such amazing men in her life.

If they were really in her life... Sam had said he loved her, but the look on his face now was cautious, reserved, almost as if he were trying to figure out how to let her down easy, how to extricate himself from her life without hurting her too badly.

"Sam? What's wrong?" Lila asked, reaching out to touch his face, feeling her breath catch as his bright blue eyes met hers. He was so beautiful, they both were, inside and out. She knew she wouldn't be able to bear losing either one of them.

"I know what you want, Lila, I'm just not sure if I can give it. Or if it will be the way you want it to be. There are things I haven't told you, things that might change the way you feel," Sam said, dropping his eyes down to the grass.

"I love you, Sam. I love you and Arthur and I'll do whatever I can to help us find a way to be together, in a way that can make us all happy," Lila said, relaxing a bit as Arthur tightened his arms around her in a grateful hug. He wanted this too, wanted all three of them together, she knew it without even turning to look in his deep brown eyes. Now if only Sam could find a way to understand, to get past whatever obstacle was in his way.

"Burlin is a small town, and I don't know what people would think about—"

"Sam, no one can see me. No one would think anything except that you and Lila were lovers, that you lived together happily. In any event, I think many of the residents would be more open to our bond than you would think. This is a place of great power and potential," Arthur said, reaching out to take the other man's hand even as his other

hand slid up Lila's thigh, coming to rest possessively on the inside of her leg, just inches from where she was already wet and ready.

Sam gripped the other man's hand instinctively, but then seemed to rethink the gesture, trying to pull the hand away once he realized that Lila was looking. In that moment, the second the shadow of shame passed over Sam's face, Lila knew what was wrong. She smiled, relieved that something so easily mended was causing this uncertainty.

"Sam, I don't care what anyone else thinks. I love you and I'm a little offended that you think so little of me," Lila said, sliding off Arthur's lap and lifting her dress over her head in one smooth movement. Her underwear was long gone, and she was nude in the sunshine, with her two lovers' eyes on her. She'd never felt so beautiful, so happy, so filled with the power to bring happiness to others.

"Lila, I don't know what—"

"You do know, we all know," Lila said, smiling as she took each man by the hand and pulled them to their knees. In the second they touched, a thrill of power and desire coursed through her, making her moan with delight as her nipples hardened and a rush of wet heat dampened her thighs.

Eyes half closed, feeling a little drunk on the energy coursing between them, Lila lifted each of their hands to her lips and feathered kisses across their knuckles. She watched them as they watched her, their eyes riveted to her mouth as she began to suckle one of Arthur's fingers into her mouth, adding one of Sam's soon after. Hungrily, she slid the fingers in and out, rolling her tongue across their salty skin, skin that tasted like earth and water and man, pure amazing man.

Arthur made a sound very like a growl and Sam echoed the sentiment as she began to suck even harder, sliding another finger from each into her hot mouth. If she had been able, Lila knew she would have smiled at the sound, and at the way both of them moved their hands to cup the bulge in their jeans, as if the aching there were quickly becoming too intense to bear.

"Why don't you touch each other?" Lila suggested, allowing the fingers she suckled to slip from her mouth, guiding the wet digits down to her breasts. She gasped as Arthur eagerly captured one of her already erect nipples and rolled it between his fingers. Sam's touch was a bit more hesitant, but no less firm once he'd gripped her breast in his palm and squeezed, and the need to claim both of them made her pussy pulse with a hunger unlike anything she'd ever known.

Sam's eyes met hers with silent understanding and the smile that stretched across his face a second later was a thing of such pure beauty Lila would never forget it.

"I think I'd rather touch you," Sam said. "I love you for being able to read me so well, but you're the one who's back from death's door."

"We thought we'd lost you," Arthur added. "And I don't think either one of us will be satisfied until we make sure you realize how very glad we are to have you returned to us."

Lila felt her breath catch as both men withdrew their hands from her breasts, but the connection somehow remained strong between them. The heat in both of their eyes seemed to caress every inch of her skin, smoothing over her like a warm wind and leaving her half mad with need. She knew she was going to go crazy if she didn't feel them both against her in the next ten seconds.

