



*Come
As You Are*

MELINDA BARRON

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Special thanks to Tiff, for her patience and friendship.

For J

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on...”

—*William Shakespeare, The Tempest*

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Chapter One

*Oh so beautiful, this one
She warms my soul and gives me hope
Could she be the one?
Yes, I believe she is, in one form or another
Either she'll gift me with her life
Or she'll provide me with my heart's desire*

*So hard to tell which one I would like best
It's always such a pleasure to watch them die
But the sweet morsel lying beneath me right now
Shouldn't die so quickly
It would be a waste of her warm and willing body*

*Now, my little angel
Do not fret so, all will be well
Yes, that's it
Sleep now, my sweet
And rest well
You'll need your strength*

* * * *

Tempest Gandy opened her eyes slowly, her spirit savoring the soft light caressing her face. It came in through a small crack in the translucent sheers hanging from the full-length windows that led to the balcony. And it marked another new day, another day where she woke

up tired, despite the fact she'd slept the night through. Her body ached as if she'd been taking part in a sex marathon. What was wrong with her?

She closed her eyes, remembering the dream that had kept her wrapped up tightly; the warm male hands that caressed her breasts and stroked her thighs, leaving her body tingling for more.

But while her body craved the attention of her dream lover, her mind screamed at her that something was wrong. This was the seventh night in a row that she'd had this dream. They were always the same, featuring a man who didn't seem to have a face—or even a body, stroking her to orgasm, leaving her sated and very sore.

He didn't seem to care about his own pleasure, for when she'd tried to reach for him she'd realized he wasn't there. One minute he'd been touching her, the next he'd just vanished.

No, that wasn't really right. He hadn't been there in the first place. She'd never seen a form. That had been just fine with her. When was the last time a lover had cared about her enough to make her climax without worrying about his own pleasure?

Never, that's when. She shouldn't be concerned about it. After all, it was only a dream.

Or was it?

The last few mornings her clit had been sore, as if someone had actually toyed with it all night long. And today was no different.

She had climaxed again and again. And again. And again. The sensations had risen with each climax, so much so that she would be screaming at him to leave her alone, to stay away from her, to let her rest. Too much pleasure could bring pain. She'd tried to convince him of that but he wouldn't listen.

Until right at the end. She remembered his deep voice whispering for her to relax, to sleep. And she had. But not enough for her to forget the dream.

She pushed back the covers and swung her feet over the side of the bed, the hard wood chilly under her soles as she stood and padded over to the floor to ceiling windows, pulling back the sheers and lifted the sash all the way up. She stepped outside, not caring that she wore only the shorts and ripped T-shirt that she slept in.

It was early, the only people who would be out now were her neighbors and she trusted every one of them. Tourists didn't generally find their way to her neighborhood until later in the day. At this time of the morning, they would be exhausted from partying on Bourbon Street the

night before to go exploring. She took a deep breath and sighed in pleasure as the smells of fried dough coated with sugar reached her nostrils. Beignets. Her mouth watered and she made plans to go to the corner and pick up some of the tasty concoctions, along with a large café au lait.

October in New Orleans: it didn't get much better than this. The weather would be middle of the road, there might be some rain but it wouldn't be too bad. Not at this time of the month. The heavier rains generally came earlier in the season, and this year the storms had been blessedly absent.

She'd worried a little about buying her house on Dauphine, five blocks from the Mississippi River. If another hurricane like Katrina hit, she might regret it. But she decided she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. Her house was located one street over from Bourbon, which would come in handy when she'd finished all the repairs and opened her B&B; it would be within walking distance for partiers.

The house had been in relatively good repair, despite the fact it had set empty for almost ten years. It had escaped the worst of Katrina's wrath, and the last owners had obviously planned to do what she was doing: running a B&B. Their work had been extensive, and she wondered once again why they'd given it up. The realtor practically salivated over Tempest's interest in the property, and when she'd named the asking price of a little more than \$150,000 for the six bedroom, three-bath house, Tempest had been amazed. She'd also been very suspicious.

She'd once again questioned the former owner's motives, but the realtor would only tell her they'd moved back East.

The realtor assured Tempest that there was nothing structurally wrong with the building, and the inspection had confirmed that information. She'd decided the deficiency must be that there was a ghost attached to the building, but that idea had quickly vanished. Having a resident ghost would be a definite plus in a New Orleans hotel. People would run to book rooms if they thought there was a chance of meeting up with a spirit. She could probably double the price she would be asking for rooms.

Plus, she'd been in the house for more than two months now and had not seen an inkling of a ghost. All that had happened was her recurring sexual dreams that left her more depleted of energy as the days passed.

She needed coffee. Now. She took one last, lingering look at the street, waving to Mrs. Baker, who had lived in this neighborhood since the 1940s. When she'd first moved in, Tempest

had tried to guess the woman's age, but there was no one around to tell her whether she was right or not. Her neighbor, Dex, had only said, "She's been here forever." Going up to the woman and saying, "So, did you enjoy the 1920s?" didn't seem like the proper thing to do, so Tempest had just let it slide.

The older woman, a to-go cup of coffee in one hand and a white pastry bag in the other, wiggled the sack to return the greeting. Then she hurried down the block and darted inside her gate. Mrs. Baker would stop to talk to Tempest when Tempest was on the street, but she would never come near the front door, and when Tempest greeted her from the balcony as she'd just done, the woman never kept her gaze fastened on the house for long.

As Tempest studied the spot where Mrs. Baker had just been, she wondered why she avoided the house. All the other neighbors had come by to welcome her to the area two months ago when she'd moved in. All of them except for the one who had lived here the longest. Strange.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, then centered on her to-do list for the day. The plumber would be here at one, to change out the fittings in one of the downstairs bathrooms. Before that, though, the gardener was going to finish putting in the fountain she'd selected--a large, wonderfully carved block of stone with a marble sphere on top of it. The water would move the sphere, giving it, she hoped, a sort of otherworldly feel.

The garden behind the house was huge; another thing she hoped would be a great draw to potential customers. One of the previous owners had torn down the slave quarters that once sat behind the house, extending the area for plantings. The gardener had already set up three stone benches at various places, two of them tucked behind bushes that would give young newlyweds a place to go and neck when they booked a room.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," she whispered. "You have to get things done first. One day at a time, and it's just the two things today."

She stretched her arms above her head and yawned. "Well, that and the painting. I need to finish the kitchen."

She'd selected bright yellow for the kitchen, accenting it with light green to give it a cheery look that made people feel at home. It was a large space, with a table for come and go breakfast offerings.

Thinking about breakfast made her stomach rumble. *Time to shower, eat and get the day going.* She moved back inside the window, stopping to stare at the doorway. Her two large black cats, Trinculo and Prospero, stood just beyond the entry to the bedroom, staring at her.

“Come on in, you two.” When they didn’t move, she put her hands on her hips. “Listen, your strike about avoiding this room needs to end. There’s nothing here. Get in here or no tuna for you tonight.”

When neither cat moved, she frowned. This really was getting to be too much. They’d had one strange experience and the cats would no longer come in here. At first, they’d been thrilled with their new surroundings. They’d run from room to room, examining each place and checking out new furniture as it had arrived.

She knew they’d picked out their favorite places to sleep, and hoped that, when guests started arriving, the closed doors would not upset her felines. And she hoped whatever dogs the customers brought were okay with cats. Her four-legged companions were laid-back enough to be ambivalent about having new animals around. They never had. This was why it concerned her that they’d banished themselves from her bedroom.

“Weirdos.” She stepped toward them, stopping just inside the doorway. She bent down and extended her hand. “Come on, Culo, Pero, come here.” If she didn’t know better, she would almost bet that they both shook their heads. Either way, neither of them moved, their stony stares remaining fixed on her face.

“You know I miss you two at night. Do you miss me?” They gave her no indication of an answer and Tempest stood. “Fine, be that way. Maybe I should trade you in for newer models.”

The moment she stepped outside the room, both cats started to meow furiously.

“Okay, I’ll feed you. Give me a second.”

She hurried to the bathroom, wondering how much money it would cost to outfit her own room with a private bath. When she’d first moved in, the idea there wasn’t one hadn’t bothered her. But the more she thought about it, the more she’d decided she wanted one. She made a mental note to ask the plumber today. She went about her business, then traveled down the stairs, both cats running around her to race toward the kitchen.

She put down food, watching as they bent their heads toward the bowls. “At least your fear of my bedroom didn’t put you off your eating schedule.” After a few minutes of watching them scarf down food, she decided it was time for her to do the same.

After taking a quick shower, she donned some jeans and a loose T-shirt. A trip to the corner store provided her with coffee and beignets, which she enjoyed in the garden as she watched Culo and Pero chase after insects. Watching their exuberance reminded her of the listless way they would stare into her bedroom, and their refusal to cross the entranceway.

Something was up. Maybe she needed to have a priest come over and bless the house, or she should burn some sage around each room. Or both. That would cover all her bases. Before she did that, though, she needed to finish the renovations.

“I’m going inside, you two. Are you coming with me?” Both of them stopped chasing a butterfly and turned to her. The looks on their faces said, “We’re having fun, leave us alone.”

Tempest laughed. “Lazy butts. You need to grow opposable thumbs so you can pick up a paint brush.”

She turned toward the house, her energy picking up just a little with the influx of caffeine. She’d paint, then take a break for another trip to the store for another jolt of coffee. It would be a perfect morning.

* * * *

“Ms. Gandy?”

Tempest groaned and tried to open one eye. Her body felt as if she’d been fitted with a suit of lead.

“Ms. Gandy? Do I need to call the ambulance?”

The accent made the word sound like “ambulance.” Tempest opened both eyes and looked into the concerned face of Mr. Hathaway, her gardener. Behind him stood the plumber, a man whose name she could never remember.

She looked around and tried to gain her bearings. She was on the kitchen floor, a paintbrush clutched in one hand. The overturned container of paint rested on the floor, leaving a trail of yellow that lead toward the backdoor. Her free hand was resting in it.

She pulled it up and stared as the paint dripped from her palm. “What...?”

“You sick?” The plumber continued to stare at her as if he thought she would sprout another head.

“No, I’m fine.” She tried to sit up, her one and only head spinning. Thank goodness she didn’t have another one. What had happened? She remembered going to the store and enjoying her coffee and beignets. Then she’d come back here and started to paint. She’d been tired, she

remembered, and had yawned. And then there had been the voice, deep and commanding, sensual yet just a little scary, telling her to sleep, to let him in.

Her stomach flipped and her heart went into overdrive, making her chest ache. What the hell had happened?

“I’m fine,” she said, keeping her voice low. “Really, I just must have...fallen sleep.”

“While paintin’?” Mr. Hathaway took the brush from her hand and laid it across the lip of the can. “You want I should call your parents? Or one your brothers? Or ya sista?”

