

The Chosen One

by Kelly Wallace

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To my beautiful daughters, wonderful soulmate, and dearest friends who have made this all possible. I couldn't have done it without your love and support.

Prologue

Though his body slept, the Dream Master's mind held no rest. Visions formed behind his eyelids, dim at first, but the scene quickly came into focus as he stood within the dreamscape of his mind.

He flinched as a flash of lightning lit the area around him, showing he was just outside his home standing in the Xilitlan village clearing. While his physical form lay warm in his bed, his soul ventured out into the dark world—just as it did every night, yet this evening something felt different.

A tremendous clap of thunder shook the earth, shattering the quietude of the cloistered Indian village. Rain poured down from the black sky above.

This is a sign, the pretense of a sacred vision!

Thunder rumbled through the ground beneath his bare feet, echoing within his soul. What would be revealed to him on this night? Would the knowledge be blessed, or would it be cursed?

As he waited for the vision to come, a blue-green fire sprouted from the earth before him and pulsed with energy, growing in intensity. The Dream Master shielded his eyes against the glare, holding his breath in anticipation.

The Ancient One then appeared no less than two feet away, dressed in his ceremonial garb. He looked so strong now, so

full of life and youthful vigor. It was hard to believe their healer had died looking so feeble, so very old and weak.

The Dream Master dropped to his knees. *Yes!* After so many years he was at last experiencing the vision he and the Xilitlan villagers had been waiting, praying for.

Without uttering a word, the Ancient One motioned for the Dream Master to rise to his feet.

He did so, eagerly awaiting the message he had been hoping to dream of for the past five years. The Ancient One nodded his snowy head, a benevolent smile pulling at the corners of his thin lips. Without sound or song being breathed from his lungs, he communicated with the Dream Master, transferring thoughts through the so-still air and into one another's minds.

At last we meet again, my friend.

It is wonderful to see you, Ancient One. We have waited so very long for you to appear. Many have died without you in the village to heal them. Some have left behind their life in the jungle to move to the city below.

Yes. I have seen this from the other side, Dream Master. I have been waiting until the time was right to appear again—as I promised I would.

The Dream Master felt joy coursing through him. The Ancient One would be returning to them, their Supreme Healer.

The village will once again have a healer. My weary soul has at last found a resting place with a long life ahead.

Where?

A child with hair the color of a golden sunrise and eyes like jungle fern. Search him out. Bring him here to Xilitla. He will be your new healer.

A picture flashed through the Dream Master's mind, the image of an Anglo boy, approximately eight-years-old. Instantly the effigy was imprinted upon him. But where did this child live? He could be anywhere on the face of this big, wide earth. How would he find him? How long would the search take? Frustration filled him. The village had been too long without a healer. They could not wait much longer.

Where is this child? The words were urgent as the dream started to fade. No! He could not wait for another vision to

appear to him—if it ever did again. Where is this child? The question was more insistent this time.

Another scene flashed before him. A woman. The mother of the child, he supposed. Long auburn hair and green catlike eyes rimmed with silken lashes filled his vision. Lush pink lips that grew wide when she laughed warmed his brain. Her figure was full and curved in places made for a man to hold on to. His body stirred with the image. Promptly he admonished himself for becoming aroused over a vision when he should be concentrating on finding the boy. Their next Supreme Healer.

Before the dream faded completely, he heard a name echo in the air, spoken by a voice so sweet and so soft it nearly stole his breath away. *Matthew Colby*.

Noel woke with a start, his breathing erratic and perspiration covering his body in a fine sheen. His heart beat wildly in his chest. He threw back the covers, exposing his nakedness to the cool air around him. Thoughts of how his palms would feel cupped over the dream woman's breasts swirled around his brain without invitation. He cursed softly, taking note of the throbbing erection this caused. How would she affect him in reality? He inhaled a sharp breath at the very thought.

"I must stay focused!" his words an angry warning.

Sitting up, he reached behind him and threw his pillow against the wall to break the spell he was under. He watched as it hit, made a soft thud, and slid to the floor. Noel stared at it a moment, frowning deeply, not liking the sensations a mere vision of the woman had caused, or perhaps liking it too much.

Shoving the image away, he got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom in search of a mind-clearing shower. One thought now reverberated throughout him: He had to find Matthew Colby, no matter the obstacles, consequences, or cost. This Anglo child was destined to be his people's healer.

The fates had planted their seed. It was Noel's job to sow and tend to the ancient offspring, Matthew Colby, for he was...The Chosen One.

CHAPTER ONE

Six months later.

Elise Colby sat in the darkness on the edge of her son's bed, holding his small hand, whispering soothing words to help lull him back to sleep, just as she seemed to do most every night now.

She stifled a yawn and rubbed her eyes. Lord was she tired. A glance at her watch showed it was well after midnight. Once again Matt had been talking in his sleep. For most parents that would pose no great concern, millions of people probably talked in their sleep, but her son spent a great portion of his nocturnal hours mumbling. No, it was more of a whispered chanting, an even, softly murmured litany. And it was spoken in a language unknown to her.

Listening to it night after night never helped her get used the unearthly prayer-like words. It still made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end and goose bumps to spring up all over her arms.

She had recorded the strange mantra and taken it with her during Matt's last visit with the psychiatrist. Dr. Loggins had said it was nothing but gibberish, and felt that Matt's recent bouts of strange behavior were due to a belated effect of his father's death, an attempt to reap in all of the attention Frank had neglected to give his son. Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome was one label Matt's behavior had received. She had a hard time believing it was as simple as that, yet she didn't want to ponder over his other analysis of Matt's odd actions of late: Dissociative Identity Disorder—multiple personalities.

Dark sadness gathered in her chest and her eyes filled with tears as her heart fought against the possibility.

When something traumatic happens, the conscious mind may remove itself from the present while another part of the mind takes over and holds on to the painful memory. That way the weight of the event doesn't smother him and he can go about his normal life. This alter personality is the one that deals with the negativity, in this case, the death of his father. Sometimes the other personality comes out. This may be what your son is experiencing. If so, he may recover in time with therapy and psychoactive drugs. And he may not. The doctor's words reverberated in her mind on a daily basis. Elise shivered deeply and rubbed her son's hand.

As Matt drifted into quiet slumber once more she kissed his silky hair, breathing in the scent of his favorite Berry Blast shampoo. Smiling sadly, she looked around at the *Star Wars* paraphernalia decorating his bed and walls. Becoming a Jedi Master was his ultimate goal. To find answers and peace of mind was hers.

Silently she slipped from his room and walked across the hall, eager to fall into bed. Luckily tomorrow was Saturday. She could sleep in.

* * *

Elise enjoyed a few stolen moments of quietude before Matt finished his video game. After swallowing the last of her coffee, she set the cup in the stainless-steel sink then looked around for something to do. Dinner was still an hour away, so she decided to change Spike's water. She smiled at the name her son had given the fat, black goldfish. Matt had wanted a dog for his ninth birthday, but since they lived in an apartment she had gotten him the fish instead. He had been slightly disappointed at the time, but had grown to love the bulgy-eyed creature, talking to it daily.

Reaching across the dining room table to grab the fish bowl, she saw that Spike was unusually still. He floated atop

the water, one protruding eye gazing blankly at the ceiling as he lay on his left side.

"Damn," she muttered. That's all she needed now. How would Matt take the news? He had folded in on himself so much over the past six months she was afraid to say or do anything that might have him caving in completely.

She breathed out a frustrated sigh. "Oh well." She didn't want him walking out here to find his small friend dead.

Going to the kitchen to retrieve the net she had purchased along with the bowl, she checked one drawer and another, jostling items, finally finding it mixed in with the jar lids, bread ties, three ice creams scoops, and odd assortment of things she had collected over the years and should really toss out.

Walking back to the dining room, she stopped, her breath catching in her throat. She was too late. Matt stood at the table. He had scooted the bowl over to the edge of the table and was peering intently into the water. Elise saw a pulsing light that seemed to emanate from the bowl itself, but realized it must be the late afternoon sunlight from the window causing the odd effect. Her only hope was that Matt wouldn't get hysterical over the loss of yet another loved one.

Elise slowly walked over to his side, placing the net on the round table before laying a hand on his slender shoulder. Ignoring the sting of electricity that shot through her hand when she touched him, she gave him a squeeze, offering her physical, as well as emotional, support.

"Hi Matt." She smiled tentatively.

"Hi mom." He looked up at her and grinned. Everything about her son mutely said he was Elise Colby's child. From his thick lashes and green eyes, to his square jaw and one dimple in his left cheek. Except for his blond, baby-fine hair. *That* he had inherited from his father. "Maybe we should get Spike a girlfriend," he suggested, turning his attention back to the clear bowl he held between his palms. "He looks kinda lonely sometimes."

Elise couldn't bear to look into the bowl. "Honey, about Spike." Her voice came out a tad quivery.

"What about him?" Matt bent a little, peering into the side of the glass. "Hey, Spike." He tapped on the bowl with a finger and made little kissing noises to get the fish's attention.

Elise stifled a moan. "Oh, Matt, I'm so sorry." She wrapped her arms around him, wanting to comfort him as much as herself.

He wriggled free from her crushing embrace. "About what?" He frowned up at her. She noticed the violet smudges beneath his eyes. This thing, whatever it was, was taking its toll on them both.

"About Spike."

"What about him?"

"Well..." She took a deep breath, finally glancing over at the bowl. Her eyes grew wide and the breath she had been holding came out quick and surprised. There was Spike swimming in and out through the gray toy castle that took up the majority of the glass bowl, looking energetic as ever.

"What did you want to tell me about Spike, mom?" His eyes were on her as she held on to the side of the table to steady her suddenly weak legs.

Elise couldn't tear her eyes from the frisky fish. He had been dead just moments ago. Hadn't he? A sudden chill ran up her spine and an eerie feeling seeped into her soul.

"Spike?" She directed her attention back to her son who waited for an answer. "I...uh..." Shoving the strange feeling aside, she smiled weakly. "Spike will have to wait until Friday for a playmate. I don't get paid until then."

Matt shrugged. "That's okay. I guess he can be alone for a few more days."

Elise ruffled his hair. "Why don't you go take a bath while I finish up some typing then we'll have dinner?"

"A bath?" Matt balked, looking as if he had just chewed on grapefruit peel. "I'm not a baby, mom. I can take a shower, you know."

Elise laughed. "All right, Mr. Colby, go take a shower then." She gave him a kiss on the cheek and watched as he tramped off in the direction of the bathroom. "Don't forget to wash behind your ears," she called after him.

"I won't."

"And pick up after yourself!"

The bathroom door clicked shut. "I will," came his muffled voice from behind the wooden barrier.

When Elise was alone once more she took another look at the chubby fish swimming around. "I could have sworn you were dead."

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With a shrug, thinking perhaps she was making a big deal over nothing, she walked to the kitchen then back over to the bowl. Removing the plastic lid from the small can she had retrieved, she fed the fish a pinch of dried food flakes.

"Here, boy." She added an extra pinch. "A little treat for you. It's not everyday that you have the opportunity to be brought back from the dead." The fish zoomed up to the surface, gobbling the multicolored flakes in the blink of an eye. Elise laughed. "Well, your appetite sure hasn't suffered any." Snapping the lid back on the can, she put it back in the cupboard.

A knock on the door startled her. Since moving to Eureka from San Diego after her husband's death, she hadn't had the time or the energy to pursue many friendships. In fact, Mrs. Holden who lived downstairs was the only person she talked to on a regular basis and that was only because she babysat Matt.

With these thoughts flitting through her mind, Elise opened the door, leaving the chain on for safety's sake, and peered out into the dimly lit hallway.

A small gasp burst from her lips and her hand leaped to her chest when she saw the towering man standing stiffly on the other side of the door. He looked down right back at her through the small crack the brass chain allowed.

Something about him intimidated her on the spot—other than the fact that no man had appeared on her doorstep in well over ten years. Bad news trickled from his every pore.

"May I help you?" Elise tried to project a strong voice since she felt this man's overpowering vibes penetrating the thick wood.

His eyes narrowed for a moment and a spark of recognition seemed to ignite briefly in them before quickly dying out. "Mrs. Colby?" His voice was deep and raspy, as if he had just woken from a deep sleep.

"Ms. Colby," she automatically corrected. "I'm a widow." Elise cringed inwardly. Now why the hell had she blurted out that bit of information? It was practically a verbal billboard letting this stranger know she was alone. An invitation for him to bust the door down with one of those powerfullooking shoulders of his, come right on in, rape her, then

make off with her...her what? TV set? Cheapo computer? Wal-Mart Jewelry?

No, she quickly decided. This man was no burglar or a rapist. But the hard look in his steel-gray eyes told her he was definitely on a mission.

"The mother of Matthew Colby?" The words were heavily coated with an accent Elise guessed to be Spanish. His brows bent in impatience, obviously frustrated at having to talk through a two-inch crack in her door.

Without answering right away Elise studied what she could see of him. He was part Indian, as his dark skin and telltale nose attested. He must have some Anglo in him too, she mused, staring into eyes the color of a stormy sky with charcoal-black rings around the irises. Had she ever seen eyes that unusual?

"Are you?"

Elise jumped at his harsh tone. Though this man was as intimidating as any she had seen in her thirty-five years, a feeling within urged her to reply.

"Why, yes, I'm Matthew Colby's mother." She heard the stranger let out a deep sigh. "Are you from the school?"

"I think my business would be best discussed on the other side of the door and not out here in the hall, *senora*." He glanced around as if somebody was lurking just around the corner eavesdropping.

Her feelings fluctuated with every shallow breath she took. Should she let a complete stranger in her home or close the door in his handsome face and lock it firmly behind her?

As indecision warred in her, his next words stopped her wary mind in an instant.

"I can help your son."

With only slight hesitation, Elise closed the door, slid the chain from its locked position and opened it again, allowing him to enter.

He walked over the threshold, giving her a small nod. Elise closed the door and turned to see him standing tensely in the middle of her suddenly tiny living room. She looked him up and down for the fifth time. He certainly was an attractive package, wearing a pair of jeans that spread over his lean hips and powerful thighs like pale-blue frosting on

a cake. His denim shirt was much darker, and though it was baggy at the waist, it fit his shoulders without an inch of excess material on either side.

"I am Noel Posas." He gave a deep bow, his cool, gray eyes never leaving hers. His long hair was held back with a leather cord, and Elise watched with fascination as the raven ponytail spilled over his right shoulder with the motion.

Good lord! The man invaded every corner of her home with his sheer size alone, not to mention the aura drifting off him that felt like an electrical storm. But for some odd reason Elise couldn't drum up any feelings of fear. Curiosity, yes. An insane, instant attraction, definitely. Wariness, perhaps a little. But fear simply wasn't there.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, Mr. Posas." She walked over to the flower print sofa and sat down in one corner, feeling a little more protected with cushioning at her side and back. Mentally she gave a derisive snort. What was her problem? Hadn't she talked to enough strangers over the past half year? Why should this be any different?

"Noel," he corrected, taking a seat across from her. "Call me Noel." He sat on the edge of the overstuffed chair.

Elise heard the shower running and knew she still had some time alone with Mr. Posas. Questions battled for first place in her mind. She chose the easiest one to grab. "What brings you here, Mr. Posas?" She nervously fiddled with the beaded barrette in her hair.

He frowned, his thick brows meeting in the middle as he looked her up and down with a familiarity that made her feel naked. Elise fought the urge to cover herself with a throw pillow, wishing she had put on a bra this morning. In the next breath his smoldering look was gone and a more guarded one took its place as his eyes met hers.

"Your son has been exhibiting strange behavior lately." It was a statement, not a question.

Trying very hard not hyperventilate, Elise nodded. "How—?"

"Senora." Now he settled back, hands folded in his lap, his wide shoulders touching either side of the chair. "What I am about to tell you will most likely sound like the ramblings of a lunatic, a man who has lost all touch with reality, but I assure

you every word I am about to say is the truth." One palm turned upward briefly. "If you doubt me when I am finished, I have proof to back my story."

"Okay." Elise wasn't sure she wanted to hear what he had to say. Part of her wanted to throw this man out, yet the prospect of finding answers to her son's odd behavior had her sitting still. "What does this have to do with my son?"

He leaned forward, his voice low. "Elise, it has everything to do with your son...as well as the future of my people."

How did he know her name! Now it was Elise who sat perched on the edge of her seat. She felt a sudden sense of foreboding and thought about telling him to leave. Instead, all she could do was murmur a soft, "Go ahead." If he had answers, she would listen, no matter how quivery he made her insides feel.

Noel Posas shot to his feet. Elise shrank back against the sofa, her heart shooting up into her throat. When he tucked a lock of stray hair behind his ear and started pacing the small quarters, she relaxed a little. Damn, he made her nervous!

He turned his back to her for a moment and she noticed his jet-black hair reached the middle of his back. Her eyes wandered a little lower, admiring his firm ass clad in those ancient jeans.

He must have felt her eyes on him because he quickly faced her once again, a small smile tugging at his full lips. Elise's eyes shot up to his face, a hot blush heating her cheeks. What was the matter with her? It must be all of the stress, she reassured herself. *And the fact that I haven't had sex in over two years.* She cringed at her totally hormonal thoughts.

When they stayed there like that, eyes locked and Elise's heart threatening to bolt out of her chest at any moment while a languorous heat pooled between her thighs, she somehow found the strength to break his hypnotizing gaze. She gave a little cough, hoping it would clear her mind more than her throat. "You said you had a story to tell me, Mr. Posas."

* * *

Noel fought against the memories of his dreams centered on this woman. He had often wondered if she would remember him as they breached the gap of the subconscious and joined minds for a few hours each night for the past six months. The steady and slightly wary look in her emeraldeyes said she did not know him. Many people did not remember their dreams upon awakening, as was obvious in this case. The realization left him feeling oddly disappointed yet strangely relieved at the same time.

To Elise Colby they seemed as nothing more than strangers who had met only moments ago, though *he* felt as if he had known this woman a lifetime.

As Noel had penetrated Elise and Matthew Colby's minds each night he always felt like an outsider viewing scenes of a happy family life he had never known. At first the dreams had been hazy and hard to recall the next morning. But as he followed his dreams' clues and grew geographically closer to mother and son, the visions became crystal clear.

And in his dreams he had not only sought out the bits and pieces of evidence that led him here tonight, but, being able to control the dream world, he had also indulged in the many gifts Elise had to offer. In his dreams he had tasted her lips. In his dreams he had held her close against his heated body and stroked her silken skin. He had felt himself buried deep inside her, feeling her heat, her wetness, heard his name cried out as she climaxed. His entire body tensed at the memory. He clenched his jaw, willing away the feelings that were quickly causing him to become hard once again.

Only in dreams, he reminded himself.

When she opened the door and he had seen her standing there before him, the woman from his visions, he realized he was at last about to reclaim his village's healer. And for a moment he had debated on reclaiming Elise Colby—in the flesh.

Impatiently he pushed the taunting hunger aside. He was not like other men, therefore he could not long for something he could never have. Had he not learned the cruel lesson years ago? Come to terms with the reality that he would lead a solitary life because he was one of the chosen ones?

Still, he found himself yearning for what could never be.

He clenched his fists and a chafing sigh escaped him. *Enough of this foolishness*. He was on a mission to save his people, not to curse the fates for depriving him of a normal life.

"I come from a small, secluded village in the Mexican jungles. Xilitla," he quietly began as he noted the tightness in his groin. Uncaring if Elise saw how aroused he was. Curious as to what the look in her eyes would be if they traveled south of his belt buckle at this very moment and she caught sight of his erection. Thrilled at the prospect. Angry for the thought.

"Though it is primitive by your standards," he continued, "it is the place where I grew up and continue to live to this day. My people have been virtually untouched by modern man." He took a step closer to her, his voice stronger now. "Among the tall mountains of Mexico the ancient life goes on, having changed little in a thousand years. We rely heavily on age-old beliefs and the supernatural abilities of a chosen few to keep the tribe strong. I am one of the Chosen Ones." He gave a little bow of his head before meeting her eyes. "The Dream Master.

"Able to reach into the dream world, enter the subconscious, to control and decipher its often vague omens. I can tell when one has a problem that needs tending to, when one is with child, is ill, or even about to die. But I cannot heal."

He started pacing again. Noel knew he sounded like a walking madman, but he had to make her understand, had to make her believe. He could not leave here without Matthew Colby.

He ignored green eyes that were on him, most likely filled with regret for letting him into her home. "Our Supreme Healer died five years ago. On his deathbed he vowed he would return to us, that his soul would be reincarnated into another." He walked over to the small bookcase that held mostly children's titles and a few fiction novels. Picking up a framed photograph of Elise, he ran a finger over her smiling features. It wasn't good, he thought with a hint of bitterness, the way she affected him. He had a quest. He must remember that at all times. There was no room in his life for such things as passion and promise.

But now, a small boy would be in his life. Matthew Colby was the Chosen One, but his powers must be honed and harnessed before they would be of any great use to the people of Xilitla. And this is where his own destiny lay. Not only was he the village's Dream Master, but he would now be their new healer's mentor.

The Chosen One

With great reluctance, Noel replaced the photo and turned back to the woman on the sofa who looked at him with an unreadable expression. It made him uneasy. If only she was sleeping, he would enter her nocturnal mind and unveil every thought and every feeling she hid behind those catlike eyes.

Hating himself once again for his too-human feelings, he continued his story. "Six months ago the Ancient One came to me in a dream. A vision. He told me his soul had at last found its destination, reincarnated in a small child. Two faces flashed before my mind's eye." He slipped his hands in his back pockets, pinning her with a steady gaze. "Yours," he nodded in her direction, "and your son's." He glanced toward the hall then back to her. "One name was spoken: Matthew Colby. All of those years I had waited for the vision, and all of these months I have been searching for the Chosen One. And now, I am here."

He lifted his chin defiantly, awaiting her response. "I have more to say, if you wish to hear it."

CHAPTER TWO

Elise blew out an incredulous laugh, throwing her hands up in surrender. "You bet! What have I got to lose?"

"Care for some coffee?" she asked, heading toward the kitchen. Not that she was being hospitable in the least, but Noel Posas was scaring her. *The man* and his story. Yet something in her gut said she should not send him away. Not yet anyway. Though her mind rebelled against his weird story and primitive tale, she had seen enough in the past few months that she honestly couldn't disregard it outright.

"Gracias," he said from directly behind her. "It isn't often that I indulge in the things most men take for granted." His voice held a strange weight to it and when Elise turned around his eyes flickered with awareness, a flame of familiar desire that turned her knees rubbery as week-old celery.

She chose to deflect the comment, along with the strange feelings he invoked, and said, "Well, I guess if one lives in a secluded jungle village one might not indulge in many things the modern world has to offer." Elise quickly turned away from those probing eyes and her own disturbing thoughts. She sighed inwardly with relief as he took a few steps back, though she could still feel his gaze penetrating through her clothing.

"Do you take anything in your coffee?" She frowned hard, concentrating on the usually mindless task of pouring water in the reservoir on the coffee maker.

"No."

They stood there in silence as she finished. The coffee was ready in a matter of minutes, though her hands shook badly and she nearly slopped coffee over the edge of the mugs as she carried them to the table. They sat down in unison, Noel's body dwarfing her dinette chair.

"So what are these pieces of evidence you claim to possess that would have me believing your story?" Elise sipped her coffee, feigning a calmness she didn't feel in the least. "And how did you find out about us?"

He ignored her questions for a moment, murmuring something to Spike in what Elise supposed were Spanish endearments. The fish stuck his chubby face against the bowl as if trying to get closer to the finger delicately tapping on the glass. After a moment he turned his attention back to her, those smoky eyes flooding her body with heat. Her nipples grew hard, pressing against the thin fabric of her t-shirt, and she moved uneasily in her chair.

After a long swallow of coffee he set the mug down, his big hand wrapped around the pale peach ceramic that set off his dark skin. "As I said, I have had dreams of you and your son. Though I have never met either one of you in person, I feel I know you each quite well due to my dreams." He suddenly went silent and simply sat there looking at her. His gaze dipped down to the front of her blouse and a wicked smile tipped one corner of his lips.

"Go on," Elise prompted from over the rim of her cup, ignoring his blatant perusal. "Your evidence."

He gave a small nod and looked in her eyes once more. "Your son has blond hair like his father, but in every other way he is a replica of his mother. His bedroom is down the hall, on the right side." He inclined his head in the direction stated. "He sleeps with a light on since he is afraid of the dark."

Elise cocked an eyebrow at him. "Lucky guess," she informed him. "Besides, a lot of kids are afraid of the dark. So are some adults," she added.

A tiny snort escaped his lungs before he directed his gaze to the window across from them. "You are a hard woman to convince, Elise Colby."

The way he had said her name with his rich accent made her blood speed hotly through her veins. "I admire a man with such determination. I'll give you another chance to convince me."

He looked at her, nodded again, accepting the challenge. "The sheets on your bed have violets trailing the top edge. Your favorite perfume is *Sunflowers*, and you have a strawberry birthmark on your left breast." He looked smug with that last comment.

Elise nearly dropped her cup, but set it down with a shaky hand. This man was a stalker, for cripes sake! She rose to her feet, her whole body ready to shatter. "Look." Her eyes were on him, hard and angry. "I have no idea how you found out about Matt and those personal things about me, but I think you'd better leave before I call the police, Mr. Posas." She kept her voice low and cool, not wanting to alarm Matt, and she certainly didn't want this man to know that she was suddenly scared beyond imagination.

* * *

Noel was also on his feet now, upsetting the chair behind him. "Madre mia! I am only trying to prove my story to you." He watched on in frustration as Elise sprinted over to the phone in the living room. He had to convince her somehow. Being arrested was not part of his plan. "Senora, you are the one seeking answers to your son's behavior. I have the answers. I can help." He walked slowly toward her, not wanting her to run or scream. "Your fears will only cause your son to eventually be diagnosed as insane. I know. I have been in that situation. You must trust me." He stood in front of her now. She looked up at him with big, frightened eyes, yet a small hint of surrender could also be seen. It gave him hope.

As much as he hated to do it, he had to go straight for the heart, cut her to the marrow to make her understand. "You never loved your husband, Elise," he whispered, knowing how the words must sound, especially coming from a stranger.

In the dreams he had often felt her guilt on this subject, the disappointment that was directed at herself for staying in the loveless marriage for so very long. The bitterness directed at her husband for leaving her and their son virtually penniless. He knew other things about this woman he would never acknowledge aloud, for they were many of the same things that harbored in his own lonely soul, yearnings that for him would never be fulfilled, but for her...perhaps someday.

He continued his personal assault, stripping her soul bare. "After a string of unfulfilling affairs and failed relationships Frank Colby represented stability and companionship, as well as someone you knew you would never love. It kept your heart safe. You were married less than three months after you started dating. It did not take long for you to discover that perhaps you had made a hasty decision, but by then you had conceived." He tilted his head and gave a slow shrug, keeping an even gaze on the woman before him who was viewing him with defeat.

Without thought he had taken more steps toward her and was now brushing her knees with his shins. Staring down into her eyes, he longed to taste her lips that were parted in what he knew to be shock. "You stayed with your husband only for the sake of your child. Since his death you have held feelings of guilt that his passing was a relief for you. Though you worried about your son being without a father, you also felt free."

He watched as she replaced the receiver of the telephone in its base with a trembling hand and slumped onto the sofa, eyes downcast.

Noel wanted to take her in his arms, comfort her, make love to her and erase the look on her face, replacing it with one of rapture. But he was here to collect the boy, not follow his desires.

"How could you know?" Elise whispered. "I never told anyone how I felt. At times I wasn't even sure of how I felt." She looked at her hands limply folded on her lap. Noel's eyes studied them; they were surprisingly strong looking for their small size. "The only thing that kept us together was our one creation." Her gaze tangled with his. "I should be furious as hell at you for saying those things, but you know...you *really* know."

Noel crouched down in front of Elise, getting only as close as he dared, but close enough to feel her body heat reaching out to him. Her warmth taunted him, her feminine scent teased him, her very presence tortured him. He needed desperately to get away from this woman, yet he was galvanized to the spot. "I told you, Elise, I am the Dream Master." His voice was soft. "For six months now you and your son have lived in my nocturnal mind, and I in yours. I know you and your child as well as I know myself." He smiled crookedly. "Perhaps more."

Standing now, he retreated from their too-close proximity and the wild feelings rising within him, and went to sit across from her in the chair he had occupied about 30 minutes before. He was now confident that he had a captive audience. When he spoke again he was certain to not let his voice reveal his reactions to the woman, and he rested his right ankle over his opposite knee, concealing the bulge at his groin. "Your son has been chanting in a foreign language, es verdad?"

He watched her eyes leave her hands and travel to his face. She nodded. "Every night, just about."

"Has he been displaying any acts of healing?" Noel further elaborated, "Perhaps healing an injured animal, reviving some small thing that appeared dead?"

She closed here eyes briefly, looking overwhelmed. "Spike," she murmured, pointing weakly in the direction of the dining room.

Noel glanced over at the bowl sitting on the small wood table only a few feet behind him. "Spike?"

"Yes, the fish." She blinked hard. "I could have sworn the fish was dead just awhile ago. I went into the kitchen to get the net and the next thing I knew Matt was standing with his hands on the bowl. I also saw that the container was kind of glowing, but I figured it was just my eyes playing tricks on me. Spike was swimming around as if he hadn't been floating on top of the water when I looked at him the first time. And the flowers." Her voice was stronger, her gaze taking the short path to the potted blooms. "I bought them about two weeks ago and they're just as fresh as the day I brought them home."

Noel rubbed his hands together briskly. He was excited now. "Yes. His healing gifts are already making themselves known. The light you saw came from within him. When the Ancient One would heal another, his hands emitted a golden aura, sometimes blue, depending on the internal strength involved in the healing."

"So you're saying my son can bring back the dead?" Disbelief colored her words.

"No. Not the dead." More hair escaped the leather lace as he shook his head. "Only entities which are ill, injured, or hovering just over the threshold of life and death. If one has not crossed over onto the other side, they can be brought back across the doorway of near-death."

She bit on her bottom lip, causing Noel's pelvis to lurch, nearly jolting him from the chair. "I also noticed that he looked completely exhausted after he resurrected Spike—or whatever it is he did."

Noel remained outwardly calm. "It will take time to raise his tolerance. He will need to learn to harness his power and strengthen them. Soon it will course through him just as naturally as oxygen through his lungs."

CHAPTER THREE

"Hold it, Mr. Posas." Elise met his gaze, raising a hand to stop any further words. "While what you've told me is quite interesting, and somewhat disturbing, I'm not quite ready to believe that my son has the soul of a dead medicine man living inside of him! Although I can handle the fact that he has healing qualities."

Noel raked a hand through his hair; oblivious to the fact that he pulled it free from the confining band he'd had it in. The ebony curtain now lay splayed over his shoulders. Elise took in a sharp breath at the sight and could easily imagine this man wearing nothing more than a loincloth, chanting in his mother tongue, dancing around an open fire under a full moon.

"Elise." He said her name with such harshness that it caused her insides to shrink. As he spoke his next words her heart twisted with the anguish she knew he must feel but hid well. "My people have been without a healer for too long. Many have died needlessly. Though the jungle is a peaceful and beautiful place to live, it is not without its dangers. My people are losing hope. Many have deserted the village and gone down to the more civilized areas below. Since I haven't been in the village for nearly half a year, and though I have

kept in contact as best I could, I can only imagine what awaits me once I get back." He closed his eyes as if trying to erase a haunting image before focusing back on her. "And if I return without the Chosen One..." He clenched his hands into tight fists, his knuckles white against otherwise dark skin. "We need your son, Elise. More than you will ever know."

Elise fought for a deep breath, feeling she was drowning. "Surely there must be doctors in those civilized areas below. Why can't these sick and injured people be taken to a doctor living there?"

He blew out a breath of frustration. "How can I expect you to understand beliefs that are nearly as old as man himself? We are a simple people who live by fact and fable, myth and natural medicine, and by our strong faith. Your son possesses healing powers. Powers we believe in. Not every malady can be handled by modern medicine." His gaze looked far away and slightly sad but returned to hers with granite hardness in them. "Do you want your son to go through therapy year after year? His talents will not cease, Elise. Without proper training they will become chaotic."

He then painted a bleak future. "You seek answers, but will those answers be found in a counseling room? In a prescription? In a laboratory? That is where your son will end up." His tone was assured. "As his talents become stronger you will become more concerned. He will either be locked up and declared mentally ill or a novelty and taken to a lab to be prodded and examined and studied." Steely eyes dared her to protest.