Arthur's shirt was already off, but he started to make quick work of his pants while Sam disrobed. Within a few moments, they were both naked, both of their thick cocks jutting proudly toward her, showing her that they felt the same hunger that consumed her. Lila opened her arms to both of them. She was so much smaller than either man, but so filled with love and need she was certain she could hold them both in her arms, lift them all up together and spin them in a victorious circle. She wanted to celebrate this second chance at life, wanted to let both of them know she couldn't be more grateful for the chance to love them, to feel more love than she'd ever dreamed possible flowing back to her.

"God, I love you," Sam said before his lips met hers, his lips, teeth, and tongue claiming her mouth with a passion that left no doubt to the truth of his words.

"And I, more than I'd dreamed possible," Arthur said, and Lila would have sworn she felt a dampness against her neck that had nothing to do with the tongue he traced up and down the column of her throat. Her strong, powerful, enormous magician was crying, so she supposed it was okay for her to give into the urge as well.

"I love you both," she sobbed, tears starting to fall as she smoothed her palms down two strong backs, gasping as four hands roamed over her body, touching her seemingly everywhere, all at once. She didn't know whose hand was claiming her breast, whose had fisted in her hair, whose was even now sliding over the curve of her bottom and up between her legs, and she didn't care. They were all a part of the same loving energy. Arthur, or Lila, or Sam, their names or even their genders didn't matter, they were simply lovers, euphoric beings who fell together onto the grass in a tangled mass of sweat-slicked skin.

"I need to be inside you," he said, and Lila wasn't sure which he, but she felt two strong hands gripping her hips, lifting her into the air, and suddenly her legs were spread and she was sinking down onto a thick, pulsing shaft that speared through her molten center with steely perfection.

She gasped and looked down to see Arthur beneath her, his eyes nearly black with desire. His hands stayed on her hips, guiding her up and down his length, while Sam knelt behind her, his chest pressed into her back and his calloused palms working her breasts, teasing her nipples until her breath came in desperate pants.

"Come, come for me," Sam breathed into her hair, following the demand by raking his teeth over the sensitive skin of her shoulder.

Lila shattered as he bit down and Arthur dug his fingers into her hips. There was a little bit of pain in both of the actions, but it was the perfect counter to the raw, primal pleasure that burst from her groin and exploded through her entire body. Colors

flashed behind her eyes, and when she opened them again, the entire front yard of the cottage was bathed in an orangish-pink light, like a Florida sunset or an ice-cold Tequila Sunrise. Arthur and Sam both cried out along with her, Arthur's body bucking into her with renewed power and Sam's cock grinding into the slick cleft of her buttocks.

They both groaned and convulsed, but their orgasms didn't trigger their ejaculation, and Lila was suddenly aware of a new power within her. Call it her magic, or her energy, or maybe it was simply part of being in the triad with her two men, but she suddenly knew she would be able to make this happen for them every time they were together. She would be able to give them pleasure again and again before they finally lost control and spent their seed. She laughed at the realization, giddy with excitement, the newfound ability to be the guarantor of multiple orgasms.

"Sam is dying to be inside you, love," Arthur said, his voice more than a little breathy as he moved his hands from Lila's hips around to Sam's. He pulled the other man forward, and tried to slide his own cock from between her thighs, but Lila ground her hips down and lay forward until her breasts were pressed into Arthur's strong chest and their slick bellies quivering against each other.

"I want Sam inside of me, but I want you both inside of me," she said, spreading her legs and arching her bottom up toward where Sam now lay on top of both her and Arthur. The action brought her clit into even tighter contact with Arthur's pelvis, and, combined with the cool air that suddenly swept over the swollen ring of her rear entry, was almost enough to make her come a second time.

"Are you sure? It won't be too much?" Sam said, his voice thick with need as he pressed the head of his cock gently against her anus. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You could never hurt me. It will be just enough, I promise," Lila gasped, wiggling on top of Arthur as he sucked her nipples into his mouth.

"Oh god, you have to hold still or I'll never be able to control myself." Sam stilled her hips with his hands and slowly pushed just the plump head of his erection inside her.

"Yes," Lila cried out, so insanely, perfectly full. Arthur's cock inside her pussy, Sam pressing into her from behind, it was a moment of pure perfection, pure pleasure, and she wept with the beauty of feeling so loved, so complete.