“No, thank you.” She took his hand as he helped her up. Behind him, the no name plumber was looking around the room, his gaze nervous. “I’m fine. I just haven’t been sleeping very well.”

“Dis place too big for one woman to fix.” The gardener’s face drew into a frown.

“That’s why I have you, Mr. Hathaway, and you, Mr....Melton,” the name came to her lips at the last minute. “Plus a whole handful of other workers who are willing to get things done.”

When neither of them replied, she stepped toward the sink, running her hand under the warm water. “Speaking of fixing things, what’s up?”

“Nothing yet,” Mr. Melton said. “I was going upstairs when we found you here. Course I had to wait to get inside since you didn’t answer the door at first. I rang the bell and knocked.”

She nodded, wondering how they’d gotten into the house, then remembering that she’d given Mr. Hathaway, who had worked for her parents for years, a key.

“I’m sorry.” She’d slept through the bell? And someone knocking at the door? She glanced around. Where were Culo and Pero? “The cats...”

“They outside,” Mr. Hathaway supplied. “In the garden, sleeping.”

“I guess it was an epidemic.” Tempest hoped her laugh covered up her nervousness. “Okay, let’s get to work. I’ll come and talk to each of you about different ideas I have. Just give me a minute.”

Both men nodded and headed out, one to the backdoor, the other to the back staircase. When they were gone, Tempest wiped off her hand, then headed toward the phone. Something was going on in this house. She wasn’t sure what, but she was pretty sure it was something supernatural. You didn’t grow up in New Orleans and not believe in that type of thing.

Having dreams while she was sleeping was one thing, but being commanded to fall asleep was another problem altogether.

There was only one person that she knew of who had a handle on otherworldly things. She punched in a number she knew by heart, smiling at the soft, “WXBJ, how may I help you?” that greeted her ears.

“Yes, I’d like to speak with Quinn Nicholas, please. It’s urgent. Tell her Tempest Gandy is calling.”

Chapter Two

What is happening here?

Does she think she can just go out of the house at night?

That can't be allowed

Her nights belong to me

There had been a major break today

She'd succumbed to my demands during the waking hours

It brought me such pleasure to watch her crumble to the floor

To see her eyes close, to hear her whispered "Yes, Sir" in response to my command

It means she's close to being mine, totally

So many of my kind rushed into these things, scaring their chosen women

I know better, though

Women give more easily of themselves if one takes the time to seduce them

And now that she's proven her worth, she is ready

Today would be the perfect time

She will call

And I will answer, in full form

I'll make her my own, permanently

Maybe I shouldn't wait

We should consummate things now

Tempest

There was no response from her.

Next to her, the cat hissed and ran from the room and she turned to watch it, frowning. A ringing bell tore a scream from his throat as she focused her attention on the instrument in her hand.

*This won't do
You can't ignore me!
You will be punished for this
Tonight, I will see to your discipline and you will never ignore me again
Tonight you will learn that your life belongs to me*

* * * *

A “come as you are” type of place, huh? Tempest stood in front of Franco’s Grill, glancing at the pristine white façade. A simple menu board gave prices for the offered fare, which included pasta, seafood and po’boys. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of an oyster po’boy, stuffed full of the delicious seafood treat and dripping with wonderfully spicy rémoulade sauce.

The prices were moderate, but the front of the restaurant promised something special. She hoped she was dressed appropriately, wearing only jeans and a cotton blouse. Restaurants in the French Quarter varied from simple to extravagant. This one seemed middle of the road from its modest front.

But from the looks of the menu, Quinn had definitely made a good choice for their meeting. Her longtime friend had been thrilled to hear from her, but when Tempest had told her she needed information on ghosts, Quinn’s manner had turned serious. She’d suggested a dinner with her two lovers, Devlin St. Giles and Fletcher Covair, and Tempest had quickly agreed.

She knew Dev and Fletch were part of a group that hunted ghosts throughout the New Orleans area. Hopefully they could come by see if they thought her place was haunted. Thinking about the two men and Quinn produced a spurt of good-natured jealousy inside Tempest. She was happy her friend had found love with not just one, but two men. Tempest just wished she could find one for herself.

If Quinn could do that, why couldn’t Tempest find love with one man? That idea totally sucked. Maybe she needed to get out more often. One thing to support that fact was the idea this

restaurant was mere blocks from her new home, and she'd never even known it was here. Yes, she definitely needed to get out more.

She stepped inside the door. Jazz music greeted her and she looked around the room. It was a bar. Her eyes widened as she searched for Quinn. Not seeing her friend, her brows furrowed. She was sure Quinn had said Franco's Grill on Orleans Street. Maybe she should have written it down.

One more scan of the room didn't pinpoint Quinn, but it definitely hit on the absolutely gorgeous man who was making his way toward her. He was tall, well over six feet, with dark hair and a grin that twinkled all the way up to his dark eyes.

When he reached her, he winked. "Tempest?"

"Yes?" *Oh my—I should—I should say something.* "Who are you?"

She groaned at her choice of greeting. It didn't seem to bother him, though. He laughed softly and put his hand on her arm. The touch was light, but it made her body tingle with delight.

"I'm Franco LeBeau, your host. Quinn and the gang are upstairs, in the restaurant."

"Oh, cool." *Stupid, Tempest, stupid!* She was out of practice with the male sex if all she could think to say to this absolutely stunning man was cool. She should have said, "Nice to meet you," or "How did you know I was Tempest," or better yet, "You're absolutely gorgeous. Can I get an order of you to go?"

"Let me take you there." He stepped behind her and put his hand on the small of her back. Her body pulsed in response to his touch as he steered her toward the circular stairway that set in the far corner.

They passed a stairway that ran against the wall and she glanced at it as they walked by.

"That one goes to the main room." How had he known she was thinking about it? "The other one goes to a private room that I use for parties and such."

"Sounds good," she replied. Where was her brain? It obviously decided to take a dinner break the minute she'd seen this man walking toward her because it didn't seem to be working anymore. She should have said, "How many people make up a special party? Two maybe, like you and me? If that's the case, what's on the menu? You? After a round of oysters, that is. Make that several rounds."

Tempest flushed as they made their way up the stairs. She was hyper-aware of the fact he was behind her, watching as she climbed. She was also very conscious of the fact that her mind

was thinking about having sex with this man. She envisioned herself bent over as he pounded into her, bringing her to orgasm, making her scream. The next scene showed her with her legs splayed wide, his head buried between them. Pleasure snaked through her as his tongue teased her clit.

Right when she was about to come, he stopped, standing to tower over her. He undressed slowly, revealing his gorgeous body inch by glorious inch. When he got to his pants, he undid the top button, sliding his hand down below the waistband of his jeans, much like a stripper would do, when it was obvious his hand had cupped his cock he said, "Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes, oh good Lord above yes. Take me now and—"

"Temp!" Quinn's greeting interrupted her fantasy. The newest WXBJ news anchor came running across the room, arms outstretched. She gathered Tempest in a bear hug. "It's so wonderful to see you."

Quinn had never looked so great, Tempest thought. Not only did she have two fantastic lovers, but she also had the job of her dreams as a news anchor. Originally, the station passed her over because her weight was "not up to camera standards." But the woman they'd hired had been a disaster, and when she'd left the station, the producers finally offered Quinn the job, and the station ratings had soared. It seemed the public didn't care that a woman who carried a few extra pounds delivered the news. The public loved Quinn.

"It's good to see you, too," Tempest said as Quinn released her hold. She glanced at the table where five people now sat, watching them. "Wow. It looks like we are having a party."

"Just a few friends," Quinn responded as she took her by the arm and led her toward the table. "You remember my darlings, Dev and Fletch?"

"Of course. Hello." Both men stood and inclined their heads slightly, Dev giving her a wink.

"This is Martin Vandreen." Quinn indicated a man sitting in between a man and a woman. "He's our group medium. Well, one of them. Sitting with him are Rumer Rousseau and Noah Hopper, his significant others."

"Nice to meet you." Tempest nodded slowly, wondering if being part of a threesome was a prerequisite for membership in their ghost society.

"And you've already met Franco. Be careful around him. He reads minds."

Tempest's eyes flew wide open at Quinn's words and she turned to the man who'd just escorted her to the room. The look on his face told her he'd known everything she'd fantasized as she'd climbed up the stairs before him.

His tongue moved out of his mouth slowly, wetting his lips, and she thought she might die of embarrassment. She didn't have to read his mind to know what he was thinking about doing with that pink appendage. Her clit tightened in need and Tempest wanted to turn and run. Before she could act, though, someone else broke the silence.

"Come and have a seat," Dev said, waving at them. "We'll order, and while we wait for food, we'll talk."

Tempest glanced around the table. She knew Quinn and her lovers, but she didn't know the others. Trying to get her point across to them without being graphic would be hard to do. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. But she wouldn't tell them that just yet. She'd have dinner first then chicken out afterward, telling them her fears were nothing more than graphic dreams brought about by the fact she hadn't had sex in forever.

Of course, saying that would be embarrassing, too—especially with the Franco in the room.

"I wouldn't be so sure about it being just dreams." Franco's voice sounded right next to her ear and she shivered as his breath caressed her. "If you like, I'll tell them what's happening."

Tempest stared after Quinn, who was walking toward a seat at the table. She wanted to yell at her friend that she was leaving now, that she'd changed her mind. How was it that this man was able to probe into her mind and basically read what had happened in the last seven days? That, added on top of the fact she'd mentally undressed him the moment they met, was embarrassment enough to last the rest of her life.

"I thought it was a quite pleasant experience," he said, keeping his voice low. "And I'd like to finish the stripper part of your thoughts when we're alone."

"Don't get any ideas, buster." She frowned at him.

"I'll let you get them for us, and will be more than happy to bring them to life with you." He held out a chair.

She sat down, fighting back a smile. He definitely was charming. Still, she had the feeling she shouldn't be here. What would these people think when she started telling them about

erotic dreams? They'd probably tell her to go get a life, that there was nothing supernatural about it.

"Don't discount the dreams, or yourself," Franco said. "We're not here to judge you. Remember that."

That doesn't make me any less nervous. She opened her mouth to repeat the phrase, then realized she didn't have to. He knew exactly what she was thinking. This could turn out to be most inconvenient.

"Sorry." He waved his hand and a server approached the table. "I'll try to keep it toned down, just for you. Well, after this, that is."

He turned to the server. "She'll have a mint julep and an oyster po'boy, fully dressed, heavy on the sauce. And I'll have the same."

Tempest watched the server make the rounds. Tendrils of jazz music drifted up from downstairs, lulling her into a sense of relaxation. *This won't be so hard, she thought. Treat it like a story, even though you were a producer instead of a reporter. You still know how to keep people's interests. Just don't think about the fact that you're talking about yourself, and a phantom, having sex. Hopefully, they won't think you've gone over the deep end.*

Chapter Three

The little bitch!