Elise searched for a way to counter his argument, but instead she found herself more curious about this man. "You act as if you know first-hand."

He lifted his chin, a solid shield. "I do."

"So tell me. Help me understand."

"Very well." He turned his back to her, his shoulders stiff. "I was cruelly taken from my village at the age of fifteen. My father saw money in my talent." Though his words were barely a whisper, Elise heard them all. "I was literally sold to American scientists as nothing more than an inanimate object. My father was handed a large check and that was the last I saw of him. I spent 6 years at PRI, the Paranormal

Research Institute." She saw him shudder at the memory. "I was drugged much of the time so they could control me. The drugs caused my talents to wane until they felt I was of no use to them and I was discarded."

He faced her again, his eyes wide and heartbreaking. "Elise, is that what you want for your son?"

When she didn't reply, her mind racing, her heart confused, he muttered a curse in his native language and stuck his hand into one of the front pockets of his snug jeans. "If what I have said has not convinced you, then maybe these will." He pulled his hand out and walked over to her. Unfolding his long fingers, he held the items out for her to see as they rested against his giant palm.

"What are they?" She examined them closely. One was a necklace made of a leather lace and held a bird claw grasping a perfectly round and transparent crystal in the sharp talons. The other was a small brown suede pouch. "May I?" she asked, placing her hand on the satchel that looked older than she and the man standing before her put together.

Noel nodded. "These items belonged to the Ancient One."

Elise picked up the bag and her fingers touched Noel's palm ever so slightly. She felt electricity zing into her veins and lightning burst in her head. Images swirled around her mind like scenes from a dream. She had the sensation of being in Noel's arms, felt his lips crushing hers, his body liquid heat over hers as their naked bodies moved together to a timeless rhythm in a bed she did not recognize.

This was all so crazy, she told herself. She had never met Noel Posas before, yet this recollection seemed so real. Fleetingly she wondered if it was nothing more than wishful thinking.

Somehow, and most reluctantly, she found the strength to pull her hand away, fighting off the wave of urgent desire telling her she had physically loved this man before.

Inwardly, Elise forced herself to concentrate. She pulled the lace and opened the pouch, ignoring his dark eyes that were on her. Peering inside, she reached in a thumb and forefinger taking out a few dried leaves. She sniffed them. They smelled funny. She figured they were herbs of some kind used for natural healing. Down the corner from her was a Chinese herb shop selling everything from ginger to dried seahorse. She'd heard people rave about these natural remedies, though she had never tried any herself.

She closed the bag and handed it back to him. This time she was certain to avoid skin contact. The man unnerved her far too much!

"Call your son. If he recognizes these items will you then believe everything I have said is true?" Though it was a question, Elise detected the impatience in his voice.

"If Matt *doesn't* recognize them I'll send you on your way," she warned, holding his penetrating gaze with one of her own.

"I am a confident man." He raised his chin a notch, looking down at her with hard eyes.

Could everything he told her be the truth? Perhaps, in a day and age where there were new inventions everyday jetting them swiftly into the future, there still remained areas of this world that were untouched by modern man, and all over the planet there were people who possessed supernatural powers that simply couldn't be explained by scientific fact and data. Her son could be such an individual.

If he did recognize the objects he had just shown her, she had no idea what she'd do then.

"I will not be disappointed, Elise." His voice came out on a raspy whisper.

Elise was frustrated with herself for still doubting him. Did she really need any more proof? Was she so blind that she couldn't see his evidence, so deaf that she hadn't heard his assured words, so desensitized that she hadn't felt this man's own power herself even when he had been standing out in the hall?

No, she admitted, it was none of those things. She had indeed heard, seen, and felt it all, but her senses rebelled because the knowledge frightened her, because the man himself frightened her. He was dark and mysterious, formidable and intimidating, sexy as the devil himself, and she had a feeling he could be just as dangerous. Above all else, if what he said was the absolute truth, what lay ahead for her and Matt? If she didn't believe him, what would happen

to her son then? Putting her son on anti-psychotic medication was out of the question.

"We'll see," she finally murmured, unable to force her gaze away from those mirror-like eyes of his that reflected her uncertain features. She shivered again, wrapping her arms around her waist, not liking the deep emptiness she saw there.

"Yes," his voice low but rough. "We shall see."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Matthew!" Elise called from the front of the hall.

"Coming." His voice trailed out to them from his room.

Noel waited anxiously by her side, absently taking in the décor around him that he had seen dozens of times on his night time journeys through the minds of this woman and her son.

He scanned the framed pictures of Matthew Colby from birth up until his last birthday lining the hall, the assortment of bisque and ceramic statuettes placed around the room, an abandoned knitting project laying on one end table, small fingerprints scattered over the plain white walls.

The familiar scenery in the room that spoke of a warm family life did not hold his attention long as his senses were drawn back to the woman beside him. Elise Colby frustrated him more than anything in his entire life ever had; yet she intrigued him at the same time.

On a purely male level he admired the way the cotton of her shirt clung to her full breasts. His appreciative gaze had not missed the fact that she had neglected to wear a bra. The jeans she wore hugged her rounded hips and full thighs. He turned his head slightly toward her, looking at her through lowered lashes. Yes, that body was made for a man to hold on to during cold winter nights, in the throes of passion, in times of need. And he ached all the more with wanting.

Before his mind had a chance to wander any farther down the path it had taken, Matthew came ambling down the hallway, fidgeting with the drawstring at the waist of his gray sweat pants. The vibrant Spiderman shirt he wore contrasted with his slow steps.

When he reached the end of the hall Elise spoke. "Honey, I want you to meet somebody."

Matthew looked up from his task, his gaze drifting from his mother to Noel. His green eyes grew wide. His hands dropped to his sides. "The Dream Master!" Matthew whispered in awe.

When Elise's gaze flew to Noel's he gave her an I-told-you-so smirk.

"He could have heard you talking," she quietly informed.

"Uh-uh, mom." Her son gave a shake of his still-damp head. "This guy was in my dreams. I thought it was just 'cause I'd been watching TV so much lately." Matthew looked Noel up and down. "This is him. Wow." He met his mother's bewildered gaze. "I didn't know you knew the Dream Master."

Noel pulled the items from his pocket again, trying to ignore the cold fist gripping his heart at seeing the child outside of his mind. Memories of times long ago raced back to him. Times when he was a young child himself, carefree and unaware of the implications his gift held for a solitary future.

This boy was so like him. Maybe not physically, but he was a Chosen One. It was there in his eyes that reflected ancient wisdom, though he was still full of youthful innocence at the moment. In time all that would change, he grimly mused.

Noel did not want to ponder over the life Matthew Colby, too, was destined to live. His life's path had been dictated for him. There was no turning back.

"I suppose you recognize these things too?" He heard Elise say somewhat bitterly, snatching back Noel's attention.

"Sure." Matthew shrugged as if seeing an eagle claw and leather satchel containing herbs was an everyday occurrence. He looked at the pouch. "These are sometimes used after the healing ceremony. The *ojas de curarse* are a natural painkiller.

They can be brewed into a tea and taken internally or ground into a poultice and placed directly over the affected area."

He held the bird claw up before him. Waning daylight came through the window striking the crystal sphere, casting a rainbow over his face. In his eyes the childlike glimmer was gone, replaced by that of ancient knowledge.

"The eagle claw represents peace, power and freedom. The crystal represents purity of the soul. It also binds the healer with the person he is healing, and helps the healer to concentrate his power." He spoke like a scientist of the earth, not a nine-year-old child.

Noel let out a satisfied grunt. How could Elise doubt him now?

"How do you know all of this?" Her voice was strained, but came out pleading with her next words, "Matt, please tell me you saw it on the Discovery Channel or something."

The boy frowned for a minute as if trying to dredge up and capture remnants of a fading dream then shrugged once again. "I don't know how I know, I just do. Can I go play my PS2 some more?"

"Sure." She sighed and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Matthew rolled his eyes toward the ceiling at her display of affection. Noel laughed softly at the display.

"Will the Dream Master come back?" He looked Noel over once again in obvious awe at having him in his own home.

"Well...I—I'm not sure."

"I will be back," Noel assured.

"Great!" Matthew smiled up at him with trust and admiration in his eyes.

Noel offered Matthew the barest of smiles, reached out a hand, and ruffled his hair. He felt tenderness lurking beneath the stony exterior he tried to project, mentally recoiling at the weakness he felt there. It was important to keep an emotional distance from this situation. He glanced over at Elise who seemed rather pale at the moment.

In that moment his soul cried out with an intense need he had never acknowledged in the past. A need to be a man, only a man, and not the Dream Master. A need to indulge in the wonders of a woman, not a village maiden who was in awe of his powers and longed for a night in the arms of a Chosen

One. He yearned for a woman with whom he could release the passion she roused in him and not have to hold back.

In Elise Colby's company he was merely Noel Posas, and that thrilled him to no end. Gave him a bigger adrenaline rush than that of being a Chosen One used to give him when he had been much younger and lived through his ego. When all of the ramifications of being different from others were still unknown to him, just as it was unknown to Matthew Colby now.

Noel focused back on the child, jaw tense, watching as he jogged down the hall to his room. When the child disappeared from view, he closed his eyes, fighting for the strength he needed to keep them both at arms' length.

* * *

Elise was grateful to have a break from answering any questions her son might ask right now. Her head felt dizzy and she was sure she'd blackout at any second. Her mind battled against all of this. It simply *couldn't* be true. Her son, a healer? The thought made her sick to her stomach. Her son on medication, under observation, in a mental institution or research laboratory? That thought made her even sicker.

She watched the hall long after Matt had gone into his room. Without so much as a glance at the man beside her she went and crumbled onto the sofa.

"When will you be ready to leave?" Noel stood directly in front of her now, looking down at her with eager eyes, though his face remained expressionless.

"Excuse me?" She blinked several times, trying to rouse herself from this nightmare.

"You wish for answers to your son's powers. He must learn to control them or there could be consequences." The tone in his voice hinted at the horrible things Matt and she would be going through if they faced this on their own.

"Consequences?" The word was a distracted whisper as her mind raced with a thousand miserable scenes of her son as a human guinea pig.

"Elise, do not be fooled into thinking that your son's powers will go away." He headed off that thought before she could voice it aloud. "It will not. In fact, as he grows older his powers will become stronger. If he does not learn to harness

them he could very well end up hurting himself...or others." The last statement was spoken with a dark tint of doom staining it.

"But—" He covered her lips with the tips of his fingers to stop her words.

"Do you want him to end up like me, Elise?" Each foreboding word he spoke slithered into her belly, his warm touch slid lower still. "A bitter recluse who is unable to function in the ordinary world? He needs someone like him to show him the way." His hand fell away and Elise felt a strange sense of abandonment.

"And you can assure this won't happen to my son?" When he looked at her without a hint of guarantee in his eyes she sat on the edge of the sofa, urgent. "I want him to be a normal boy."

"Without my help his powers will quickly grow to monumental proportions. Soon you will be unable to comfort him. In time you will eventually succumb to a doctor's diagnosis and have your son put on medication or institutionalized because you and all of mankind are afraid to accept what is not seen in the everyday world." His voice grew earnest. "I can help you, Elise. I can help your son. Allow me to do this."

Memories of Matt's strange behavior and the fact that Dr. Loggins wanted to start him on drug therapy for psychosis at their next appointment had Elise grasping at her only thread of hope. Noel had been through it all before. In her heart she knew she could trust this man. She laughed caustically to herself. Did she have any other choice? Help was here now, but did she dare follow Noel Posas, the Dream Master, to his Mexican village? And if so, for how long?

Her mind shifted to what it must be like to live in a jungle. Snakes, mosquitoes, lots of rain, and Indians eating insects and roots swam in her mind. "Our lives are here." *In a civilized city with modern amenities*, she wanted to add, but didn't. "My work is here. And what about school for Matt?"

Noel squatted down so his face was even with hers. She fought the urge to press herself against the back of the couch...or closer to this man. He looked around her tiny dwelling before leveling her with those eyes that left her

breathless. "You and your son will be quite comfortable in Xilitla, that I can promise. I will teach your son how to hone and harness his powers. He is on recess from school for the summer. There are schools in the city below and buses that come to our village, he will be able to learn the academics. And you," his tone was suddenly soft, "you will not have the burden of working two jobs."

Elise shuddered down to her soul. She had always followed common sense in the past. Common sense had told her to marry Frank for stability and security—and look where it had gotten her. But now, probably for no other reason than fear and desperation, she decided it was time to follow gut instinct instead of logic. She just hoped she wouldn't live to regret it.

"Noel," she said as calmly as she could. "I want to help my son. I want him to be *cured*."

He laughed, the puff of air rustling her bangs. "You act as if he has contracted some disease and simply needs an inoculation to remedy him. I said I would help him. There is no cure." His last words sounded bitter.

Elise sighed heavily and slumped back against the sofa, rubbing her throbbing temples. The beginnings of a headache and the wild turn her life had just taken since Noel Posas arrived were preventing her from thinking clearly. That could explain why she was about to say what she was.

"All right, Mr. Posas. Matthew and I will go back with you." She saw him relax a bit, but there was still tension roiling within him as his ticking jaw attested. "Since Matt is on vacation for the summer, I'll give you one month to prove to me that you can help him." She felt a hysterical laugh bubble up in her throat. "If you fail, we come back home." And then what? Start him on drugs and shock treatment?

She had just paid her rent two days ago, but she would have to work something out with her jobs before they left. Neither should be too hard to get away from for a while since this time of the year was slow with taxes and she could ask someone else to type up the medical transcripts while she was gone. She would much rather work two jobs at home, than one nine hour a day job at an office away from her son.

"That is fair." He reached out a hand cupped her cheek for the briefest moment. Elise turned liquid at his touch. "Thank you, Elise." She wondered what exactly he was thanking her for. For the chance to prove her son was a healer? Or for something in the future that was reflected in the promise of his eyes?

"It's the least I can do for the Dream Master." She managed a little smile. "Do you have a place to stay?" she found herself asking in the next heartbeat, resisting the urge to reach her fingers up and place them against her cheek where he had touched her.

"No. Not yet, but it should be no problem finding a hotel." His words sounded like gibberish to her at the moment.

"You're more than welcome to stay here tonight." The offer popped out of her mouth before she could stop it. But there it was, hanging in the air, echoing in her ears. When he'd stayed quiet for several seconds she tried not to look away, to squirm, to snatch back the offer.

"Very well." He nodded tightly, his expression blank.

Elise sighed inwardly, with relief or dread, she wasn't sure. She gazed up at him, trying to decipher his emotions, wishing she could read his thoughts. Both were impossible though as his gray eyes only reflected her image. The effect of those eyes was unsettling. She wondered again what powers this man held. And would she be the recipient or victim of them?

"Are you hungry?" She finally found the strength to avert his hypnotizing gaze. He finally stood, taking a few steps backward. Elise used the opportunity of the added free space to head for the kitchen after turning on the lamp, bypassing him completely as she went around the other side of the chair he stood beside.

"If it is not too much trouble. I have eaten nothing since yesterday afternoon," he conceded. "A small stand down in Tijuana, if my memory is correct." He followed her into the narrow kitchen.

"You must be starving!" She felt her nurturing instincts kick in as she walked to the refrigerator.

"I was eager to find the Chosen One. Nourishment had not entered my mind." His deep voice filled the small area.

She heard him take a few steps closer. "Modern methods had not helped me in my search. There are many children named Matthew Colby in this world." A small laugh came from his direction.

Elise feigned a thorough search of the interior of the fridge. "I bet."

"So I relied on my dreams. At times I waited days, even weeks before I would dream of you again and gather clues. Some were misleading." His voice was closer now.

"How so?" The odd assortment of covered bowls, condiments, and other perishables looked like a blur to her. She heard him fiddling around with some things on the counter.

"I went to New York, Texas, even parts of Mexico in my search. But last night I had the final dream that led me to you. I was in Tijuana at the time. I awoke, quickly packed, and drove the rental car up here to Eureka." Noel's next words were spoken low. "Now I suddenly find myself ravenous."

"I hope you like stew," Elise said too quickly, knowing she was failing miserably at portraying the coolness she always strived for in her life and tried to cling desperately to at the moment. "I made it just last night." She pulled out the pale green plastic bowl that contained the previous evening's dinner.

"That is fine." His voice came from directly behind her, startling her. She whipped around to find him reaching up in the cupboard no more than a few inches away, grabbing three bowls. Though he didn't touch her, she could feel that hot body of his radiating like a campfire. The scent of mountain herbs mingling with his unique scent left her feeling as if she had downed way too many shots of tequila.

"Thank you," she managed to choke out as she slipped under his outstretched arm and went over to the stove.

He gave a slow shrug. "Por nada."

While she heated the stew he planted himself against the counter, arms crossed over his chest, his shrewd eyes taking in everything around him—especially her. Elise felt a sudden urge to reach up and tuck the stray hairs that had slipped from the barrette, to rush into her room and put on something else besides her tattered jeans and nondescript t-shirt, but resisted.

"Would you like some rolls with it?" She took the pan off the stove and poured some of the piping hot contents into each of the bowls. "No. This is sufficient." He looked down at the chunks of beef and vegetables cloaked in brown gravy. "I usually have tortillas with meals, but I doubt you have any."

Her clumsy hands pulled silverware from the drawer. "Sorry, no tortillas." She grabbed some spoons, closing it again with a jostling bang. "Milk? Juice?"

"Water is fine." He seemed to be oblivious to her comic display of nerves.

Elise sagged against the counter a few feet away from him. She hated feeling this jittery, and vowed to relax. This man apparently posed no great threat to her or her son. He only wanted what he had come after: A healer for his people. And though what information he had laid on her since entering her home a while ago was pretty hard to digest, at least he had answers. And all of those answers fit her questions, although she didn't particularly like it.

Instead of listening to doctors that merely brushed her off or pointed incriminating fingers, she had someone who could really help. He understood what Matt was going through.

"This isn't a prison, Noel. You're a guest in my home." She could tell by his manners and his attire that life in the United States had some impact on him. She glanced down at his shoes. Black leather boots. She didn't know what she had expected to see. Maybe moccasins? "Please feel free to accept anything I offer."

That wicked fire was in his eyes again. He opened his mouth to say something, but seemed to change his mind. "Water is fine." His voice came out dark as the aura he projected. "As I told you," he retrieved a glass from the dish drain, holding the fragile object in his powerful-looking hand, "I am not used to indulging in what the majority of people take for granted."

"That's too bad," she whispered. This whole day was wearing on her nerves. How else could she explain her intense attraction to a man who deemed himself the *Dream Master* of some secluded jungle village and claimed her son to be a reincarnated medicine man?

With legs that felt heavy as stone and just as stiff, she carried the bowls over to the table then got him a glass of cold water and a napkin. She poured a glass of juice for herself and Matt.

When Noel sat in the small chair and stretched out his long limbs beneath the table, she felt herself being drawn to the empty seat across from him.

She called for Matt to come eat; vaguely realizing he would want cereal and not stew. Cereal and hot dogs seemed to be the only foods he'd eat half the time. He yelled his reply and Elise sat down. She looked at Noel's bowl and saw that the food was already half gone. Smiling to herself, she took a sip of juice and glanced down at the stew in her own bowl. Her stomach pitch. There was no way she could eat right now.

They sat in silence for several minutes. When Elise could stand the quiet no longer she asked, "Do you mind if we talk some more?" She gripped the glass between her palms.

He lifted his cool eyes. "Fine." And bowed his head to finish off the rest of the stew. As Elise got up to refill his bowl, even at his adamant refusal, so many questions raged in her mind she had no idea where to start.

Matt came out and they finished their food in mostly silence, punctuated with a bit of small talk between her son and Noel. Matt seemed completely at ease having him here. Noel finished his second bowl of stew a little slower this time. She herself picked at a few carrots.

Silently Elise took the dishes and put them in the sink. Pouring them each a cup of coffee from the pot she had made earlier, she placed one in front of her guest.

"I'm gonna go finish my game then go to bed, okay, Mom?"

"Sure. Have fun." She smiled as he loped off to be alone once again. "Don't forget to brush your teeth!" He turned around and rolled his eyes. Elise chuckled and took up her previous seat, forcing herself not to squirm around in it as Noel leaned way back in his chair, peering steadily at her over the rim of the blue mug he held.

She ran a nervous finger over the handle of her own cup. "So...you're the Dream Master."

He only nodded, taking a slow sip from his cup, gaze fastened to her face.

"You told me earlier that you were one of the Chosen Ones, just as Matt supposedly is." She watched as he moved his head in affirmation. "Could you tell me more about your...supernatural gifts?"

He was quiet for so long she was certain he wouldn't speak. Finally he leaned forward, lowered his cup to the table, flicked an invisible crumb from the polished wood surface, and spoke. "What I have is a form of mental telepathy, though I am only able to use my gift in the dream world. I can enter the subconscious; yours, my own, or anyone else's."

Elise's brows puckered. What a disturbing thought. At least while one was awake they could try to control their thought pattern, but when asleep and vulnerable...every hidden desire, every fear there for him to probe? "Can you enter anyone's dreams at will, or is it kind of hit-and-miss?"

"All I have to do is think of that person before I fall asleep and within moments, if that individual is also asleep, I enter their nocturnal mind. In my village, if someone feels they have a problem that needs tending to, or perhaps just for preventions sake, they will leave an offering on my doorstep." He gave a casual shrug as if dream counseling was an everyday thing. "That evening I will enter their dream world and show them how to correct the mistake, right the wrong, or any other steps that must be taken in the particular situation."

"It seems so mind boggling." Weird and nearly unbelievable was more like it. But it would very well answer the question as to how this man knew so much about her and Matt.

A shiver traveled up her spine at the thought. If this was all true, it meant he had complete access to everything in her subconscious. Everything she kept hidden. Everything she tried to bury. Just as her feelings toward her dead husband had been hidden and buried until this mysterious man uncovered them and tossed them in her face.

"Not really. As I said, it's a form of mental telepathy. If my power existed in the conscious area of my brain I could converse with you now, implanting my words and ideas into your mind and withdrawing your reaction to them." He downed the last of his coffee. "It is nearly the same, except I perform those feats while asleep." A small smile claimed his lips before saying, "Where I live it is probably for the best that I only operate in the sleeping mind."

Elise was intrigued and her previous anxiety at knowing this man had probably invaded her nocturnal mind vanished. "Why so?"

Noel folded his arms on the table and leaned closer to her. "I told you before, my people rely heavily on tradition, omens and the like. They live in a social-religious frame that is part ancient Indian, part sixteenth-century Spanish catholic. In fact, most of the elders speak no English and little Spanish, using the language of their ancestors." He leaned back once again and a smile of mirth played over his mouth. "To my people, the answers they find in their dreams are far more significant to them than if someone said, Pablo, I think your garden needs more water. Perhaps that is why your vegetables are dying."

Elise laughed out loud, turning into a quivering, feminine mess as the man across from her let out a deep, rumbling chuckle. Her nipples rose to peaks as if reaching out to Mr. Noel Posas. The rest of her body felt compelled to follow, but she resisted the invisible lure, focusing on the dark liquid in her cup instead.

* * *

It was ethereal, Noel thought, to be sitting here like this sharing conversation with another as if he was any normal man. It was overwhelming, sharing himself this way. How long had it been since he'd communicated with another at any length? Probably since his stay at PRI over fifteen years ago.

Elise rested one arm on the table, chin cupped in her palm. "When did you first learn of your gift?"

He smiled again, only slightly, his eyes distant. "When I was four. I dreamed of my father one night, that we were climbing a tree just outside of our home in the jungle. The next morning I awoke and told him of this dream. He said he had also had the same dream. I did not comprehend the significance of this at the time, but as I got older and started entering the dreams of others . . ." He met her eyes once more. "I was deemed the Dream Master at ten years of age."

"Wow," Elise let out on a gusty sigh. "That's a big enough title to carry around for a grown man, let alone a child."

His mouth twisted into a rueful line. "You will never know."

"Perhaps I'd like to know," she said softly.

"Perhaps you will know . . . in time." That is, if he allowed himself the luxury of thinking of a future with this woman on any level. After all, she would be with him, in his home, night and day, for at least one month.

"What about your healing powers?" she asked.

"They began nearly at the same time as my dream-visiting." His smile was forced. "Though they were not nearly half as strong as those of the Ancient One. Where he could control his power, I was victim of it, an out-of-control lightning rod to all around me."

"That explains the static I felt when you touched me," she said more to herself than him. "What about now?"

Noel's eyes closed briefly. "I have learned to control my energy for the most part. As for my healing qualities, after my years at PRI—they are gone, never to be regained." His throat felt tight.

"Are you sure?"

Noel merely shrugged.

Elise stifled a yawn, looking at the clock on the wall. "Already ten? I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted." She rose to her feet, grabbing both mugs. "We need to straighten out the sleeping arrangements." She refused to look at him as she made this comment, placing the cups in the sink.

She walked back to the dining room. Noel was still perched in his chair. "Why don't you take my bed for the night and I'll sleep on the couch," Elise offered.

"I will not put you out. You sleep in your bed as usual, I will take the sofa." Noel was not eager to falling asleep. In fact, he always loathed the moment when the sun would go down. All night long he would spend his nocturnal hours in somebody else's head, if not his own. It was far more exhausting than actual physical labor. And though one would expect him to awake the following morning completely drained of energy, on the contrary, he was filled to overflowing and with no way to extinguish the power coursing through him.

At a young age he had learned to pull energy from the air around him to replenish what was used up when he performed his nightly routine of subconscious traveling and sessions of healing. Soon he could draw power without so much as a thought. And every morning he awoke with that intense energy flowing through him. Exercise, meditation, and tight self-control were his only means of containing the natural electricity flowing through his body.

The Ancient One had often said he needed to find inner peace to quiet the storm of emotions inside of him. He would forever be a walking lightning bolt without that tranquility.

For a while he had searched, but had never discovered elusive inner serenity. For most of his life he had stayed secluded, knowing peace would never be found.

He looked at the woman standing before him. How he wished she could diffuse the energy raging within him. Hadn't he touched her twice now, and without any negative effects? In fact, she seemed to lean into his touch. Dare he try to touch her again? Let a bit of his power loose to see what affect it would have on her?

Immediately he banished the taunting thought. He had been down that road before. The memory of it weighed heavily on his mind. Besides, who said she would someday share his bed? Just because she had been so willing to share herself with him in her dreams gave him no reason to think that she would be as passionate in his arms in reality. There were very few people who could interact in their dreams; most were merely puppets in the subconscious world, reacting to the goings on around them in their head.

"I thought perhaps my bed would accommodate your height a little better than my small couch, but all right. I'll get you some blankets and make you up a bed on the couch." Elise roused him from his fantasies. "While I do that you can go to your car and get your things and bring them up. You can even grab a shower if you'd like."

"Very well," Noel nearly barked, causing the woman to jump, her eyes wide in surprise. Yes, a few hours of meditation would help to ebb the rampant sensations within him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elise watched as Noel stalked toward the door and grabbed the knob. Blue charges of electricity flowed from his hand, right into the silver metal handle as he jerked it open.

Then he was gone; closing the door behind him with quietness she believed he fought hard to show.

She struggled against the sinking sensation within her that threatened to liquefy her legs. What was she getting herself in to? And what about Matt?

This man, Noel Posas, the Dream Master, said he would help Matt, would show him how to deal with his surfacing powers. She had no doubt Noel was capable of teaching her son those things, but what she feared most was the very real possibility of Matt ending up just like him. A walking power transformer and a lonely, bitter man. A man who must surely crave human contact, even love, but could not—would not?—accept it. Is this what she wanted for her son? No. And she didn't want it for Noel Posas either.

She smiled with determination at the closed door. Perhaps she would have to do some teaching herself while on this strange adventure.

* * *

When Elise came back out with fresh sheets, a pillow and blanket, she saw Noel crouching on the floor by the side of the couch, sifting through the contents of his black canvas duffle bag. Without him looking up from his task, and though she made no sound at all, she knew he sensed her presence as his shoulders became a little stiffer, his back a little straighter. He quickly stood and turned, his long hair flinging over one shoulder, spilling down the left side of his denim-clad chest, his silvery-gray eyes piercing.

Elise fought the urge to drop the blankets on the floor, run to her room and lock the door behind her. Never had a man frightened her more, yet lured her to him at the same time.

"I—I brought the things to make up your bed." She stopped at the front of the hallway, gripping onto the blankets as if to buffer herself from the potency of this man.

"Leave them there." He jerked his head in the direction of the chair.

"Don't be silly," she said lightly, forcing an air of ease. Setting her frigid feet in motion once again, she walked over to the opposite end of the couch from where he stood. "I'll make your bed up for you." She removed the cushions from the back of the sofa to give him more room.

"You do not have to do that." His voice came out rough, almost perplexed. Her small act of hospitality seemed to catch him off guard.

Elise glanced up at him, frowning. "I don't mind doing this. It's no problem." Her own words came out sounding a million miles away.

His eyes darted around, suddenly looking like a caged animal. He seemed as frightened of her as much as she was of him, although she knew the thought was completely ludicrous. What did Noel Posas have to fear from her? At the moment he was in complete control of her life and her son's, and at her consent no less.

"You said I could shower." The statement came out sounding as hard as he looked.

"Yes." She tucked the sheet in around the bottom cushions. "It's down the hall, first door on the left." She continued to busy herself with the mundane task of fixing his bed, heard him rustle through his bag once more and felt him leave the

room. As big as he was, it still surprised her that he made no sound as he walked. Then again, he *was* an Indian.

Elise glanced up as she finished plumping the pillow that would soon cradle his dark head, and saw him standing at the threshold of her bedroom, motionless. He seemed deeply absorbed in the view before him but turned his head, meeting her gaze. "The bathroom is on the left," she reminded.

He gave a curt nod, turned and disappeared through the doorway, closing the door after him.

When she heard the bathroom lock click on the knob, Elise let out a pent-up breath. Would the next thirty days be as nerve-wracking as the last few hours had been? She reminded herself again that Noel could help her son understand the strange powers invading his young life.

Without dawdling a second longer, Elise turned down the lamp to a soft, unobtrusive glow and went back to her room to start in on the transcripts. Closing the door behind her, she tried very hard not to imagine how Noel Posas might look in her shower right now. His hard body naked, his cinnamon skin wet and slick as hot water cascaded over him, her lips and hands exploring every sexy inch of him. She gave a vigorous shake of her head to clear it. "I've definitely been out of circulation too long."

Sitting down at her computer, she switched on the desk lamp. Slipping her earphones over her head, she started the recorder, casting her eyes to the glow of the screen before her. Within minutes Elise was absorbed in her work, keeping her mind closed to all around her—especially her houseguest—until she finally finished the last page at a few minutes past twelve.

She stretched to work out the kinks that had settled in her neck and back, grateful her work was done and she'd be able to go to bed now. Ah, sweet oblivion for a few hours from all that had taken place in her crazy life over the past six months.

Elise felt a giggle of disbelief flutter up in her throat at all that had happened today. She wanted to scream, saying his whole story was insane, but she knew better. Hadn't Noel Posas been the only one to give her any real answers as to Matt's strange behavior? Even as frightening as his answers

were, they were far less scary than admitting her son was insane.

Now that she thought about it, she was quite eager to share the burden of her problems with somebody else. Her shoulders had grown weary long ago from the weight of them. She had never been close to Frank's side of the family. Through the last two years and especially the last six months, she had handled it all alone. It was almost too much to bear sometimes. But, for at least a month, she would have Noel's wide shoulders to lean on. She couldn't deny the feelings of relief coursing through her.

"Noel Posas," she spoke his name aloud, gaining a strange sense of power from the syllables. "The Dream Master." And she wondered if he would be slipping into her dreams this evening. The thought made her stomach dip as a thrill shot through her.

After slipping off her clothes and underwear, she changed into a nightgown and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth, wash her face and run a comb through her hair. When she finished she went to Matt's room to check on him. She opened the door, her eyes adjusting to the dim glow of his nightlight. Padding over to the bed, she laid a hand on his shoulder and smiled as he slept soundly for the first time in a long time. Did the arrival of the Dream Master have anything to do with it? Had he, with his unique powers, slipped into her son's subconscious, bidding him a night of quiet slumber?

Exiting her son's room, Elise looked toward the end of the hall and noticed the dim table lamp was still on. Evidently Mr. Posas was having trouble sleeping.