The men above and below her echoed her sound of triumph and began to move, slowly, carefully, in and out of her, their bodies writhing against each other in perfect harmony. Sam's arms wrapped around her and Arthur's did too, their hands finally starting to caress each other even as their cocks stroked in and out of her with the same loving motion. Lila smiled as their embrace grew even closer and Arthur reached up to claim the other man's lips, tears in her eyes as she watched the two people she loved most in the world kiss.

It was beautiful and sexy as hell, and when Sam's tongue swept out over Arthur's full bottom lip she knew she was a goner. As they both thrust deeply inside her, their tightened balls pressing together beneath her body, she came, a blinding rush of pure

sexual energy that made an audible popping sound in the air around them. The air crackled with electricity and both men broke their kiss at the same time, throwing back their heads and finding simultaneous release. This time she felt them pulse violently, could feel the hot streams of semen spraying inside her, and the sensation was enough to take her over again and again, bringing the men with her, until they were all lost in a constant, pulsing bliss.

Lila didn't know how long it went on, how long it would have gone on, but they didn't get the chance to find out because a car suddenly pulled up in the driveway.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry. Really, really sorry, but they said you were attacked and I was so terrified that you were hurt. I mean, after what you did for Megan, and what Sam saw at the clinic today, I just couldn't—"

"For god's sakes, Amy, you could at least look in the other direction. Give the people time to get their clothes on," another voice sounded from the driver's side of the car. Bob Waterhouse sat there, still in his scrubs, seemingly fresh from the clinic.

Lila knew she was blushing psychedelic pink by the time she mustered the strength to meet Amy's curious gaze, and was glad that Bob had the grace to look in another direction. Though the grace to keep from pulling up in her driveway in the first place would have been more greatly appreciated.

"Wow, Lila, I mean....wow," Amy said, her eyes as wide as saucers and dancing with good humor.

"Amy, would you mind, um...this is a little embarrassing," Lila said.

"A little?" Sam repeated, his tone ripe with sarcasm. "Look the other way, Amy. I'd be a lot happier if no one else saw me naked today."

"Sorry!" Amy said, whipping her head around to stare at the windshield in front of her. "I just couldn't help myself. You guys just look so happy, and he's gorgeous, Sam. You didn't tell me he was so gorgeous. I mean...god."

"I'm a man, Amy, I don't go into the gorgeousness of other guys," Sam said as he gently pulled away from her body and began to struggle into his clothes.

Lila knew she would have been right behind him if Amy's words hadn't finally penetrated her consciousness. She could see Arthur, someone other than she and Sam could see Arthur.

"Bob?" she asked, wrapping her arms around Arthur's neck as he sat up suddenly, the question in his eyes mirroring the one on her lips. "Did you see the man underneath me? Before you so nicely averted your eyes, of course?"

The words made her blush even harder, but Arthur's hopeful gaze and the way his arms tightened around her in excitement made her ignore her embarrassment. He might have acted as if he didn't care if he ever became visible to others, but she knew, deep down, that he wanted to be a real part of her and Sam's life, real in every sense of the word.

"I sure did, Lila. Dark-haired gentleman, longer hair. I'm sure Amy's right and he's gorgeous, but I'm with Sam. I don't really go in for raving about another man's good looks," Bob said.

"By Danu," Arthur murmured, a triumphant smile on his face as he lifted her up in his arms, standing and spinning in a circle with her legs wrapped around his waist and his cock still buried inside her.

"Arthur!" she shouted, laughing, crying, as he swung her around.

"Congratulations," Sam said, his voice sincere, though Lila knew he'd been nervous about what the people of Burlin would think of their admittedly strange relationship. If Bob and Amy were anything to judge by, however, Lila knew they'd have at least a few friends who would stand by them, no matter how they chose to love each other.

"It's going to be okay." Her eyes sought Sam and found him, and when he smiled, she knew he believed her. She reached out to pull him into her and Arthur's embrace. "I love you both so much," she whispered, her body shaking with happiness.

"I love you," they both said, and as they buried their heads in her neck, Lila thought their happiness was enough to send all three of them soaring into the sky, their souls forever joined in one perfect triad.