Where the hell is she? How dare she leave me alone like this?

Each minute she spends away from me means a harsher punishment

She will not enjoy her sleep tonight as she had last night

She'll be lucky if I let her have one orgasm

I'll keep her on the edge, hovering at the peak

Then I'll stop, watching her squirm and shiver in pain as her anticipated pleasure fades away

She never should have left tonight

She will learn that soon enough

And I will savor every second of her pain

* * * *

“When did the dreams start?” Franco’s question seemed innocuous enough, but Tempest’s hands still trembled just a little. The whole table was watching her. Even though their hands were busy with food and drink, it was almost as if eating were a sideshow. They were more interested in what she was saying.

“Seven days ago,” she replied. “About two weeks after I’d moved in, I could feel someone... watching me while I slept. I thought I was losing it. I’d wake up and feel a presence there, but not see anyone. I put it down to nerves, from buying my first house, from quitting my job to start something that could backfire on me. But then Culo and Pero ran from the room one night, and they won’t come back in, to this day.”

“Culo and Pero are cats,” Quinn supplied, and Tempest felt stupid for not giving that fact up on her own. “Cats are sensitive to spirits, Temp.”

“Yes, but there’s no usual haunting signs. No cold spots, or rattling chains or anything like that.”

“Ghosts don’t rattle chains,” Martin said. “And I hate to tell you this, but I don’t see a spirit aura around you. If someone had been visiting you for two months, a bit of the ghost’s impressions would stay with you. I see nothing.”

“Does that mean you think I’m losing my mind?”

“No.” Franco laid his hand on hers and gently squeezed. The warmth of the contact spread through her, helping to ease the fear she felt right now. “Go ahead and finish what you were saying.”

“I’ve been trying to convince myself it’s nothing more than wet dreams.” She glanced around the table, wondering what they were thinking about her. Franco squeezed her hand a little more in an obvious sign of encouragement. “There’s no body, but I can hear a male voice. He...brings me to orgasm repeatedly and then he disappears.”

“You’ve never seen his face?” She looked down the table at Devlin, who’d asked the question she was sure everyone was thinking.

“No, I’ve never seen a form. But my body is—always sore, like I’ve had sex.”

“You mean like you’ve had intercourse?” The calming tone in Franco’s voice was gone. Now he sounded worried.

“No, just very heavy petting.” She inhaled sharply. Her nerves had abated. She wanted to get this out in the open. “At first the dreams were sort of...pleasant. But then...it started to hurt, physically. There was too much stimulation, too many orgasms. Plus I’m tired all the time. I can’t seem to get any rest. Then, this morning, I fell asleep in the kitchen, after I heard a male voice in my head. My gardener found me lying in spilled paint. This was the first time it’s happened during the day.”

“Incubus.” The word came from several people at the table, but the one that she centered on was Franco.

“What?”

“An incubus,” he said. “It’s a demon that visits women while they sleep. He has sex with them and feeds off the energy they produce. That’s how he lives, by drawing on their live force through sex.”

“A demon?” She couldn’t keep the sound of derision out of her voice. She’d thought it was strange to think it was a ghost. Now they thought it was a demon?

“Don’t discount it,” Quinn said. “There are things in this world that are hard to explain.”

Tempest opened her mouth to object, but stopped when Martin spoke again. “You believe in God?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then, isn’t it safe to say if there’s good in the world there’s bad, too.” Rumer explained and Tempest found comfort in her native accent.

“So, this demon just goes around having sex with women?” Tempest hated the fact that she sounded so sarcastic, but it was such a far-flung idea. “Why is he sticking around with me, if he’s never, um, had intercourse with me?”

“Incubi have been around since the middle ages,” Franco said. “They stay with one woman once they’ve chosen a...partner. Lots of people believe that they were invented by humans as a way for women to explain pregnancies when they were supposed to be virgins.”

“It can get a woman pregnant?” This was getting to be too much.

“Yes, it can.” Franco put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. Although he was obviously talking to everyone, his gaze was on her. “That’s their main goal, to find a human to carry their child, to carry on their line.”

“Great, he wants to use me as a demon baby-making machine. I feel so much better.” She wondered if she could sell the house, maybe she could find somewhere else to start her B&B. That would end up costing her too much money, though. “Can you help me get rid of it? I mean that’s what you do, right?”

“It’s not that easy,” Franco took a sip from his glass. “Ghosts are one thing. Demons are a whole other ball of wax. Although an incubus can be bound, I’m not sure how you kill it.”

“Demons are not like spirits I can help crossover,” Martin put in. “Are there other spirits in the house?”

“I haven’t seen or felt anything.” Her dinner companions seemed to start talking all at once, the din rising in the room. Franco leaned closer, his warmth making her feel much better. Until she thought about their explanation again. She’d been having sex with a demon?

“You haven’t had intercourse with him, you said,” Franco offered. “Incubi are said to have unusually cold penises. Have you felt that?”

She giggled nervously, the idea striking her as funny. “No, I would say I’d remember a cold penis.”

“I’m sure you would.” Franco’s laugh was deep. When he spoke again, his voice was loud, and the others stopped talking. “I say we go and check things out, see if we can feel anything. If that’s all right with you, Tempest.”

“Fine.” *I think it’s fine. Maybe.*

“Then let’s go,” he said, standing up and helping her from her seat. “I’m anxious to see what’s there.”

The scraping of chairs sounded through the room and Tempest suddenly didn’t want to leave the restaurant. Telling people about the dreams made them too real. Maybe if she just ignored them they would go away. Maybe coming here had been a huge mistake.

“It wasn’t.” Franco took her hand in his.

He was a touchy-feely man, much more so than any man she’d ever known. And his smile was always present, which was a nice thing. Before she could stop herself, she wondered again what it would be like to have sex with him. Knowing he’d read her thoughts made her blush, and when he winked at her, she smiled. Maybe she would find the answer to her question one of these days.

“Oh, you will, trust me. When we make love, it will be because you want me, not because an incubus has aroused you.”

Tempest smiled up into his eyes. Things were looking up. Way up.

Chapter Four

What the hell?

Who are all these people and what are they doing in my house?

Get out! Get out!

Wait! What is this? That's my woman, standing next to a man

A tall, beefy man who is touching her

Damn it all to hell and back!

Why was I so stupid?

Just one more night, I'd said, maybe two

Then she would call my name, give me physical form

If I'd followed my instinct and given her my name, I'd be inside her right now

The contract would be sealed

Instead I waited

And now there were humans here

Human's who obviously want to get rid of me

GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!

GET AWAY FROM MY WOMAN!

One of the men walked toward the stairs stopped and looked around, as if he'd heard him, but he knew that wasn't true.

What he'd probably heard was...*her*

*Worthless slut, did I tell you that you could speak?
Go back to your corner, which is all that you're good for
That's it, whimper and cry
It makes me happy*

The man who'd noticed the noise stopped after going up two stairs, his gaze now focused on the ceiling.

*That's right, human, I'm here
Don't think you can take over
This house, and that woman, belong to me.*

* * * *

Franco always loved watching Martin work. How he would have loved to have a gift like his friend's. It would have been better than being able to read minds. Knowing people's innermost thoughts wasn't always pleasant, unless it dealt with Tempest. Damn but that woman was fine.

He imagined himself above her, her legs wrapped around his hips as he buried himself deep inside her. True to the fantasy she'd had about him, he'd love to bury his face between her thighs, too, licking her sweet clit until she screamed in pleasure. His cock throbbed at the idea and he wanted to kick everyone out, toss her on the bed and make the dream come true, right now.

He gazed back at her. She stood in the middle of the room, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders in loose curls. Her brown eyes focused on Martin. Franco gazed down her body, at her full breasts and lush hips. Damn he loved a woman who wasn't a stick figure.

Easy boy, easy, he said to himself as more images of her naked body continued to flood his mind. *First things first. Deal with the demon, then you can get the girl.*

"Well?" Her question was full of concern.

"I feel a woman," Martin replied. "She's scared, though, and won't talk to me. She died here, on the stairs."

“What?” Tempest all but screamed the word. “They didn’t disclose that when I bought the house.”

“It was an accidental death, I’d say in the fifties, or the sixties,” Martin explained. “Although I’m pretty sure your demon had a hand in it. I can feel her hovering around the edges of the room. But I can also feel a darker, more evil presence. I would say that’s your guy.”

Franco wanted to gather Tempest in his arms, to soothe the fears that were racing through her body. She was yelling inside her mind, telling herself that this couldn’t be happening. And she was afraid that since the incubus had tried to possess her that the demon somehow had a hold on her. He needed to let her know that wasn’t the case. They could fight this. And win.

“Get rid of it,” Tempest said. “Do whatever you have to do, exorcism, or whatever! Just get rid of it.”

“I can’t,” Martin’s voice sounded very tired. Franco knew he did that sometimes when he tried to contact spirits. “This is beyond my capabilities. I deal with ghosts, not demons. And the ghost I feel won’t respond right now. Once the demon is gone, maybe before, depending on its hold on her, I can help cross her over. But until then...I’m sorry.”

They can’t help you. No one can.

Franco shivered, fixing his gaze on each person in the room. The voice was deep, and menacing, and it didn’t match one person standing nearby. He’d never been able to read people who weren’t in the room with him before. Was there someone else among them? In the house?

You’re mine, you little bitch. Get rid of them. You have some punishment coming your way. The thought slammed into his brain and this time he had no trouble deciding where the feed was coming from. It came through Tempest, but it wasn’t her. It was...

Oh holy shit. He could hear the demon inside Tempest’s mind.

Franco watched her carefully, seeing how she would react to the demon’s declaration of punishment. He was shocked to see that she didn’t react at all. Had she heard it? If she had, she was sure being very calm about it.

How was this happening? He’d never been able to hear ghosts when Martin, or one of their other mediums, talked to them. How in the hell was he hearing the demon? This was something that had never happened to him before and he wasn’t sure how to proceed. If he let the demon know he could hear it, they were letting go of what could turn out to be a perfect card to play at just the right time.

“Hey Dev, um, could I speak to you for a minute?” He tried to keep his tone light. He didn’t want to distress Tempest any more than he wanted to tip his hand to the demon. “Outside? In the garden?”

Everyone was looking at him now and a barrage of “What the hell?” expressed in various forms hit his brain. So much for keeping things light and not alarming people.

“The garden’s out that way,” Tempest said, pointing toward the backdoor. “What’s going on?”

“Outside first.” Franco crossed to Tempest and put his hand on her shoulder, turning her toward the area she’d indicated. He knew there would be no way she wouldn’t come now. Better to accept it and not waste time arguing.

He led the way, smiling to himself as the group fell into line behind him. He hoped the garden would be far enough. When they reached the doorway, he heard a sharp, enraged “*NO! Get back here you slut!*” and he knew it would be. The incubus was tied to the house.