Following an unnamed urge, she turned from her own doorway and walked down the hall. She stopped when she reached the entrance, glued to the rug beneath her feet as she stood there watching the dark stranger standing at the side of her sofa removing his shirt. His back was to her and she had an excellent view of the wide expanse of the copper skin there, the light from the table lamp reflecting off every muscle as he folded his shirt and placed it over one arm of the couch.

She didn't have to make a sound to make her presence known. Even in this short amount of time she had come to know this man had a keen sixth sense. Still, he acted as if she wasn't there at the front of the hall, trying in vain to take in every inch of him from his smooth back and narrow waist to his powerful thighs still clad in denim.

"Was there something you needed?" he asked, not bothering to look up at her as he sat down on the chair to remove his socks and boots.

Elise started, not expecting him to speak. She took a few steps forward. "I was just about to ask you the same thing." She was mesmerized by the way his long hair created a black satin curtain that hid his face from her as he bent to remove the other boot. "I saw the light was still on and thought maybe you needed something." She was so close to him, she could reach out and capture a lock of that silken hair and tuck it behind his ear.

Slowly Noel lifted his head and looked at her. "My needs will have to wait."

Elise frowned. This man seemed to talk in riddles. Unfortunately, she wasn't any good at deciphering puzzles. She let out a small sigh. "Well, if you find you need anything during the night don't hesitate to call me."

*

Noel stood. Did this woman know just how taunting those words of hers were? He felt something burn in his throat. Rage? Unshed tears? A cry of injustice? Perhaps a bit of each one.

He could not answer the direct statement she posed him with, so merely whispered, "Bueno suenos, Elise. Sweet dreams." On a whim he placed a forefinger over her mouth, watching the play of emotions sweep over her delicate features. A blue spark erupted from his finger, absorbed by her. The power within remained, even after a long walk and a session of meditation. And it was quickly building again with her presence.

Her mouth opened and Noel snatched his hand back.

With a gruffly spoken curse he turned his back on her, listening as she hurried away to her bedroom and closed the door firmly behind her. Had she been afraid of him? Of his power? Most likely. Good. It would be far better if she were afraid. That way he would not start weaving any wild ideas of them becoming lovers.

He knew he was setting himself up for certain torment by bringing her along with him and her son to Xilitla.

Impatiently, Noel threw back the covers on his makeshift bed, wanting to bring the entire house down with the intense emotions running rampant inside him. Wanted to fling each and every delicate figuring on Elise's shelves to the floor, shattering them into a million broken pieces.

But he resisted, steeling the power building in him, yearning for a way to diffuse the electricity he felt his body drawing from the air against his will.

Sitting on the sofa, legs crossed, arms folded over his bare chest, Noel murmured a soft mantra that had him relaxing little by little as the moments ticked by, the fierce energy within him waning at last.

Chapter Six

Elise was floating in that perfect place of oblivion, the cloud of dark serenity, when a dream seeped into her mind like a soothing night wind. She found herself standing in the middle of a dark cavern. She was there alone until smoke swirled before her, blooming into a brilliant flash of light.

Noel Posas appeared to her. He was big and dark and powerful, and she couldn't deny the way her body ached for him. His ebony hair unbound, it flowed around his bare shoulders. His glittering gray eyes revealed an intense need that only matched hers.

He wore a snug-fitting pair of jeans that sculpted every muscle and donned nothing else except the sensual glimmer of promises in his eyes and a half-smile on his lips telling her she would be his.

With an abandon she could only express in a dream, Elise stepped into his embrace with great familiarity when he held his arms open to her. His touch felt so good, so solid, so right. She didn't resist burrowing closer, wishing to melt as one.

"Again we come together," he whispered hotly against her cheek. "The daylight hours are torturous and never-ending for me, *querida*. My passion barely tolerable until finally night pervades the land and I am able to join

you like this." Elise moaned softly at his words, swaying closer to his body.

Noel cupped her face between his palms, settling his lips over hers. The kiss was slow and sweet and the most erotic thing Elise had ever experienced. His touch seemed to reach right inside and stroke her heart with the most sensuous of caresses. His tongue wove its way in and out of her mouth, twining with her own, tasting her, drinking from her until they both trembled with a stronger need, a need to come together as one. Again.

"Let me make love to you, Elise," he murmured over her throat. "Just as I have every night for these past months."

Elise gasped at the sensation. "Yes. Oh yes..." She closed her eyes, grabbing on tightly to his shoulders as he lifted her into his arms.

A troubled look stole over Noel's finely carved features as he stared down at her. Elise reached up, running a gentle palm over his smooth cheek. "What is it?" she softly coaxed.

"Elise." Her name was a silken sigh upon his lips. "What do you believe is taking place here?"

She frowned, not wanting to talk, only wanting to share in the ecstasy she knew Noel could offer her. "What do you mean?"

"Are you simply dreaming of me, or have I entered your nocturnal mind as I told you I was so capable of?"

Her hand dropped. Her bewildered expression deepened. Why was he asking her these things when she needed his touch so badly? Needed to feel his soft lips devouring hers. His hungry body taking her to a place only he could lead her to.

"Does it matter?" she finally said, tracing his lips with her finger.

He let out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes for a moment. "I suppose it does not." He then asked, "Who am I, Elise? Is it the powerful Dream Master you so desire, or myself, Noel Posas?"

Elise ran the tip of her tongue over her lips and lowered her lashes. "Do you really have to ask that? I'm a woman, and I want you, as a man...Noel."

Noel moaned deeply. "Perhaps I am the one dreaming, my mind simply conjuring what I so crave in reality. At the moment it does not matter." He lowered his lips to hers once more, sharing in a kiss that bound them closer together—at least in this dream world where he ruled, if not in reality.

Elise blinked as she found them now both laying on a downy mattress. She lay on her back and Noel was hovering over her naked body. She reached up to take his face between her hands, scattering delicate kisses over his lips, his eyelids, his cheeks and chin. He whispered her name and lowered himself onto her. She waited in sweet expectation, but just when he was about to bury himself within the velvet core of her, something ripped them from their nocturnal Eden.

Elise woke with a start then groaned in frustration. Not only had she just been stolen away from the most arousing dream she'd ever had—and remembered—but she could also hear Matt in his room...chanting yet again.

Brushing damp hair off her forehead, she sat up and swung her legs off the bed. After recovering from her hazy, lust-weakened state, she reached for the foot of the bed and grabbed her robe that lay there, slipping it on.

Should she wake Noel? Wouldn't he want to be witness to an act that had become commonplace in her home for the past six months? The chanting that still frightened her whenever she heard the eerie litany pouring from her child's lips.

No. She would let Noel sleep. She was still too affected by the dream she had just had about that dark Indian.

It had been a dream, hadn't it?

Giving a vigorous shake of her head, she cleared it of such uneasy thoughts, crossing the short way to Matt's room. With her hand on the doorknob she stopped, unable to bring herself to open the door. As childish as it sounded, each and every time she had to enter his room when he began murmuring those strange words, she fully expected to find a scene reminiscent of *The Exorcist* awaiting her.

She didn't know how long she stood there with her hand clenched tightly around the warm knob when she felt Noel come up behind her. He placed a hand on her shoulder and she wanted so badly to sag against him and let him absorb all of her troubles. Wanted to lay her head against his hard chest, have him wrap his arms around her and bury herself in his strength. To at last rest from her problems and not have to think and worry and be tough as nails.

The memory of her dream just moments ago though caused her face to flush and body to go rigid. Had it been a dream? Or had Noel Posas, the Dream Master, invaded her sleeping mind, kissed her senseless, nearly made love to her, aroused a passion in her she was afraid to ponder over?

Instinctively she knew he had entered her dream. Hadn't he told her at the table earlier that all he need do is to think of a person before he fell asleep and could then enter their subconscious?

If she looked into his eyes right now she was sure she would find the answer, but it was an answer she couldn't quite handle at the moment, though it was infinitely arousing nonetheless.

"It is all right, Elise." She felt his warm breath against her ear. "Do not be afraid."

"That's easy for you to say," she replied, shoving embarrassment aside. If she had his power, his strength and size, she didn't think anything short of the devil himself would frighten her.

His touch on her shoulder became a gentle massage. "You are not alone anymore. I am here with you."

Elise felt a small surge of something race through her and could have sworn Noel had just given her a bit of his power that pumped up her courage. "Thank you," she whispered. Inhaling a fortifying breath, she turned the knob in her grip, stepping inside.

Her breath whooshed out in a tremendous gasp and she took a step backward, coming in contact with the solid wall of what she knew to be Noel's bare chest. All around Matt's head was a halo of blue light. "What is it, Noel?" she struggled to keep her voice low and not let the fear show in it. "Should I call the doctor?"

"No. He is not in any harm, not in any pain." He maneuvered himself to her side, his palm still resting on her shoulder.

They stopped by the side of the bed. "What it is?" Elise asked, taking note of the way Matt slept peacefully, yet his lips moved in a steady rhythm and the blue light radiated from him.

"This is just another piece of evidence in my favor." When she looked up at him he gave her a small smile. "I told you at the dinner table I would have to teach your son to harness his powers, hone them, and when they are spent, to draw fresh energy to replenish the lost supply. Soon he will be able to restore any lost energy without thinking of it. Anything that causes his internal powers to dissipate, he will subconsciously reach into the air and bring forth all the power he needs to replace what was used. He will also have to learn to control that energy. That is something I struggle with every day of my life," he whispered.

"So you're telling me that the light is—" she swallowed hard—"is energy?"

Noel merely nodded, not looking at her, keeping his eyes on Matt. Elise wanted to go back to before this all started. She wanted her son back. She wanted him to be a normal boy again playing kickball and watching cartoons, not a chosen one, not a healer. She fought back the tears of fury. "Wha—what's he saying?"

"It is a sacred incantation the Ancient One often used in his healing ceremonies. It is in a language so old, even though I grew up in Xilitla, I do not know some of the words. I *do* know it is meant to chase away the bad spirits, to call in the good. That is indeed energy radiating around his head, just as it courses throughout me."

Elise felt as if she had been plopped down in the middle of a supernatural thriller novel and not standing in her own son's bedroom.

"His powers are becoming stronger." Noel sounded pleased, eager.

Elise turned and gazed up at him. "Noel," she said softly. "Can't we just make this go away? Can't I just ignore it?" She couldn't hide the small sob that came from her throat.

Noel gave a fierce scowl, as if she had just spit in his face. "Have you been able to ignore it these past months? Have you not noticed his powers are becoming stronger?" He placed his hand on her shoulder again. "You are not alone anymore. It may sound frightening. It may seem like a bad dream from which you hope you will awake, but it is not. This is reality. This is your son." He nodded at Matt who was again sleeping soundly. "This is his destiny. He is a chosen one."

Chapter Six

Without thought, Noel grabbed hold of Elise's wrist, nearly dragging her from her son's room, closing the door behind them. He was becoming worried. Could sense she wanted to back out on her promise. Noel did not know what caused his inner fear most, the thought of returning to Xilitla without a healer, or returning without Elise Colby.

Once they were in the living room he let her go. She massaged her wrist and said, "I don't believe in destiny. You make your own life, your own choices, good or bad. People have choices, even chosen ones."

"Yes, normal people have choices. They can be doctors, lawyers, and carpenters. But when you are a chosen one your path has been selected for you." He raked his hands through his hair then shoved them into his pockets. He could feel the energy building. He had to remain calm. "I know it is difficult to understand, all I ask is that you give me a chance to prove to you what your son is capable of. Can you deny an entire village the right to a healer? Can you deny your son's true calling in life?"

"Can you deny a boy the right to a childhood?" Her eyes and voice never wavered.

"We all have to grow up some time." As he had to at the age of ten, perhaps earlier if he thought about it. But he did not think about it.

"Yes, but most of us are given the opportunity to grow up in our own time, not to be forced into taking on the title of a demigod!" Her voice became quiet and pleading with her next words, "You were stripped of your childhood, shouldn't you understand how important it is to not let it happen to another?"

Noel took his hands from his pockets and sat down on the sofa, head bent. "You think I do not understand, but I do. I am not like my parents who traveled the world, following my father's dreams, leaving their child alone in the village as if he was a small adult, able to care for himself. As if *I* was not human and did not crave the contact of others, as if I was not a child who yearned to go fishing and climb trees and cry at night in someone's arms when demons entered my sleeping mind. I was simply cast away and sold to strangers as if I was nothing more than an item dropped off at a pawn shop."

He looked up at her and felt liquid in his eyes; he dared not name them as tears. "I do not want these things for your son, but his powers cannot be denied. I will help him to become the strongest he can, but I will also allow him to be a child. Only when he is healing another will he need to shift from his role as a child and be a chosen one. Only then. And he will not be alone. He will have you...and me." And he himself would be alone no more. It was an idea that caused his heart to beat a little faster.

Elise seemed to relax at this knowledge, giving Noel encouragement. He continued, "Why do you feel your life in Xilitla will be so bad? Yes, it is different from the city life you are accustomed to, but it is beautiful and fulfilling in its own right. You have nothing here, Elise. Nothing except worries and solitude. *Es verdad*?"

She closed her eyes briefly and nodded.

"You will soon discover life in Xilitla will settle in your soul."

"Perhaps." She looked deep in thought before saying, "What about contact with the townspeople?" She moved to sit beside him on the couch.

"From a distance. As I told you before, they are simple people who perpetuate ancient beliefs. I am held in a high place in their society. I am not like everyone else. But better than any words, you will see when we arrive there." He did not want to talk about this anymore. It brought upon him those feelings of cold solitude again. Since arriving at Elise Colby's home this evening, he had never felt as whole as in her company.

"Tell me about your parents."

He lifted his shoulders in a slow shrug. "There is not much to tell as they were in my life very little. My father came to Xilitla from Spain two years before I was born. He came from a very wealthy family and loved to travel. When he found the secluded village in the jungle, he deemed it his fantasyland. He had wild dreams to create a haven for himself there. That at the age of forty he needed to put down roots. Xilitla seemed to be his idea of that perfect place. He met my mother there and they settled into a quiet life while my father worked on his sculptures. My mother was tired of living life in the jungle, especially after hearing all of my father's stories of his travels.

"The following year I was born and my mother fell into a well of depression. My father was aching to travel again and thought it would be an excellent cure for my mother's blue moods. For a few years they took me along with them, coming back to Xilitla for a few weeks or months every year. When my powers became stronger and my parents could no longer cope with them, the Ancient One took me in. He felt I would be a beneficial addition to his healing powers. My parents thought of him as a surrogate grandfather. They left when I was eight and that is the last I saw of them until I was fifteen. By then my father's money had run out and figured that with my unique powers..." he let the rest of his statement hang in the air.

Noel leaned against the back of the sofa, feeling spent. "Until five years ago, the Ancient One was the only other person I conversed with on a daily basis. It was different than what you and I are sharing now though. I was his pupil. Though he was wise and amiable, our relationship was somewhat distant also."

* * *

Elise felt sympathy welling inside her, but felt Noel would balk at any pity directed at him. Deep inside she was certain he would not let Matt experience the same pain of growing up too quickly. Somehow, she knew this. Now all he had to do was prove to her that Matt was indeed this healer he had been searching for. True, Matt had been displaying some pretty strange acts, but they were a far cry from actually healing another human being.

She was giving this man one month. "One month," she whispered, her gaze ensnared by his.

"One month can be long as a lifetime or faster than the blink of an eye." His voice was softer than the well-washed blanket they sat on. His head lowered just a fraction.

Elise's heart thudded in her chest. "Which will it be for you, Noel?"

He moved a little closer. "I have yet to see." He then touched his lips to hers in the lightest of kisses

When Elise opened her lips to invite him closer, he pulled back. She opened her eyes and he smiled grimly. "Good night, Elise." He stood, took her hand, and brought her to her feet also.

As if snapped out of a hypnotic trance, Elise blinked rapidly. "Oh, yes." She placed a trembling hand over her mouth. Her lips still tingled from the slight contact. "Good night."

She walked past him and hesitated only a second in the hall as he murmured, "Sweet dreams."

Memories of the dream she had before being woken by Matt's chanting had her hurrying to her room and softly closing the door behind her. Once on the other side she leaned against the solid wood, her heart beating in her ears.

Noel was right. All she had here in Eureka was worries and solitude. Although most people would think traveling to a Mexican jungle in search of answers to their child's odd behavior may seem drastic or even downright insane, Elise had to admit that nothing in her life before had felt so right.

Pushing away from the door she walked over to her bed, slipped off the robe, and slipped between the cool sheets. The feel of Noel's soft lips against hers filled her mind as she drifted off into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After Elise laid her open suitcase on the bed, she started rifling through her closets and drawers, looking for some appropriate clothing among her paltry offerings to bring with her.

What did one wear in the jungle?

Her mind once again conjured up Noel Posas in a loincloth, but she discarded the persistent image and decided to rely upon a simple wardrobe for herself of jeans, shorts and blouses. Certainly those clothes would get her by in most any situation.

She wanted to ask Noel what the climate was in Xilitla, but since she awoke to find her sofa empty—sheet, blanket and pillow neatly stacked to one side and a note on the table saying he would be back around nine—she hadn't had the chance to ask him.

Breakfast had been spent with just herself and Matt. She was grateful to see the dark circles beneath her son's eyes had vanished somewhat and he seemed to be more energetic today than she had seen him in a very long time. He was especially happy after she told him they would be spending summer vacation with Noel.

The memory of what they had encountered in Matt's bedroom last night, the blue halo around his blond head,

made her stop the task of folding a turquoise gauze blouse as she inhaled a shaky breath. Noel had seemed almost overjoyed by the display—if that's what one could call the look in his eyes since he usually showed little emotion.

Placidness was something she had come to expect from the dark Indian; even in the few hours she had known him. It was something that bothered her to no end. He always seemed in complete control of his feelings and emotions, never letting anything show through that silent, almost dour exterior of his. Though on a few occasions she had sensed the roiling tension, even anger and desire, rippling below the seemingly calm surface, but he was certain to contain it.

Elise snorted softly as she placed her brush and only bottle of perfume, *Eternity*, into the gray, soft-sided case. Matt had taken the arrival of Noel Posas right in stride, as if he had been waiting for the Indian to show up on their doorstep. Knowing he would.

The thought caused her blood to run cold and sluggish through her veins for a moment. This had started out as a strange and frightening thing six months ago, and it was continuing to get worse since the arrival of one Indian, and yet in some ways it felt so much better.

"Muy sensual. I think you should take it." A deep voice whispered down her spine. She looked up to find Noel standing in her doorway. Just as tall and dark and handsome as she remembered from the previous night, though now he donned a flannel shirt in a plum color over his previously bare chest. Never had a man intrigued her so thoroughly yet intimidated her so badly, with his words, his powers, his intentions, his mere presence.

Suddenly Elise felt like a bird trapped, knowing there was no escape since his wide shoulders blocked either side of the doorway. But she quickly calmed the irrational feelings of fright he brought to her. He was stiff, tense, subdued, even morose, and still he drew her to him without reason like a hypnotist.

She looked down at the item in her hand he just suggested she take. It was a white lace and satin nightgown. She dropped the fragile confection from her hands and felt

her entire body catch fire. What had she been thinking when she'd reached for that particular item?

Refusing to meet his gaze, she said in a light tone that masked the riptide swirling in her stomach, "I was thinking of something more along the lines of long-sleeved and flannel. It might get pretty cold at night."

"There are ways to stay warm." Elise would have taken that as a sexual innuendo, but the flatness of his voice matched the cool look in his eyes when she dared to meet his gaze.

She went back to her dresser, retrieving a flower sprigged granny gown and, with clumsy hands, placed it in her case—along with the much shorter lace and satin gown. Noel made a little grunt that she didn't know whether to take as approval or displeasure. "I hope jeans and casual blouses will be all right for the environment there."

"It will be." He continued to linger in the doorway as she packed the rest of her things. Before she had her case zipped closed Elise felt like screaming. Noel Posas made her nervous as hell.

"Where's the boy?"

"His name is Matthew," she informed somewhat tightly, more angry at herself for letting him get to her this way than for his refusal to call Matthew by his given name.

The Dream Master and the Chosen One, they sounded like names from a *Kung Fu* television script. "He's downstairs taking Spike to a neighbor's," Elise finally said. "I already helped him pack earlier."

"Did you talk to him?"

"About what?" She fiddled needlessly with the zipper on her case. It gave her something to do other than meet those eyes that always caught her off guard. They either mirrored her every reaction to him, clouded over, disguising any internal emotion on his part, or became as deep and dark as an endless abyss. It was most unsettling.

"The reason we are going to Xilitla." He now stood only a few feet from her on the other side of the bed. Again she felt the need to flee the room—or fall into his arms.

She did neither.

"Oh sure, I'm just going to say, Hey, Matt, you're the reincarnate of an ancient medicine man. Your destiny is to live in a jungle village and heal the primitive townspeople there until your dying day'." She looked around the room making sure she had packed everything she needed. "I have a feeling it would scare him. He probably wouldn't even believe it. I don't want to believe it!" Her eyes were wide on the man before her. All she wanted was some answers over this next month. She highly doubted she'd make Xilitla her home, though didn't tell Noel this.

"Elise." Noel's tone was soft and low. "You have to accept your son's chosen path. I am certain if you gave the boy half a chance, he would understand his destiny."

"He's just a child!" Elise bunched her hands into fists at her sides, wanting to fight against Noel and everything he represented for her and her son's future. Her appointed with Dr. Loggins in less than a week had her thinking twice about pummeling the only person she'd met over the past half year who seemed to have real answers.

"Sometimes you will find that children are far more accepting than adults." His voice was smooth and soothing. He smiled slightly. "I am sure Matthew will find Xilitla a wondrous place, as will you. It may be primitive by most standards, but you will see that it is very comfortable."

Elise felt all fight seep out of her. "Perhaps you're right," she conceded, closing her eyes in surrender. "But I'd still like to take things one step at a time."

"Very well," he said harshly, turning from her and walked over to the doorway once again. "But once in Xilitla I will begin showing him how to use his powers, how to build them." He was silent for a heartbeat. "If you would like, I could talk with him," he gently offered. "Who better than I, another chosen one, to explain the situation to him?"

Elise felt like scum passing off her parental duty onto this man, but she had no idea how to explain all of this to Matt. Perhaps it would be better for Noel to tell him.

"Why don't we wait and see how things go first? I still have to be convinced Matt truly possesses these healing powers, at least on a bigger scale than goldfish and flowers. I just told him we were going on a trip for summer vacation with you to Mexico."

Elise smiled when she recalled how excited Matt had become when she told him of the trip. His eyes had grown wide with eagerness, thinking what a grand adventure awaited them. If nothing else, she supposed she could look upon this as a free vacation. But in a secluded jungle?

Oh well, if she would get the concrete answers she was looking for in regards to Matt's recent behavior, and if Matt continued to act as carefree as he had since awaking this morning, it was worth whatever she had to endure—even sexy and intimidating Noel Posas.

"Very well, we will do things your way for now. I have already made plane reservations. We leave at eleven."

"Eleven?" She glanced at the alarm clock on her night table. "That only gives us two hours to finish getting ready and get to the airport, and I still have work to drop off at my employer's." Elise became more and more anxious as the time approached. She eased her mind by telling herself she needed Noel, which was the absolute truth. Needed him as she had never needed anyone before. Her life, her son's life, perhaps Noel's life, depended on her decision to travel to Xilitla.

"It should be enough time. I will check on the boy. On our way to the airport we will go to your employer's. I am still in possession of the rental car." His words were more command than question, and with that he was gone. Elise slumped down onto the bed, wondering what in heaven's name she was getting herself into?

How could so many emotions run through one person? Worry, fear, intrigue, desire, excitement, relief...all were there in her cluttered mind and all bore a striking resemblance to Noel Posas.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For five hours they had bounced along in a Jeep while an acquaintance of Noel's who was eager to make a few extra pesos sat in the driver's seat. Over the dusty Mexican plain they had driven, up and up into a green world that peaked suddenly into tree-covered jagged ranges. Though weary, Elise had taken it all in while Noel played tour guide. He pointed out the coffee plantations, wandering bougainvillea, banana trees, crashing streams, until they finally arrived at the top of the world it seemed. It was after seven in the evening as they found themselves halfway up the steep mountain, now tramping on foot to reach the hidden hilltop town of Xilitla.

The plane ride over had been uneventful and not as terrifying as Elise had thought it would be. Matt had enjoyed himself as he sat next to Noel along the way, chatting quietly of things she was not included to hear as she sat alone, staring out the window at the tops of white, cotton clouds.

Occasionally she'd glanced over at them, intrigued by the way her blond-headed son got along so casually with the dark-headed Dream Master. After the episode in her bedroom where she had spoken aloud her uncertainties, Noel Posas had seemed to immediately shut her out, avoiding eye contact and talking stiffly when she pointed him with questions.

But in Matt's company Noel's icy exterior melted. She had even caught the slightest hint of a smile playing over his lips a time or two. Inevitably his gaze would meet hers and she would feel every ounce of oxygen being sucked from her lungs as his eyes grew dark and the smile he had worn flattened into a grim line.

For the rest of the trip she had refused to look at the two of them again. Now, after endless hours of traveling, Elise found she and her son dutifully following the towering man in front of them up the side of the mountain like a small flock of sheep.

"Are you sure there's no other way to your village?" Elise asked as her foot got tangled in a leafy vine. She stopped to pull herself free, hurrying to catch up. Even carrying their two heavy cases, Noel Posas moved with all the speed and grace of Mercury with wings on his heels.

"There is no other way. It is too steep and the trees are too thickly grown for vehicles." He then added, "It is only two miles."

Yeah, Elise said silently, two miles straight up into the clouds!

"This place is cool!" Matt declared. Picking up a small branch to use as a walking stick, he jogged a few yards to walk by Noel's side. His hair was mussed and his cheeks ruddy from the long trip and laborious march up the mountain. "It's even better than when we went camping last year, Mom."

Elise smiled, not for the first time today, at Matt's changed mood. He had talked more, smiled more, and laughed more since waking up this morning than he had in the past two years.

After Frank's death she tried to fill the role of both mother and father, but knew it couldn't be done. Matt needed a male role model in his life. And though she was reluctant to cast Noel Posas in that role, it was doing her son good just being in the presence of another man.

A man who possessed powers no one else on this earth did, she reminded herself. So did her son, it seemed. The knowledge of being in the company of two such possibly powerful human beings was both humbling and slightly intimidating.

She didn't fit into Noel's plans, she was sure. All he wanted was the Chosen One. But his village's supposed healer was not a grown man, nor an orphaned or neglected child. Instead, he was a small boy with a very caring mother. Elise felt as if she was nothing more than excess baggage in this venture. She reminded herself once again she was here of her own choosing.

Elise mused deeper over her thoughts, trying not to feel too excluded as Matt pointed to a squirrel that scampered up the trunk of a nearby tree and heard him laugh as Noel told him something she could not hear.

They walked on for a few more minutes in silence when suddenly, springing before them huge and almost dreamlike, was a concrete statue of a giant pair of hands; their fingers, as big around as Elise's legs, crooked to the heaven's above, palms cupped as if trying to capture the last rays of the sun.

Elise stopped in her tracks, thinking she must surely be seeing things. What would a pair of cement hands be doing in the middle of the Mexican jungle?

"How do you like it?" Noel was at her side, while Matt ran up ahead, attempting to climb onto the humongous statues.

"Is it some relic from the ancient Indians?" She had heard of the famous Olmec head, perhaps these were the Xilitlan hands.

"No." She looked up at him and his lips twisted into a smile that seemed somewhat crooked and almost bittersweet. "This is a part of the legacy my father left behind. He was a dreamer with many bizarre ideas. I told you he fell in love with Xilitla at first sight. With more money than he knew what to do with, he tried his hand at creating in life the things he saw in his mind, much like Salvador Dali." They walked over to the huge monolith towering at least fifteen-feet high. Noel gave Matt a boost so he could sit on one palm.

"I might have expected to see pyramids like the Mayans left behind, but giant hands?" Elise ran her palm over the smooth stone. Noel had mentioned his father was into sculpting, but she had imagined the hobby on a much smaller scale.

"This is only to be the beginning, there are many more such sculptures scattered about." Noel helped Matt down so they could resume their trek, readjusting the long strap on Elise's suitcase to a more comfortable position on his shoulder.

"Many of my father's thoughts were perplexing and jumbled. When I would enter his nocturnal mind, the subconscious thoughts there, the memories and desires were all a confusing puzzle. Bits of reality mixed in with fantasy." He kept his pace slower to accommodate Elise's smaller strides as they wove in and out and around the thickset trees.

"Since then I have learned to decipher the dream symbols and have come to understand that my father craved acceptance and acknowledgment. Though the people of Xilitla accepted him into their lives from the start since that is the kind of people they are, he longed to leave something behind on this earth that spoke of his presence here. Building this and the other statues, as well as the home he started and I later finished, were his signature to the world. They are all strange, yet beautiful in their own ways."

"I can imagine how lonely it was for you when they left," she found herself saying, wanting to probe deeper as they plodded over a land carpeted thickly with vines, leaves and moss, with bubbling streams lacing almost every gully. Every scent was new to her, and one, the heady scent of Noel's body, introduced to her only since yesterday, all mingled, overwhelming her.

"I would be lying if I denied it. After dropping me off at the laboratory then vanishing from my life...Over the years though I have come to accept their leaving as just another stepping stone in my life that will lead to my final destination. The Ancient One often said everything in this life happens for a reason. Destiny is one part necessity, one part luck, and one part desire. Many times things we experience in life seem unfair, even cruel, but in their way they make us who we are." He became silent as he pushed back some low growing fern that spilled like a green, feathery cascade from the treetops, creating a pathway for Elise and Matthew.

Elise ducked under his outstretched arm, following Matt, wondering who this man really was. Was he as cool and uncaring as he made himself out to be? Or did tenderness, caring, even love, lay beneath that burnished copper skin of his? Did pain and anger and sorrow dwell in his heart? Or was he like a duck in the water, all problems rolling off his broad back? Mostly, she wondered if she would have a chance to find out.

One month.

As she was absorbed in her thoughts, she was wrenched from inner speculation when Noel let out a few words in Spanish that she instinctively knew were swear words. She looked around and saw the recipients of his outburst. Several of the villagers hovered just to the sides of the trees to their right, looking eager, yet wary.

There were about ten men and five or six women, two with small babies resting on their ample hips, each and every one of them staring intently at the two new arrivals to their jungle. Trying to get a look at their new healer, she bet.

Not a one of them were over five-and-a-half feet tall, and the characteristics they shared with Noel were the same color of cinnamon skin, though Noel's was a bit lighter, almond-shaped eyes, and midnight hair. But he had most definitely taken after his father's Spanish side with the height, body structure, sharp features and gray eyes.

Elise noted that while some of the villagers still dressed as she suspected their ancestors once did, others had embraced a more modern fashion, donning jeans, T-shirts, even running shoes. They may be secluded, but they were by no means the primitive Indians she had expected to find.

Eager to begin fitting in as quickly as possible, Elise made a move forward, her hand extended, a wide smile on her face while Matt remained behind Noel, unsure of how to react to their cautious welcoming committee. When she had taken no more than two steps forward, Noel snaked out a large hand, clasping her shoulder tightly, preventing her from making any further movement toward the small tribe.

As soon as his hand touched her shoulder, all of the villagers gasped, taking a huge step backward. A few of them bent their heads together, murmuring amongst themselves, never taking their black eyes off her.

For the moment Elise was distracted from her previous attempt to make friends with these people, acutely aware of the looks of awe the villagers pinned her with. Noel dropped his hand to his side, but Elise reached out and clasped his wrist, feeling a bit uneasy. "What are they saying?" she whispered to Noel who stood directly behind her now. Had she done something wrong?

"That I touched you," was his even reply. He then looked down at her hand upon his wrist. "That you are touching me."

She looked up at him, immediately releasing her hold. "Is that weird?" Had this man never been physically touched before? The thought sent another wave of awareness through her.

He gave a rough snort, refusing to look at the fearful villagers, keeping his cool, steely eyes on her face. "In this world...yes." He gave a sharp shrug. "They are surprised."

Before Elise had the chance to comment on his strange answer, Noel directed his attention to the villagers who had been tentatively smiling moments ago but were now standing there with wide eyes and open mouths. He then barked at them in such a way that even Elise cringed, though the harsh words were not spoken in English. One of the babies, no more than a year she suspected, started crying. In the next second the villagers turned and fled back into the woods like a flock of frightened geese.