Epilogue

Four Months Later

Lila stretched and yawned on the pale blue couch, still a little groggy from her nap, and found Sam standing over her, his handsome face amused. He loved to tease her about her habit of napping in the afternoons after her yoga classes were done and before he got home.

It was home now, home to all three of them. They'd arranged to buy the little cottage from Lila's landlady shortly after Arthur became a visible Burlin resident. Using Sam's savings and the money Lila had received as Clayton's widow, they managed to pay the asking price on the home and still have rainy day money left over. Arthur loved being out in the woods, and Lila and Sam enjoyed the privacy. Over time, the three of them had become even more comfortable with each other, their love deepening as they spent days in the sun, and long nights laughing and talking, making love to each other until the moon was high.

At least, the two men made love to Lila. Sam was still a little uncomfortable with being overtly physical with Arthur, but they were taking it slowly. Lila and Arthur both understood his hesitation, understood that, for a man like Sam, it wasn't easy to admit he wanted to be physically intimate with another man. They'd decided to be patient. They both loved him so much. And Lila felt certain that, one day soon, he would come around and find himself able to fully express his feelings for Arthur.

Although she knew the waiting wasn't so easy for the other man in her life. Some nights, the hunger in Arthur's eyes as he watched Sam's perfect golden body diving into hers, as their bodies touched, was almost unbearably painful for Lila to watch.

"Hey, sweetheart," Sam said, giving her a soft kiss on the lips. "Good nap?"

"They're all good these days," she said softly. The visions still came to her, but they were easier for her to handle now, easier for her to understand.

Mostly. There was only one that had the power to wound, and it was the one she did not share with her men. The one where she held a baby, tiny and perfect, in her arms, and Arthur and Sam looked on with the kind of pride that only a father could possess.

That one hurt, for she knew it wasn't a prophecy, that it was not a vision at all, but a wish that would never come true. She did not discuss it.

"Hmmm," Sam said, his lips traveling down her neck to where her pulse beat. "I know what else is good."

Anticipation rushed through her veins. Being with Sam would never grow old. "Oh?" she whispered. "What's that?"

"Come into the bedroom and I'll show you," he replied, taking her hand. She was already undoing her buttons with the other, her skin tingling as they walked down the little hallway and into the cool semidarkness of the bedroom.

They'd barely crossed the threshold when he was on her, his lips taking hers with a passion that left her breathless.

"I thought about you all day," he muttered. "I sat in that car and was so hard thinking about you, I almost came home and interrupted your class."

"My students probably wouldn't have cared," she said, and almost giggled before his hands wandered to her breasts and she lost the urge to laugh.

"No, they probably wouldn't have," he agreed, sharing her amusement. Most of Lila's students were friends of Amy's, although a suspiciously large number of them were referred by Bob for "muscle aches". It made Lila feel good to know she had friends who cared so much about her, and that she and Sam and Arthur had found such amazing acceptance of their relationship in a tiny Missouri town.

Not quite as good as Sam's hands made her feel, though, as they slipped her shirt off her shoulders and unhooked her bra. He traced a leisurely path down the curve of her back, then slid down her behind even as his mouth fastened on one stiff nipple.

Quickly Lila undid his buttons and pants, stripping him, freeing his cock to bob gently against her leg.

"On the bed," he said. The desire in his voice made her shiver. "Get those pants off. I want to see you naked."

Shivering with delight, she obeyed, lying down on the bed. She reveled in her absolute freedom from inhibitions when she was with either or both of the men she loved. It made her spread her legs, letting Sam see how swollen and ready she was for him, and a thrill went through her at the frank appreciation in his eyes.

"You will never stop being the most beautiful woman in the world to me, you know that?" he said, sliding onto the bed next to her. He reached out and palmed one breast, holding it in his big, strong hand. Lila shivered, watching his face, his eyes, looking down his muscled chest to his erection and taking it in her hand.

Sam closed his eyes as she started to stroke him, her hand slowly moving up and down his length. He ran his fingers down the soft skin of her stomach and through the patch of hair that covered her sex, dipping the tip of his index finger into her cleft to stroke her wet flesh.