Just to be safe, once they were all outside, he went to the stone wall that marked the back of the garden. When everyone gathered around him, he took a deep breath, trying to figure out a way to say what he needed to without sending Tempest over the edge.

He listened to see if he could hear the demon again. He couldn’t. Good.

“I heard the demon, and he’s not a happy camper.”

Chapter Five

That little bitch!

How dare she disobey me!

I need a fucking body

Why the hell did I wait so long?

This shouldn't be happening this way

She should be here, lying under me, accepting my seed, doing what she was made to do

Serving me

That's her purpose now

I won't stand for that tall man and the way he's looking at my conquest

It's obvious he wants her for himself, but that won't happen

Once she's called me into existence, I'll find a way to take care of her new admirer

*This time things will go as they are supposed to, and I'll finally get the child I need to continue
my line*

* * * *

“You heard the demon?”

Devlin was the first one to break the silence, and Tempest wondered where he'd found his voice. Hers seemed to be lodged somewhere in her lower intestine, and she felt as if she'd never find it again.

Her heart rate had morphed into an irregular static rhythm that made her wonder if it would ever get back to normal. For some reason, even after telling them about it, it hadn't seemed real until Franco said he'd heard the demon. She wanted to think he was mistaken, but

she knew that he wasn't. He'd read her mind at the restaurant and known what she'd wanted to talk about before she'd said anything to anyone.

She hadn't even told Quinn what she wanted, exactly. She'd only said she needed to discuss ghosts. If he'd heard the demon, did that mean it was corporeal?

"How can it speak to you? I've never seen a body, remember. Or a face."

Franco frowned, and then he cleared his throat. "I think I intercepted a message that was meant for you."

"Oh God, this can't be happening." She collapsed onto the stone bench, her hands shaking, her heart hammering even faster. "Every bit of money I had I put into that house. I can't leave it. If you can't get rid of it, I..."

"We can get rid of it," Franco said, sitting down next to her. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into his chest into a comforting hug. "It'll just take us a little bit of time to do some research. This is something I've never encountered before."

"We never have either," Dev said. "But we have several members of our group that specialize in demons. We can call them and get some information. In the meantime, you can come and stay with us."

"Yes," Quinn said. "I'll go inside and pack a bag for you."

"Thanks, but no." Tempest squeezed her hands into fists in an effort to stop their shaking. "I won't allow this—thing—to run me off from my home. I'm staying here."

"I'll stay with you." Franco caressed her shoulder and she felt better from the contact. Until she remembered the demon inside her house. She was about to tell him no, he didn't have to stay, but then she thought better of it. It would be a comfort to have him nearby.

Tempest nodded, then realized that the others in their group had moved toward the center of the garden. They were huddled together, their voices low as they talked.

"What are they doing?"

"Probably discussing who should call who," Franco replied. "They'll set things up for us. My main concern is you, and making sure that you're all right."

"Why didn't I hear him when you said you did?"

"I'm not sure." His voice was very soothing. "I can honestly say that I've never had anything like this happen before."

"Does that make me special?"

“Very.” His fingertips trailed down her arm and she shivered, this time in delight.

“Thank you for staying.” If she’d been thinking straight, she would question the fact that she was allowing someone who was almost a perfect stranger to stay in her house and protect her from a demon. It was almost like using an unknown to fight an unknown.

But he was a friend of Quinn’s, and she trusted her friend very much. Plus, while she didn’t want to leave her home, she didn’t want to be alone, either. Since neither Culo nor Pero would come into the bedroom, she would have been horribly alone if Franco didn’t stay.

“I don’t mind staying. Trust me. Why did you name your cats after characters in ‘The Tempest’?”

She laughed, her body actually feeling as if it were getting back to normal. “The idea you can hear what I’m saying, before I say it, is going to take some getting used to.”

“Sorry, I was just trying to make you relax.”

Tempest gazed up at him, her breath catching. Her body quivered at his look. Yes, she definitely wanted him, and it was disconcerting to know that he knew it. She smiled, then licked her lips, determined to keep the conversation away from sex, no matter what her body wanted.

“My parents are both English professors at Tulane. My mother is an expert on Shakespeare and my father on Hemmingway. I have three brothers and a sister, and my parents named all of us after books written by those two authors. I figured since my parents named me Tempest that I should name my cats after characters from the play, Trinculo, a jester, and Prospero, the Duke of Milan.”

“Great names.”

“They fit.” She glanced back at the group of people who were still talking. “Can we sleep inside the house? If it’s tied to the house will it...come visit me again tonight?”

“We can sleep in another room. Sometimes that confuses the incubus. Or we can sleep outside, on the balcony. I don’t think it can come outside. It didn’t follow us out here.”

I want to have sex with you, but...

“I know.” He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “We just met. But you had some great ideas in your fantasy back at the restaurant. I like the second one, especially.”

She closed her eyes and she swore she could feel his tongue on her clit, swirling around it, sending vibrations of pure bliss through her.

“Yes, just like that.” He kissed her forehead again. “I’ll be right back.”

He made his way toward the group and Tempest clasped her arms tightly around her. She would have an orgasm tonight, but this time one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever met would be the cause of it.

Chapter Six

How dare that bastard touch her?

Agree to stay with her

Only I'm allowed to do that

But I can't, can I? I waited too long

Again

Even the defeat in my own voice mocks me

They are outside, on the balcony, laughing and joking

She isn't allowed to do that with others

Only with me

She needs to be taught a lesson

If I can't follow you out there, then I'll use something else

To lure you back inside

And then you'll follow directions

I promise you that

The pathetic wimp that wouldn't leave hovers nearby

Looks like you might be good for something after all

Get over here

Right now

** * * **

“I think these inflatable beds are one of the best things ever invented.” Franco threw a pillow down on the mattress. Tempest sat on the balcony railing, watching as he brought out bedding.

Franco allowed her in the house only to walk from the garden to the balcony, even though it seemed as if he’d essentially blocked communication between her and the incubus. He also wouldn’t tell her whether or not he’d intercepted any more thoughts from the demon, which made her think that he had.

He was laughing and telling jokes, though, talking about his childhood in the French Quarter.

“So the restaurant belonged to your father before you, huh?”

“Don’t want to talk about the bed? Okay, as long as we use it, that’s fine with me.” She laughed at his response to her very obvious attempt at changing the subject. “Let’s talk about something else. Tell me what a news producer does.”

“Well, I used to set up interviews and decide which stories would be the best to put on the air. Plus, I’d send crews out to shoot news as it happened, like accidents and hurricanes, that sort of thing.”

He laid a blanket across the mattress, then sat down, taking off his boots. He still wore a tight T-shirt that showed off his muscles and jeans that stretched across nice, large thighs. She thought about what else those jeans encased, and then turned her gaze toward the house when she thought about him hearing her say, “I wonder what his prick looks like.”

“It’s average,” he said, stretching out on the cushion. “Nine inches, maybe, give or take. I’m pretty wide, though. I don’t know exact numbers, I’ve never measured. Would you like to now?”

He patted the space next to him and she dissolved into laughter. “No, I think measuring is out.”

“For now,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows. “But I know you want to.”

“Does it ever get old, knowing exactly what people are thinking?”

While he considered his answer, she wondered exactly what it felt like to be able to read other people’s thoughts.

“When I was a kid it freaked me out. But as I got older, I learned how to control it. I try not to intrude now. It’s rude, really, to press into people’s feelings.”

“You did it to me. Are you saying that you were rude to me?”

“I knew you were coming, and I heard you when you were looking for Quinn. When I saw you, I, um, wanted you.” He winked at her, and her nipples, which had tightened at his words, grew even tauter. “No sense beating around the bush. I know you felt the same thing.”

Tempest leaned against the post and looked down the street. The sounds of people partying on Bourbon carried over to them on the cool, evening air. It was barely after eleven, and the parties would carry on until early in the morning. She didn’t care, though. She loved living in the French Quarter.

“I feel a little strange about us being here together.” She’d had a little time to think about her immediate acceptance of his company. She’d never been one to sleep with a man she’d just met.

“I meant what I said earlier, that when we do make love, it will be because you want it, not because you’re under the influence of the incubus.”

Suddenly it felt cold outside. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“It’s not your fault, you know.”

This was a point where he being able to read her mind came in handy. “Why wasn’t I scared of him? I mean, a demon comes to me in my sleep and I just spread my legs and let him play?”

Franco sat up, sitting cross-legged on the bed. “The whole point is to seduce you. The incubus wouldn’t have done anything to frighten you. That wouldn’t have served his purpose. He wants you to want him, to open up to him so he can...”

“Get me pregnant.”

“More than likely, yes.”

“Why hasn’t he, um...you know?”

The look on her new friend’s face said he was carefully considering his words. Was there something he knew that he wasn’t telling her? And if so, why wasn’t he?

“You said you never saw a face? That’s because he doesn’t have physical form. You have to call his name to make his existence real. When that happens then he can take you. And he will. When that happens he’ll have complete control over you, so you need to make sure that, whatever you do, you don’t say his name. Ever.”

“I don’t even know his name.”

“Hopefully, since we’re out here, he won’t be able to tell you.”

Tempest sat down on the mattress next to Franco. “I can’t stay out here forever. I have a house to finish renovating, a B&B to open and hopefully some money to make. I can’t let this—thing—control me.”

When he put his arm around her, she felt the same wonderful sense of calm that she’d felt earlier. But that didn’t mean she was going to have sex with him. Not when she’d just met him.

“I understand perfectly.” Franco put his fingers under her chin and turned her face toward him. He gazed into her eyes. “I won’t let him near you, I swear. I can hear him, and something tells me I can piss him off. If it takes that to keep him from bothering you, then that’s what I’ll do.”

The fierceness of his words touched her very soul and made her spine tingle. No man she’d ever dated had offered to stand between her and a demon, even though they’d never had the chance. And she was pretty sure that, even if they did, they never would have. They probably would have run for the hills and left her standing directly in the incubus’ path.

“A woman would run through fire and water for such a kind heart.” She probably shouldn’t have said that. It sounded too much like she was falling in love with him, which she wasn’t. She barely knew him.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s Shakespeare, from ‘The Merry Wives of Windsor.’ I’m just saying that, you’re a good person. Thank you.”

The smile on his face turned mischievous. “Well, I have ulterior motives. I want to get to know you, in more ways than just one. And to do that, I have to get you through this. I’m just saying...I’m not all that kind. Just remember that.”

He ran his tongue over his lower lip and they both laughed. Then he tackled her, covering his body with hers. “We’ll just pretend this is a big slumber party.”

“That’s going to be tough.” She tried to keep herself from grasping his hips and grinding herself against him. “I never wanted to kiss any of my—”

His laps came down on hers, hard and insistent, yet feeling gentle and sweet. She moaned softly, opening her mouth in invitation. He accepted it instantly, his tongue diving into her mouth, filling her completely. Her body reacted as she knew it would, her pussy growing instantly wet, her nipples tightening even more, begging for attention.