"Well," Elise turned to him, puzzlement and ire shooting to the surface, "what was that all about? Why did you scare them away?" No wonder nobody ever talked to him or even got within ten feet of him! They were probably scared to death.

Noel merely turned and headed back in the direction he had been leading them, mumbling something to the effect of, "Bored little people with nothing better to do."

Elise and Matthew looked at each other and shrugged before following behind the dark figure ahead of them again.

After ten minutes or so of traipsing over the jungle floor, dodging trees and ducking under more curtains of fern, Noel stopped. "Here we are." He held his arms open wide to the land that spread before him, his eyes glittering with a look that was filled with obvious pride.

"Wow," Matt gasped in awe.

As Elise took in the sight before her, she felt as if she had been flung into another millennia, fully expecting a triceratops or perhaps a brontosaurus to step from behind a lush, fern-covered tree. A waterfall delicately spilled over the edge of a small green cliff to her right, pooling into a

crystal-clear lagoon below. The call of jungle birds mingled with the sound of the streaming fall. And all around, sticking up through the mossy, vine-covered carpet at their feet, were more concrete statues. Leaves, big enough to walk on, huge stone flowers and a few giant mushrooms with vines curling up and around the pale gray cement structures like thin, leafy snakes were all around.

Elise felt like Alice in Wonderland when the girl had shrunk and viewed the world anew, as a small mouse might. Ferns were everywhere, as were thick trees, all intertwining with the dreamlike figures, making it impossible to tell where the jungle left off and the fantasy began.

"Wow," Matt whispered again, all three of them standing still as if in reverence to the strange sight.

"It's amazing," Elise finally said, taking in the cement garden. "Your father made all of these?"

"Yes." The single word was fierce. "This was what he left behind. This is his handprint upon the world."

"Where's the village?" Elise looked around, expecting to see huts sprinkled around somewhere, but her eyes only encountered the ancient jungle touched by the modern, immortal statues.

"It is in a hidden chasm over there, a mile or so away." He pointed to an area off to his left. "There is a road, a pathway that leads down there."

"Are we going there now?" She was eager, yet slightly wary to meet up with these people again after Noel's recent outburst that sent the small welcoming party scurrying away. How would they react to them, obvious outsiders, showing up in their village? .

"No. You and the boy will be staying with me." Noel looked on with something akin to amusement in his eyes as he watched Matt climbing around on one of the giant sculptures. Elise felt a tug in her heart at the very real knowledge that Noel had probably never had such frivolities in his life.

Then his statement struck her. They would be staying with *him*?

"But, I thought we would be staying in the village?" She couldn't bear the thought of living under the same roof, or whatever it was they used for houses in the jungle, with dangerously luring Noel Posas.

"Your son is a chosen one. He cannot live with the villagers. It is our way," he firmly added, leaving no room to argue. "Besides, I will have to guide the boy daily."

Elise didn't try to broach the subject, knowing it would get her nowhere. "Okay." She sighed in surrender and fatigue. She was far too tired to put up a verbal struggle. "Is your place far from here?" Her feet throbbed and her stomach felt well-bottom empty. She wanted a shower, a hot meal and a good night's sleep, or at least two out of the three. She doubted if she'd sleep much at all while living with this unsettling man.

"My home is there." He turned and pointed to a grove of trees overgrown with frothy, draping fern.

He lived in the trees? "Where?" She squinted, trying to find some sort of shelter amongst the rich vegetation there.

"Yeah," Matt piped right in, crowding in between her and Noel. "I don't see a house." He looked upward, inspecting each and every treetop. "I don't even see a tree house like the Swiss Family Robinson lived in."

"That is because I do not live in a house." He trudged ahead toward the crowd of trees and fern.

"Where do you live then?" Elise felt the dread setting in once again.

"Yeah, Dream Master, where do you live?" Matt plodded along side Noel.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Matt," Elise felt her patience waning, "call him Mr. Posas, or even Noel, but not Dream Master. It makes him sound like something out of a Science Fiction movie." She wanted to tell her son that Noel Posas was a man like any other, but she knew she'd be lying. Noel was like no other human being she'd ever met, though she hated him to be called by the godlike title of Dream Master.

"But he *is* the Dream Master, Mom," Matt replied, not missing a step as he hopped over a small boulder. "I had dreams about him for a long time, and now here he is. And here we are in the jungle where he lives. It's so cool!"

Elise's smile was a contradiction of amusement at his obvious exuberance and chagrin at the crazy situation she found them in. They could be at home right now, watching a movie on TV, eating popcorn, laughing...She let the thought

The Chosen One

trail off in her mind because she knew if they were still at home nothing would be further from the truth. When was the last time she and Matt had spent any leisure time together? Between her always having a load of work to tend to and Matt's subdued behavior before Noel Posas had shown up, their lives had been one long treadmill.

Noel told her that everything in life happens for a reason. That life's lessons made us who we are. She wondered how her son would change in these next thirty days. Wondered what impact Noel Posas and the jungle would have on them both. And what lessons she would learn, what secrets—Noel's, Matt's, her own—she would uncover in that amount of time.

"Here." Noel stopped. "Here is where I live." "Whoa," Matt said in awe. "Just like Batman."

Elise stood before the huge wooden doors that seemed to have grown into the very rock that surrounded them, not believing what she saw. "You live in a...a cave?"

CHAPTER NINE

"Yes," was his only answer as he set down one of the suitcases he had hauled up the side of this mountain as if they weighed nothing more than a handful of leaves. He pulled on one of the thick iron handles opening one door outward.

Darkness seeped out, oozing over, consuming them within the inky blackness. Elise shivered. She and her son would be staying in a *cave*? She had expected the facilities to be primitive...but this?

She glanced around, trying to take in everything at once. The porch was a smooth slab of gray marble. On the porch sat an ornately designed concrete bench. On the bench was a large basket filled with vegetables and other items. A welcome back gift for the Dream Master from the villagers?

Noel didn't give the generously-filled basket a second glance. "Do you want me to bring this in for you since you're carrying our bags?"

He cast a bored look at the bounty and sighed. "Yes. Go ahead."

Elise was perplexed by his reaction to the gifts. She'd be overjoyed to find such a gesture awaiting her. "That was very thoughtful of whoever it was to leave you these things."

"I suppose." His voice was flat. "After so many years though, I'm afraid my gratitude has worn off."

"You get this all of the time?" She frowned, hefting up the heavy basket that looked as if it had taken many hours of painstaking hand-weaving to create.

"Day and night." Once again he picked up the heavy case. He was about to enter the black cavern when he stopped, half turned toward her and smiled—only slightly. "It makes shopping quite easy, though. All I need to do is open my front door."

"Wow! It's like Christmas every day," Matt said, trying to get a peek into the basket in his mother's arms.

Elise laughed softly, feeling lightheaded. Seeing another emotion aside from anger and bitterness lighting up his eyes caused her heart to beat a little faster and her insides to do a flip-flop. Seeing her son so normal for a change made her want to cry out with joy.

"Yes, I guess it is a bit like Christmas," Noel said. "In fact, I've accumulated so many gifts over the years that on my trips down below I take the majority of the offerings—blankets, toys and the like—to the orphanage."

"How kind of you," Elise said in a hushed voice, grasping at the opportunity to see a small glimpse of the real man beneath the sober persona.

Noel gave a fierce scowl. "Kind? It is simply the right thing to do. What use would I have of so many items? I am only one man." He gave a lazy shrug. "There are many others who could use them instead of me merely packing them away somewhere."

Just when Elise was about to assure him that his actions were most indeed kind, Matt said, "You didn't give away *all* of the toys, did you?" There was a hopeful tone to his voice.

Noel chuckled.

Elise's knees buckled at the sound.

"Have no fear, *hijo*. I've kept a few of the best ones for just this occasion."

Elise's heart tripped when she saw Matt's face light up and how easy the word *son* had poured from Noel's lips. His entire body tensed. Silently he stalked into the house, seeming to dissolve into the shadowy interior of this dark cavern that was to be their home for the next month.

Her feelings of happiness at both her son's and Noel's change in demeanor were short lived as she viewed the inky entrance of the Dream Master's home. A chill of apprehension raced down her spine and her limbs felt frigid, positive they would break if she took the smallest step forward.

Matt went trotting in after Noel without a second's hesitation and Elise crushed the urge in her to grab him and hold him back.

She imagined what the inside must look like: animal skins placed on the stone floor as the only furniture, Noel cooking and warming himself over an open fire placed in the middle of his cave-home. It was probably cold and dank, smelling of moist, age-old stone.

Was she insane? How had she let this man convince her into bringing them to this jungle hideaway all for the sake of superstition and her own worry over Matt's recent displays? Dr. Loggins words haunted her. It would be to his benefit and your own if we keep him for observation and drug therapy. Elise shrank at the memory. No, living with Noel Posas was far less frightening.

"Come on in, Mom," Matt called, his voice echoing from within.

She took a deep breath, knowing she would never know what awaited her unless she went inside. Crossing his threshold felt like a portal to another world. As if by an invisible hand, the door shut behind her with a heavy thud. She felt trapped within the thick black walls. There were no windows and the blackness around her seemed to crawl into her soul. When Noel's voice came from behind her, she jumped in fright.

"I sent the boy to what will now be his room." His words were low and blended in with the darkness around them.

"His room?" Elise echoed as Noel's words hit her. "How could you let him go off in the dark by himself? He's afraid of the dark, and what if he gets lost?" Elise turned, angry for the fact that she couldn't see him, even more upset that she wasn't in control of the situation.

He gave a low snort, telling her without words how foolish and overprotective she was being. "I gave him a lamp to carry, and there's no need to fear his getting lost."

Noel was so close to her she could feel his body heat; smell his scent. The same scent filling the jungle outside. A mixture of moist earth, velvet moss, leafy fern, woodsy bark, and fragrant leaves...mingled with his one-of-a-kind scent.

If her hands weren't otherwise occupied with the basket, she'd gratefully reach out to find him in this darkness. Maybe it hadn't been Matt who was afraid of the dark all these months, she uncomfortably mused, as the blackness seemed to press down on her. Perhaps it had truly been herself. At this moment the thought was easy to believe.

She wanted to ask him to turn on a light, but wondered if his home had electricity. "Can you turn on a lamp, a lantern, or at least open the door to let some light in?"

"Are you afraid of the dark, Elise?" Noel's voice was a raspy caress, a taunting murmur. He reached out a finger, just a single digit, and touched her cheek.

"That's silly." She acted as if the very thought was ridiculous. "Why would a grown woman be afraid of the dark?"

"Then why are you trembling? Perhaps you're afraid of... me?" The words were spoken just as softly as before, yet Elise detected bitterness beneath them, perhaps a hint of sadness.

She thought about denying his words, but she couldn't. The darkness erased any courage she possessed. "You *are* intimidating," she managed to say, wondering if he was doing this on purpose, just so she wouldn't forget who was in power here. And that now she was on his turf.

A noise, like that of a match being scraped against denim, came from directly in front of her. A flame bloomed from the wooden matchstick Noel held between his thumb and forefinger. The small yellow glow cast harsh shadows over his face, giving him a sinister look that only added to her unease. He smiled, though the expression held no amusement. With his left hand he held up a lantern, touched the flaming match to the wick and a bright glow sprung forth, lighting the area where they stood.

"Follow me." Noel leaned forward to whisper in her ear, his hot breath teasing her, making her quiver. "I will show you your room." His hand lowered to take hers. Instantly she felt a zing of electricity shoot through her veins like a bullet

purged from the barrel of a gun. Elise was grateful for the solid feel of her hand in his.

Guiding her down the stone corridor, she heard the distant tinkling sound of water spilling over rock.

A moment later Noel stopped, pulling her along side of him, releasing her hand. "This...is my home." He held the lantern up, giving her a glimpse of the cavernous room stretching before her. Elise let out a little gasp of surprise. Never could she have imagined a medieval castle to look like this. The ceiling was at least twenty feet high and a staircase leading up into another area was off to her left.

The living room lay sprawled before her; more elegant than anything she was used to. The floor was tiled in an irregular pattern of earth tones. A large sofa and two love seats, all in a tan tweed material with plump throw pillows along the backs of each one, rested in the middle of the room. A huge fireplace, carved out of the stone wall itself, sat nestled just a few feet away. Was it the only light offered aside from the small kerosene lamp he carried?

A few potted trees gave the room an earthy appeal, as if a bit of the jungle outside had crept inside. But the real attention-getter was a waterfall directly behind the large sofa. Water, made inky by the absence of light, seemed to come from nowhere and bleed down the irregular-shaped stone.

"Do you find it suitable?"

"I...Yes." Her voice came out exactly as she felt: awed. And here she had imagined animal skins as his only furnishings. "It's beautiful."

He made a slight grunt of approval. "My father started this home a few years before he left. When I returned I picked up where he left off." He took a few steps forward, leading her into the room. "There is a skylight there." He pointed at a six-foot square cut into the stone over the sitting area. A generous sprinkling of stars shone down at them. "There are more to let in the daylight."

"Amazing," she whispered.

"I never thought of it as so," he paused, looked down at her then directed his gaze back to their surroundings. "Yes, I guess it is if I saw it through your eyes. For me, it is merely the place where I spend my days and nights."

She felt the solitude radiating off of him, heard it in his words. That was Noel Posas' life. Alone.

"The kitchen is over there." He pointed to his right. "There are the bedrooms." He directed her attention to the stairs. "The boy's and mine."

"Only two bedrooms?" Perhaps he intended her and Matt to share a room.

"You will sleep in my room." He seemed to read her mind, and his words left no room for argument. "I will sleep on the sofa."

Elise breathed a little sigh of relief. That cleared up one question that had been haunting her all the way over here. She and Noel Posas would *not* be sharing sleeping quarters. The very thought was ludicrous, and her slight feeling of disappointed was even more so. "Where's Matt?"

"I'll take you to him."

Elise followed Noel to the darkened stairway. They walked up twenty or so steps before he stopped, turning to a door on his right, ignoring the steps that led further up.

He opened the door, light bursting forth. Elise drank it in with her eyes, devouring it through her pores, never more happy to see her son than she was now. He was busy putting his clothing in a small dresser beside the single bed as if he had always lived here and had finally returned after a long vacation.

He looked up at her and Noel. "Isn't this place neat, Mom?" He beamed.

Elise wished his exuberance would rub off on her. "Well, it certainly is different than what we're used to." She brushed past Noel, avoiding any bodily contact, and went to help Matt, taking the opportunity to do something with what she was familiar: putting her son's clothes away.

"And look at that." He pointed to the ceiling. "There's a window up there. I bet if any spaceships fly by I'll be sure to see 'em."

Elise couldn't help laughing. This was the Matt she had known and loved. Not the silent little boy who had avoided any company but his own for so long. "I guess you will at that. If you do spot one, be sure to wake me up. Seeing a UFO is something I wouldn't want to miss."

"You bet!" He stuffed his shirts in the top drawer, heedless of the wrinkles that would be sure to plague them when taken out again. "I'll tell Noel, too." He grinned up at the dark man standing stiffly in the doorway, looking very much the outsider in his own home. Elise felt that something stir inside of her again. When he had walked into her home only yesterday, he had taken over the place with his sheer presence. Now, back in his own home, he seemed so out of place.

"After you two are settled in, come to the kitchen. I will prepare something for dinner. I phoned Juan earlier today and told him to have Maria straighten up and leave some fresh food." He turned, saying over his shoulder, "Your room is up the stairs. I will put your suitcase on the bed." With a lingering look at both she and Matt that Elise could only interpret as longing, he left.

Elise recognized the name Juan as the middle-aged man who drove them up here most of the way in his battered red Jeep, but before she dwelled too much on who this Maria woman was and what she might mean in Noel's life, she turned her attention back to Matt.

"What will you do without video games to keep you company? And I didn't see a McDonald's on the trip up here." Elise attempted to put all thoughts of dark and mysterious Noel out of her mind, determined to focus only on Matt and his needs as she had done for the past nine years.

"Heck, Mom," Matt gave her an incredulous look. "Why would I miss video games? Or even McDonald's? Did you see all the neat stuff out in the jungle? All of those trees to climb, those cool statues?" He gave a shrug as he stuffed his last pair of socks in the bottom drawer and shoved it closed. "Noel said he'd show me all kinds of stuff. That we'd do all kinds of things together. Fishing, playing in the waterfall outside, hiking. All the stuff Dad said he'd do with me..." His voice trailed off and he slumped against the dresser, eyes downcast.

Elise walked over to him, giving him a gentle hug. "All of the things your dad said he'd do with you but never had the time to," she finished for him with tears burning her eyes.

"Do you think Noel will be like Dad?" His eyes met hers, a look of too many broken promises hovering in their green

depths. It was the same look she had seen in Noel Posas' eyes.

"In what way?" Elise sat on the bed and patted the space next to her. Matt took up the spot.

"I don't know." He shrugged again, picking at a fraying hole in the knee of his jeans. "I never wanted to tell you before 'cause I thought you'd tell Dr. Loggins. You know how he is." Matt rolled his eyes. "He thinks everything I say is weird. Anyway, every time I dreamed about the Dream Master—Noel—he told me he'd take care of me and you, that we'd do things together just like we always wanted to do with Dad. When we were on the plane I asked him if it was true or if I was just dreaming."

Matt looked up at her with such emotion on his small face Elise nearly wept for all the years lost to him while Frank spent his time at the office, with his friends at the bars, away from his family. "What did he tell you?" She brushed back the lock of his hair falling across his forehead.

"That it was true." He gave a wobbly little smile. "He said he didn't want you to have to work two jobs. And he said the city isn't a good place for a kid like me to grow up."

"Did he now?" Elise slid an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close.

Matt nodded. "He said I need fresh air and places to run and swim. Places to sit and be quiet and hear nothing but the sound of the birds in the trees. I'd rather run and swim than sit and be quiet." He wrinkled his nose and Elise laughed again, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

"I think he's right. We all need fresh air and places to run and swim. We even need places to sit and be quiet." She hoped Noel wasn't building her son up too much. Especially when she had no idea if they'd be here longer than the month she promised him.

"Why don't you finish up in here while I put my things away and we'll meet Noel in the kitchen for dinner?" She stood up and walked to the door. "Call me if you need anything, all right?"

"Sure." He went back to exploring the small room, taking a box from under the bed that was full of an assortment of handmade toys. A wooden top, a small marionette of a brightly painted bird, a checker set and other items. Elise realized all of these were handmade and thought they had probably been gifts from the villagers. The things Noel had told Matt he'd saved.

She climbed the steps leading to the other bedroom, the thought running through her mind that a self-proclaimed recluse had a box of toys under a bed. Indeed, Noel Posas had been determined to bring her and Matt back with him, as the box of toys attested.

As she stopped in front of the bedroom that normally held Noel Posas' body as he slumbered and went about his nocturnal missions of psychoanalyzing the subconscious of others, she wondered if she should be disturbed, even angry at the knowledge that he had persuaded her so completely in coming here.

Placing her hand on the cool knob, she shoved aside such thoughts, placing her trust, not quite as freely and easily as Matt had, in the powerful lap of the Dream Master.

Opening the door, she couldn't help the sharp intake of breath as she encountered the musky jungle scent that she had come to recognize as his. Noel had placed a lantern on the dresser top, adding to the warm, sensual atmosphere within. A look upward confirmed the presence of yet another skylight. This place would look remarkable during the day, she mused.

The bed in his room was a larger replica of the one in Matt's room, a simple wood frame with an ornately carved headboard. The long dresser bore the same intricate designs on each and every one of the nine drawers.

She walked over to the bed, trying to control the quiver skating its way up over her body, knowing she would sleep in the very bed Noel normally did, and opened her case. She took out a few items, walked over to the dresser, searching for a drawer that was empty, resisting the urge to take out one of the T-shirts she found folded there, press it to her face, and simply revel in the scent of him.

Finding the drawers he had left empty for her, she hurriedly tossed her clothes in. She had to be very careful where this man was concerned. He had already captured her son's heart, won his trust, gained his complete faith in

him. With her current state of mind she was tempted to do the same. Give up her problems and lay them in Noel Posas' capable hands.

When her case was empty, she zipped it closed and slid it under the bed, seeing there was a small box underneath just as there had been under Matt's bed. Curiosity getting the better of her, she slid out the wooden box, placed it on the bed and opened it. Inside she found two items. An intricately hand carved bangle bracelet that must have taken hours of delicate work with the smallest of blades, and a leather string with a cut crystal tied to it.

She took out the necklace and held it up to the light. A rainbow of color struck the walls and bathed her body in a variety of happy color. Warmth seeped into her body just from looking at the range of violet to red, green to yellow.

Elise didn't know how long she stood there, mesmerized by the sight, until Noel stepped through the doorway. The first few buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing the silken skin she had had the pleasure of viewing just last night.

Feeling like the biggest snoop in the world, she turned and placed the items back in the box, cleared her throat and said, "I'm sorry for going through your things. I saw the box there when I put my suitcase under the bed."

She heard his footsteps whisper on the stone floor. "Do you like them?" he asked from behind her.

"Yes." She turned, finding him no more than a foot away from her. He looked down at her, face placid as usual, but those eyes of his said everything, making her heart to thunder in her chest. "They're both beautiful. Did you make them?" She backed up just a fraction of an inch. Her legs hit the side of the bed.

"I did. I find solace in carving." He towered over her and Elise felt another urge to flee.

She bit on her bottom lip in an effort to control their trembling. "You're very good at it."

"They're yours."

"Mine?"

He nodded.

Elise wanted to ask how he knew they would have been coming back with him, that they would have met him at all, but Noel Posas was very sure of himself. It was something she envied greatly and found sexy as hell. "Thank you." Her voice came out soft as the flicker of the lantern light caressing the room.

He reached into the front of his flannel shirt and pulled out a leather string tied around his neck, holding up a crystal just like the one on the necklace he had made for her. "The crystal is thought to have great powers. It is believed when two people wear a crystal cut from the same stone, it binds them together."

"Do you believe that?" She found herself sitting down on the bed, looking up into eyes reflecting the intrigued look on her face.

He smiled slightly. "It is an old superstition, some believe, some do not."

"Which category do you fall in, Noel?" She could hardly hear her own voice over the high-speed thrum of her heart in her ears.

"Perhaps we will both find out the answer to that question in the near future." With that he turned and left the room, informing her dinner was waiting.

Elise dragged air into her deprived lungs. With shaking hands she slipped the necklace over her head. The stone felt warm against her chest, even through the material of her blouse, though she knew it was all due to the Dream Master himself and not the superstition of a crystal.

* * *

When Elise entered the living room and started toward the kitchen she saw Noel and Matt already seated on tall bar stools flanking a square table that seemed to be made of one tremendous chunk of wood; sanded, stained dark and varnished to a high gloss. They were engaged in animated conversation.

Elise noticed that Matt wore a pendant like the one she and Noel had around their necks. She remembered his words of moments ago. Did Noel truly did believe in the old fable? Was he hoping to keep them here with him by binding them together through stones and an ancient myth?

She stood in the shadowy doorway and could see the trust in Matt's eyes for the man who loomed over him. Her

chest grew tight and tears pressed heavily behind her eyes at hearing Matt's laughter again, seeing him open and relaxed in this daunting man's company. Whether Noel ever admitted it or not, he too seemed to find comfort in her son's presence. She could see the harshness had faded from his eyes, leaving them now a crystal gray.

Elise longed to join in on the conversation. Longed to be included in the ease Noel and Matt had formed between each other. But where she and Noel were concerned, there was always tension, an invisible wall that seemed impenetrable. She suspected it always would be that way

Noel lifted his dark head as if sensing her presence even as she stood cloaked in the shadow of the living room. His eyes lanced on her, his thick eyebrows snapping into a fierce frown. The atmosphere in the entire house seemed to reflect Noel's sober mood. Before the air had been light and almost cheerful, now it was as oppressive as summertime smog.

"Dinner is ready," he said harshly, rising from his seat and going over to a surprisingly modern stove in shiny black with chrome trim.

She entered the brightly lit room, appreciating another division of this hand built stone structure. Dark wood cupboards lined one wall to her right. Spanish tile in a rich rust color decorated the floor, counter and tabletop.

"Hey, Mom." Matt turned in his seat to face her as she walked over and out of the shadows. "Noel gave you one, too." He held his own crystal between his fingers, looking down to examine the way the light from overhead played over each smooth surface of the carved stone. Evidently Noel's home possessed a generator since the light above held a bulb instead of a wick. The knowledge had her slightly more at ease knowing they had some modern amenities.

"Yes, he did." She wrapped her hand around her own stone, casting her gaze to the man piling dinner onto a serving platter just a few feet from them. He looked up at her and Elise quickly averted her gaze. She reached the table, taking the stool near Matt, separating herself from Noel when he would again take his spot at the table.

Three plates, silverware, and glasses rested on the table; two were filled with what she suspected was wine. A sniff into her own tall glass confirmed it. The liquid was a deep red color, and though she seldom drank, she took a long sip from her glass, hoping to calm her frazzled nerves.

Without a word Noel came back to the table, setting the platter heaped with beans, rice and meat in a rich red sauce in the center. He went again to the stove and came back a second time with warm tortillas and a small pitcher of water for Matt.

Elise took the large spoon next to the serving platter and began dishing up the food onto each plate. When she handed Noel his he looked at her, totally baffled. "I am quite capable of serving myself." The tone of his voice projected an air of anger, but beneath that was almost a plea to his words, one that warned her about attempting to get too close, too comfortable with the Dream Master.

"It was no big deal." She felt defensive at his attitude. "I had to serve Matt and myself anyway." She glanced at Matt who was hungrily digging into the food, but refused to meet Noel's eyes as she picked up her own fork and poked at the grains of fluffy rice.

"I did not mean it as it sounded." Noel attempted to apologize, looking down at his plate of food, eyebrows pulled together in a seemingly endless frown. Finally he looked at her. "While you are here I do not expect anything from you. You do not have to cater to me or my needs." He focused now on the glass of hearty burgundy.

Elise gave a small laugh. "For heaven's sake, I only dished up your food; I didn't scrub your floors."

Noel grunted, picking up his glass of wine, consuming it in three large swallows. When he finished he said, "Nor do I expect you to do any such thing. You and your son are my guests."

Elise knew the meal must be delicious, yet with Noel sitting so close, her silent son looking as if he could drop off at any second as he had already scraped his plate clean, every bite Elise took may have just as well been shredded bits of dryer lint for all she could taste.

"Can I go to bed now, Mom?" Matt yawned, slumping forward, eyelids heavy. Elise wondered what time it was. By the night filtering through the skylight above, she knew it was late.

"Sure, honey." She thought it the perfect opportunity to excuse herself from this silent man's company as well. "Why don't I help you get settled?"

That brought a grimace from her son. "I'm not a baby, Mom. I can change and get into bed myself. You can come in later and say goodnight to me, though," he offered as compensation.

"All right. Don't forget to brush your teeth," she said on impulse, immediately wondering if Noel's cave-home possessed a bathroom.

To answer her unspoken question, Noel said, "The bathroom is in your mother's room."

"Okay," Matt replied. "'Night, Mom. 'Night, Noel."

Elise bid her son goodnight.

Noel offered another grunt.

Pasting on a smile, Elise watched as Matt slid from the tall leather upholstered chair and went padding off into the living room, toward the stairway lit with wall sconces. When he was no longer in sight, she turned back to see Noel clearing the table. She jumped at the opportunity to do something, anything, to add some normalcy to her life right now.

"Here," she grabbed hers and Matt's plates, "let me help you."

Noel stopped still at the side of the table, a long sigh seeping from his lungs. "I told you, Elise. You do not have to do any work while you are here. You are not my *criada*. My maid," he supplied in English."

Elise looked up at him. "I want to help. I'm going to need something to keep myself occupied while staying here." She managed a tiny laugh. "I'm so used to working from sunup to well after sundown, it's going to be hard getting used to this slower pace." And being around you twenty-four hours a day, she silently added.

"Muy bien," he gave in.

For the next few minutes they worked in silence. Elise was thoroughly amazed to find that he had running water and faucet fixtures. After Noel had scraped the plates, and placed them in the sink, she turned the handle on the left and hot water streamed out. Would the plumbing in the bathroom be as suitable?

Noel took out a sponge and liquid soap from a cupboard at his feet and Elise immediately took them from him. Again he had that perplexed look upon his face. She should understand his reactions though. It must be pretty strange for him to suddenly find two guests in his before empty home.

He leaned stiffly against the counter, watching her perform the menial task of washing, rinsing and stacking the dishes. When Elise found the silence unbearable, she grabbed the first thought she could and offered it aloud. "I'm surprised to find your home so comfortable. I didn't notice any power lines outside."

"I have an efficient generator to run the lighting. Propane runs the stove and water heater."

"So, who's Maria?" Elise instantly felt foolish for such a jealous display. She knew it was purely adolescent to feel covetous over a man she had known all of two nights, so put her question down to mere curiosity and nothing more.

"She is one of the women from the village."

When he didn't elaborate, Elise probed a little deeper. "Oh. Are you two friends or...something?" She sneaked a look at the man at her side, noting the permanent frown was still on his face.

That brought a short laugh of amusement from him. "I detect a hint of possessiveness in your words."

Elise speared him with a look of indignation. "Don't flatter yourself, I was only curious." She went back to her chore, ignoring the feeling of his eyes on her.

He gave a low snort at her reaction then said, "She and her husband Enrique are about the only people in the village who say more than a couple of fearfully spoken words to me, though there is still an air of wariness when they approach me." His lips curved ruefully. "When I went out this morning to call Juan, I had him deliver a message to Maria, asking if she would clean my home before we arrived since it has been vacant for the past six months. I don't normally rely on the favors of others, but I will repay her." He went silent again.

Elise felt something akin to tremendous relief wash over her. Maria was married. She promptly chided herself for her ludicrous musings once again. She wasn't looking for a relationship, affair, one-night stand or anything of the kind. "So," she began after another length of silence, "when will you start working with Matt?"

Her question seemed to baffle Noel for a second and when she looked up at him she saw him blink a few times as if she had pulled him from that place of deep inner thought he often seemed to visit. "Manana," he ultimately said. "I will start first thing tomorrow morning."

"Oh." Elise went back to washing the few dishes remaining, purposely taking her time. "What sort of things will you show him?"

He seemed to relax, perhaps beginning to enjoy the new act of conversing with another. "I watched the Ancient One for many years. I learned many things from him. I learned many things on my own, as well." He reached for a hand towel from the cupboard below. When Elise had rinsed and stacked the last dish, he took her hands in his and tenderly dried off each finger. When he had finished he tossed the towel onto the counter and motioned for her to follow him into the living room. Elise followed on weakened legs, ultimately crumpling onto one plump sofa as Noel walked over to the fireplace.

He crouched down and started the fire, stoking the flames until the wood blazed heartily. "I will show your son how to develop his powers to their maximum," he began again, as if several minutes hadn't passed since his last words. "The best techniques to use in healing, how to replenish his lost strength, and many other things." He continued to stare into the fire as it crackled and popped. "The way of my people. Our beliefs. Our strengths and weaknesses."

He rose and stood in front of Elise now, looking down at her with and unreadable expression. Though his arms hung at his sides, Elise could feel darkness rolling off of him again as his fingertips twitched. "I will tell him of the things he will have to give up while reigning as the Supreme Healer."

Elise tilted her head to one side, sensing the vulnerability Noel sometimes projected, though tried to hide beneath the gruff veneer. "What things would he have to give up?" Then she said in a much softer tone, "What things did *you* have to give up, Noel?"

"What every chosen one must," was his simple and too low reply.

Elise didn't believe that line of baloney for a moment. She fully believed people chose their own paths in life. Noel's solitude was *his* choice. A choice she never hoped her son would make. "What things are those?" She took his hand, pulling him beside her on the couch with great ease, reveling in the sizzling sensation pumping through her veins whenever they touched. "Tell me. Please." Her voice was a lowly spoken plea to know more about what directed this man in life. There was no way she would let Matt end up like him.

* * *

Noel sat close to Elise, but was sure to refrain from touching her thigh with his. He didn't wonder at the sudden urge sweeping over him to tell her of all he had given up in the name of his people. At times his title of Dream Master brought him great pride, and at others pure loathing

"I have performed my duties to the best of my ability. I have helped my people, protected them from potentially harmful outsiders. I am a healer for the mind. The Ancient One was a healer for the body. Both talents are greatly needed within the village." He sat stiffly beside her, his body tight and throbbing with want as he watched the flicker of the firelight dance over her delicate features. "I am destined to remain alone. I must live a solitary existence." His tone was solemn, yet accepting.