Her legs spread a little wider at his touch, begging him without words to touch her more, to keep up his light pressure.

"Oh no," he said, his voice already a little faint with desire. He wanted to taste her, to feel her body shaking. "Not just yet."

Sam slid sideways on the bed until he was in the center, and shifted Lila to straddle him. She did, not letting go of his cock, leaning over to help fit it inside her.

He stopped her, removing her hand, and instead urged her forward, bringing her pussy right over his mouth so he could suckle her tender, delicate skin, so he could slip his tongue lightly over the tiny little nub that now protruded slightly from her folds.

She groaned out loud as he did, a sound of pleasure that never stopped thrilling him. He opened his eyes, delighting in the view of the soft swell of his love's belly, the full undersides of her breasts. Her hands gripped the headboard of the bed as her head fell back, her body already starting to shake over him.

He gripped her hips, holding her steady, exploring her with his tongue, savoring the feel of her and the taste of her, savoring the pleasure he knew he was giving her. His cock was hot and hard against his belly, his entire pelvis burning with need, but he didn't want to take his own satisfaction yet. It was too amazingly perfect here between Lila's legs.

Sam hadn't heard the screen door open and close, but obviously it had, because he suddenly sensed Arthur in the room. Their connection had grown so strong that he knew when Arthur was within a half mile radius, and sometimes it was almost as if he could hear the other man's thoughts, knew exactly what he was thinking without having to use speech. Like right now...

He sucked Lila's clit into his mouth, knowing how it would excite Arthur to see Lila and himself together. Picturing Arthur's enjoyment in his mind only added to the pleasure he'd already been feeling, added something faintly elicit and incredibly exciting. Just as watching Arthur make love to Lila, watching Arthur use his mouth to bring her to orgasm, excited him.

Even as it excited him to kiss Arthur, to feel the other man's hands on his chest or his ass.

That was as far as it had gone, though. If he was honest with himself, Sam knew he wanted more. Sometimes, when the three of them were in bed together, Sam wanted it so badly he could hardly breathe, wanted a connection with Arthur that was more primal than the connection of the triad. But for some reason, he just couldn't seem to do it, couldn't seem to bring himself to take the other man's cock into his hand or his mouth or his body. When Arthur reached for him he shied away, in spite of a need so overpowering that, at times, it was enough to make him come all by himself just thinking about it.

Lila groaned and writhed above him, moving her hips in delicate little circles, encouraging him to explore further. This he did, avoiding some of the spots he knew gave her the most intense pleasure, simply because he wanted to prolong it, to make her wait for that first orgasm and then to give her several more on top of it. He became so focused on his work, so lost in the taste and feel of Lila's heat, that it took him a moment to realize that Arthur wasn't going to be content with watching, not this time.

Sam froze when Arthur's hand found his cock. For a long moment, he wasn't sure what to do, his surprise and hesitation mingling with hot joy at having one of his secret

fantasies fulfilled. Apparently Arthur had gotten tired of waiting for him to make the first move and had decided to do it himself.

Lila moved her hips again, gently reminding Sam what he was doing. The sensations spreading in his pelvis from Arthur's expert manipulations of his cock were...indescribable. When it was joined by Arthur's other hand massaging his balls, he could no longer help himself. He groaned and thrust his hips upward.

Lila started riding him in earnest, moving faster, and he increased the speed of his tongue to keep up. Below his waist was Arthur, his hands still keeping their slow, steady pace, driving him mad with need, a madness that he funneled into pleasuring the woman above him within an inch of her life.

"Sam!" Lila screamed, her breasts rising high as she arched her back, her nipples poking proudly into the air as she came. The pure, desperate pleasure in her voice drove Sam higher, and he slid his tongue into her throbbing channel, sucking her dry, running it along her entrance. Oh, it was so good, so good with Lila, so good with Arthur's hand...

He almost groaned aloud when Arthur's hand suddenly disappeared, feeling strangely, sadly abandoned. Just as he was getting used to the other man's touch, just as he was finding himself comfortable with the knowledge that he was letting Arthur touch him so intimately, the blissful contact had been taken away. He couldn't deny it *had* been blissful. It felt amazing. What he could deny, or at least try to deny, was that it also felt right.