When the deep kiss was over, he placed several smaller kisses around her lips, not stopping until she moaned with need.

“Hi. I’m Franco Antonio LeBeau, age thirty-three. I was born in New Orleans and grew up here. Never went to college. I’ve worked at my parents’ bar, named Franco’s Grill, since I was sixteen years old. I can read minds. I believe in ghosts, and I think you are absolutely stunning.”

“Thank you.” She put her hand on the back of his neck, pulling his face down to claim his lips. This time it was her tongue that did the exploring, the feeling sensual and exciting as the kiss deepened.

When he lifted up and looked down at her, she smiled, hoping it looked as sexy as it felt. “Hi. I’m Tempest Adriana Gandy, age thirty-one. I was born in New Orleans and graduated with a bachelor’s degree, and then a master’s degree, from Tulane, both of them in English. I worked at WXBJ as a news producer for about six years before I decided that I wanted to run a B&B. That’s what I’m doing now. I can’t read minds and I’ve always believed in ghosts, but until today, nothing like demons.”

He kissed her gently, his mouth lingering over hers. It made her feel as if he could swallow her up at any second, and she loved the idea.

“What play is Adriana from?”

“The Comedy of Errors.”

“My personal favorite has always been ‘The Taming of the Shrew.’”

“I hate to tell you this, but if the play was written about us, it would be very, very short. There’s not a lot of taming to do when the male lead already knows the female lead has the major hots for him.”

“Well, we can rehearse the real one, then. Are there spankings involved with this taming?”

It was hard not to laugh at the idea. “I don’t believe Will wrote any into that particular piece of work, and I know all his work, by heart.”

“Well, then we’ll have to improvise. Just follow my lead. I’m really good at this.”

Somehow, she didn’t doubt that at all.

Chapter Seven

I need to remain calm

If I allow this interloper to upset me, then things will not go well

I need to stay calm

I am in charge, and I need to remind my woman of that

I must be firm, but sweet

Temper is what left me in the position I'm in

Alone and floundering, stuck in this hell hole

She's in his arms right now, but he didn't fuck her

The stupid man would be no match for me

If I'd had the chance I would have filled her completely

I would have claimed her and let her know who she belonged to

Once I'm rid of the idiot, I will make that happen

But until then, it's time to show her how much power I really have

And what will happen if she continues to ignore me

Candice, my darling, come to me

This will only hurt for a little while

* * * *

Being nestled in Franco's arms was the next best thing to being in heaven, or so Tempest thought. Necking with him was sheer magic, and when he hadn't pushed for anything more, she felt herself fall a little bit in love.

When they'd settled down, wrapping the blankets around them, he'd quickly fallen asleep. His deep, even breathing should have lulled her to sleep. Instead, she lay awake, listening to it, enjoying every second.

Who would have thought that, when she woke up this morning sore and wondering what was happening to her at night, she would fall asleep in the arms of one of the hunkiest men she'd met in years.

If she'd known Quinn had friends like this she would have invented a ghost, or in this case, a demon, a long time ago. She'd been in such a drought where men were concerned that she'd given up on them. There was no chance of her finding someone she could spend the rest of her life with, or so she thought.

Right now she doubted that fact. Sure, she'd known him less than twenty-four hours, but the instant attraction she felt for Franco Antonio LeBeau was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. She was pretty sure he felt the same way, maybe not as much as she did, but there was a definite attraction.

Men, she knew, mostly thought with their little heads. But that didn't seem to be the case with Franco. If so, he would have pushed to be inside her tonight. Not that he would have had to push very hard.

Truthfully, she probably would have said yes in about two seconds flat. Unfortunately, decisions made that fast usually spelled disaster for relationships. The fact that he was willing to stay with her to protect her from the demon, and was willing to wait for sex, was perfect.

A low moan brought a smile to her face. Maybe he wasn't asleep. She needed to steel her will. If he made a move to take things deeper than they had with the necking session, she would need all her willpower to say no, that they needed to wait.

"Oh, ow, no, please no."

Tempest's eyes flew open and she tried to sit up, hindered by Franco's arms that still held her close.

The next sound she heard was a wail of pain.

"Franco!" She put her hand on his chest. "Did you hear that?"

The woman's voice sounded as if she was saying, "Please stop."

"Franco!"

He was sitting up now. "Where's it coming from?"

“In the house. It’s a woman.”

A loud wail brought him to his feet and he rushed inside. Tempest was shocked at how fast he moved. She scrambled up, hurrying after him only to stop when he held out his hand.

“Don’t come in.”

“Why not?” Another wail greeted her question and she hurried inside, ducking through the window. Frigid air surrounded her and Tempest gasped in shock. It was colder in here than it was on the balcony. What was happening?

“Tempest! Go outside.”

The feminine wailing had stopped. What the hell had it been?

Don’t listen to him, sweet one. Her feet seemed rooted to the floor. He is not the one for you. I am.

She couldn’t move. Her senses reeled as she tried to figure out what was happening. It was almost as if she’d stepped inside a ride at a county fair. The room seemed to spin and then she was on her back, a heavy weight on top of her.

Had Franco changed his mind? Was he taking advantage of her while she was sleeping? It didn’t seem like something he would do, but who knew? She’d only known him for a few hours, after all.

The pressure on top of her increased, compressing her chest making it hard to breath.

You know how much I love you. Say you love me, too. Say it.

Pleasure swirled through her, her clit twitching and demanding more attention.

“Fuck me,” she whispered. “Oh yes, please.”

“No! Tempest, don’t allow yourself to succumb to him. It’s a trick! Tempest, answer me!” Franco’s voice sounded as if he shouted across the miles.

The force on top of her pressed down, the feeling incredible. “More, more.”

“Tempest!”

You must call for me, little one. Call my name, say it.

From far behind, Tempest heard Franco talking. He said the word Martin, then Dev, then get here now. Who was he talking to?

It does not matter, my sweet. All you need do is say my name and I will take care of you. I will give you all that your need, all that you want.

No, this wasn’t right. What was this...thing on top of her?

Say it, sweet little Tempest. Say my name.

“What...what is it?”

Arland. It means pledge. Pledge yourself to me, and I will care for you always. We belong together.

“Tempest!” There was that voice again. Franco’s voice. And were there other voices with it? Men were in the room, shouting. What was happening?

Ignore them. Say it!

The pressure on her chest seemed almost unbearable and she pushed up, but there was no relief.

Say it, you little cunt!

“Tempest! You can control him. Push him off, come back to me, remember? You’d walk through—crap, what did she say? A woman would...Tempest!”

What was he saying? Oh yes, a woman would run through fire and water for such a kind heart. She’d just said that earlier in the night, to Franco. He was so kind, so sweet. He would never call her a cunt, like the—thing on top her. The incubus. The demon.

“Shit! Get off me! Get off me!” Tempest flailed out, her breath coming in great, heavy gasps. Her clothing was in disarray, and she was sweating. How long had she been in this position? To her point of view, it had seemed like only a few minutes. Yet Franco was here, and she could hear Dev and Martin, too.

He’d had time to call them, time for them to get here. Even though they all lived in the Quarter, it would have taken at least ten minutes, if not longer.

Someone grabbed her and it took a few seconds for her to realize it was Franco, trying to lift her off the ground.

No! Not again!

“Command him to leave you alone.” It was Martin’s voice, deep and authoritative. “Take control of the situation. Until he has form he can’t hurt you.”

She pushed again, surprised when the weight lifted off her. “Leave me alone. Go away, now.”

The room grew silent but the cold lingered. Within seconds, Franco had lifted her off the floor and wrapped his arms around her.

“It’s all right,” he whispered in her ear. “He’s gone. He’s gone.”

“For now.” She didn’t want to be frightened, to let the demon get the best of her, but right now, he’d done exactly that. Tears leaked from her eyes and she nestled against Franco’s chest. She felt like she should say something but her voice caught in her throat and nothing came out. It was beginning to look like she’d wasted her life savings on a B&B that she would never be able to open.

Unless they could get rid of the demon, and it didn’t look like they were going to be able to, not after tonight’s incident.

“Cowards die many times before their death,” Franco said, stroking her hair. “It’s the one Shakespeare quote I know. I had to memorize parts of Julius Caesar in high school. This demon is a coward, and he may already be physically dead, but he’s going to die for real. Soon.”

Chapter Eight

Weak, so weak

I can barely feel the air around me

How did she do it?

I was so sure it would work this time

The bitch had played her part well

I enjoyed tormenting her, making her spirit cry with grief

It worked just as I had planned

Right up until the part that she'd gone to him instead of calling me into existence

Now my strength is depleted and she's not even here

He'd carried her out of the house

And she'd gone willingly

She had to come back at some point

After all, this was her home

I'll put this time to good use, though

Building back up my strength

Next time, she won't be so lucky

* * * *

This morning the sunlight held a special gift. Tempest could feel it warming her face, and then the next thing she knew she was receiving a kitty kiss, right on her nose. She'd felt the

pressure when Pero had climbed on her chest, but had known it was a good pressure this time, not the evil, frightening force she'd felt last night. She opened her eyes to gaze at her Pero, who was staring down at her. Culo sat next to her, and she could hear his loud purr.

She put a hand on each cat, gently stroking furs until both of them were purring loudly. "How's it going guys? It's good to see your smiling faces first thing in the morning."

"I think they're pretty happy."

She turned her head toward the doorway where Franco stood, holding a cardboard tray with two steaming mugs of café au lait and a white pastry bag.

"Stevie, the cook, sent up a huge bowl of shrimp for them earlier, so they're pretty satisfied. Quinn set up their box, along with food and water dishes. And I brought this for you."

"The service here is fantastic. Would you like a job when I open my B&B?" Her heart clenched, and she tried to hold back tears. "If I get to open my B&B."

"You will." He came into the room and placed the tray and bag on the night table. The cats scampered out of the room and she watched them go.

"They must be pretty freaked, being loaded up in the middle of the night and brought here." She put her hand on his. "Thank you, by the way, for opening your home to us."

"You're most welcome." He leaned over and brushed his lips over hers, the contact light and sweet, reminding her that she really, really liked this man. "I think they'll do just fine here. They've already staked out a spot on the balcony in the extra bedroom. The sunshine is very good there."

He sat down next to her on the bed and she pushed herself into a sitting position, accepting the cup of coffee and watching with anticipation as he reached for the bag. He placed it in her lap, then put his arm around her.

"Beignets?" she asked, hopefully.

"A few. There's also a cruller or two. I wasn't sure which you would want."

Tempest opened the bag and grasped the first pastry she'd come to: a cruller. She took a huge bite, moaning in satisfaction as the chocolate coating melted in her mouth. "After last night, anything with sugar is just perfect."

He stroked her hair and didn't reply as she continued to eat. "How long was I on the floor with...him?"