"Why?" Elise frowned up at him. "Why would anyone be destined to live alone, secluded from the rest of the world, forced to be a recluse?"

He turned his head slightly to gaze into the fire across the room. "It is our way. That is the way it must be."

"Your way?" Her tone was incredulous. "I don't want my son to be forced into living the life of a hermit. That was one of the reasons I agreed to come with you. My son had been wrapped up in his own world for so long. But when he met you, the change in him was instantaneous. I don't want the world to ostracize him simply because he has a talent that most people don't."

Noel felt suddenly angry. He was angry at the way she fought against her son's destiny and his people's beliefs,

and he was angry with himself for not being able to control the effect this woman had on him. "There is no other way," he said through clenched teeth. "It is our way."

Elise got to her feet, hands on her hips, eyes narrowed as she stared down at him. "Well I think *your way* stinks! We all need to be around people. We need human contact. Human touch. Friends. Laughter. Love. Without those things Matt could end up—"

"Like me," Noel soberly replied, his gaze fixed on hers.

"Oh, Noel," Elise groaned, reaching out a palm, laying it on his bare forearm where he had rolled his sleeves up to prepare dinner. "I saw how you were with the villagers who came to greet us. You nearly tore them apart. They fled in terror from you. They need your talent. They may even respect you or be in awe of you as the Dream Master. But why do you purposely force them away? Some of the villagers had on Levis, for God's sake! And you're telling me they wouldn't approve of a chosen one having a life mate?" Her eyes took on a new challenge, as did her words. "Tell me, Noel, why do you really separate yourself from the villagers?"

Noel jerked his arm free from her touch, afraid he would snap under the pressure at any moment with having her so near. He jumped to his feet, tugging the band free from his hair. As if by unbinding his hair, he felt he had somehow let loose the simmering rage within himself. "I am supposed to help others with *their* problems. The Dream Master is not supposed to have problems of his own."

Noel felt stripped bare in front of this woman and turned his back to her, walking closer to the fire, not wanting to look into her gentle eyes. He told himself he did not want the caring of her words, the tenderness of her touch...though he knew he was lying to himself.

"And you're telling me the Dream Master isn't human? That just because you have powers no one else does, you're above human feelings, fears and yearnings?"

Noel didn't answer. He simply stood there motionless.

Elise said quietly, "What problems do you have, Noel? I'll listen. I can't promise you any answers, but I can at least listen. It may help."

"You would not understand," he muttered, thrusting his hands into his pockets as he felt the power in him start to peak.

"How will you know unless you try?" She said from directly behind him. "Why do you hide away from people? Why do you wear that fierce mask?"

Noel placed his palm flat on the uneven stone of the wall and pressed his face into his shoulder. "I told you, it is our way. I cannot change the thinking of a tribe of people whose ideas still linger in the Stone Age. They are good people, but they are primitive people. Even if I wanted to socialize with them," he continued, "they would be terrified of me."

"That's ridiculous. Why would anyone be terrified of the very man who helps them? Who wards off potential danger just to protect them?"

Noel spun around, his face set in a tight mask. She had pushed him too far. "Do you want to know why people fear me, Elise? Do you truly want to know why the last woman I made love to fled the jungle nearly ten years ago, never to return?"

Her only answer was a barely perceivable nod of her head and a whispered, "I want to know."

Noel grabbed her arms, wanting to kiss her, to silence her taunting, yet tantalizing words. His body shook with the effort of holding back when all he wanted to do was to expel the tremendous force he felt and use this woman as a ground for his live wire. He brought his mouth so very close to hers, his grip tight, then tighter still as he held on to the rage within him. "The dream last night at your home was not enough to repel you? To show you why others fear me?" He snorted caustically. "But then again, the dream we shared was of lust. I have also inflicted pain, suffering and terror into the minds of others if they crossed me wrong."

"Please," Elise gasped. "You're hurting me."

Noel felt a sinister smile on his lips. "Say my name," he growled, needing to hear the single word, *his name*, upon her trembling lips.

"Noel," came her small, whispered voice.

He held her closer to him, barely hanging on to that final thread of sanity. "Ah... that's it." His breath hushed over her lips. "Again!" he commanded, pressing the length of his body against hers.

"Noel." Her voice was husky, less frightened. His birth name, not the Dream Master, upon her lips caused him to groan with surrender.

And he crushed his mouth to hers, letting loose all of his anger, every ounce of passion this woman caused him to feel.

Elise gasped and he took the opportunity to plunge his tongue deeper within her mouth. Their tongues mated, their breathing heavy. Her arms went around his neck, her breasts pressed against his chest. He slid a hand down to her lower back, pressing her close to him. Heat pooled in his groin as she moaned into his mouth, and he felt his control slipping.

Noel ran his tongue over the pulsing vein in her neck, nipped slightly then planted open-mouthed kisses over her checks, her eyes, and her mouth again.

She moved against him, her belly to his pelvis. She moaned his name against his lips before twining her tongue with his once again. She clung to him, returning his passion with that of her own. Noel thought he would climax with his next pounding heartbeat.

And now he knew it was not his manipulations of the dream world in which he and Elise shared in one lustful encounter after another, but the very fact that on some level she wanted him, perhaps needed him, just as he did her.

Wrenching his lips from hers, he pushed her away from him, making her stumble and reach out a searching hand to steady herself as she grabbed hold of a table. She took a few more steps back as he gave a low, dark chuckle.

"Yes, Elise." He felt grim satisfaction at seeing the look in her wide eyes. "Fear me like all of the others."

He stood a few feet from her, and though the fire lit up the expansive room, in the place where Noel stood he could feels shadows cleaving to him. "Too much anger over too many years has made me who I am today. *Lo siento*." He sighed. "I apologize." He stepped forward, out of the murkiness, reaching out to touch her, but she dodged his hand, taking a step to the left. Noel let his hands drop to his sides.

"Do not fear for your son, Elise. I will not let what has become of me happen to him. I will teach him the gentle ways. I am a warrior, one who conquers the demons of the mind and

the unsavory men who may attempt to ruin our village. I am directed by my past; the bitterness and anger I harbor. Your son, however, is a healer. A good person. A peacemaker. As I stand here before you, I promise to teach him all I know, and to make a better man out of him than I myself have turned out to be."

With that he turned and stalked to the corridor they had walked down when first arriving here, opened one of the doors, closed it behind him, and walked out into the night.

CHAPTER TEN

Elise awoke to bright light shining down on her, caressing her body with gentle warmth. For a moment she simply lay there and relaxed, basking in the sunshine, soaking in the comforting rays, forgetting where she was for a moment.

When she remembered she had spent the night in the home of the Dream Master, indeed slept in his very bed, she opened her eyes and sat upright. She placed a finger to her lips, the memory of his heated kiss still fresh in her mind.

She believed Noel had reacted that way because he was attracted to her, just as she was attracted to him. He had also been trying to scare her—and had done a great job of it, too. If she had ever met an emotionally unstable human being, it was Noel Posas. Yet he was also infinitely passionate and sexy as sin.

Shoving the disturbing thoughts aside, she looked around the room, admiring the rugged beauty of this place in the daylight.

Last night she had thought Noel Posas truly primitive when they had come upon his home carved out of huge, gray stone. But now...it nearly took her breath away with its unique simplicity radiating feelings of deep inner peace. For the first time in a long time she had slept the whole night through. Had Matt been talking in his sleep once again and she had missed it?

She stretched and yawned, feeling uncommonly languorous. She yearned for just a few more minutes of quiet solitude, but forced herself out of the huge warm bed.

Grabbing a change of clothing from one drawer, she went into the bathroom she had explored last night. She had been surprised to find the room not only suitable with modern plumbing, but also luxurious, sporting a huge bathtub.

Elise laid her clothes on the tiled sink, stripped off her nightgown and took a shower, indulging in the seemingly unending supply of hot water. Back home her small water heater held ten minutes worth of hot water, tops.

After changing into a pair of khaki shorts and a mint green blouse, she brushed her hair and tied it back with a ribbon. Slipping on her socks and running shoes, she went to check on Matt.

Poking her head inside his room, she saw he was still asleep, so she left him that way. Today he and Noel would start working together. She figured Matt would need all the rest he could get.

As she traveled down the long hall and down the steps, she noticed Noel's home wasn't nearly so intimidating with light streaming in from every skylight. The walls were a variety of color and texture, from white and beige, to hues of rust and brown. The textures went from smooth and even, to rough and jagged.

She let out a little breath of pleasant surprise as she took the last step and discovered at least a dozen shelves directly to her right that were packed with books. She scanned the titles, noting that there was a vast array of subjects in both English and Spanish, everything from classics to woodworking to psychology. The fact that Noel enjoyed reading shouldn't surprise her. He seemed an intelligent man.

Turning from the bookcase, she stopped stone-still. Noel was asleep on the couch. She debated whether she should turn around and go back to her room until he awoke, or take the liberty of preparing breakfast.

Elise ventured a little further to the sofa where he slept, taking the opportunity to study him as he rested, for once unaware of her presence.

Though he looked formidable, even fierce, when awake, in sleep he looked very touchable.

What was going on in that mind of his? Whose dreams did he inhabit at the moment? She knew he hadn't visited her mind last night since her own sleep had been a dreamless one. What problem was he trying to solve with his unique telepathic talent? Or was he given a few hours of rest from his ever-alert, ever-traveling mind?

Elise moved closer still, taking in the wide expanse of his bare back as he lay on his stomach, a soft blanket in a bright, geometric print draped over his hips and legs.

Her eyes rested on his lips parted in slumberous abandon. Would she ever know the taste of those lips again? Last night he had been so angry, so frightened and bewildered after he had kissed her. So had she. His sweet yet savage kiss had both scared her senseless and seduced her very soul.

As Elise stood there staring down at the dark, enigmatic man, she found herself yearning for the next time when he would kiss her. And more.

With a small sigh and a thorough mental kick to her butt over such lust-struck musings, she turned in the direction of the kitchen and went to make breakfast.

The large skylight set into the high ceiling scattered light throughout the cavernous room. A look in the few cupboards the room possessed proved that Noel kept his kitchen well-stocked.

After retrieving supplies, Elise assembled three omelets, adding some spices she had found, and a few vegetables that had been in the small fridge. She scattered large crumbs of white cheese over the tops of the omelets and was just setting the filled plates on the chest-high table when she looked up to see Noel standing there in the doorway; that infinite look in his eyes, his inky hair spilling over his bare shoulders.

"What are you doing?" He looked from the plates and back to her.

Elise thought she would break under his hard stare, but maintained a cool front. "I woke up a while ago and thought I'd make us all some breakfast."

"I told you last night, I do not expect anything out of you. I am perfectly capable of tending to the cooking and cleaning, and any other tasks that need my attention." He stood before her in only a pair of jeans. His legs splayed, hands on his lean hips.

Elise went to the sink, retrieving three glasses from a high cupboard. She needed to do something to avert her attention from the man just a few feet away who had her heart flopping around in her chest. "And I told you I need something to do. I need some normalcy in my life right now to calm my nerves. Matt and I have never been far from home before. And though I suspect he'll love his new surroundings, I'm having a harder time adjusting. It's only breakfast," she said, sucking in a sharp breath when she turned around and found him directly in back of her. Did the man never make noise?

"Very well," he said flatly, reaching up into the cupboard directly above her head, "have it your way. I, however, will make the coffee." He looked down at her and Elise could have sworn a slight smile threatened his lips, and a spark of amusement lay there in his eyes. Was he remembering the kiss they had shared last night? The way he had been so utterly pleased to see her back away in fear?

Before she could be sure, he turned from her and filled a copper kettle with water, putting it on the stove to boil. Elise leaned back against the counter, trying to steady her quaking limbs and slow her racing heart.

* * *

Noel went about the usually simple task of making coffee when all he could do was recall the distinct feminine aroma pervading every corner of his brain when he had stood so close to Elise just seconds ago. After last night the imprint of her body had burned itself to his chest and thighs forever. And the kiss he had stolen... *Dios*, she was driving him insane with want.

He spilled coffee grounds onto the tiled floor and cursed in his native language for letting his thoughts become obsessed with her.

Since the Ancient One had visited him those months ago and implanted the face of this woman within his psyche, he had never known peace. She haunted his nights and his days were spent yearning for her. Noel feared he would never know peace again until he had her for his own—if only for one night. Even more so, he feared that once he had her, he would never truly know peace unless she was branded his... forever. He knew both were impossibilities.

When the coffee was finished he poured it into two thick mugs and handed her one, having already accomplished the task of scooping up and throwing away the grounds from the floor.

"Thank you." Elise avoided his eyes, taking a large swallow. A moment later the boy came into the room and climbed up onto one of the bar stools with a mighty yawn.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Noel." He greeted them each verbally, but his attention was focused on his food, picking up his fork and digging into his eggs.

"Hi, sweetie." She carried her mug over to the table and took up one of the stools, her feet dangling far from the floor.

Noel remained silent, though he kept his eyes upon her, upon Matt, as he sat down and ate his meal. The woman feigned concentration in the scrolling pattern of vines along the edge of the table, forcing herself to take a few bites of the eggs she had prepared. He ate his own meal, his attention divided between the food on his plate and the people beside him who were still anomalies in his life.

"What are we gonna do today, Noel?" Matt asked after he had finished his food, leaning forward, both elbows on the table, chin resting on his fists.

Noel looked at Elise, wondering how much she would allow him to tell the boy, to his great frustration though she kept those moss-green eyes of her averted. Having finished his own food that was not surprisingly delicious since he had had a sample of Elise's cooking the other evening at her home, he drained his coffee mug, weighing his next words as he got up to pour himself another cup. "I thought I could show you around today. Perhaps go fishing. Take a swim in the lagoon."

Matt nearly flew from his seat. "All right! I'll go get dressed." Just as he was about to leave the room, he stopped and looked back at Elise. "Are you coming, too, Mom?"

Elise's eyes raced to Noel who was looking directly back at her from in front of the stove. He was certain his gaze held no look of invitation.

Meeting her son's expectant face again, she hesitated then said, "Maybe I'll join you two tomorrow. I think this should be a day just for the guys." She smiled.

"Allow me to shower and change then we will leave." Noel finished off his second cup of coffee in under a minute then exited the room, careful to keep his gaze from wandering to Elise as she sat there with questions in her liquid eyes.

She wanted to join him and the boy today. The thought of how close he had come last night to losing his waning hold on his desires made him realize, more strongly than before, he would have to avoid spending too much time in the woman's company.

Without a word or even a backwards glance, he left her alone.

* * *

Noel smiled to himself as he walked along side of the boy through the jungle, heading toward the river. Everywhere the child stepped the yellow and brown carpet of leaves he walked upon were left green and supple in his wake. Wherever he went his healing powers flowed as naturally as the blood coursing through his veins—yet he did not realize this. But he had to learn to harness those powers. At the moment, without proper training, the energy was being needlessly expended.

He would teach the boy to recover the spent energy, to tap into it only when needed. When he was weakened, he would show him how to replenish his lost vigor. He would teach him to control the rare gift he possessed.

Noel gave a silent laugh, leading the child to the edge of the river where he intended to spend some time fishing today. Who was he to teach anyone about control?

Once again he recalled how he had taken Elise so harshly, his passion running rampant as he took her mouth so severely. And yet, she seemed to welcome his harshness.

Cursing under his breath, he sat with the boy at the mossy side of the river, instructing him on how to use one of the hand-made fishing poles he brought along. Noel sat with him for a while, trying to put any thoughts of alluring Elise Colby out of his mind but failed miserably.

Noel looked away from the blond, sun-streaked head beside him, his mouth pressed into a brutal line. This boy's mother, without ever trying, seemed to be reviving places inside of him he thought dead and buried long ago. She made him feel alive again. She made him feel desired.

The recollection of dreams and yearnings he had laid to rest years before appeared achingly clear in his mind. His clenched his hands, the fishing rod biting into the skin of his right palm as he fought against the images taunting him.

After a half hour of small-talk with the boy, Noel could stand the rising force within him no longer. He needed time alone to calm his storming insides. Time alone to sort through his jumbled thoughts.

Getting to his feet, he ruffled the child's fine hair and told him he would be just through the bushes to the right, in the lagoon, as he needed some quiet time alone to meditate. The boy smiled up at him, his trust clearly evident. His beatitude in spending time doing the things all children should indulge in shining brightly in his eyes.

Noel attempted a smile in return, found it too difficult to conjure, and stalked off through the shrubs, anger rippling throughout every part of him.

Damn him for bringing the woman here!

Damn himself for his ill-control where she was concerned.

Damn the fates for selecting a chosen one who was not an orphan, but was a child with a widowed mother whom he desired with every fiber of his body.

Damn it all.

After exploring Noel's huge home in more detail, Elise pushed the iron handle of the front door and it swung outward. Light spilled into the entryway and she shielded her eyes from the afternoon glare. The heavy scent of moist earth, thick moss and jungle leaves drifted to her. *Noel's scent*, she thought to herself, inhaling deeply.

Elise stood there on the threshold for a moment, simply taking in the sight of the groves of trees filling her vision on every side. She had been to the mountains before, but this was way different than anything she or Matt had ever seen, a primitive high country where nature reigned supreme.

As Noel had told her, his people lived in harmony with nature; they didn't fight against it. Here there were no ever-present reminders of civilization to rob the wilderness of its true meaning. Here one could breathe, listen to and feel nature without the smell of gasoline, the roar of off-road vehicles and the sight of litter left behind by previous campers. She truly could believe this was paradise.

She heard a rustle in the fern bushes directly ahead of her. Elise looked up to see, not a squirrel or deer as she had expected to find, but one of the villagers. A young woman, perhaps only a few years her junior, wore a faded red dress, a bright yellow bandanna covering most of her midnight hair, and an uncertain smile. Elise waved and smiled back, but frowned when the woman's smile melted into a mask of wary curiosity, her dark eyes wide, thick brows bent in trepidation.

"Don't be afraid," Elise coaxed, hoping to gain at least one friend. She also hoped this woman spoke some English since she hadn't once practiced the Spanish she learned in high-school. "Are you Maria?" she asked on a hunch since Noel said Maria and her husband Enrique were the only ones who dared venture as far as his front door.

The woman nodded, her round face not quite as tense as before, confirming to Elise's relief that she did speak English.

"Si," the woman said in a soft, unsure voice, giving a little bow of her head. Taking a few steps closer, her bare feet scarcely made a noise in the carpet of dense leaves. "Did the Dream Master find his home in suitable condition? The kitchen well-stocked?"

"Yes," Elise assured her, since the look in her dark eyes was filled with uncertainty, as if she was afraid of ticking-off the almighty Dream Master. "In fact, you needn't go to so much trouble to please Noel all the time." Why was it so hard for everyone to believe he was a man, not a god?

Maria looked surprised that Elise had used Noel's birth name. "It is the least we can do. He does much for us. We have little money, so we gratefully offer what we can." She then frowned. "It is our way," she said, as if those four words explained every action the villagers performed, everything they believed in, and the way their lives were in general.

"I see." How many times had Elise heard those very words from Noel's mouth? Words that could unite an entire small village for the past many centuries, or fling one from its society. "Well, it's very kind of you."

Maria looked both pleased and relieved. Elise sat on the stone bench and patted the empty space beside her, eager to share in some conversation and not simply stilted words and a cold shoulder from Noel. Maria dared to take a few tentative steps forward placing her on the porch, but she didn't sit down.

"Do you and your son find Xilitla suitable?"

Elise answered the stiff woman's question. "Yes, Xilitla is very beautiful." This answer, too, seemed to please the woman.

"Maria," Elise broke the silence that carried on for too long. "What do you know about Noel?" When the woman cocked her head to one side Elise elaborated. "I know you cleaned his home for him before we arrived. I know you and your husband are the only villagers who talk to him." Yet you still you seem terrified at just the mention of his name. "Has he always been so," she tried to choose a word that wouldn't look as if she was badmouthing their Dream Master, "distant?"

Maria looked at the partially opened door, her eyes blankly fixed for a moment as if recalling a memory. "Not always." She trained her black eyes on Elise, nervously fiddling with the knot at the back of her bandanna. "My mother was a close friend of Julia—the Dream Master's mother. I will not go into any detail for it isn't my place, but when Julia and Raphael left him behind," she inclined her head toward the door, "I suppose it was hard for a child to grow up without his parents. Julia wanted to see the world. Raphael was a *viajero*. A traveler. Very wealthy. And when they returned, only to take him away..." She shrugged her shoulders.

"The Dream Master is a chosen one. He belongs here. With us. Just as your son does." She gave a little nod of her head, her hands folded primly in front of her. "We have waited for a healer for many years. It brings us great peace of mind to know the Dream Master has found your son. If only my mother could have lingered a while longer..." Her voice trailed off and a deep sigh added weight to her words.

Elise's heart went out to this woman, knowing what it was like to lose a parent, just as her heart had gone out to Noel for the very same reason, though her feelings for him were far more intense and only slightly based on empathy. "I hope you won't be disappointed, but being a healer is an awfully big role to fill." She left out her skepticism and feelings of downright fear in regards to the subject.

"We will not be. The Ancient One appeared to the Dream Master. If the Dream Master believes your son is the village's new healer, then it is so." She spoke with such conviction even Elise was being swayed.

"You put a lot of faith into one man," Elise couldn't help remarking.

"Faith that has been earned and deserved," was her solid reply.

"Then why is everyone so afraid of him? Why do they keep such a distance from him if they admire him so much?" Elise sat perched on the edge of the bench, trying so very hard to understand.

Maria sighed. "It is the way he wants it. Because of his past and because of the title he bears. He is so angry, so wanting to be apart from all. I am afraid he cannot be helped," she said in a soft voice, her eyes wise to Elise's secret intentions of helping the brooding man. "You are a special woman, señora. I saw it in his eyes yesterday." Her own expression suddenly became pleading, even warning. "Do not offer him false hope, Senora Colby. He has been hurt too many times; by his own flesh and blood, and by the woman he believed he would marry."

Elise nodded, indicating she knew of the woman in Noel's life that had run from him, from his power. Though he hadn't gone into detail, he made it clear that he had trusted a woman before and never intended to do so again.

Maria looked wary, as if she had said too much. "Until next time," she quickly said, turned abruptly and hurried off in the direction of the village.

Elise stared at the spot in the grove of trees where she had disappeared for several minutes while absorbing the information shared between her and the woman. She didn't learn anything she hadn't already heard from Noel's own lips or deduced with her own instincts. Still, hearing it from another person made it seem all the more critical.

Yes, she was right in her resolution to stay away from that dark, mysterious man. She had enough problems of her own. She had no business, no right, to interfere in Noel's extremely complicated life as the hermetic Dream Master of this ancient village and shattered man in his own life.

With a little shrug, knowing she would never be able to change the thinking of one stubborn man, let alone a whole village of primitive people, she looked out into the jungle wondering where Noel and Matt could be.

She saw a pathway of trampled leaves—trampled *green* leaves contrasting with the fading, yellow ones around them—going off to her left, showing the trail they most probably had taken.

Elise promised herself not to wander off too far if she didn't find them right away, not eager at the prospect of getting lost out in this jungle where everything around her looked exactly the same yet completely different at the same time.

She hiked for about a quarter of a mile until she heard the sound of humming directly ahead of her. A look around the next tree revealed Matt sitting at the edge of a small river, homemade fishing rod in hand. A quick glance around didn't turn up Noel, however.

Walking a few more yards to Matt's side, she crouched down next to him, tossing a small stick into the softly swirling water.

"Hey there, are the fish biting?"

"Hi, Mom." He turned and grinned at her. "Not yet, but Noel already caught two huge fish." He pointed to the pair of twitching fish a little ways away lying upon the blanket of leaves. "He said we could have 'em for dinner."

"That sounds good." She looked around, still not espying Noel. "Where is he anyway?"

Matt thumbed an area to his side. "He's over by the waterfall. He said something about cleansing his channels and meditating." Matt scrunched up his face at the words. "And I thought you said weird things sometimes." He rolled his eyes skyward.

Elise laughed, planted a kiss on her son's forehead, and stood upright. "You stay here and work on catching another fish for dinner while I go find Noel, okay?"

"Sure." He shrugged and started whistling to one of his favorite Disney tunes.

Elise walked toward an extra thick grouping of fern bushes, wondering why she was so intent on finding the sullen man. She told herself it was for the reason that he had left her son alone in the woods, denying that she simply wanted to see him again—even though he scared the pants off of her. She paused with that last thought as visions of having her pants off, and his, streaked through her mind.

The sound of water crashing over rock drifted through the air. Parting the green, feathery leaves before her, she saw a limestone ledge with crystalline water pouring from it, emptying into a small lagoon below. The very lagoon they had seen on the trip up here yesterday, yet this from a different angle. On the other side of the lagoon she saw the strange concrete garden nestled amongst the twisting vines and curtain of ferns.

Something about the tranquility of this place lured her to stay.

And then she saw him.

From within the stand of fern Elise remained as still as one of the statues across from her. She watched as Noel stripped off his brown flannel shirt, golden sunlight kissing his cinnamon skin. She knew it was wrong to be spying on him like some oversexed voyeur, but she neither moved nor called out to him. She did nothing at all except stay where she was, her breath coming quick, her blood pulsing fast.

He folded his shirt as carefully as she had seen him do at her apartment the other night, and sat it on the ground at his feet before removing his boots and socks. Elise sucked in the oxygen she found her lungs being deprived of, awaiting the removal of his last bit of clothing.

Slowly, as if aware of her presence and enticing her with a taunting strip tease, he unbuttoned his jeans and slid them down his powerful thighs. His briefs were last to go.

Elise's breath caught in her throat. Noel's body was beautiful. Sleek, smooth, muscled. Perfect.

He stood with his back to her, lifting his face and his arms to the sky as if trying to capture the rays of the sun for himself. His long hair spilled down his back, reaching the top of his buttocks. Elise stared, knowing this was wrong, yet unable to tear her gaze from the sight before her.

Unbidden memories of Frank rushed into her mind. Never had she wanted to watch him undress, hide in the shadows and observe him in all of his naked glory as she was now doing with Noel. Their lovemaking had been passionless, missionary encounters in the dark. It had never bothered her then. In fact, she had thought sex severely overrated. But watching this Indian before her now, a man who was warrior and healer both, she could honestly say she had never craved a man's touch so fiercely.

No, she gave herself a mental shake. She couldn't let anything sexual happen between them. As if he'd asked! Elise laughed at her own romantic notions. Noel was dark and brooding, silent and intimidating, suffering from the mental scars of things she could never hope to mend.

Elise's attention was recaptured, her eyes taking in Noel's every move as he clasped his hands together and brought them down to his lips, his head bent forward in prayer. Yes, she wanted him. Bad.

She watched as he walked to the water's edge. He looked every bit the warrior he claimed he was, wild and dangerous. And he fit into this ancient place just as the age-old limestone did, the towering trees, the ever-flowing waterfall.

The water rippled outward from his body as he entered, coming only to his waist at the deepest part. Elise longed to join him as he made his way to the cascading fall that appeared a bright silver color as sunlight glinted off the water spilling over the ledge.

He turned, facing her.

Elise tried to convince herself there was no possible way for him to see her as she was hidden amongst the thick fern, yet she could feel the intensity of his eyes upon her. He stood under the tumbling water, letting it fall over his hair, his face, his body, while he simply stood there looking in her direction. Just as she, he didn't move, didn't utter a sound. And Elise at last admitted he indeed knew of her presence.

What did he think to find her here watching him? Was he angry? Puzzled? Aroused?

* * *

Noel stared at the woman watching him from behind the shroud of fern; her pale green blouse and length of smooth legs revealed to him through small bare spots in the fern. He could see her eyes, her lips slightly parted, her light skin contrasting against her flushed cheeks.

He stepped out of the stream of water and washed his hands over his face. The water had been at first cool now felt like a desert hot spring as his body heated with the knowledge that she was there, watching him. How long had she been concealed behind the grove of fern?

Ducking his head beneath the water, he strove to hold on to sanity. When he came back up he shook his head, sending out a small rainfall of water droplets in every direction. He thought about turning his back to her and carrying on with his original task of meditating in his favorite place. He thought about frightening her, shouting out in anger that she was spying on him.

Yes, it would be infinitely better if she were afraid of him. But when he saw her tongue flick over her lips to moisten them, he found himself saying aloud, "What are you doing here, Elise?"

He didn't move as she parted the fern and approached. "I—I was just—"

"Spying on me?" He tried to force the words out with curt accusation, yet he heard them with his own ears and they sounded greatly aroused, just as his entire body felt.

"No!" she said quickly, lifting a hand to her chest. "I mean, yes. I mean, I didn't intend to stay in the bushes and—"

"Watch me strip to bare skin and wade into the water?" His dark brows arched upward in incrimination.

"Yes," she finally admitted, dropping her hand to her side, keeping her eyes trained on his face, though he willed them lower. "I know I should have said something." She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips again and he felt an erection spring to life.

"Then why didn't you?"

Elise heaved a surrendering sigh. "I didn't want to."

Noel looked down into the water, his hands brushing the glassy surface. His lips lifted in a forced smile and his hooded gaze met hers as he said, "Are you planning on joining me then?"

She didn't move. "What about Matt?"

Noel's eyes grew wide as she didn't completely deny him. His eyes looked downward again, his hands stirring the water. "Ah yes, the boy. Perhaps another time then." His hungry eyes met hers.

"Perhaps," Elise whispered, backing up and nearly running away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elise lay in bed trying her utmost to fall asleep. On her back, hands laced behind her head, she stared up through the skylight.

The scene by the waterfall earlier in the week had shaken her to the very core. Not once in the past had she been so curious as to spy on a nude man! Noel Posas was having a severe impact on her life and on her hormones. He was dark and intimidating, and just when she became frightened of him, wanting to demand him the very next minute to take her and Matt back home, the vulnerability within him would make itself known to her.

Pain and lonely desolation called to her without words, showing clearly for only the briefest of moments in his glittering eyes. The more she thought about it, the more she knew she had to stay. Although they had been here nearly a week now, and with no sign of Matt's supposed healing gifts coming to the surface, she felt the need to stay just a bit longer before calling this whole adventure a bust.

Somehow, what had started out as a mission to find the answers to her son's behavior, had turned into a mission to also show Noel Posas that he could have a normal life. A life filled with happiness, laughter and love. Though she wasn't

quite sure if she and her son would be around here long enough for him to find that life, she at least wanted him to realize what he could have if he only let somebody in.

As these thoughts wove in and out of her mind, she found herself on her feet, standing beside the bed, slipping on her robe. Perhaps a walk around this cavernous dwelling would bring her some answers, or at least calm the chaos in her mind.

The waterfall in the living room seemed to beckon her. The sound of the water as it ran over the age-old rock in an even rhythm would be soothing to her nerves right now.

She glanced at the lantern on the night table she had extinguished before getting into bed, but decided against lighting it. Somehow the darkness was a balm to her confused soul at the moment. Where before she had sought out the bright sunshine in her own apartment several times a day, in this Indian's strange home she found solace in the quiet night surrounding her.

As she made her way along the murky corridor, pressing a hand against the wall to guide her down the stairs, a pulsing blue light coming from the living room caught her attention. She walked quietly down the length of the hallway, stopping at the end of it, perched silently on the last stair.

What she saw before her caused her heart to beat in a heavy rhythm of...fear? No, it was more curiosity than anything else. Her breath felt trapped in her lungs. She reached out a hand again, placing it on the rough wall to support her suddenly boneless body.

Noel had moved his coffee table back and now sat crosslegged in the middle of the heavy woven throw rug, eyes closed, arms folded over his bare chest. He was meditating, as she recognized the position he sat in. What really startled her though was the way his entire body pulsed with a soft blue light. The light seemed to come from within the very center of him and radiate outward, casting a halo of brightness all around. Just as she had seen with Matt, though this was on a far greater scale.

Riveted to the unearthly sight, the light drew her to him. The next thing Elise realized she was standing directly in front of him, no more than six inches away, hands outstretched, the blue light playing over her palms. He kept his eyes closed and she wondered if he knew she was there.

She watched in awe as the light traveled up her arms as it found another pathway to follow. She tingled all over, feeling oddly rejuvenated, strangely alive.