Sam forced his attention away from thoughts of Arthur's hands, focusing in on Lila, finding her clit with his tongue again, determined to make her come even harder this time.

She was halfway to another orgasm when Arthur brought his attention back to Sam's cock again, but this time it wasn't his hands he used, but the wet heat of what could only be the other man's mouth.

Sam's heart almost stopped. Oh God, he wanted this...he wanted it so badly. The feeling was incredible, the feeling of Arthur's tongue swirling around his shaft, the gentle suction. He just wasn't...damn it...was he ready for this?

Then Arthur sped his pace and suction, and Sam no longer cared if he was ready for it. It felt good, so good, and as his hips started pumping upward into Arthur's mouth he realized it *was* good. He loved Arthur, just as he loved Lila. It didn't matter that he was also male, or that Sam had never had an erotic thought about another man in his life before Arthur came along. He loved the spirit within him, and longed to express it physically, the same way he'd been doing for months with Lila. There was a connection between the three of them that nothing could break, and by God, he'd been wasting time being afraid when he could have been doing this.

Lila came again, her scream louder this time. Sam looked up and realized she was watching, watching Arthur go down on him, and seeing how much it turned her on only reinforced his certainty that it was time to stop hiding from what he really wanted.

Gently he lifted her sideways, sliding her onto the bed, so he could watch what Arthur was doing. With one hand he continued to touch her, manipulating her clit between his fingers the way he knew she loved. She groaned her approval, but did not look at him. She too was watching Arthur suck him. Sam wondered dizzily if it was as arousing a sight for her as it was for him, and then he came, his body shaking, the force of Lila's magic keeping him from ejaculating, but coming just the same.

"Arthur," he whispered, his hips now moving recklessly, freely, letting Arthur know how much he liked what he was doing. "Oh God, Arthur."

The other man was naked, and Sam could just see his cock, thick and hard, between his legs. It made his fingers itch to hold it, to touch it. To finally let Arthur know how he appreciated him, and to finally unlock his own secret desires.

"This amazing thing," Lila murmured, her body still writhing next to Sam. "Oh God, Arthur, Sam...if you knew what seeing that does to me..."

Sam leaned over and kissed her, their tongues entwining passionately, wildly. Then he reached down and took hold of Arthur's arm, bringing him up to join them, to stretch his hard body over them both.

A horrible weight lifted from Arthur's heart as Sam pulled him up for a long kiss that Lila eventually joined. For so long now he'd waited, wanting Sam to share himself physically, dying to take their friendship, their love, to a more intimate place. Some nights, after the three of them made love, he'd lain awake, dreaming of a day when Sam would finally relax the wall he'd built between them.

Today something had just broken. Arthur had seen them together, the intense joy in witnessing their pleasure just as strong as always, but he'd suddenly known he couldn't wait any longer. He'd felt Sam's longing, seen it in his face, and gambled that he would finally be ready. The gamble had, thank the gods, paid off, and Arthur rejoiced to feel the barrier finally fall. He was still half drunk from the pleasure of knowing that he could caress the other man's hard cock in his mouth without bringing Sam shame, taste the very essence of the man he loved and feel how much pleasure he could give him. Now, as he lay on top of Sam, one hand reaching out to stroke Lila, to slide into her entrance while Sam played with her clit, he deliberately brought his hips down. Their cocks rubbed together, soft bare skin against soft bare skin. The sensation sent a shiver of delight through Arthur, and when they kissed and Sam's tongue slid into his mouth, he groaned.

"I love you both so much," Lila moaned, as she pulsed around Arthur's fingers, drenching his hand with her juices. Arthur increased the speed of his hands, celebrating the beauty of his love's pleasure, even as Sam's hand found his cock and started stroking it. He was hesitant at first, but then let his grip grow firm when Arthur moaned his approval. Never before had he felt so contented, so aroused as he did at this moment.

Thank the gods, I'd begun to lose hope.

Sam kissed him again with a tenderness that was at odds with the swift, sure strokes of his hand. It was almost as if he knew what Arthur was thinking, and was making amends with his lips, even as the work at his cock quickly brought Arthur near the edge of a blinding release.

Not yet, I want to watch you with our Lila.