"A half-hour."

Tempest dropped the half-eaten treat back in the bag. “What?” Her voice shook and she still wasn’t sure if she’d heard him right. A half-hour? How was that possible? It had seemed like seconds to her. But it couldn’t have been that short of a time period. Everyone needed time to get there. But a half-hour?

“It may have been a little longer. I wasn’t exactly counting time. I tried to touch you, so I could pull you back out onto the balcony, but your skin was burning hot. Plus you slugged me, hard, several times. After a few minutes I called for Dev and his crew, and he called Martin.” He inched closer to her and kissed her forehead. “Martin made contact with your ghost.”

“Really? That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. He says...”

Before he could continue, she put her finger on his lips. “I slugged you?”

“Yup. You’ve got quite a left hook.”

Tempest put her face in her hands, fighting back the shame she felt for doing something so horrible. “How did he get hold of me like that? He’s never done it before.”

“Candice, that’s the spirit, told Martin that the incubus, whom she won’t name, feeds off her energy. He berated her last night, repeatedly, leaving her feeling sorry for herself and very sad. He told her the only way he would stop was if she would lure your inside. And then he attacked. He had the energy he’d stolen from you from the last week, plus hers. Those combined made him very strong.”

She started to ask how they would fight him, but realized she didn’t need to.

“Don’t worry, gorgeous. We found a member of our group named Pebbles that’s an expert on demonology. She hasn’t advertised the fact, so we were thrilled to hear from her. She’s coming to dinner with us tonight so we can plan our strategy to rid you of...him.”

“Pebbles?”

Franco’s laugh was wonderful to hear and it lightened her spirits. “It’s a nickname. She won’t tell us her real name.”

Tempest took a sip of her coffee, then turned to him. “You know it, obviously.”

“Yes, I do. But I respect her wishes not to make it known.” He nuzzled against her neck. “She’s a very sweet woman, and I think she’ll be able to help us.”

Relief seeped into Tempest’s body, although she was afraid to let it fully consume her. There was the idea of victory, but it wasn’t there yet.

“Don’t think that.”

She laughed softly, then took another bite of food. “I can’t help but think that last night wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t contacted Quinn; that things would have just gone on as they had been.”

“Yes, and he would have control of you. You would have called his name and he would use you for his pleasure, and for bearing his child. You know that’s what he wants now, right?”

“Yes, I know.” That thought made her stomach churn. She dropped the pastry and passed him the bag. He put it on the table, then pushed them over so that he was on top of her. His lips found her neck, trailing kisses up and down it until she shivered in need.

She might wish she’d never contacted Quinn, but if she hadn’t, she never would have met Franco, and that, she was starting to believe, would have been the biggest tragedy of her life.

Tempest shivered and groaned as he knelt over her, his hands caressing her breasts through the T-shirt she wore, which obviously belonged to him. He put his hands on her stomach and inched his way up slowly, caressing her as she lay there watching him.

When he reached her nipples, he took each one between a thumb and forefinger, applying that wonderful pressure that turned to instant pleasure. He teased them mercilessly as she undulated under him, rocking her hips and trying to come into contact with something that would help ease the pressure that was building in her clit.

She was wearing nothing more than his borrowed shirt and her undies. She didn’t remember undressing last night. She barely remembering coming over to Franco’s, much less going to into bed. Had he undressed her?

Who cares, Tempest. Just relax and enjoy this wonderfully seductive man who is making you feel oh so good right now.

He lifted the shit up to expose her breasts, then bent quickly, capturing a nipple in his mouth while his hand toyed with the other. When he grasped one breast between two hands and then licked the nipple over and over, Tempest thought the action might make her come right then and there.

The sensation was incredible, her nipple aching to be sucked and him refusing to do so, just teasing it repeatedly with his tongue. Need swamped her but Franco refused to be hurried. He lifted his gaze to her and winked, and that one little innocent movement affected her as

nothing had in such a long time. Then he bent to the other nipple, grazing the hard bud with his tongue until she finally cried out.

“Franco! Please, I...” She grasped his shoulders. “Lower, please.”

“Hush. Just lay there, sweet Tempest. I don’t want you to lift a finger, do you understand me?”

“But...”

“Not a finger or we’ll discuss that taming issue that we brought up last night.” The look he gave her was stern, and it made her insides tingle even more.

“Fine.” She thought about saying ‘spank me then’, but instead she said, “Love me.”

“With pleasure.” He bent back to his task, sucking each nipple in turn. Tempest closed her eyes and relaxed into the mattress. His lips moved over her stomach and for the first time ever she didn’t worry about the fact that she was a larger woman. The comfort she felt with Franco was something she’d never experienced before and she never wanted it to end.

His hands were on her panties now, gently tugging them down. She lifted her hips and he moved them to her knees, spreading her thighs just enough to place a kiss on her neatly trimmed mons.

“Oh, my.” Further words escaped her as he kissed her slit, starting at the top and moving down. Her body pulsed with energy and her spirit soared as he slowly explored her, opening her slit and tracing his tongue over the soft, wet flesh just below.

She wiggled and squirmed and when his tongue found her clit, and when he flicked the tip over it, she came, her hips shooting off the bed, his order to stay still forgotten. Her legs wouldn’t move very far, encased in her silken panties as they were, and she tried to fight them until he lightly pinched her bottom. She settled down and buried her hands in his hair, a second orgasm spiraling through her as his tongue and teeth taunted her clit, with him applying pressure before letting off and then applying it again.

When he finally sucked the hard nub into his mouth, then released it with a kiss before setting back on his knees, Tempest wondered if she would ever be able to walk again. Her legs felt like jelly. Her body quivered with the desire to have him inside her.

“Not now,” he whispered. “Go to sleep, my Tempest. We’ll unleash another storm later, after we’ve met with our friends. Just sleep now.”

She closed her eyes and followed his directions, fighting the urge to stay awake and count the seconds until the promised storm would arrive.

Chapter Nine

*Someone's talking to Candice
And the little bitch is answering them
I need to go to her, remind her that she belongs to me
After all, she stayed here with me even though she is dead
She is worthless, but she provides a little fun*

*How dare she disobey me?
She needs punishment
And she'll get it
Later
When I have some strength again*

*You'll get yours, and then I'll get my Tempest back
Soon
Very soon*

* * * *

“Weren’t we just here last night?” Fletch held the chair out for Tempest as she approached the table. “I think when Franco arrives we need to see about getting a discount for being repeat customers.”

Laughter came from everyone sitting around the table and Tempest counted people. Everyone who was here last night had returned, and sitting with them was a dark-haired woman in her mid-thirties whom Quinn introduced as Pebbles Malloy.

Tempest shook the woman’s hand, then looked around the table. “Where’s Franco?”

“Not sure,” Dev said, taking a drink of his beer. “He called me earlier and said he had to take care of something and he’d be here in time for dinner.”

The server set a mint julep in front of Tempest and she smiled to herself. Someone had trained the staff well.

“We’ve got gumbo cooking up,” the server said. “Plus Franco ordered different types of po’boys. They’ll be up here in a bit.”

When she was gone, Quinn put her arm around Tempest’s shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine, thanks.” She wanted to add that she’d had a nice, human-produced orgasm this afternoon that had sent her off to la-la land in a sweet haze of bliss. And when she’d woken up, she’d felt more refreshed than she had in weeks, maybe months. Or more to the point, years.

The memory of Franco’s tongue on her clit made that part of her body tighten with need. They needed to finish with dinner so the two of them could go back upstairs and play some more. Hopefully this time he would let her participate.

“Do we have any new information?” She glanced at Dev, and then at Martin. They both seemed to be the self-appointed leaders of the group.

“I’ve spent the afternoon in your house, talking to your ghost,” Martin said. “Her name is Candice Seaton. She died in 1956 when she was twenty-seven years old.”

Tempest felt a surge of sympathy for the woman who had died so young, and who had stayed around the house for the past fifty-three years. “What did she die of?”

“She fell down the stairs,” Martin’s voice was matter of fact. “I’m sure she threw herself down them because of the stress of dealing with the incubus named Arland.”

“Good lord above.” Tempest felt her hands shake and she clasped them together so that, hopefully, the others wouldn’t notice. “That poor woman. Can you help her?”

“Yes, I can cross her over, once I gain her trust,” Martin replied. “He used her horribly last night, and I tried to soothe her today. She’s a very fragile soul.”

“That could be me,” Tempest said, her hands shaking even more. Where was Franco? He calmed her down and she needed him now.

“No, I don’t think so.” It was as if he’d heard her ask for him. He stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. “Did you rest well?”

“I feel one hundred percent refreshed,” she said, hoping the others didn’t know it was because the two of them had made love. She glanced around the table and from the looks of suppressed merriment on their faces, she would say they knew exactly what had perked her up.

“I brought a guest,” he said, turning her just a little. “You know your neighbor, Mrs. Baker?”

Tempest turned a surprised gaze on the small woman as she moved into view. “Of course I do. Hello.”

“Hello, Ms. Gandy.” She nodded at Tempest, then included everyone else in her greeting. “Your charming friend came to see me this afternoon. He was asking questions about the house and I realized that the time had finally come, the right people were in place.”

“In place for what?” Tempest looked at Franco, who was staring down at her. Right now, she wished she could read his mind so she could find out exactly what was happening.

“Mrs. Baker has lived in the neighborhood since 1946,” Franco said.

“My sister lived in your house after she was married,” Mrs. Baker said. “She died in there and, if I’m to understand things right, is still there. I want to help with whatever you’re doing to get rid of that fiend and, hopefully, help Candice find some peace.”

Chapter Ten

*I should be angry, but I just can't find the power
She's drained me of it, the little tramp
Things are so bad that I can't even put Candice in her place
Sleep, I need sleep
When she's back, she'll give me what I need
I can get back on top again
Soon, very soon*

* * * *

“Candice is—was—your sister?” This came from Martin, who was starring at the newcomer in fascination. “You’re Miranda?”

“Yes, I am.”

Tempest felt as if she should say something, but she wasn’t exactly sure what. Franco was helping Mrs. Baker into the seat next to her. He sat on the one opposite Tempest before leaning over and kissing her.

“Did you enjoy sleeping in my bed?”

“I did, thank you.” She blushed, knowing he could hear her think that she wanted nothing more than to go upstairs and hit the sheets with him again. To try and keep from jumping his bones she turned to her neighbor. “I’m sure we’d all like to hear Mrs. Baker’s story.”

Mrs. Baker seemed a little disconcerted. She took a drink from a glass of water, then swallowed hard. “It’s not a long story, really. Our family lived in my house for years, even before Candice and I were children. She fell in love with Mr. Seaton, who lived in your house, Ms. Gandy. He loved her as well, and the match was a good one. He had quite a lot of money as he worked as an attorney.”