* * *

Noel felt the energy within him being sucked away. He opened his eyes to find Elise standing before him, her body bathed in light. Her eyes were closed, a smile of pure rapture upon her face.

His heart jolted. Dressed in the thin satin and lace gown and robe he had urged her to bring, her auburn hair flowing like a cloud around her face and shoulders, he felt dumbstruck by the sheer beauty of her. He was left speechless by her unearthly sensuality as natural as her laughter, her smile, the love she bestowed upon her son, and the kindness she offered him though he tried to refuse it.

Elise wasn't repelled by his power or rage. No matter how badly he tried to frighten her, to keep her at arms' length. This was the one woman with whom he could lose himself completely in and she would not be repelled.

The knowledge was nearly overwhelming. He had waited so long to find a woman like this. Had given up the hope of ever encountering her long ago.

Perhaps he was dreaming. A dream could only explain something as ethereal as what he was witnessing now. Or could she really be standing before him, drawing into her his own energy?

Noel rose to his feet. "Elise." His voice was a low as he stared down at her.

Elise slowly opened her eyes. They looked heavy.

"Touch me." Noel couldn't keep the desperation from showing in his words.

She tilted her head to one side.

"Elise, por Dios!" he whispered urgently when she still didn't answer, didn't move. "Touch me, now!" Noel wanted to drag her against him. To see if she melted against him as she often did in his dreams. But he waited for her to make the move.

She blinked as if rousing from a dream. Hesitantly she reached out, laying her hand on his chest, over his heart. Noel sucked in a sharp breath. "Does it hurt?" she quickly asked, snatching her hand back.

"No," he gasped, praying she would touch him again. "It does not hurt. It feels good." He smiled. "Muy, muy bueno."

Elise smiled in return and stretched out her hand once more. Noel hoped she would not worry over the fact that she was touching a half-naked man she had only met days ago. This felt too good right now.

With a slow sweep she ran both of her palms over his skin. Had anything ever excited him so?

Noel trembled from this woman's touch, from the intimate act of touching in itself. For so long he had remained only half contented with making love in his dreams or too-quick-to-enjoy encounters while he had been in the United States. In all of his years, in all of his dreams, he had never thought he would find a woman who could actually touch him when he was in this state. Touch him and glory in the sensation of it.

As her hands continued to travel over the heated surface of his torso, Noel could stand no more. For six months he had dreamt of this woman, and for six months he had yearned for her. She was here with him now, in the flesh, and he would have her.

With a low growl wrenched from the core of him, he picked her up into his arms, pulling her against his fevered body. When she looked up at him in surprise he inclined his head, fastening his mouth over hers. Her entire body stiffened then melted right into him. Noel moaned in triumph, plunging his tongue into her open mouth, drinking long and deep of the woman who had teased and tormented him for so long in his nocturnal mind.

As the kiss escalated, their tongues mingling, retreating and coming back for more, the blue light surrounding them began to fade. Noel pulled back only slightly, looking into her eyes. "I'm taking you to your bed. My bed." He held his breath for a moment, waiting for her refusal, praying for her acceptance.

Elise rested her head against his chest and murmured, "Take me."

All air came out of his lungs at once at hearing her words. With long strides he carried her up the dark corridor and into his bedroom. He noticed her sent in the air and knew he would always recall this moment with this woman, especially on long empty night. He wouldn't think of that now. All he wanted was to share in one night of sweet surrender...though he knew one night with Elise Colby wouldn't be nearly enough.

Reaching out a foot, he closed the door behind them, walked closer to the bed, and gently set Elise on her feet. Without hesitation she pressed herself close to him, twining her arms around his neck.

Noel roamed his hands over her back, caressing her through the thin material of the nightgown before finding his way beneath the insignificant barrier to cup her bottom through her panties. It was then he noticed the light around him had disappeared altogether. Instead of feeling disappointed at its absence, Noel felt joyous vibrations coursing throughout him at this his blatant exploration of her body.

Pressing himself closer to the pliant woman in his arms, molding every hard line of his body to every soft curve of hers, he ached for release. He wanted desperately to thank her for coming to Xilitla, for lighting the dark lonely corners of his home and his life with her gentle presence. Years of solitude forbid him to speak the words his heart felt.

Feeling greatly aroused and frustrated both, needing an outlet to these and other deeply buried emotions, he rubbed his stiff erection against her flat abdomen. Noel took full advantage when Elise gasped, parting her lips further still, burying his tongue deeper within her throat, trying somehow to merge as one.

He reached between them, placing both hands at the front of her nightgown and pulled hard, ripping each and every tiny pearl button from its hole, sending them flying into the air; some clattering to the wooden dresser beside them, others to the tiled floor. When her full breasts were bared he stepped back only slightly, letting out a sigh of satisfaction as he viewed the dime-sized strawberry birthmark. Lowering his face to the milk-white mounds, he took one and then another nipple into his mouth, suckling roughly, grazing the tender peaks with his teeth.

Tonight, she belonged to him.

* * *

Elise tangled her fingers in Noel's unbound hair, reveling in her passion that had been plucked from someplace deep inside of her and kindled to blazing life by Noel Posas. Nothing about this encounter seemed wrong. Not the fact that they had met only days ago. Not the fact that she felt intimidated by him. Not the fact that he had whisked her and her son away to this secluded Mexican jungle. In fact, nothing had ever felt this right, as if she had waited a dormant lifetime to be roused by this man's touch. She wondered if Noel's healing powers weren't as dead as he thought them to be.

She felt his hand slip inside her panties, a palm covering her mound, a finger sliding inside her while his mouth stayed fastened to her left breast. She cried out, needing his touch as much as he seemed to need hers. She had been in a sensory deprivation chamber for most of her life and suddenly set free into the world. Noel brought every sensation of being alive back to her.

When he withdrew his fingers from her, she called his name, telling him she needed more. "I want you, Noel. I want you naked with me. I want to feel you inside me." She didn't wonder at the brazenness of her words; Noel brought out the wicked side of her and she reveled in it.

With only a soft push, Elise lay on the bed, raising her arms in seductive invitation. She heard Noel swallow hard, heard him breathe a rough, "Dios, mio!" before laid beside her.

Noel slowly trailed his fingers from her lips, her neck, over each breast, and her soft abdomen then cupped the feminine part of her. Elise arched toward his blatant touch and knew she was lost.

She laughed at her greed. They hadn't even finished this session of lovemaking and here she was already craving a second, third, and on to infinitum with him.

Sliding her fingers through Noel's silken hair, she pulled him closer as his kisses wandered lower, past her stomach, skimming her hip then resting between her thighs. His tongue blazed circles over her sensitive clitoris, his lips nipped and suckled at the throbbing peak as the excitement in Elise building. He licked her until she was certain she'd explode into a million pieces.

They spoke no words of love or promises of tomorrow as their passion soared, and Elise was grateful for the silence. She wanted to concentrate on every single sensation this man roused in her. She wanted to marvel at the extreme gentleness in his touches and kisses that contrasted so sharply with the formidable image he portrayed by day.

After several minutes Elise tensed, her body ready to burst into flames as she reached climax. She called out to him on a ragged whisper of ecstasy and when he raised his head, his eyes filled with an intense need, Elise felt her soul clench at the sight of him. Again he seemed so vulnerable, almost virginal, yet so powerful and infinitely experienced at the same time.

Didn't he cause her to feel the same? And wasn't she already musing over the next time she could slip into his arms and be loved by him again?

When she whispered his name again, he rubbed her clit with his thumb, commanding her to look into his eyes as she reached orgasm. It should have felt unnerving, but coming while locked in his gaze was the sexiest thing she could imagine. In fact, in that moment she felt Noel Posas had stolen part of her soul. Forever that piece of her would belong to him. The knowledge was strangely sobering, yet exhilarating.

As her soul floating back into her body, their eyes meshed. Noel stood and quickly shucked off his jeans. With tender urgency he slipped into her embrace, resting his entire weight over her as he probed her opening before nestling himself deep within her.

Elise lifted her head slightly to kiss Noel's lips and brush back a stray lock of hair. She was rewarded with a shudder that wracked his body and a deep groan that filled her with feminine satisfaction.

Needing him closer, Elise wrapped her legs around his trim waist, pressing her heels into his buttocks, moving with him. His thickness filled her completely. Exquisitely.

* * *

Noel knew this was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Only in his dreams had he been able to let himself go completely as he was now with this woman. He could feel the power coursing through him, out of control like an electrical storm, but Elise absorbed every bit of it.

She held him against her so tightly, her soft breasts crushed against his hard chest, as if she never wanted to let him go. As weak as it sounded, that was also how he felt. He could live forever in this woman's arms. Live and die and be reborn again a thousand times.

A lifetime of injustices did not matter at the moment. Too many yesterdays of longing were erased by the miracle of Elise's sweet abandonment beneath him. He was intoxicated with her soft cries of his name, reveled in the rhythm they created together, gloried in the sensation of being sheathed within her silken heat, embraced by rich satin.

He wanted to stay like this always, but soon he could no longer hold back as every sensation mounted within him. He was a man possessed by the woman running soft kisses over his cheeks, his eyes, his lips, murmuring his name like the sweetest litany. Tension gathered at the base of his spine then exploded to envelope his entire body. He pressed himself deeper within her, letting out a low growl as he spilled his seed within her.

He whispered her name again and again as he buried his face in the crook of her shoulder. At this moment he felt so very fulfilled and content, spent and strangely rejuvenated.

If he didn't know better, he would swear this woman with her loving care and compassion held more power than he himself or even her son ever would.

Yes, he was too attracted to Elise.

Obscene feelings of hatred welled in him for the very fact that she accepted him as nothing more than a man. And though his solitude at the moment was not physical, it was emotional and profoundly felt.

When the chaotic feelings within him faded, he looked up to see a contented smile on her lips. Noel couldn't deny the surge of pride racing through him at the sight. He had satisfied this woman.

"You asked me to touch you," she said wryly, a smile still tipping the corners of her lips.

Noel let out a low chuckle. "Would you be pleased to know you are the first who ever has?" He rolled off her and pulled her against him, staring into darkness.

She reached up and tucked his hair behind his ears. "I'd be very surprised. You're a passionate man, Noel, and you're telling me you've never made love before?"

His eyes met hers as he ran a gentle finger over her lips. "Yes, I've made love before. But I have always been the ever-powerful Dream Master. Quick moments simply to release a need. The one woman who appeared to accept me as only a man...I had been young and naive," he quickly finished, then chased the thought away. "Enough of the past." Words could wait. His passion, though, could not. "Kiss me, Elise. I want you again." He lowered his head to hers, claiming her lips once again as his body fully intended to claim hers. "Besa me, toque me...para siempre."

* * *

When both were spent, they lay there in the dark until Noel got to his feet. "Morning will be here soon. You must sleep."

Elise sat up, not bothering to cover her nakedness with the sheets. Her appreciative gaze wandered all over his magnificent body before coming to rest on his face. "What about you?" She wanted to ask him if they would be sharing a bed together tonight, but didn't want to seem too presumptuous. A session of sex was a far cry from anything more permanent or lasting. She'd be a fool to allow herself to think anything more would come of this than moments of stolen passion. This was more than likely a onetime thing. It was better it ended now.

Yes, and there was Matt to think about. Though her son was taken with Noel Posas, how would he react to the knowledge that he and his mother had something intimate going on between them?

Noel smiled. "Is that an invitation to share your bed?" He knelt on the bed, running his lips down the length of her neck.

"No," she said on a husky sigh. "It's an invitation to share *your* bed."

He made a small groan in the back of his throat. "Perhaps another time. I still have a full night ahead of me."

Elise hid her disappointment, knowing it was for the best that they sleep in separate quarters. Though their lovemaking had been wondrous, it was something she needed time to mull over. She wanted to put it into perspective, afraid she would lose her head over this man.

Offering him a brave smile she said, "I understand."

Noel slipped on his jeans then picked her nightgown up from the floor, pressing it to his face and inhaling deeply. "Your gown is ruined." It was satisfied statement.

Excitement flooded Elise's mind of how he had ripped the satin barrier from her body. His savagery aroused her to no end. She gave a casual shrug and said, "We were both feeling rather passionate."

He looked form the confection in his hands and back to Elise. "Es verdad." She watched the play of emotions over his face. He seemed confident, yet vulnerable. Dropping the scrap of satin to the floor he cleared his throat and said, "I will check on the boy before I start my journeys."

Elise nodded, watching as he walked to the door, trying oh so hard not to feel abandoned.

"Thank you for this night, Elise," he whispered. He touched the doorknob and a blue spark passed between flesh and metal.

She looked at him. No words were necessary.

"Sleep, querdida. I must begin my duties."

Elise yawned, fulfilled and lazy as she slipped between the covers. "It must be hard being the Dream Master."

Noel stared at her. "It is all I have ever known."

Emotion caught in her throat at his words. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It is my life." He softly opened the door and slipped out, closing it behind him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Another week passed with no sign of Matthew's powers. Although Noel took Matt out each and every day, staying out with him from morning until late afternoon, Elise felt it was more for the fact that Noel was avoiding her than for trying to awaken Matt's dormant healing gifts.

She gathered the items she would need and went about the task of making dinner, shoving aside her chagrin at Noel's absence since the night they had made love.

The villager's main staple seemed to be beans and tortillas with whatever meat or vegetables were handy. Elise had concocted some interesting meals in the past days as she'd had plenty of time to experiment in the kitchen since she was left alone most of the time.

A part of her was angry, feeling Noel was stealing Matt from her, but she immediately counseled herself. She had plenty of time with her son on the everyday occasions when Noel went out to meditate at the lagoon—while she steeled the voice in her that urged to follow along and join him.

Matt was blooming with Noel's attention, and she couldn't be too upset with either one when they left every morning right after breakfast. Like an outsider, she often watched Noel with her son through the sanctity of the jungle

cloak that prevented her from being seen. She knew he sensed her presence, but chose to ignore her. And she chose to stay within the shadows, her heart in her throat as she watched man and child talk, laugh, explore, and do many of the things a father would do with his son.

Even though she had a full bookcase to select from, an entire jungle to wander around in, and Maria's brief and sporadic visits, all she could think about was the one evening she had spent in the dark Indian's arms.

She still hadn't seen the village as Noel refused to take her, and she wasn't keen on getting lost out in the jungle if she attempted the trek herself. She had asked Maria to take her one day last week, but the wary look in the woman's eyes had Elise taking back the question. The woman was probably afraid Noel would explode if he found out she had gone to the village. Elise knew the villagers wanted to remain in the Dream Masters good graces.

She gave a small shake of her head. How could one man have so much power over an entire village, over her son, over her own life?

Deep in thought, Elise nicked her finger with the knife. With a soft curse on her lips, knowing the accident was due to her jumbled feelings and wayward mind, she grabbed the clean dishrag and dabbed at the droplets of blood. The injury was little more than paper cut.

A moment later the air within the room became heavily weighted. She could almost feel electricity sizzling in the air. Noel was in the room. Though his footsteps were as silent as a panther's, she had come to recognize the way the entire atmosphere of a room changed when he entered it.

Elise went about her task of preparing the evening's meal, not knowing what to say or do, feeling clumsy and awkward.

She glanced up to see him leaning against the table, eyes dark and unreadable. Her insides whipped around, but she tried to appear uncaring as she moved over to the stove. Tried very hard not to recall how she had been so eager to make love with Noel that night. How she still ached for more.

"How did your day go?" she asked while meat sizzled in the iron pan and the scent of fresh herbs drifted in the air. "Good," was his only reply. He didn't move from his place by the table. Merely stood there staring at her, making her uncomfortable.

"Has he displayed any of the powers you were hoping to uncover?" The beans had been cooking for about two hours and one of the villager's had brought freshly made corn tortillas earlier in the day. Elise intended to sauté strips of the meat with some of the tomatoes and an onion she had left over from yesterday.

She heard a deep sigh come from a few feet away and knew that Noel had moved further into the kitchen. "No, although I am not expecting any miracles." He then added, "Not yet, anyway. We have been working on drawing energy from the air around him. He is becoming quite good at siphoning the power and controlling it. Too bad he has not had the opportunity to try it out. Nor face the reality of what I have been showing him and why." The words came out sounding exactly as Elise knew they were meant: As an accusation. Noel was frustrated that she hadn't told Matt about his powers. The reason they were truly here in the jungle with the Dream Master.

Elise feigned concentration in her work. Now was as good a time as any to tell him what she'd been pondering over for a couple of days now. "I was thinking perhaps it would be best if we leave." She finally turned and faced him, finding him less than a breath away.

"Leave? No! You gave me one month!" His tone sounded desperate and angry, his eyes hard, face tense.

"I know." She had to turn away from him. The look in his eyes made her insides crumble. She didn't like being afraid of Noel, especially when she knew how gentle he could be. She didn't like knowing she was hurting him. "But there hasn't been any sign of his powers and I—"

Steel-like fingers grabbed her shoulders, spinning her around to face him. "What is the real reason you want to leave me, Elise?" he interrogated.

Leave me? His words echoed in her brain. Is that what she was trying to do? Leave him before he ultimately hurt her any more than he had? Before she and Matt starting caring about the Dream Master so much she could never force herself to leave here—regardless of the consequences?

"No!" she quickly said, wishing he wouldn't look at her like that. Wishing he would loosen his harsh grip that would surely leave bruises come morning. "I mean, I realize I gave you a month, but there's been no success yet. Perhaps there never will be. Maybe all that's been happening—the fish, the flowers, the chanting and the episode in his room while your were there—maybe it was all just...I don't know." She squirmed in his grasp, squeezing her eyes shut. His grip was still unbearably harsh, yet aroused her at the same time. If being unable to unveil Matt's supposed powers wasn't proof enough, her reaction to this intimidating man was all the evidence she needed to make her want to run.

"It will take time, Elise. Powers such as his do not perfect themselves over night."

She opened her eyes, though kept her gaze fastened to an area past his right shoulder. "I don't want my son to be a chosen one." She tried for a firm tone, yet her words came out sounding just as she felt since meeting up with this Indian: Small and uncertain. "I wanted answers. Answers I felt you could give me. I wanted a cure." She felt as if her bones had dissolved and wanted to fall into a heap on the floor.

Elise forced herself to meet his eyes once more. "I want him to be a little boy again." She swallowed hard and could feel tears burning in her eyes. "I want my life to be simple again. I want Matt to be a normal child. I want to go home," she whispered, searching his face for some indication of understanding, some softness to ease his harsh features, a tiny glimmer that she would someday slip into his heart as he was surely seeping into hers.

She found nothing, only quiet determination to get what he wanted. And what he wanted was a healer for his village.

"No, Elise. I told you, there is no cure. Your son is not ill. Without me, his energy will soon be out of control. Do you wish him to be a freak? To be taken away by one of those doctors and subjected to ruthless experimentation?" Old memories clouded his eyes for a second and Elise clearly saw his pain there.

In the next instant Noel pulled her against him, staring down into her eyes. The memory of their evening together created a slow burn in the pit of her stomach. "To be a healer, it is the boy's destiny." His lips lifted into a rueful smile. "Just as you are my destiny, Elise Colby."

She slowly shook her head from side to side in denial, though her body, acting on its own, leaned into his suddenly gentle embrace. Her hands were trapped between their bodies and she could feel his heart beating fast through the thin layer of his black flannel shirt. She felt energy pumping within her veins and gloried in the sensation.

He smiled grimly. "I, too, have tried to fight this feeling between us. After we made love that night I purposely distanced myself from your company, knowing I would be under the complete mercy of your spell if I so much as looked into those beautiful eyes of yours again."

He inclined his head, bringing his lips close to hers, his midnight hair falling around them, creating a black silken curtain. "Regardless of the consequences, I need you with a desperation that tears me apart the longer I am away from you." He brushed his lips back and forth over hers before saying, "Not all things are logical. Not all things are easily accepted." He sighed against her lips. "Trust in fate and know this is the way it is supposed to be."

Elise fought to hold onto her sanity when all she could do was glory in Noel's touch, revel in the knowledge that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. But destiny? "So I'm just supposed to close my eyes and be lead blindly on this crazy path my life has taken?"

"I will not lead you astray," he murmured. "You yearned for answers, knowing only I could help your son. And you."

She wanted to resist, but it was no use. Elise gave up the fight for now, melting against him, opening her lips to receive a devastating kiss from Noel, a kiss that stole her soul out from under her.

When their lips parted, he held her face between his palms, his thumbs tracing the outer corners of her mouth. "Esta noche," he said in a hushed whisper. "If you need me tonight, call me." He slid one hand down to capture the crystal pendant she wore. With his other hand he took one of Elise's and brought it to his own pendant. The stone felt warm, almost pulsing to her touch. "I will hear you. I will come." He placed another kiss on her lips, this one deceptively tender.

Elise let out a shuddering sigh when he stepped back from her. He seemed to be waiting for an answer, but all she could manage at the moment was a small nod. It seemed to be enough though as his eyes turned dark with promises and his lips lifted in a smile she could only interpret as desire—or remorse?

"You may continue with what you were doing," he softly prompted when she simply stood there, her fingers on her lips. "I will be back down after I shower and change."

She nodded again, feeling like a mute idiot.

When she regained her senses, she was just about to ask where Matt was when he came tramping in, planting himself on one of the bar stools, giving them each a quick smile before examining his newest treasures of the day. Thankfully, his appearance had broken the hypnotizing spell Elise was under.

"Dinner will be ready when you come back down," she said lightly, keeping her eyes fixed on Matt.

Noel grunted, turned and left the room, taking with him the tension in her body as she shoved his words aside and went about finishing dinner.

* * *

Noel lay on the long sofa, anxiety humming through his body as he stared up at the murky ceiling, the rushing sound of the waterfall in back of him refusing to lull him to the slumber he must find.

He felt tense and frustrated. At the dinner table he had hoped for some sign from Elise that she would invite him to her bedroom this evening. After remaining aloof from each other for nearly seven cruel and punishing days, he could stand being separated from her no longer. Each and every day he and the boy spent in the jungle, only half of his mind and body were on his teachings, the other half was constantly reenacting the lovemaking he and Elise had shared.

When he had awoken the following morning he had tried to convince himself that, though he had at last found a woman who embraced his powers, another episode such as the one they had shared should never happen again.

But when he had walked into the kitchen earlier and saw Elise, he had let his languorous gaze travel every curve of her tempting body. When she had made her thoughts known that she did not intend to stay in Xilitla any longer, that she wanted to leave here, leave *him*, he had become desperate at the thought of losing them. He had to push aside foolish pride. He refused to put himself through such torture as he had for the past nights without her.

Before dinner he had stolen a kiss with his lips, and with his words he had left the door open for her to offer herself to him once again, yet he was alone on this sofa instead of in her bed.

Turning to his side, he laughed at his own arrogance. He had made the most passionate love in his life to that woman. She had poured out every bit of her passion in return. And the next morning he had treated her as if she was nothing more than a piece of furniture about his home. He was most fortunate that she was still speaking to him at all, indeed still living here in Xilitla, with the way he had been avoiding her.

Instincts told him it was well after midnight. He sighed heavily. It seemed that although he had fervently hoped to receive her call, Elise was the kind of woman who held a grudge. And who could blame her?

He wished he could at least join her in her dreams this evening, but Enrique, Maria's husband, had already asked him for his assistance with a problem.

Noel's lips twisted ruefully in the darkness as he recalled the encounter earlier in the day. Enrique had come up to him while he was with the boy out near the lagoon, attempting to teach him how to meditate; an act that would strengthen his healing gift. The young villager had begged for both he and the boy's forgiveness, keeping his head bowed, eyes averted, saying he was in desperate need of the Dream Master's help. It seemed his new marriage was on shaky ground.

His wife had given birth to their first child six month's ago and Enrique had not touched her since their son had been born. Maria had threatened to move back in with her parents if he did not start being a more attentive husband. Enrique swore adamantly that he loved his wife, but he was reluctant to approach her in any intimate way.

Noel had given a slight nod of his head, agreeing to help the man. Enrique had thanked him repeatedly, bid farewell to the Dream Master and the new healer, and hurried away without ever looking back.

It was easy to see what was bothering Enrique, Noel thought to himself as he readjusted the blankets around him. Why the man's desire for his wife had changed so drastically after the birth of their son. He was suffering from the Madonna syndrome. It happened to many men after the arrival of a child in their lives. Enrique could not separate Maria the wife with a woman's needs, from Maria the new mother.

Noel figured the problem would be easy enough to solve. He would simply enter Enrique's subconscious this evening and manipulate his dreams. He would bring the image of Maria into the dream and recreate the feeling, the passion and the desire Enrique had felt for her before the arrival of their child. Noel would rekindle Enrique's sex drive and that should take care of the problem.

Just as he settled himself in for a night of dream-calling, Noel felt the crystal that lay against his bare chest begin to grow warm and pulse as if the stone held a heartbeat all its own. Taking the gem in his fist, he laid there without moving, without breathing, wondering if this was the sign he had been waiting for. Was Elise truly beckoning him, or was it only his mind playing a cruel trick?

As the stone grew warmer it emitted an internal light that illuminated Noel's personal space like a small lantern. Indeed she was calling to him. The knowledge caused his blood to pulse quick and hot.

Throwing back the covers, he sat upright, the cool night air bathing his half-bared body. He got to his feet, eagerness thrumming through him as he strode quickly up the stairs. At last they would come together again as one.

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Elise held the semi-precious gem between her thumb and first finger, examining the item. She thought of Noel and the confrontation they'd had in the kitchen earlier. She relived his kiss and his words telling her that if she called him he would come to her. She wondered if it was a better idea to avoid any further intimacy between her and this man when the crystal around her neck suddenly grew warm and throbbed with a pure white light.

Noel knocked softly, opened the door, and appeared in her bedroom, looking big and tall and daunting. She looked at the crystal nestled against his bare chest then down at her own.

"I felt you calling me." Noel looked from the stone around her neck and then his own. "Es verdad?"

"Yes," she said in the smallest of whispers. She watched as Noel's uncertain gaze swept over her, the bed, and the entire room, looking as though he had never ventured over the threshold before.

She had seen this expression on his face only briefly before. An expression he kept well hidden behind his sober mask: Vulnerability. The man who had an entire village bowing at his feet because of the tremendous power he held was unsure of himself at the moment. The realization helped to ease Elise's own feelings of wariness over allowing him into her bed again.

Without uttering a single word, she lifted one corner of the blanket in mute invitation. Starlight shone down at them making every emotion that passed over Noel's features clearly visible to her. His eyes grew wide for a second, as if he wasn't certain until this very moment she wanted him here.

With a casualness that appeared forced; he silently closed the door behind him and walked over to the edge of the bed, looking down at her, dark hair falling over his wide shoulders. As always, his long hair aroused that primitive part of Elise as it represented something wild and untamed. Her heart pounded.

Still holding up the one corner of the blanket, she reached out with her other hand in a welcoming gesture. Noel gave a throaty groan and took her hand, sliding in beside her, his lips claiming hers instantly. He kissed her hard and long, his tongue leaving no area of her mouth unexplored. He bit in to her neck and she gasped at the pain that was pleasure. He was rough, harsh, and she reveled in his savagery. This was so unlike the first time they had made love. That night she sensed he held himself back. Not now. This time she was receiving all of Noel, his pain and anguish, his lust and passion, his hatred and power. And she took it all willingly.

Elise held on to his shoulders as he licked and bit his way over her body. He sucked on her nipples making them stand in sensitive peaks. Over her stomach, down her legs to her feet he ran his tongue along every inch of her before coming to rest between her thighs. Placing one palm on each of her knees, he pushed her legs apart, spreading her open wide. His mouth was on her again, this time with more self-control as his tongue explored her, probing, seeking and finding.

He took his time bringing her to climax, sliding two fingers in and out, while whispering words of lust that had Elise wild with desire. As soon as she came Noel turned over, bringing her on top of him. She kissed him deeply, tasting herself on his soft lips.

"I want to be inside of you," Noel whispered, looking into her eyes. "Take me, Elise."

Smiling in the darkness, Elise took over their lovemaking. For once the Dream Master didn't want to be in control. He wanted her to posses him. The knowledge sent a shot of feminine power through her veins that made her slightly dizzy.

Though she had never taken the lead while having sex, it came quite easy to her. She reached between her legs and grasped his firm erection. Noel let out a slow sigh as she slid down onto him and began to move in an erotic tempo. She clasped her hands with his, bringing them over his head and pinning him down against the pillow. He slowly closed his eyes for a moment, a wicked smile claiming his lips as she claimed his body.

"Yes, querida, like that."

"Does it feel good?" She rocked her body back and forth, rolling her hips, slow and then faster, keeping him off balance, keeping him on the edge.

"Muy, muy beuno." At first Elise found it a bit unnerving, but she soon enjoyed the control she had over this man and his pleasure. She could direct when and if he would come. Bringing him to such heights of ecstasy thrilled her.

He tried to move his hands, but she pushed harder, not allowing him freedom. Noel sucked in a sharp breath and Elise sealed her mouth over his. She could feel his body tensing, knew he was getting close, so she stopped. He made a small sound of protest, but she refused to heed his complaint. "You'll come when I want you to."

Noel merely nodded, his heart beating heavy under her wandering lips, sweat covering his body as she kept him so near the point of sweet release. She made circles around his nipples, glorying in the effect she was having on him. When she felt him relax she began her decadent torture again.

After several minutes Noel moaned. "Por favor, mi alma, let me come."

Elise laughed softly at his plea. "Should I?"

He nodded, bucking his hips, making her gasp. "Take me. Now!"

She knew he was ready to shatter and couldn't keep him in this state any longer. She moved her hips up and down his shaft from tip to base. When she felt his body stiffen she sat up, bringing Noel with her so she was on his lap, his hands on her hips pushing her down as hard as he could. Threading her fingers in his hair, she grabbed hold, lifting his face, pressing her mouth to his, silencing his cry as he exploded inside of her. Wave after wave wracked his body until he was still.

Breathing heavy, he fell back against the mattress, bringing Elise with him. He was still inside her as she rested her head against his damp shoulder, his hands trailing languorous circles over her body until they fell asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Noel's bare feet pounded the solid ground, oblivious of the sharp rocks and broken twigs digging into his heels as he ran through the jungle. One thought echoed through his mind: He had to find them.

The last thing he remembered was falling asleep with the woman in his arms. Now he found himself frantically searching the woods for her and the boy. He stopped for a moment, his chest heaving, his senses coming to, and recognized this as a dream. He did not like the feeling sweeping over him. He did not feel in control of this nocturnal journey. Was he in his mind, or another's?

Fear raced through him. Matthew and Elise were in danger, and he must find them before it was too late.

He stood at the edge of the river. Where the water usually flowed in a languid motion, now it moved along swiftly, churning evilly. In the middle of the frothy white body of water he could see Elise struggling to keep her head above the swelling waves. Her eyes wide and frightened, she begged him for help as she moved along with the undulating river.

"Elise!" Noel called out her name, readying himself at the green edge to jump in and rescue her.

He heard laughter all around, a high-pitched, demented sound filling the air and creeping into his very bones, chilling him to the core. He recognized the demonic chuckle all too well. And he knew, inside of his fearful heart, this was not a dream, but was instead a premonition of what was to come, to surely pass, if he did not stop it.

Matthew's small voice drifted to his ears, seeming to come from the tops of the trees, pleading for him to come to his and his mother's aid. Noel's feet felt embedded in quicksand. He could not move, and felt helpless to rescue the two people who had been the closest thing he had ever had to a family in over two decades.

He let out a cry of anger. "You leave them be, Kako! If you lay a hand on the woman or the boy, I swear, by the very blood flowing through my veins, I will not rest until I have your head!"

The laughter grew as did Elise and Matthew's cries for help. Noel placed his hands over his ears to shut out the horrific sounds, squinted his eyes to close out the terrible image of Elise being pulled under the inky water.

"You will not intimidate me! You are nothing but a demented magician with a bag of tricks. I should have taken care of you years ago." Noel raised his outstretched hands to the midnight sky, lifting his face to the drops of rain that began to fall, while fury swam through him. "If we meet again, you will not live this time!"

Noel awoke with a start, sitting upright, his body covered with a fine sheen of perspiration. His heart beat frantically in his chest as he gathered his senses, trying to recall where he was and what had just happened. He swiveled his head from side to side, taking in the scenery around him.

He was in his own bedroom, in his bed, and he remembered that Elise lay beside him. The recollection brought to mind their lovemaking of just hours ago. He took in her slumbering form curled next to him, his dream momentarily forgotten. He was getting in too deep with this woman yet he could not stop himself. Did not want to.