With a groan of assent to Arthur's unspoken words in his mind, Sam sat up, flipping Lila over to her knees. Without taking his hand from Arthur's cock, he slid into her, driving himself hilt-deep into the welcoming heat of her body.

"Aaaah," she moaned. "God, yes."

Sam quickly found a rhythm, timing his thrusts into Lila with the actions of his hand. Watching himself slide into Lila's swollen flesh, while, at the same time, his hand squeezed Arthur's cock was amazing, incredible. Sam could not tear his gaze away as the pressure in his pelvis built and he came, again using Lila's power to stop from ejaculating, his body throbbing with pleasure.

"I want a turn," Lila said, laughter in her voice as she gently moved Sam's hand away and brought her mouth to Arthur, sucking him, tasting him. With a moan of pleasure, Sam slipped a finger into Lila's ass, knowing how much she enjoyed his touch there, wanting to thank her for realizing he loved watching her mouth on Arthur even more than he loved touching the other man himself.

Arthur touched the top of Lila's head with reverence, and then leaned over her back, bringing his mouth to Sam's, their tongues tangling in a deep kiss. Arthur's hand then joined Sam's, teasing Lila's rear entry before he reached down past Sam's thrusting cock to stroke her clit, making her scream her pleasure out around his cock.

It suddenly became difficult for Sam to keep up his pace. He wanted more, wanted both of them closer to him, as close as they could get and still be separated by skin. Sam pulled out, his cock glistening with Lila's hot juices, and lay on his back on the bed, inviting Lila to mount him, to ride him while Arthur penetrated her from behind. It was one of her favorite positions, one of her favorite things, to have them both filling her at the same time, and one that never failed to satisfy all three. This time, there was something more to it, however, something more intimate. Sam remembered the way Arthur's balls pressed against his in this position, stimulating the delicate skin of his sac. It had been something he'd tried to ignore before, but now he knew he would relish the contact, couldn't wait to feel all three of their sexes writhing together. Even the thought of it set the flames burning inside him even higher.

Lila straddled him eagerly, her eyes alight with love and desire as she slid his cock back into her hot cleft. She sighed in pleasure and kissed his lips with aching softness as Arthur's fingers began probing her back entrance, stretching her and making her ready for the blunt, wide head of his cock.

Sam felt the change in her body the second Arthur slid into her, felt the friction against his own cock grow tighter, hotter. He knew it felt amazing for Lila, saw her back arch as she gasped, her skin going red with pleasure, and it was at that moment that he

realized he had everything he could ever want...except one thing, one thing that his soul wanted, that would make their family complete...the one thing he knew Lila thought she would never have.

I wish we could get her pregnant, he thought, finding Arthur's face over Lila's back, staring into his brown eyes. *I wish we could have a baby*.

Arthur inclined his head slightly, listening, his smile the only answer Sam needed. Sam smiled back as Lila increased her pace, swiftly bringing him to an orgasm he knew would be one of the most intense he'd ever experienced. Behind Lila, he knew Arthur felt the same thing, felt her tight channel squeezing him, pumping him, felt his balls tighten and harden against Sam's.

They came together, their cries of ecstasy mingling in the cool room, turning into one cry of triumph, of pleasure, as their souls and bodies became one for that brief moment.

For Lila, it was an incredible moment, a perfect moment, one that she knew would never really end as long as she had these two men to love her and complete her.

Sam might have one more wish before he could set Arthur free, but Lila didn't need any more. All of hers had come true.

About the Authors

Anna J. Evans came back to her true love of writing fiction after working Off-off-off-Broadway and in a few Hollywood C-movies. She quit the biz to become a stay at home Mom-Writer and she's loving every minute of it!

Anna lives in Arkansas with her Air Force husband, her real-life romantic hero, their three kids and all the stories still making their way from her imagination to the page.

December Quinn is a multi-published author of romance and erotic romance. She lives in England with her husband and their two little girls.

December is a fan of high heeled shoes, corsets, cocktails, French fries, and rain. She is not a fan of airplanes, Brussel sprouts, or algebra. She still believes in dragons and the divine right of Kings.

Anna and December welcome comments from readers. You can find their website and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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Seducing the Enemy
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