There was a silence as Mrs. Baker paused. Everyone was listening to her very intently. “She married Mr. Seaton and they lived in the house for three years. They were very happy by all appearances, but soon after their third year in the house, Candice started showing signs of depression. She would sleep at all hours of the day, and when she was awake, she didn’t seem to have any energy.”

“Déjà vu, except mine was only for a week,” Tempest whispered. Franco grasped her hand and squeezed it gently.

“In her fourth year in the house, Candice changed. Her depression worsened and when she announced she was with child, Mr. Seaton became very angry. It seemed that she no longer allowed him to visit her bed, and there was no way he could be the father of her baby.”

“The incubus.” It was the first words Tempest had heard Pebbles say besides hello. The newcomer leaned toward Mrs. Baker. “Did she ever tell you about the demon?”

“Not until a week before her death,” Mrs. Baker continued. “Mr. Seaton moved into a hotel soon after the pregnancy was announced, and Candice never was quite right after that. She would talk to people who weren’t there and once she...tried to kill the baby.”

“How?” Tempest could only imagine the pain the woman had gone through. And to be stuck in the house all those years with that—thing.

“She drank two bottles of castor oil when she was only in her sixth month. She told the doctor it was an accident, but I knew better. She’d talked about it for days before doing it. She threw herself down the stairs to try and get rid of the baby, but it ended up...”

The older woman’s voice cracked and Tempest put her hand on her arm, patting her gently. “I had no idea she was still there. If I had known...”

“I’ll help her cross over,” Martin said. “She’ll be at rest soon enough, I promise you.”

“What we need from you is information on the demon,” Franco said. “Did she say anything to you about him?”

“I didn’t believe her, of course. I thought she had gone mental. She said he told her he’d scattered his seed for generations, making new demons to haunt women as they slept.”

“Yes, well now that Candice is a spirit she knows the true story,” Martin put in. “Arland was indeed the son of an incubus, flitting from place to place seducing women. But he was never able to get one of them pregnant, until he met Candice. She said that soon after her death a woman visited the house and said a spell, effectively trapping him there.”

“Did you do it?” This came from Rumer, who looked expectedly at Mrs. Baker.

“No, I hired a witch. Then I worked to scare off everyone who tried to move into the house. At one point I wanted to see if it could be torn down, but I was afraid it would free the demon.” She toyed with the napkin in her lap, tearing it into small little bits. “Most people have left quickly, except for the people in front of you, Ms. Gandy. They did a great deal of renovations before they finally moved. It was two men, living together.”

“That means he might have gotten sex, but he couldn’t get a baby, which seems to be his major goal,” Fletch said. “He might have scared them off in hopes of a female moving in.”

“And that’s exactly what happened,” Tempest said. “The question is how do we get rid of him? I don’t want to lose my house.”

“Oh we’ll get rid of him. And you’re not going to lose a thing.” Pebbles raised her glass toward Tempest. “You might even have some fun while we do it.”

Chapter Eleven

Pain

Darkness

Despair

There is no one here, no one for me to feed from

One of the bitch's friends comes to see Candice daily

And whatever he's saying to her gives her the ability to avoid me

That is unacceptable

Something has to change, and soon

Or I will spend too many years in darkness

Again

* * * *

Tempest didn't want to get too content with her present location. After all, come Halloween things would change. They would bind the incubus and she would be able to go back home, be able to get back to her normal life.

Unfortunately, right now she wasn't sure she wanted to go back to the way things were, since that would include a life without Franco. During the last three days she'd become very comfortable with falling asleep in his arms and waking up the same way.

His kisses had become a part of her daily life that she wanted to preserve. The one thing that hadn't become part of it was sex. He'd made sweet love to her with his mouth on her first day there, making her tingle and relax.

She knew now that he'd done it to settle her down, and it had worked. But she wanted more than that. She wanted him inside her. She didn't have to be a mind reader to know he was trying to be chivalrous by not having sex with her again before the situation was resolved.

That would never work though. She planned to seduce him tonight, but it would take careful planning. If she was thinking about it when he came into the room he would know exactly what was about to happen.

That's why she thought it best if she employed a little trick that she'd read about in a book. She'd set up a chessboard on a table and was concentrating on the moves, playing herself while she waited for him to come in. It was close to midnight and she knew he was downstairs, helping with the business as the restaurant closed its doors and the bar filled up.

He wouldn't stay downstairs for long, though. Since she'd been there, he'd taken to coming home just after midnight, and she could tell from the way his staff reacted that it wasn't a normal thing for him to do. That was just fine with her, though. The more time they could spend together the better things were.

She checked the chess board one last time, then went into the other bedroom to make sure Culo and Pero were settled in for the evening, or at least as settled as cats were at night. They would sleep until around one, and then they would get up and roam around their new surroundings. She was impressed with the way they had adjusted, including the way they now came into the bedroom and work her and Franco up every morning. A high point of that was that her new lover seemed to enjoy the feline attention. That made him ace in her book.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs caught her attention. She hurried back to her position at the table and studied the chessboard, hoping that he'd fall for the bait. When he came in, he brought the smell of the kitchen with him, spicy Cajun food that almost made her stomach growl with need. Until she remembered her main objective.

Sex.

"Hey darlin'," he said, sitting down opposite her and toeing off his boots. "Who's winning?"

"I am." *Hopefully, for both our sakes.*

He glanced at the board, his gaze seeming to drift over each piece. "Looks to me like white's going to lose in about two more moves. You need to learn to play more defensively."

Yeah, that's the plan.

"We can start over and you can play me, if you like." *Or you can play with me. No! Don't say things like that. You don't want him to hear them. Chess. Chess. Chess.*

His gaze lifted to hers and he licked his lips. “Do you want to play the game in progress, or start a new one?”

“Oh, definitely a new one.” She picked up the black queen. “Are you up for it?”

“Darlin’ I’d love to be up for you. But I need to take a little cap nap first. Is that all right with you?”

Oh yes, he was definitely following his usual routine. “No, go ahead and lay down. I’ll just study the board.” She put the queen back in her place and kept her attention focused on the board as he walked toward the bed. He undid his jeans and slid out of them, then pulled his shirt over his head, leaving only his boxers.

He had the most gorgeous body she’d ever seen. Even though they hadn’t had actual “sex” she’d seen him every night, felt him curled up next to her as he’d held her close. She couldn’t wait to get him inside her.

Maybe she should give him a few more minutes to rest before she jumped him. Or maybe she should go and change her own clothes, put on something sexy, even though her choices were limited. Quinn had packed her bags and she hadn’t included any sexy nightgowns.

Still, she had a nice bra and panty set in the bag. She could go and put that one, see how it liked it.

From the bed came a low, throaty growl. “Forget it, babe girl. Just come as you are right now, cause that’s the way I really like ya. I’ve been listening to you plan this scene for the last hour and my cock is so damn hard right now I don’t know if I can wait much longer.”

“Oh!” She pushed back from the table and ran to the bed, jumping up and straddling him. “You creep!”

The closest thing to hand was a pillow, so she picked it up and began to hit him with it, his laughter filling the room. It was contagious and she laughed along with him, almost forgetting at the last minute the most important part of her plan.

She dropped the pillow and grabbed one of his wrists, pulling it above his head and attaching it to the handcuffs she’d found in his bedside table. He gazed up and watched with interest as she fastened the other one. The cuffs were attached to the bed by a short chain that she’d run through the slots, giving him room to move his hands if he wanted to.

“You know, Tempest, this is the first time these have ever been used on me. Usually it’s the other way around.”

“Is that a complaint?”

“Just an observation.” He darted his tongue out to wet the top of his mouth. “Kiss me.”

“No. I’m running this show. If you’d been listening to me you would have known that.”

She ran her hands down his chest. “You’ve been an awfully good boy, waiting to have sex with me because you thought I was traumatized.”

“Weren’t you?” He bent his legs so that she could lean back against his thighs.

“A little.” Tempest ran her hands over her breasts, savoring the sound of his obvious pleasure at the movement. “But not anymore. I want to fuck you. I want to feel you inside me. Behaving these last few nights has been hard, and it’s time for the storm to be unleashed.”

She stood up, making sure their gazes held as she looked down on him. Then she began to strip, slowly, gathering her shirt in her hands and inching it up her body. The hitch in his breath made her feel bold, but instead of speeding up, she slowed the process, letting the shirt drop down just a little. She lifted the skirt enough to show him she wasn’t wearing any panties.

His growled “Oh hell baby” made her laugh.

“Something wrong?”

“Not a thing. I’m just enjoying the show.” He licked his lips again and she imagined that mouth wrapped around one her nipples, pulling on it every so sweetly.

Then she grinned down at him and wiggled her eyebrows. “Hot damn, it worked.” She hopped off the bed and grabbed the key to the handcuffs, placing it on the pillow where he’d barely be able to reach it.

“I’m going for a walk. Coming with me?”

“A walk? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She headed for the doorway, pausing to grab a bag.

“Tempest Adriana Gandy, get back here this instant.”

She hurried down the stairs, laughing, stopping at the bottom as she listened to his “Damn it,” which accompanied the rattle of the chain.

When his feet hit the floorboard, she went down all the way into the bar, sliding out the front door and turning right toward the Mississippi River. She’d just made the corner when she heard him call her name again.

She quickened her pace. She didn’t want him to catch her, but she didn’t want him to lose her, either. She wanted him to follow her to the place she’d picked out for their little rendezvous.

Her plan had worked, right down to thinking about changing her clothing. He had no idea she'd planned to leave the building. He thought she was going to jump him right there.

At the Bourbon Street crosswalk, she wound through the throngs of people, ignoring the calls of "Show us your tits."

A glance back showed that Franco was still behind her, and gaining ground. How could that be? He'd had to put on his clothing, from his shirt to his shoes. Sure, his legs were longer than hers, but they weren't that long.

She crossed Royal and Chartres, coming up on the back of the St. Louis Cathedral at Jackson Square. She snaked to the left, laughing when her name again reached her ears.

Jackson Square was still full of people, even though it was after midnight. There were a few artists left, willing to do drawings of you and your loved ones for a nominal fee.

Fortunetellers hollered at her to stop and partake of their services. One of the things she loved about her hometown was the fact that it never closed down. The Café Du Monde, located just across Decatur Street, was open twenty-four hours a day, and she'd tucked money into her shoe earlier in the evening so that, after their love making, they could stop and get themselves a treat on the way back to Franco's place.

On the other side of Decatur, she stopped and looked back. He was almost to the traffic signal, and in the moonlight mixed with the lights from the street lamps and artists' tables, she could see that he was grinning.

Oh yes, she was sure he got it now. Even if he lost her in the crowd, which would thin out once she was on top of the pavilion and heading down toward Riverside, he knew where she was going.

She climbed the steps next to the Café, then went down them on the other side. The sight of the Mississippi bathed in moonlight made her smile. It was definitely a gorgeous night for this.