Scooting back down beneath the spread, Elise stirred, laying her head on his chest, sighing contentedly. As Noel allowed himself to ponder over the ramifications of the

hellish vision he had just experienced, his eyes wide in the thick blackness of the room, he absently ran his hand from Elise's shoulder, down to her rounded hip and back again.

"Noel?" Elise awoke. "Is something wrong?" He heard concern there in her sleepy voice. "Your heart's beating so fast." She stroked his damp chest with soft fingertips.

"No. Nothing is wrong." He kept his voice soft as he tried to lull her back to sleep with his soothing caresses, the energy within him spent after sharing in two passionate encounters with the woman he held. He needed time to sort through the premonition that had played out in his mind.

"Are you sure?" She yawned, snuggling further against him, sliding one of her legs over his.

Noel's grip on her tightened as he planted soft kisses over the top of her head, and inhaling the now familiar scent of this woman. "I am sure," he lied, not wanting to frighten her by this new revelation. If he told her of the dream, she would want to leave Xilitla, he was sure. He could not let that happen. The village needed the boy as their healer. And, as much as he hated to admit it, he needed this woman in a way he could not explain as yet. He only knew his life depended on keeping Elise Colby and her son within the jungle.

"Okay." She lifted her face and accepted the kiss he offered. "If you need me though, for anything," her voice held a seductive lilt to it that heated Noel's blood, "don't hesitate to wake me."

He gave a soft laugh. "I will do that," he promised, laying still and silent in the darkness until he felt her body relax and her breathing resume a deep, even pattern of sleep.

His thoughts shifted back to the frightening scenes from his dream, the sheer terror that had filled every part of him.

Some time later he sighed in the murkiness of fast approaching morning and wondered, would he never know peace?

* * *

For the next two days Noel was sure to keep Elise and Matthew in his sight at all times. Neither the memory, nor the feeling, of the premonition had waned in the past forty-eight hours. If nothing else they had become stronger, imprinting the terror he had felt in his dream into his brain for all time. He finally admitted to himself as he watched Elise and the boy collecting small stones and tucking them into their pockets that he wanted them to remain with him always. For the last two weeks he had a taste of what a family life was like, and he vowed to never let them go.

Love? Is that what he was feeling? He gave a slow mental shake. No. He was simply a man who had grown tired of his own company. He did not believe in love. Sharp images of his father and mother looking away while he was taken to PRI stabbed him again.

Angry at his painful musings, he picked up a rock and threw it in the direction of a nearby tree without thought. When the force of it exploded against the trunk, flying out into a thousand pieces of rage, he heard Elise's startled gasp. A look to his right found both she and the boy eyeing him with frightened curiosity.

"Whoa," Matthew whispered, eyes wide.

* * *

Elise bit on her lip as she witnessed the scowl on Noel's face. It was a look that had stolen over his handsome features as of the morning they awoke in the same bed. She thought he'd been experiencing regret at coming to her room that night, but she was too much a coward to ask outright. Besides, it had been two nights since then and each night he had come back to her bedroom, awaiting her unspoken invitation as she held her arms open wide to him. And each session of lovemaking only seemed to bind her more tightly to the man and the jungle in which he lived.

There still was no sign of Matt's powers, though Elise let the subject lay for now. There were two weeks left before she fulfilled her bargain, and she would go back home. The thought was both disheartening and appealing. She was getting in too deep with this brooding Indian. Matt was, too. And though it would probably hurt both of them when they left, it was better to leave after only one month of being in this enigmatic man's company than to linger and make it even harder to go.

What if between now and the end of the month Matt's powers came shining through? What would she do then?

She gave a deep, inward sigh. Honestly, she didn't know. Her thoughts hadn't gone beyond the end of their allotted time.

Matt continued to swivel his head from the man sitting on a large boulder ten feet from them, to the trunk of the tree a few yards away. She had to talk to Noel and find out what was bothering him.

She directed her attention to her still wide-eyed son. "Why don't you keep scouting around for stones to add to that collection you're working on while I go talk to Noel?"

"What?" He looked up at her, catching the meaning in her voice that said *the grownups need to talk*. "Sure." He walked over to an area they hadn't explored yet.

"Stay in sight at all times," Noel sternly warned, rising to his feet.

Elise cast him a dubious gaze. Why was he so worried about having them stick so close to him all of the sudden? He himself had been the one telling her to let *the boy* have some freedom. Now he was a bigger worrier than she was.

She walked over to the sun baked rock and sat down, patting the space next to her. The backs of her bare thighs exposed by her cutoff shorts heated quickly.

Noel didn't move at first, but ultimately took the offered spot. Elise reached out, placing a gentle hand on his bare forearm and she felt him flinch. As tender and passionate as he was while shrouded in the cover of darkness in her bedroom, when morning came along he was usually aloof, even cold at times.

Elise, too, felt as if she was walking a tightrope, but she had quickly learned to keep her balance whenever Noel's mood or her own doubts started to shake her footing. Instead of brooding over her predicament and recent actions, she had come to her decision to share her bed with Noel, with a quiet calm that surprised her.

Noel, on the other hand, seemed to be in a constant state of internal chaos. And the lonely air about him clung to his soul like a heavy fog.

"I wish you would confide in me, Noel." Elise kept her voice soft as they both watched absently while Matt inspected stones, pocketing some, discarding others. His response was a grunt as he sat with his knees drawn up to his chest, forearms resting atop, his chin planted firmly on his arms.

"I know something's bothering you. I felt it the next morning after we made love two nights ago." She turned her head, looking right at him, brows bent, biting on her lower lip. "If it's me, I wish you would let me know. I enjoy our times together at night, but I don't want you to feel obligated." She looked away as her throat burned.

"No," he said quickly, capturing her chin with his thumb and first finger, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Do not take that away from me. Not when I have just discovered something I never expected to find." He released his hold and looked away for a moment. When he looked at her again he said, "It is not you. Not all of it, anyway."

Elise shifted so she faced him, legs crossed tailor style, tucking a few strands of hair behind her ears that had fallen out of her braid over the hours of hiking around. "Tell me what it is. You know so much about me, but I don't know much about you."

He smiled grimly. "You know more about me than any other woman has or will."

She sighed. "I trusted you enough to allow you to bring Matt and me here. I trusted you enough to make love with you. The least you could do is to trust me with your thoughts and memories, even your feelings." She knew she was asking for a lot and wondered how much he'd offer, if anything.

Noel closed his eyes for a moment. "It is not that I have no trust in you, Elise. It is simply that I am used to keeping things to myself. To open myself up to another will take time." He pinned her with a look that said she had given him only one month, yet here she was begging him to share thirty-five years of a solitary and often pain-filled life in the brief amount of time they had remaining?

Elise realized how incredibly selfish she was being. Matt was blooming in this place—putting any supposed powers aside. She was more relaxed and fulfilled than she could ever remember being. She found a lover who aroused a passion in her she never knew existed. Then what was her problem? Why couldn't she simply tell Noel she would agree to stay with him for a longer period of time?

Truthfully, she was scared. Of the man at her side, of living in the jungle the rest of her life, of the impact it may have on Matt, and wondering if any of that truly mattered.

"I'm sorry." Mentally she pulled back from him. "It wasn't fair of me to ask." Again she tore her gaze away from those hypnotizing eyes of his and shrugged. "It was so easy for me to let go, I assumed it would be that easy for anyone."

"Have you let go, Elise?" His words sounded like a soft accusation.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She resisted the urge to squirm under his intense scrutiny.

"Have you really let go of your past? Of your trepidation to stay with me here? Your skepticism as to whether or not your son's powers truly exist?" He raised an incriminating brow at her.

Elise let out a little laugh of defeat. "I see what you mean. I guess it'll take us both time," she said quietly before looking off into the distance.

"It is getting late." He directed his gaze to the sky above that was awash with a violet hue. "We had better head back home."

Her pulse jumped at his choice of words. *Home*. It sounded so comfortable on his lips. And that scared her.

Elise got to her feet, brushing the seat of her shorts of invisible dirt then pressed nonexistent wrinkles from her crimson gauze blouse with the flats of her hands. "Yes," she looked up at him as he stood also, "let's go home. I don't know about you, but I'm starving." She hopped off the flat stone and headed in the direction of the cave.

She heard Noel laugh. "As am I." He came up beside her, Matthew trailing after them with bulging pockets.

As they approached the cave entrance with Noel in the lead, Elise and Matthew lagging a few feet behind, she heard him let out a loud curse as he stopped directly at the head of the porch. When she reached him she saw his fingers curled around the handle of a huge bloody knife stuck in his front door.

She inhaled a sharp breath, placing a hand over her mouth as early evening glinted off the silver blade.

"Jeez!" Matt exclaimed. "Who stabbed your door?"

Elise managed to find her voice. "Yes, Noel, who did this?"

He shrugged, jerking the razor-sharp blade out of the thick wood. "I do not know."

Elise couldn't take her eyes off the thing. "Why would anybody leave you such a calling card?" She felt ready to lose the lunch she never had as she sank onto the bench at her side.

"Probably a disgruntled villager who did not like the advice I gave him," he said in a nonchalant manner, though Elise detected something more behind his words.

"Are you in any danger?" Elise reached out and put her hand on the arm carrying the gruesome knife.

"Me?" He looked down at her, his expression hooded. "No. I am in no danger."

Elise let out a breath of relief. "That's good to hear."

"Is that human blood?" Matthew asked, looking closely at the weapon.

"Matt!" Elise stood and pulled him away. "What a thing to say. Of course it isn't human blood." She then looked warily at Noel. "Is it?"

"Chicken blood," he blandly stated before opening the front door and stalking inside, knife still in hand.

Elise walked in after him, a knot growing in the pit of her stomach. Though Noel denied it, she didn't get the impression that the knife-plunged-into-his-door incident was as small a thing as Noel made it out to be. Had it truly been a villager miffed at him? Or was the grisly message for some other reason? She also wondered if his recent blacker-than-usual mood had anything to do with it. The look on his face when he'd found the crimson-coated weapon had not been one of surprise, but almost of expectation. Why? And who had left it?

In a habit that had developed over the past many days, Noel went to take a shower while Matt went to his room to inspect his recent finds. Elise walked to the kitchen to prepare dinner, all the while trying to push the feeling of newly awakened fear within her away. Perhaps she was making too much out of the incident. Although she wouldn't have been as calm as Noel to come home and find a knife jammed into her front door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

An insistent pounding on the front door echoed throughout the entire stone structure, awaking Elise from a peaceful, dreamless sleep. She opened her eyes and saw early morning light streaming down on the bed, covering her and Noel with a pale blue-silver blanket. She smiled as her eyes drifted closed again in bliss. His arm around her tightened, pulling her closer to the crook of his body.

Just as she teetered on the threshold of sleep once more, her eyes popped open as she heard another series of loud raps upon the front door. Noel awoke, bolting upright.

"What was that?" He shook his head then dragged a hand through his hair, looking disoriented as he was pulled from his subconscious travels.

"Somebody's at the front door," Elise said in a hushed voice, wondering whom it could be. Enrique or Maria? Noel had told her nobody ever came to his home. He seemed concerned and that worried her.

Noel got up from the bed, found his jeans, and pulled them on over his otherwise bare body. Elise also got up, slipping on her robe.

"Stay here," Noel softly warned, already heading out of the room. Elise was right behind him. "Not on your life. You might need me."

Noel shot her an unreadable look, grabbed her hand and stealthily made their way to the living room. Elise's heart beat so loudly in her chest it nearly blocked out the sound of the small waterfall they passed in front of. And it nearly burst from her rib cage as she watched Noel pick up a brass candlestick that had been sitting on one of the end tables. She hoped he wouldn't need to use it.

Like thieves in the night they stole down the shadowy corridor, the tile cool under Elise's bare feet as she tried in vain to walk as silently as Noel did with such ease.

When another string of knocking came, her grip on Noel's hand tightened and a small gasp sprang from her throat.

"Stay behind me," Noel murmured against her temple, shoving her in back of him as he reached out and grabbed a hold of one iron handle.

The door creaked open, just a fraction of an inch, letting in a burst of chilly air. Noel peered outside, striving for a clear line of vision in the murky light. "Who's there?" When nobody answered he repeated the question in his native language.

Elise stayed so close to him she may as well have been clothing on his body. She listened as a voice, undeniably female and urgent, and then Noel's raspy-from-sleep baritone, came drifting to her ears in a language that was not her own. She shuffled backward as Noel opened the door wider, allowing the early morning caller to enter.

Peeking over his left shoulder, Elise saw an extremely worried looking woman who carried an unconscious boy, around Matt's age, in her arms.

She was older, perhaps late thirties, with brightly woven material draped over her form. Elise had never seen this woman before, although aside from Maria and the brief encounter with a few of the villager's on her first night here, she had seen no one else.

"What happened?" Elise continued to peer at the woman whose distraught gaze was on her immobile child. She knew it must be bad if one of those wary villager's dared to step foot inside the Dream Master's home.

"Snake bite," was his reply. "We must wake the boy." His voice held a tinge of both excitement and trepidation to it. Noel turned from the woman who he quickly introduced to Elise as Anita, then started back down the long hall.

"What do you mean?" Elise followed, noting the woman refused to leave the inky passageway.

"This will be a test, his first opportunity to try out his healing powers." He took the stone steps leading up to the bedrooms two at a time.

"Test? Healing?" Elise's mind spun out of control. "Don't you have a first-aid kit?"

"It is too late. The venom has traveled his body. The boy is needed."

This would be it, she thought with dread while her heart raced out of control. Depending on whether Matt truly possessed these healing powers Noel believed so firmly in, would direct their lives come morning. If Matt could not heal the boy, she and her son would leave back for home, and unfortunately the child would not make it. If he did heal the child...did she want to stay here in the jungle? Continue to live her life as the lover of the Dream Master and mother of the Chosen One?

Any more frantic thoughts stopped as they entered Matt's bedroom. Daylight was quickly pushing its way up on the horizon and Elise could make out Matt's slumbering features. He looked so small, so innocent. How could she allow the title of Supreme Healer to be placed upon his young shoulders? But, if his powers truly existed, how could he not? Again her mind flooded with the many doctor's visits, the recommendation of drug therapy, more testing...possible hospitalization.

"Matthew," Noel said softly, giving a gentle shake of his shoulder. "Wake up, hijo."

Elise bit back a tear at Noel's softly spoken words. In her presence he always referred to Matt as *the boy*, as if his feelings for her son were only wrapped around what he could offer the village. Now she knew better. Matt had crawled into his heart, just as the dark, silent man before her had crawled into hers and Matt's.

In that moment she felt another link being added to the chain binding her here.

Matt stirred, yawned and opened his eyes. "What's wrong?" He burrowed further beneath the warmth of the covers.

"Nothing is wrong," Noel whispered, grabbing Matt's slippers. "You must get up." He handed them to Matt as he dragged himself upright, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "We need your help."

"Yeah?" He looked up at the man towering over him and frowned. "With what?"

"Remember when I showed you how to meditate?"

"How could I forget? We sat on that rock for a year!"

Noel gave a little chuckle and Elise noticed it didn't sound quite as rusty as it used to. In fact the small sound came from him quite freely now. She stood patiently at the entrance to the room as the two men who meant so much to her talked.

"Yes, I know you were quite bored, but do you remember how you felt inside?"

Matt nodded his sleep-mussed head. "All tingly."

"Yes, tingly. I need you to concentrate again and call forth the feeling once more." Noel crouched down at the side of the bed, looking up at Matt. "Do you think you can do it?"

Matt shrugged. "I'll try. Do you want me to do it right now?" He looked at his mother before directing his attention back to Noel.

"Please, por favor," Noel confirmed, pulling the strange eagle claw necklace from his jean pocket that he had shown her weeks ago while standing in her living room. He placed the leather lace over her son's head. Seeing the gruesome piece of jewelry resting against the gray sweatshirt he wore made her shiver deep inside.

"Wow," Matt whispered as he looked down at the object. Elise shut her eyes for a moment. He had no idea what the necklace represented. What powers he may hold within his small hands. For him this was all some fantastic adventure.

Elise watched as Matt closed his eyes, took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and sat there as if asleep. She walked into the room, placing a palm on Noel's shoulder. She could feel tension there in his muscles. He looked up at her and saw the same uncertainty she felt. She was anxious, wondering what the next few moments would bring, but she was also

undeniably eager. This is what Noel had waited six long months for, five worrisome years, hoping for a healer. Elise didn't know if she wanted to bless or curse her son's potential powers.

After a moment of silence Matt opened his eyes and said, "Okay. I feel like I have ants running all over me." He smiled at Noel and then Elise. "Now what?"

Noel stood. "Now we are going to try something different. A woman came and her son is sick. I want to see if maybe you can give the boy some of your energy."

Matt's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Noel stared harshly up at Elise. She knew this situation was more difficult than it need be. If only she had told Matthew of his healing powers. But how could she tell her son of something she herself didn't understand?

Elise avoided his gaze, looking down at her bare feet.

"Just see if you can share your tingly feeling with the other boy. If you cannot, do not worry. Enrique will be able to take the boy to the city below."

"Why doesn't she take him there now?" Elise asked.

He didn't look at her. "You must understand the ancient ways of my people. They would go the spiritual route long before the clinical." Noel directed Matthew out of the bedroom and into the front corridor with Elise trailing behind them.

When they came up to the woman, she was kneeling beside her seemingly lifeless son whom she had placed upon the stone floor, resting him over the thick material she had removed. She wept softly and mumbled her words of grief and gratitude, bowing in veneration when she caught sight of Matthew.

Matthew backed up against Noel when he saw the woman and her child. Noel bent to whisper in his ear. "Do not be afraid, son. This is Anita. Her son Jorge is ill. All I want you to do is kneel beside the boy, place your hands over his chest and direct your energy outward. Do you think you can do it?"

Matt's voice came out small and unsure, "I'll try."

"That is all I ask of you."

Elise wanted to tell Noel to leave Matt alone, but she too needed to know if his powers truly existed. She whispered a few words of encouragement, watching with her heart in her eyes as Noel and Matt knelt beside the so-still boy.

Slowly Matt placed his hands over the other child's chest, giving a quick glance at every adult whose eyes were on him. Elise fought against the urge to snatch up her son and run from this situation that had to be stressful on such a small boy's spirit.

Matt inhaled a deep breath, letting it out slowly through his nose. The woman at his side started murmuring the same mantra Elise had heard Matt whispering during the night on so many occasions. Soon Matt joined in on the incantation and Noel's rich voice followed until the narrow passageway echoed with the eerie sound of their voices.

All at once energy seemed to spread down Matt's arms. A bright blue light seeped into his hands and his fingers, while the crystal against his chest pulsed quickly, and finally the energy poured into the boy lying upon the floor.

Elise shivered, wrapping her arms around her waist as she stood there, an outsider watching on, hoping to find some warmth, as all blood seemed to drain from her body at the sight.

The pulsing light, the chanting, all went on for several moments. Elise felt she had stopped breathing long ago. She could see sweat forming on Matt's brow as he concentrated.

The light faded before disappearing completely, and Elise gasped as Matt slumped backward in exhaustion. Noel rose to his feet, scooping Matt into his arms. Elise, worried at her son's incredible weakness, rushed to his side.

"How could you put him through that?" she said sharply, looking up at Noel with narrowed eyes. "Look at him. Every ounce of his energy's spent." She wanted to tell him it was all for nothing, since the boy on the floor was still out-cold, but she didn't want to add to the woman's grief who was sobbing directly behind her. Elise felt bad that this episode had been a big fiasco, but at least now she knew.

"A healing always takes much strength from the healer. In time he will learn to replace the lost power with tremendous ease." He hefted Matt into a more comfortable position, her son's blond head lying peacefully against the copper skin of Noel's shoulder. Elise let out an incredulous laugh. "You're acting as if there will be a next time!"

In the strengthening daylight shining through the partially opened door, she watched as his eyebrows rose in challenge. "I cannot believe you still doubt your son's true calling in life."

"What are you talking about?" For a moment Elise forgot they weren't alone. "My son is practically comatose and that boy—" she turned around and her words were instantly halted as she saw the child being assisted to his feet by his beaming mother.

The woman spilled forth a steady stream of gratitude to Noel, a slumbering Matthew, and Elise. Noel acknowledged her appreciation with a few words in return. Elise stood there with her mouth hanging open and Noel wore a smile of supreme satisfaction as the woman's son chatted away as if he hadn't been at death's threshold minutes ago. They walked hand in hand out the front door, closing it softly behind them.

"You were saying?" Noel asked.

"Nothing," Elise muttered, wondering whether the feeling growing deep in the pit of her stomach was elation over the long awaited arrival of Matt's powers or dread at knowing he was truly not like the rest of humanity.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elise sat at the high table in the kitchen, alone, brooding. She sipped on a barely lukewarm cup of coffee, mulling over the past few days. Since Matt had healed the boy with the deadly snakebite, a few more villagers had come seeking his healing hands. Their maladies had been minor in comparison though; a sprained ankle, a migraine, and a case of the flu which Matt had cured with his hands and those funny-smelling leaves in that blasted suede pouch which Noel had replaced with a fresh batch their first few days here.

Just as Noel had promised, Matt's strength was increasing twofold each and every day. He still needed a nap after a healing, but he was in no way completely drained of energy, as he had been that first time. Although Noel had warned her that the larger scale a healing, the more energy would be drained from his body.

Each day since then Noel had taken Matt out into the jungle for training. Not only was he teaching Matt to strengthen his powers, but he was also showing him the various healing plants that grew wild in Noel's jungle home.

Elise let her thoughts stray to a more pressing issue: how could she continue to stay here, living as Noel's lover by night, a thorn in his side by day?

She had already resolved to the fact that she was in love with him, but how could she keep up the courageous smile she had been wearing, pasted on each morning when she awoke to find herself alone in bed, with Noel refusing to say more than two words to her at a time?

A small sigh filled the air as she recalled the nighttime hours spent with him. By day they were strained housemate's, by night passionate lovers. By day she would be lucky to have a meal with him, by night she was graced with a feast for the senses. During the day she rarely heard more than a muttered, "We will be back", or, "Good night", but each night when she lay alone in her room with sweet expectation flowing through her veins, Noel would appear at her bedside with hunger in his eyes. As always, she would welcome him with open arms.

He would leave her then some time during the night without a word.

One time she had pinned him, asking why he chose not to spend the night with her. His answer had been brief and to the point: "You will not even tell the boy of his healing powers for fear it would have an adverse affect on him, how would the knowledge of his mother sharing the same bed with the Dream Master affect him?"

She probably should have been angry at his insensitivity. Ever since they had been making love there had been no words of tomorrow or the future. No murmurs of everlasting love. No promises of them forming a family. But as she had told herself before, how could she expect Noel to give she and her son his heart and soul when she hadn't even given him the slightest hint they would be here in Xilitla in another week.

Why couldn't she just agree to stay here? Lord knew she wasn't missing anything exciting back in the city. And hadn't her son let her know on several occasions how much he enjoyed being here? Hadn't his demeanor changed drastically? Wasn't he a totally different child?

Noel's words came back to her, "What are you really afraid of, Elise?" She knew exactly what she was afraid of.

When her head pounded from turning over her thoughts this way and that and back again, she slid off the bar stool, padded across the cool tiled floor, and dumped her cold coffee down the sink. A look at the sky light overhead told her it would soon be time for her to fix dinner. Good. Something to keep both her mind and her hands busy and off the twists and turns it had been taking of late.

Just as she had finished rinsing her cup and setting it upside down on the counter, Matt came charging through the house, screaming like a wounded animal. "I killed him! I killed him!" He then went running up the stairs.

"Matt!" she called after him, her blood surging through her veins. He didn't stop, but ran to his room, slamming the door closed.

She quickly made her way from the kitchen, through the living room, and was just climbing up the first step when a vice-like grip grabbed her shoulder. She let out a little squeak of surprise and spun around, almost losing her balance, to find Noel standing there. His long hair was wind blown and his chest heaved beneath the thin material of his burgundy shirt, proof that he'd been running.

"What happened?" She planted her fists on her hips. "Who or what does Matt think he killed?" She couldn't handle this stress. Between worrying about Matt and her extreme confusion over Noel, she was ready to go insane.

Noel sucked in a deep breath of air to clear his lungs and calm his racing pulse. "This." He held out his left hand, showing her a small lifeless bird that looked much like a sparrow.

"What happened to it?" Her anger waned, replaced by a need to understand.

"Your son was feeding the creature some wild seeds. When the bird ventured closer and closer to take the offering from Matthew's hand, in his excitement..." Noel closed his eyes briefly, when they opened they had that mirror-like effect she recognized as his own unique way to block his true emotions from showing through to her. "He let loose some energy from his fingers and...you see the result."

"How could you subject him to such a thing?" Elise was incredulous. "I thought you told me you would teach him to control the energy in him? You told me you would keep him from ending up—"

"Just like myself." His tone was grim. He dragged his free hand through his hair, clenching his jaw tight. "I did not expect this to happen. But now that it has, it is a perfect lesson."

"Perfect lesson?" Her voice rose. "A lesson in killing another living being? That's horrible."

"Elise," Noel reached out a hand and touched her shoulder. When she pulled away from him, he dropped the hand to his side, curling it into a tight fist. "He needs to learn to harness his powers. Unlike me," he added bitterly. "The fact that I was never able to control my physical powers is why I cannot heal."

Elise felt numb. She closed her eyes, trying to take all of this in. It was just too much. When she opened her eyes again Noel was already brushing past her, going to Matt's room.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, stalking right after him.

At the closed door he stopped and looked down at her. "To take care of something." He placed his hand on the knob, twisted it and walked in. Matt was lying on his stomach, face against his pillow, crying his heart out.

Elise felt like tearing Noel Posas to shreds. She held back though as he went to sit on the bed next to Matt and talked softly to her weeping son, stroking his head. "Matthew, I want to tell you something."

"What." The one word was spoken on a watery sob.

"You did not mean to harm the bird, son. It is the power in you that erupted unknowingly."

Matthew ceased his tears. "You mean the stuff I used to help the boy that night and the villagers?"

Noel nodded. "The very same."

"Tell me what it is, Noel. Why does that happen?" Matthew scrubbed the tears from his eyes and sat up against the headboard, looking lost and oh, so small. "Why does that blue light come from me?"

Noel cast Elise a glance. When she nodded, he breathed a sigh that she interpreted as relief. "It is a long and complicated story, *hijo*. For the moment, all I can say is that everybody in this world has a special place in it. Everybody has something to offer, some more than others. As you know, I am the Dream

Master." Matt nodded in understanding. "When people have problems up here," he tapped a long finger to Matthew's temple, "I can go inside when they are asleep and help them with their problems. Remember when I visited you in your dreams?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded again.

"Well, that is my gift to the world. And you too have a special gift."

"I do?"

"Yes. You are a healer. That is why the sick boy who came to our home the other night was able to walk back out with his mother."

Matt's eyes lit up with understanding. "Oh...and that's why I made Gilbert's foot feel better and that old lady, I took away her fever, didn't I? With my hands and with the herbs."

"Yes."

Elise swallowed the emotion backing up in her throat. If only Noel had this same love and understanding in his young life when his powers had made themselves known, how different would he have turned out?

"But..." Matt looked downcast for a moment, directing his attention to his hands in his lap. Hands that could heal. Hands that could kill. "If I'm supposed to be a healer, why did the bird have to die?" New tears sprung to his eyes.

"You have to learn to control the powers in you. It will take time, but with practice it will become easier to handle each time. Soon you will be able to call upon your healing powers whenever they are needed and keep the energy tranquil when it is not." Noel reached out, wiping away Matthew's tears with his knuckles. "Give me your hand." Matthew reached out a tentative palm. "Place it over the bird." He looked reluctant but Noel smiled and Matthew relaxed a little, letting his hand rest lightly over the unmoving bird. "Now concentrate, just as you did with the villagers."

Matt closed his eyes. Elise was already at the side of the bed, watching on with her breath held tightly in her chest as the healing scenario repeated itself.

Soon Elise saw the tiny bird's chest begin to rise and fall. His little body twitched. Matthew opened his eyes and

snatched his hand away in surprise. The little bird hopped up on its legs and started twittering away in Noel's big palm, as if singing a song of thanks.

"It's alive!" Matt grinned, looking from Noel and Elise, back to the bird.

"It was never dead to begin with," Noel said. "Just momentarily unconscious due to the energy you accidentally subjected it to. Let us take it back outside. Yes?" He smiled.

"Okay," Matt agreed.

Elise had to fight back the tears she felt threatening her eyes. Now Matthew knew of his gift, and he had accepted it as she herself, a grown woman, had so much trouble doing.

* * *

The next evening, when Matt had gone to bed after an unusually uneventful day, Elise sat on the couch watching the crackling fire she had lit a half hour ago, staring into the flames, searching for some answers to the questions in her muddled head.

Why did she feel so uncertain? And why did another part of her feel so tranquil and fulfilled at the same time?

Matt seemed to take the knowledge of his healing powers in stride, though it may just be that he didn't fully comprehend the magnitude of what he possessed as yet. He had adapted easily to life in the jungle, hadn't given any indication he wanted to go back to the city, didn't miss video games or television. No, her son had made his life here, and had adopted Noel as a surrogate father.

Noel seemed comfortable with the fact.

So what was her problem?

They had a unique and comfortable home to live in, were never in want of food. She wasn't working round the clock. She had Noel to share her problems with. And, still, she was afraid to at last give in and say, "You were right about Matt's powers, Noel. In Xilitla is where he belongs."

And that was just it. Elise had come to terms with the fact that Matt had a lot to offer this village. The realization had come to her sometime during last night as she had spent it alone while Noel kept his distance and slept on the couch. Noel and her son got along well, as if they had each been in one another's lives for all time. But where did she fit in? She had no supernatural talent. Had nothing to offer Noel except her passion night after night, and, mutely, her love. She felt like an outsider.

She wanted him to return her love. She wanted them to be a family, and someday in the future to add other children to their circle of love. All of her life she had yearned for love and passion. Now she felt it clear to the depths of her being.

She sighed, deep in though, jumping when Noel came up behind her, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"I did not mean to frighten you." His voice came out with its usual air of placidness as he looked down at her.

Elise mentally calmed her racing heart. "I was just... thinking." She turned her face away from him, staring into the flames once more, wishing they would reveal all answers to her like fiery crystal balls.

She felt the cushion at her side give way as Noel sat beside her. The action caused her to lean into him. She looked up at him hoping he would slide an arm around her shoulder, give her any indication he had some feeling for her aside from lust. When several heavy heartbeats passed with him remaining stiffly composed, emotions masked, she maneuvered herself fully upright, scooting closer to the arm of the couch, avoiding his stare once more.

Noel cleared his throat. "Will—will you share those thoughts with me?"

Elise cast him a look of wariness mingled with distrust. Why did he want to talk all of the sudden?

Averting her gaze, she traced the nubby pattern of the tweed sofa. Giving a listless shrug, she forced her eyes to meet his. "What do you want to know?"

His own shoulders lifted and lowered, causing the material of his knit shirt to stretch taut before relaxing again. "How do you feel about Matthew's displays of healing?"

She gave a small laugh. "How can I continue to deny what has been proven before my very eyes—on more than one occasion? You were right all along." She threw her hands up in surrender. "Matthew does possess healing qualities, and you're doing a fine job of training him."

He gave a satisfied grunt. "You will stay then." It was a command, not a question. "Here. With me."

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, even trapped, Elise got to her feet, gravitating over to the fireplace. She examined the variety of clay pots sitting atop the mantle, not ready to answer him in regards to that area of her life just yet. Instead, she turned and faced him saying, "People should know about Matthew's powers, Noel. How can a small village keep this knowledge to themselves when he could offer so much to the world out there?"

Noel gave an adamant shake of his head. The action splayed his hair over his shoulders in a way that brought Elise's lust bubbling to the surface. "No." The one word was harsh refusal. "Like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, once it is discovered, so many people will have their hands into the treasure, each wanting a piece of the gold, until nothing is left." He rose from the couch and in three long strides he was at her side, his eyes boring into hers. "And still they would not be satisfied."

She knew he spoke from experience, and she herself had read in several books on Noel's shelves that many psychics chose to live a hermetic existence.

His lips twisted into a solemn line. "You know of my story. Do you want that for Matthew?"

Every word he said was painfully true. Offering to help the medical world with her son's healing energies would be like writing his certain doom. Everything she was afraid of happening would come to pass. He would be taken away from her. Studied like a guinea pig. Made to do the bidding of people who were only out to make money. Just as had happened with Noel. But Noel would protect him from such soul-snatching outsiders if they should ever catch wind of Matt's powers and tried to take him away.

She turned from him, suddenly feeling cold and empty. "I suppose you're right." Her voice wavered. "It seems so unfair though."

"Unfair," he repeated as if the word was greatly amusing. "Life itself is unfair much of the time."

"It's also unpredictable."

He let out a short laugh. "Yes, that too."

"Noel...I've been thinking—"

He inhaled a gulp of air, took Elise by the shoulders, pivoted her around and looked deep into her eyes. "Marry me, Elise."

Elise felt the floor beneath her feet heave and sway, just as her stomach was doing at the moment. "Excuse me?" She blinked several times, not believing what she was hearing. She would have crumpled in a heap to the floor if Noel weren't holding her so tightly.

"Marry me. Agree to be my wife." His voice was as intense as she knew the man to be.

"But—but why? You told me before chosen ones weren't allowed to marry," she reminded, not certain of how to react. "Not that I'd do it anyway," she quickly added.

"Perhaps I misconstrued the truth a bit." He stood disturbingly close, and though his touch ignited fire all over her body, her heart was wary of his offer.

"What do you mean?" Her voice slid out low.

His lips lowered, sighing over hers with his words. "The Ancient One existed without a mate simply because he chose to do so. As you pointed out before, I had purposely segregated myself from the company of others, thinking it was how my life would always be. It was a way to hold on to the resentment I felt. Elise...my village needs a healer."

Elise's blood temperature plummeted. Suddenly she felt chilled to the bone. A healer. That's all he was after. No words of love. No admissions of affection. It was all for his own selfish purposes. She pulled away from him, forcing herself to not run to her room and lock the door behind her.

Fighting for a calm exterior, she met his gaze with an unflinching one of her own. "Noel, when I decide to marry again it will be a relationship of mutual love. I traveled the road of an emotionless, convenient marriage before, I refuse to do it again."

"If you are looking for pretty words and claims of affection, you are looking at the wrong man, but I will be a good husband. Faithful, loyal—"

"Then I'll buy a dog if that's all I want," she bit back, angry at herself for expecting him to get down on bended knee and pour out his everlasting love to her when it was clear the man would never allow himself to feel such a tender emotion.

Just as she was about to tell him what he could do with his marriage proposal, Noel spoke once more, wrapping his hands around her waist, a gesture Elise took as his physical way to keep her with him. "You can make your life here. Matthew will have all he needs. So shall you. Whatever your heart desires, I will provide it for you.

She turned in his crushing embrace, wanting to ask if that offer included his carefully guarded heart, but all she could get out of her dry mouth and tight throat was a weak, "I don't know." She hated herself for not saying no outright.

With great effort she asked him to release her, saying she wanted to turn in early for the evening. He pinned her for a moment under his penetrating gaze, as if trying to delve into her mind and pluck from her mind the positive words he wanted to hear.

When he let her go, Elise hurried to her bedroom, cursing herself every step of the way for falling insanely in love with a man who refused to let her into his heart.

Later, as she lay awake in the oppressive darkness, immersed in a shroud of ever-growing indecision, she heard the knob on the door twist then click as it swung inward. Quickly she shut her eyes, knowing it was Noel who loomed in the shadowy doorway. If it had been Matt, his footsteps and presence would have been made loud and clear.

"Elise?" His voice was low and silky, laced with want and uncertainty at her previous behavior in the living room.

Though her body cried out for his, she resisted, feeling wounded from his cold proposal of marriage, needing time to think. A night spent in his passionate embrace would only cloud her mind more, would sway her into agreeing to his offer of a *faithful and loyal* marriage. So she kept her breathing slow and even, feigning deep slumber, though she knew such respite would not come to her tonight.

Noel whispered her name into the darkness once again. When she refused to answer, she heard as he heaved a sigh and was gone, closing the door behind him.

Elise turned to her side, giving up on all hopes of finding answers as she closed her eyes and prayed for sleep to claim her.

* * *

The next morning Elise awoke a killer-headache and still hadn't come to any decision where Noel was concerned. What would she say once she saw him today face-to-face? She got out of answering him last night, but she couldn't keep the question hanging in the air.

Her mind did a turn around and she wondered if she was being selfish. Running scared. How could she take Matt away from the positive influences of this beautiful place and the man they had both come to love? Yet, how could she not?

With a heavy groan at her chaotic thoughts, she forced herself out of bed, took a shower and changed. Making her way down the hall, she intended to brood over her mind's constant state of confusion while nursing a cup of hot coffee.

No doubt Matt would still be asleep at this early hour. Noel? Would he be sprawled out on the living room sofa, deep in his dreamland journeys, or perhaps already up and puttering around the kitchen as she had found him on a few occasions in the past, looking lost in his own home.

A peek in Matt's room proved she had been wrong. His bed was unmade and there was no sign of him anywhere in the small room. Perhaps he was in another part of the house, she counseled herself, or out with Noel early today. With a small smile on her lips she went into his room and smoothed the covers back in place, frowning when she saw his crystal necklace sitting on the night table. He always wore the token wherever he went, putting it on first thing in the morning, never taking it off except to shower or go to sleep at night.

A habit she had followed too until the eerie feeling of always being connected to Noel by that piece of stone became too much. Every time he thought of her it would grow warm and pulse—as she was sure would happen to him whenever she thought of him. Days ago the gift had been abandoned to a drawer of the dresser.

"Maybe he just forgot to put it on this morning." Though she couldn't fight back the prickling sensation at the back of her neck telling her something wasn't right.

When the bed was made, she went into the living room finding Noel gone also. She breathed a sigh of relief. They were together. As she made her way through the living room, she saw the empty sofa, blankets folded at one end, reminding Elise of the night the mysterious Indian had spent in her home. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Pushing aside any feelings that may have her making a hasty decision in regards to his marriage proposal, she went into the kitchen and started breakfast.

When she finished the *huevos rancheros*, a dish she had learned to prepare years ago to suit her own south-of-the-border taste buds, she heard the front door close with a loud thud. Seconds later Noel walked through the doorway, his expression guarded, body tense, dressed in his usual attire of jeans and a flannel shirt.

Elise clutched her coffee cup tightly, keeping her eyes on the floor, the counter, the ceiling, anywhere but on the intimidating man with a million questions on his handsome face. She felt guilty as all out after feigning sleep last night. By the look in his eyes, he knew she had been faking it too.

He stood in the doorway looking uncertain.

Needing to do something, Elise slid from the bar stool, going over to retrieve a coffee mug then poured him a cup from the pot she had recently brewed. She placed the steaming mug at the far end of the bar, a silent gesture telling him she wanted to keep a distance between them. She then went to retrieve the plate of food she had kept warm for him.

"Will Matt be coming in soon?" She forced herself to act as normal as possible.

She felt rather than saw Noel take up one of the stools. Heard him slide his mug to the edge of the table, bring it to his lips and sip long and deep before swallowing. At last he put down the cup with a muted thump and said, "I suppose so. He is not up yet?"

Elise turned to him, that feeling of dread sneaking up on her again. "I checked his room when I got up over an hour ago. He was gone. I thought he was with you."

Noel rose to his feet, making his way to her in just a few quick strides. "What are you saying?"

"He's gone." With shaking hands she placed his plate of food back on the stove. "What did you do with him, Noel?" She suddenly felt anger boiling in her veins. He was guilty,

she was sure, hiding her son since she couldn't make up her mind whether to stay in Xilitla or leave.

"Me? I have done nothing with him."

"Oh, don't play innocent, Noel Posas. I wouldn't give you an answer last night in regards to your heartfelt marriage proposal, your way to keep your precious healer in Xilitla, so you took him from me."

His eyes blazed with what she interpreted as worry and confusion, mingled with ire and pain. "Loca! I would do no such thing. Yes, I want you and the boy to remain here, but you are not mine to keep, I cannot force you to stay. And I would not resort to such a fiendish exploit as snatching him away from his mother."

So he was back to being *the boy*, Elise noted with an extra notch of impatience before her heart flopped. How could she have blamed Noel for taking her son? His worry was evident. He cared far too much for Matt to take him from her. Yes, he was desperate enough to resort to asking her to marry him just to keep Matt as the jungle's healer, but he was no kidnapper. And if that was all true...where was her son?

She reached out and laid an unsteady hand on Noel's forearm, her body instantly alive with the unique power he unconsciously offered. "I'm sorry, Noel. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. Of course you wouldn't do such a thing. Maybe he just wandered outside to play for awhile." She tried to stay calm and rational.

Noel rested a large hand over hers. Elise missed the intimacy they shared in their nocturnal hours. An intimacy he promptly squelched once his passion was spent and reality came rushing upon him each night.

"Perhaps he is at that," he offered. "Let us go look for him."

"Let's." Elise took his hand and he gave hers a firm squeeze that reached her heart.

Hurriedly, they made their way to the front door, Noel swinging it open as if it was made of mere paper and not over a hundred pounds of solid wood. "We must find him." He stopped just outside. "Dios, mio!" It was a whispered gasp.

"What?" Elise could hear her own fear in the one word.

Noel didn't answer, his gaze fixed on the porch directly in front of him. Elise forced her way outside, past him, and a shriek of fright came to her own lips as her eyes met the appalling sight: Two dolls, drenched with water, lay face down on the porch; one smaller than the other.

Noel reached out a foot and pushed them over. Elise leaned into him. The dolls, sopping wet, with vines binding their cloth arms and legs, were crude replicas of Elise and Matt.

"What does this mean?" She fought for control and an even voice when all she wanted to do was curl up in a ball and wish the last six months of her life away—even the part with Noel in it.

When he didn't answer her, instead keeping his gaze on the hideous dolls, she tugged on his shirt sleeve saying, "The knife, the dolls, they're warnings meant for Matt and me, aren't they? Not you. Somebody wants us gone. Tell me." Her voice was rising quickly as she grabbed hold of his arms and looked into his eyes. "Tell me who. Why." A single tear spilled from her eyes. "And...where is Matt?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Kako," Noel soberly replied, not quite meeting her eyes. Elise's brow puckered. "Who?"

"Kako," he repeated, kicking aside the gruesome dolls so they were out of sight, landing underneath the bench. "Three years ago he tried to take over as the village's new healer."

"He's a chosen one?"

"No." He gave a shake of his head. "He is a self-proclaimed curandero. A supposed wise man." Noel gave a disgusted snort at these words. "He is just a small, demented man with a bag of tricks and some knowledge in the area of natural healing. The villagers were easy to manipulate at that time since they were in desperate need of a healer." His eyes met hers and Elise didn't like what she saw there. After nearly a month she was used to his gray eyes harboring anger, passion, placidness, even mirth when he was in Matt's company. But not once had she seen this look of soul-deep worry.

"He is power hungry and will do all he can to reign as the Supreme Healer." He pressed his lips into a tight line then said, "I was sure he would never step foot in our village again."

Elise slumped onto the bench, all strength draining out of her weakened limbs. "So what does this mean?" She pointed to the area below her where the drenched dolls lay. Noel clenched his hands. "He is back. Not happy with the arrival of the true healer. He wants you and the boy gone." He took her by the upper arms, pulling her to her feet. "I swear to you, Elise, I will die before I allow that jackal to harm either you or Matthew."

As if the knowledge just struck her, Elise gasped. "Oh my God! Matthew! We have to find him."

"Yes." Noel nodded. "I know where Kako dwells. It is nearly two miles from here. That is where he must have taken the boy. He knows we will come after him. That is his wish."

"Well," Elise said when he continued to stare down at her as if she would vanish before his eyes, "let's go find Matt." Her last words were barely a whisper, "Before it's too late."

"It is best if you wait here." His expression was unreadable, but his body looked tense, the energy radiating off him felt like a live wire.

"No way. He's my son." She swallowed back the fear stuck in her throat. "He's all I have in this world."

"All right," he quickly gave in. "But stay by my side at all times."

Elise only nodded, taking his hand as he led the way.

* * *

As they traveled over rough terrain, Elise occasionally getting tangled in winding vines that snaked their way over the jungle floor, silence spread between them. Her mind rebelled against a million grisly things they may find. If this Kako person wanted to claim the title as the village's healer that badly, who knows to what lengths he'd go?

"Why didn't you get rid of that psycho before if you knew how crazy he was?" The question was more of an accusation directed at Noel's back. "You told me about those men you frightened away just by making one trip into their sleeping minds, why not do the same with this guy?"

Noel glanced back at her before focusing ahead once more. "For the very reason you just mentioned. He is mentally unstable. To venture into his nocturnal mind would be writing my own insanity. When he came back to our village after many years of absence, decades of living alone in the jungle away from all others, I attempted to make my way

into his subconscious and find out more about him. Why he had come back." He stopped suddenly, gave a deep, visible shudder, and moved on again. "It is not something I want to remember. I am sure I was very lucky to have exited his mind without any damage to myself." He stopped again, turned and held her still with a piercing gaze. "The things I witnessed inside that brain of his would put all American horror films to shame."

"Oh, Noel!" She reached out and wrapped her arms around his waist, leaning her head against his broad chest, needing this man's physical support. "What if we're too late? What if—?" She couldn't finish the sentence, fearing it would somehow add to Matt's danger if she spoke her fears aloud.

Noel slipped his arms around her, holding her close against him, offering her the comfort of his embrace. "Matthew is still alive," he at last said with great assurance.

When Elise looked up at him in question, tears hovering in her eyes, he reached up with one hand, extracting the crystal attached to the leather cord from the inside front of his shirt. "The crystal is still warm." He clasped it tightly in his palm. "Though he is not wearing his stone, I can still feel his energy."

Elise lifted a hand to her throat, remembering it had been days since she'd worn her own crystal.

Noel dug into his front pocket, pulling out her necklace. With the gentlest of motions he placed the leather lace over her head. He then took Elise's right hand, placing it over his crystal before repeating the procedure himself with her gem.

Immediately Elise felt the stone in her hand pulse with life. She gave a wobbly smile as she remembered his words of their first night here. Some say that the crystal has powers. That it binds people together. She knew it was more than a crystalline stone binding her to Noel. It was the same emotion tying her to Matt: Love. And though her heart craved to murmur those three beautiful words to the man looking down intently at her, she withheld them.

"Come, we must find Matthew," he said softly before placing the most delicate of kisses on her slightly parted lips. "Yes," she whispered, following his lead.

They trekked on in silence the rest of the way, the only sounds coming from the natural world around them. Her ears

listened intently for any sign of Matt, but all she heard was a bird screeching, calling for its mate and wind softly ruffling the tops of the trees, sending leaves down in a soft rain.

Noel finally stopped, pointing to a black opening in the mountainside directly ahead of them.

"Kako lives here." His voice was low.

This man also lived in a cave, Elise noted, but where Noel's natural home was a dedication to beauty and uniqueness, this cave before her was simply a rock structure devoid of doors, the opening looking like the yawning mouth of a monster.

No trees, shrubs or vines graced the walls outside. No waterfall could be heard flowing over limestone in the distance. Elise shivered, taking a step closer to Noel who stood there with an indefinable look on his hard-set features.

"He is in there. I can feel his evil soul radiating through the darkness." Noel took in a deep breath. "Matthew is in there too," he quietly offered.

Without another word he moved forward with purposeful steps, right up to the opening of the cave. "Kako! I know you have the boy. Let him go! Now!"

Elise saw that the dwelling was barely big enough for a bear to hibernate in during the winter, let alone house a man all year long. It was void of any furniture whatsoever, and she realized it looked much as she had expected to find Noel's cave-home those weeks ago. Faded, shabby blankets were on the dirt floor, and the charred remains of a fire sat at the entrance of the shallow cave. A portion of it seemed to veer off to the right, perhaps going deeper within the mountain.

She could see Matthew in the murky interior. Hands bound behind him, gagged and sitting to one side of the dank-looking dwelling.

"Matthew!" It was a whispered gasp.

"Yes, and Kako." Noel flashed a hard glance in her direction.

A figure came lumbering toward them. Elise plastered herself against Noel and he put his arm around her in a protective gesture.

When the small, withered man came out into the open, he squinted as if daylight wasn't usually part of his life. He smiled; showing off crooked and badly stained teeth. He said something to Noel in a language that was mostly Spanish and part Yaqui Indian. Noel answered, his jaw tight. Elise quickly grew frustrated, wishing she understood what they were saying.

Just when she was about to ask Noel, Kako spoke in her language, his English as broken as his teeth. "I am Supreme Healer!" he barked, glaring right at Elise, a look that caused her to shudder to her very soul.

"No, you are not!" Noel argued. "You are not a chosen one, Kako. You are merely a demented man who practices black magic and plays upon the fears of the villagers." He then added, "I should have killed you those years ago, if so, you would not be here bothering us now."

The man who looked old as the mountain at his back merely sneered, smoothing his hands over his shapeless garb that looked like a monk's horsehair habit. He was about six feet away, yet Elise could smell how filthy he was even at this distance. An old milk jug left out in the sun is what came to her mind.

"Call me what you will, but I am the village's healer. I let you chase me away once before." He looked Noel over from head to toe and smirked. "I am no match for you. But now," he rubbed his hands together like a greedy miser, "now I have something that will make certain my rise to the throne. The woman's son."

Tears hovered in Matt's eyes, silently pleading to be rescued from this crazed stranger. "You let him go!" Elise yelled, lunging toward Kako, ready to strangle his scrawny neck.

Noel grabbed her by the waist, pulling her close to him. "Give him to me, Kako. *El nino, la mujer*, they are mine. They belong to me. You harm either one of them and you are writing your own certain death." His words were as intimidating as Elise knew the man himself to be. And though his claims of such utter possession, as if she and Matthew were his belongings, should have made any modern woman spitting mad, Elise thought they were the most beautiful words she had ever heard.

Before she had another second to reflect over his remark, Noel yelled for her to drop, pushing her aside and to the ground just as Kako threw a large handful of powder at them that quickly ignited, exploding just over Noel's head like a small A-bomb. Elise heard an evil laugh and her eyes stung from the smoke the powder had left behind. The smell of sulfur hung in the air.

Noel swore blackly, wiping the sooty residue from his eyes. Elise was in a little better shape and saw Kako run off to the right with Matthew in tow.

"Matt!" she screamed, wishing this was all a bad dream. Wishing she would wake up and find herself in Noel's arms again on his great big bed, tangled amongst the sheets, spent and satisfied from their lovemaking. "Noel!" She looked back at him, ready to run after Matt and the evil creature holding her son hostage.

Noel was at her side in the next heartbeat. "We will rescue him. I promise you." Elise could see her own look of fear in his eyes.

"Yes," she whispered, "but will he still be alive?"

"Come." He took her hand, but didn't answer the question.

As they snaked their way through the thick brush and vines, they soon reached a dead-end as they emerged from a thicket and stood facing the side of a small mountain that went at least thirty-feet straight up. A wild river stood between them and the mountain. It was uncommonly turbulent, as if Kako's presence had angered the normally tranquil waters. Now it crashed loudly against the rocks before speeding away in frenzy.

"Where do we go now?" She still held Noel's hand tightly, afraid that she would lose him too if she was to let go.

No sooner had her words been spoken than they heard a strange sound like that of a whooping crane. The eerie noise came from straight up. Elise and Noel directed their attention to the top of the jagged mountain, seeing Kako standing there. He held Matthew by the back of his Superman t-shirt, pushing him dangerously close to the edge.

Elise gasped. "Do something, Noel! He's going to throw Matt over the side!"

Noel looked across the churning water and up the side of the mountain, turned his head to the left, spotting an easier way up. "Stay here." His words gave her no room for argument. "Keep Kako busy while I go up the other side."

Elise nodded, watching as he ran into the grove of trees, disappearing from view. Kako's eyes were on Matt at the moment and didn't see as Noel took off. Her heart beat frantically in her chest as she watched Kako hold her son perilously close to the edge of the cliff.

"Please!" Elise cupped her hands to the sides of her mouth and called up to the grinning man. "Let my son go!" When she received no answer, only a high-pitched cackle that told her he had no intention of doing so, she said, "Why are you doing this? What do you want?"

She saw his thick gray brows snap together. "What do I want? I want you and the boy to leave Xilitla at once. I intend to rule as Supreme Healer! I have waited too long. I have spent much time practicing...and waiting. I will not have it taken away by a *gringa* and her child."

"How can you have taken away something that was never yours to begin with?" She tried to keep him talking, hoping Noel would make a speedy and silent ambush.

Her words seemed to ignite a simmering rage within the old man. "It could have been if not for the Dream Master." He spoke Noel's title as if the words left a bitter taste in his mouth. "But I have ways to take care of him as well." He let out a loud laugh. "Soon, the Dream Master will himself be only a dream."

No sooner had the threat been spoken when Noel jumped out from a bush, lunging at Kako. The wiry hermit was indeed caught off guard, but like a slippery fish he escaped from Noel's grasp, Matthew still in his clutches.

Reaching into one of his pockets, he withdrew a tightly clenched fist then tossed a handful of the same explosive powder right in Noel's face.

Noel was blinded and stumbled backward. Elise, unable to see through the thick cloud, prayed Noel wouldn't fall over the edge or even Kako since he held fast to Matt.

When the haze cleared, Noel swore loudly, causing a flock of birds to race from the tops of nearby trees.

Kako and Matt were nowhere to be seen.

Elise frantically tried to locate her son's small figure at the cliff top, but saw nothing, only Noel who was furiously rubbing his stinging eyes. She heard a scuffling sound from the trees beside her, and, wasting not another moment, she went in the direction of the activity, knowing it would lead her to her son.

* * *

"Elise! Do not go off by yourself!" Noel called after her, making his way back down the side of the cliff after his fruitless attempt to rescue Matthew.

By the time he reached the bottom, his boots crunching over dirt and leaves and small stones, Noel noticed the air was unusually still and a feeling of dread grew in the pit of his stomach. Elise was nowhere. With several angry oaths flowing from his lips, he went in the direction that Kako, Matthew, and Elise had taken, praying to the gods above that he would not be too late.

Though Kako's power was no match for his own, he had underestimated the man's state of mind. If nothing else the years of solitude only added to the small recluse's unstable thoughts.

On legs propelled by sheer fear and other emotions refused to name, he followed the voice in his heart urging him to find Elise and Matthew as quickly as possible. His chest ached and his eyes burned, not from tears of worry, he assured himself, but from the residue of the flash-powder.

The crystal against his chest pulsed wildly, urging him on, faster and faster, telling him he must hurry. Jumping over small boulders, bypassing the vine-covered monoliths left by his father, Noel ran with purpose. His senses were numb to the dense earthy smells, the primitive sounds of nature around him that he usually found so comforting. With his next breath his soul latched onto something: He was getting closer to them.

When he came to the jungle clearing very near his home, he stopped short, dragging air into his empty lungs. There, standing before him in a perfect circle, were many of the villagers. They looked over at him, not in fear or awe as he was used to, but with wide smiles on their faces. Noel's puzzled gaze landed on the man in the center of the human enclosure: Kako. Wrists and ankles bound tightly, he lay face

down in a patch of dirt. Pablo gave the ghoul a kick in the ass. They all laughed as the shriveled man cursed.

Noel walked forward feeling very stiff. "Donde el nino?" he asked, looking from one bemused face to another.

"Here I am, Noel!" Matthew appeared, holding Maria's hand. On the woman's right hip she carried her infant son.

"He is safe," she quietly murmured, not quite meeting Noel's eyes.

Enrique stepped over to Noel. "Where is your woman?" Real concern was there on his face, and the other villagers stopped their merriment of at last putting Kako in his place.

Noel scalped a hand through his hair. "I was hoping she would be here. She ran off in search of the boy."

Pablo gave Kako another kick with his bare foot, demanding to know where Elise was. When Kako refused to answer, he reached down and grabbed a handful of his matted hair, threatening to rip his heart out with his bare hands if he did not answer.

Noel stared in awe, finding it most bewildering the way the villagers, who in the past had shunned him, were now coming to his aid.

Finally the weakened man on the ground spoke. "You know where she is." He looked at Noel. "Rescue her if you can, Dream Master." The taunting statement was followed by more deranged laughter.

"Go to her! *Tu mujer*!" Enrique urged. "We will watch over the boy and tend to Kako."

"Mi mujer," Noel softly repeated, blinking his eyes as if waking from a trance. "Yes, I will find her!" He offered Enrique and the rest of the villagers a small smile of gratitude that felt unfamiliar on his face but warmed his heart even so.

With one last glance at Matthew who looked overwhelmed by all that was happening, Noel went racing in the direction of the river. Following clues from his premonition, he went straight to where it had portended she would be.

He prayed he wouldn't be too late. Prayed he would have a million tomorrows with Elise and her son. That he would have the opportunity to speak from his heart instead of his foolish pride.

When he came to the edge of the river he recognized all too grimly from his dream, he bent over and rested his hands

on his denim-clad knees, striving for a full breath when his chest felt as if iron bands were imprisoning him.

A sensation overcame him, not unlike déjà vu. Scenes flashed before his mind's eye as he looked around at scenery he had witnessed each day for more than three decades. Never before had the jungle looked as foreboding and deadly as it did to him at this very moment. He tried to force away the terrible images that were shown to him that night: The fastmoving river, the sun slipping behind a dark cloud blocking out most of the daylight, and...Elise's drowning form.

As he recalled the last part of the premonition, the crystal that lay nestled close to his heart grew cold, as if every bit of life drained from it. Elise had only been out of his sight for a short while, and now he may never look into those beautiful green eyes of hers again.

Forcing his gaze to meet the rushing water before him, his heart dipped when a lump of blue and lilac cloth went slipping by before becoming entangled on the branch of a fallen tree lying in the river. The swift water sluiced over the so-still form of what he knew to be Elise.

With a savage cry, Noel ripped his boots from his feet then dove into the cool water, arms slicing against the heavy current as he fought to gain access to the other side and the limp form of Elise.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

When he finally reached her, he thought for certain his heart would explode from anger and sorrow both. When he pulled her lifeless body from the hostile waters and gently laid her down on the mossy ground, he knew a loss he had never known before.

Yes, he had lost his parents and his only friend the Ancient One, and both losses had hurt, but nothing could compare with the black void swallowing him as he sat back on his heels viewing Elise's ashen complexion, blue lips and chest that held no breath of life.

"No!" He raised a fist skyward, wanting again to curse the fates, but he quickly brought the clenched hand to his chest, bowing his head in self-recrimination. He only had himself to blame. It was he who shunned the world, who did not know the meaning of life until two people, one blond and the other copper-haired, entered his sorrowful excuse of an existence.

In a last attempt to reclaim what he should have offered so freely the moment he brought this woman and her son back here to Xilitla, Noel turned Elise's head to the side, pushing on her icy stomach to expel the water from her lungs. He then put one hand at the back of her neck, held her nose closed and sealed his mouth over hers, offering her the breath of life. How he wished he possessed healing powers, knowing that Matthew was too far away to be of any help now.

But it was best that the boy wasn't here to witness this. Elise was already crossing to the other side. If Matthew's attempts to bring her back failed, he would forever blame himself for the loss of his mother.

For several minutes Noel continued the process of breathing for her, then pressing down upon her motionless chest with his flat palms together acting as an artificial heartbeat.

Love. The word sliced through him. He had fought it from the moment he first saw the woman who now lay unmoving at his knees. Had he lost it without ever having claimed it?

His lips tightly over Elise's, he breathed his very soul into this woman. The crystal against his chest grew warm and pulsed with life. His blood raced with optimism as Elise's chest heaved. He sat up straight, staring down as she gave a huge gasp, trying to make up for every moment her body was deprived of oxygen, coughing up the remaining water her chest held.

"Elise!" Noel gathered her into his arms, holding her tightly against his chest. "Thank the fates you are alive."

Her eyelids slowly fluttered open. "Noel? What happened?" Her voice came out weak.

"You will be fine, *querida*," he whispered softly against her cheek, uncaring of the tears sliding down his own. Mentally he willed his own life's energy to fill her. "Take all that I am into you."

Elise pulled her head back, slowly recovering from her near-death experience. She reached up a heavy hand and cupped his cheek. Noel shivered deep inside. "Where's Matt?"

"Safe." He kissed her lips, her eyelids, her chin and temples. "The villagers captured Kako and stayed with Matthew while I went in search of you."

Elise moved her head a fraction, squinting, trying to focus. "Am I dreaming?"

Noel spoke as if she had not just asked him a question. "Yo te amo, mi vida. I love you."

He felt her body tense, eyes wide. "I must be dreaming."

"I love you." Noel smiled down at her. He said it again in the ancient language of his people then told her, "I am only sorry I did not say it before now. Stay with me, Elise. You and Matthew. Be *mine*."

* * *

Elise felt her heart skip a beat, out of joy or trepidation, she wasn't sure. His response to her next question would answer that. "Why, Noel?" Her throat felt like she had scraped it raw with a pumice stone. "Is this proclamation of love for me?" She inhaled a shuddering breath before letting it out slowly. "Or is this just another attempt to keep us here because your village needs a healer?"

He was silent for a moment. Only the sound of the river beside them broke the silence. "I cannot deny that is one of the reasons." Elise turned her head away from him, but he grabbed hold of her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. Eyes that were unusually clear at this moment. "But more importantly I want you to stay because I love you. You resurrected a part of me that had been dead for so many years. You gave me love. You gave me life. And if it takes the rest of my years on earth, querida, I want to return the favor."

"Noel..." She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she felt her love for the dark man hovering over her nearly bursting her heart. "I love you too."

Several footsteps approaching caught their attention. A look to the right showed Matt riding atop the shoulders of Enrique, with Maria and their baby by his side. More of the villagers trailed behind.

"Hi, mom! You okay?" Matthew waved and grinned, as if this hadn't been the most harrowing day of their lives. Elise marveled at his resilience. After she smiled and nodded he said, "You should have seen Kako! He ran right off the cliff over by the village!" He swooped a hand up in the air and down, for visual effect. "We unbound him, telling him to leave and never return. We have our true healer," Enrique informed, lifting his head in Matt's direction. "He screamed as if the devil himself had taken hold of his soul, ran to the cliff and jumped off." He shook his head though there was no sorrow on his face, only remorse for a life wasted. "He will no longer bother us." The young man smiled at Noel and Elise.

Elise felt a bit uncomfortable being on display in front of the whole village, cold and soaking wet. "Could you help me up?" She directed the question to Noel.

"You have not answered my question." She arched a brow at him, mutely asking him to elaborate. "You have not consented to being my wife."

She let out a little breath of awe at everything that had taken place over the last month and especially today. "Yes, Noel," she whispered, looking very serious. "But...will it be hard for you to live with a person who isn't a Chosen One?" A playful smile glided over her now pink lips.

Noel gave a short grunt of triumph, scooping a wet Elise up into his arms, water dripping from his own body. "You possess more power than Matthew and I ever will." He placed a hard kiss on her lips. The villagers hooted with laughter. Matt grimaced and pretended to gag himself with his finger.

Enrique set Matthew down on his feet so he could walk along side of Noel who still carried his mother, as the villagers melted back into the woods.

"Let's go home," Matt said, skipping along. "I'm starving."

Noel laughed loud. "Yes, let's go home, *hijo*." He then looked at Elise, bent his head and whispered in her ear. "After I make love to tonight I will join you in your dreams and take you again."

A warm and delicious feeling curled up inside of Elise. "I can't wait."

Biography

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Born with a sponge for a brain and a passion for writing Kelly Wallace seems to have set out to soak up all the knowledge she can in this lifetime. She's a certified counselor, natural health consultant, and successful psychic advisor through her own website The Psychic Soul, and recently...she's become a student of forensics.

Kelly spent her childhood honing her craft and torturing her younger sister with tales of the beasts and ghouls that lived under her bed, waiting to nibble on uncovered toes. When her short story devoted to Abraham Lincoln received 5 gold stars and was displayed in the school office she decided right then and there at the age of seven that her ultimate dream was to become an author.

A lover of romance and strong characterization, Kelly believes that any story worth reading should have a hero/heroine that the reader can fall in love with. She is currently living her dream, writing sizzling tales of suspense with paranormal elements, as well as contemporary and humorous romance. All of her books contain highly sensual love scenes and sexual tension that will make your heart race!

Kelly has lived in Los Angeles and Baltimore, and now resides in Tucson, with her sights set on Austin Texas within the next couple of years.

Other Romances by Absolute XPress

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