A few more jaunts and she was near the river, in an area that would not have very many visitors this time of night. She found the bench she'd picked out very easily, sitting down under a tree that blocked the streetlights and basically left the bench in darkness.

Within seconds, Franco was behind her. "You are in major trouble, young lady. Do you realize this isn't the best area of town to be in after dark?"

“Pshaw,” she said, flapping her hand at him. “Besides, I’ve got a big, strong protector, don’t I? One that I managed to fool. You thought I was going to tie you to the bed and have my way with you. Instead I brought you here, to make you mine under the moonlight.”

“What makes you think I’m not already yours? I told you when we made love that it would be because you wanted me, not because you were under the influence of the incubus.”

“I’ve been gone from my house for three days, and that demon has absolutely no hold over me right now. What, or I guess I should say who, does have a hold over me is you. It started before you gave me that fantastic orgasm with your wickedly wonderful tongue.”

When he didn’t respond, she frowned. “Are you seeing something inside my mind? Something buried deep that he...put there?”

“No, there’s nothing.” He undid the top button of his jeans and Tempest’s nipples tightened. She could feel wetness gathering in her pussy and the idea of taking him inside her made her shiver with want.

“Please.”

“So you’re a little exhibitionist, huh?” He stepped right in front of her and undid his jeans, freeing his cock. When she went to reach for it, he grabbed her hands. “Not yet. Naughty girls need punishment for leading their lovers on chases.”

His cock bobbed in front of her face and she stuck out her tongue, moving her head just enough to run it down the ridge. Excitement threatened to boil over as he thrust his hips at her.

“Suck me.”

Tempest slid her mouth over him, her tongue toying with the slit of his cock. His groans emboldened her and she sucked him in deeper, loving the taste of salty male that filled her mouth. Franco was right; he was definitely wider than most men.

She lifted back to tell him so, but he put his hand on the back of her head, applying just enough pressure to keep her in place. “We’ll measure later. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

That’s right, she thought as she put her hand inside his jeans and lightly traced his balls. I don’t have to say it. This is one man who knows what I want, and how I want it.

He pushed his jeans down to his ankles and stepped closer to her. Tempest put her hand around the width of him. She moved her mouth up and down on his cock, meeting her fists, which worked the bottom of his shaft that she couldn’t fit into her mouth.

“Tell me the nastiest thing you want me to do to you.” When she went to lift her mouth from his cock, he held her steady. “No need for that, remember?”

She slowed her movements and part of her thought that was his intent. She could tell from the movement of his hips that, if she kept up at her current speed, he would come much sooner than either of them wanted.

“That’s right, baby. Just keep thinking. Let’s discuss bondage. I know you like that.”

Her lips tightened around his length and he stroked her hair.

“Yeah, you like that, too. Think about...” He pulled away and dropped to his knees. “My Queen, how may I serve you?”

Oh yes, his gift could definitely come in handy. Tempest spread her legs and ran her hands up her thighs. “Pleasure me, slave.”

He caressed her thighs, then bent his head toward her legs. His tongue traced over her ankles, sending sweet shivers of bliss through her. He took his time moving up each leg, moving to mimic tongue movements on the other before kissing her exposed skin.

Tempest laid her head back and looked at the stars. Her body tingled as he kissed and explored her, the feelings strong and sensual. She’d fantasized about having sex in public for years, and though she’d probably chickened out by doing it at night, where no one was around, it was still thrilling to her.

He was at her pussy now, parting her lips, gently stroking his tongue up and down the soft insides of her. He flicked around her clit, and need spread through her as her orgasm approached.

Her body tightened as the sensations threatened to burst. If only...

Suddenly he stopped and stood, pulling up his jeans. “I heard that, you know.”

“What?” She glanced at him, her mouth opened in shock. “Are you just going to leave me here?”

“No, but you only let me see half the fantasy. That’s not playing fair. I want it all, Tempest.” He pulled her up and grabbed the bag, taking her hand firmly in his. When he started to walk back toward Decatur, she pulled back, trying to stop him.

“We’re not done.”

“One of the best things about my gift is being able to please you,” he said. “I can tell when you’re right at the edge of orgasm and I can stop, then start again, building it to wonderful levels before allowing you to peak. I can also read exactly what’s in your mind.”

That means he saw—Tempest tried to dig in her heels but he was already leading them across Decatur. “No, Franco stop.”

He did stop, turning to her with a dark, purely sexual look on his face. “I can carry you, if you like. But we’re going.”

She had no doubt he would follow through on his threat so she followed him back to Franco’s Grill. The party was in full swing, a live band filling the place with a mixture of jazz and rock. People filled the dance floor and smoke filtered across the haze.

Instead of going to the stairs that led to his apartment, he took her to the back where a pool table and a few pinball machines sat, none of them in use.

The lights from the machine lit up the otherwise dark area and he dropped the bag under it, then fished into his pocket. He handed her several coins before leaning over to kiss her. “Play the game. I’ll be right back.”

Her mouth opened in shock as he disappeared into the bathroom. A server appeared and sat a beer down on a table next to the machine. “That’s for the boss. What about you?”

“Nothing, thanks.”

The woman shrugged and left, and Tempest fed coins into the machine. She was tempted to leave, since he’d not followed through on her plans, but she stayed in place, launching the ball before hitting the flippers.

The machine whirled and tweeted, lights flashing and dings sounding. When male hands encircled her hips, she blinked, looking back to see Franco. He’d placed a stool behind her and was now moving it closer. He sat down and pulled her into his lap, lifting her skirt.

She gasped when his cock ran the length of her pussy, which was still pulsing with need from earlier. “No. Not here.”

“Yes, here.” He moved his fingers quickly, sliding up and down her pussy, teasing the entrance. He didn’t enter her, though, and she wanted to scream at him to fuck her.

“All in good time.” He grasped her hips tighter. “You better play that game while I tell you why we’re here. You wanted public sex, but you wanted to do it in a place, and at a time, when we were unlikely to get caught.”

She flushed as her orgasm built. His hand snaked under her skirt to tease her clit, taking her right to the edge before moving back to her hips. The urge to scream increased and he put his lips on her ear.

“I know what you were thinking, that you didn’t want to be fucked in a crowded place because if someone saw you, their first thought would be ‘look at the fat chick getting screwed.’ Well, I’ve got news for you, Tempest. I want your body, every delectable inch of it.”

His words swirled around her, almost as if she could see them. Her hands were trembling and she was trying to follow his instructions, to play the game, but all she could do was think about the cock sliding up and down her pussy.

“I want you just as you are, and I want you to come just as you are.” He moved his cock to her entrance and slid inside in one hard, long stroke. Tempest gasped, grasping the table as her orgasm slammed into her.

It filled her completely as he banged in and out of her, lifting her up and bringing her back down. If anyone could see them, they would probably think she was moving as she played the game.

His hand moved back to her clit, where he stroked and pinched, and a second orgasm flooded her, leaving her feeling breathless.

Franco was not moving now, his cock firmly embedded inside her. She pulsed around him, willing him to start moving again.

Instead, he turned her head and kissed her lightly. “Don’t ever hold back from me again. Understand?”

He moved his hips very slowly, sliding in and out before a deep, dark sigh escaped him. She moved along with him, wanting to feel him as he came went over the edge. He grasped her hips and growled, “I asked you a question.”

“Yes, I understand.” His cock pulsed inside her and she felt the warmth of him fill her, from her insides all the way up to her heart. She closed her eyes to hold back the words that threatened to spill out.

“I think I love you, too,” he whispered against her neck. “As a matter of fact, I know I do.”

He put his hand on hers and guided it to the mechanism that launched the ball, pulling back and letting it fly. He kissed her neck as they worked the flippers together, moving the machine as they jiggled.

“We’re going to make it tilt,” she said.

“Life is full of tilts. And I can’t wait to face each one of them with you.”

Chapter Twelve

No, stay with me

I command it

The room is cold, oh so cold

How dare this man and his two companions presume to come in here and take my toy

She may not be worth anything, but she's all I have now

Candice!

I can see you floating, wavering

Your spirit is lighter than it has been in years

She's mine! Mine! Mine!

You're happy now, laughing

Talking with the woman who tried to take you away from me all those years ago

It didn't work then, it won't work now

Wait...wait...wait

No!

She's fading...fading...fading

The woman is crying

The man is smiling

Candice is gone

*Now I'm alone
Until my new love comes back
And she will
She must
Or I will have nothing*

* * * *

“Are you sure you’re up to this, Martin?” Franco put a hand on his friend’s shoulder and gently squeezed. Tempest could see the concern in her lover’s eyes as he studied his friend.

“Yes, I’m sure. Besides, Pebbles will be doing most of the work since I crossed Candice over this morning.”

“That takes a lot out of him, but we helped build his energy back up today.” Rumer stepped up and kissed Martin. Behind him, Noah wrapped his arms around Martin and pulled him into his chest and they effectively made a sandwich. Martin and Noah shared a kiss and Tempest smiled.

The love these three had for each other was strong, as strong as that of Quinn, Dev and Fletch.

Franco turned to her and winked. The message was clear. “We’ll get there. Allow the game to play out, tilts and all.”

“Tell me exactly what we have to do,” Tempest said as Pebbles stepped through the gate. They were all in her garden now. It was the first time she’d been back to the house since “the incident” almost two weeks now, and she hadn’t realized how much she missed it until she’d seen it.

She wanted to be back here, at the place she was making her own. But she didn’t want to live here alone anymore. She wanted Franco here with her. They’d discussed it quite a bit lately, finally deciding that, when the incubus was gone, he would move in with her. He’d go to work at Franco’s Grill every night but he’d come home to her.

There had been no declarations of everlasting love and marriage. Yet. But she knew they were coming. With Franco, you couldn’t rush things, and that was something she loved about him.

“I’m going to cast a circle in the middle of the room,” Rumer said in answer to her question. “You two will be in the center of it.”

This was the part that Tempest wasn’t sure she liked. Sex would attract the incubus, but it would also give him power.

“That’s why we’re not going to have sex,” Franco said. “Remember what we said. The one thing the incubus doesn’t understand is love. He understands the physical aspect of it, but not the emotional. We’re going to neck and pet, just enough to attract him, but not enough to give him a jolt of energy. When he’s there, Pebbles will do the rest.”

“Which is?”

“Incubi are hard to kill,” Pebbles said. “I’m going to try and banish him with a prayer, and if that doesn’t work, then Rumer and I will work together to capture him in a spirit jar. There he’ll stay until I can find a way to get rid of him permanently.”

Tempest nodded, grateful when Franco wrapped his arms around her. She felt cold, and more than a little frightened. This was something she’d never expected to happen in her house. Hopefully this would work, and the thing would be gone. Forever.

“It’s getting close to eleven,” Dev said. “We need to go inside and get this done before Samhain ends.”

Franco took her hand and led the group into the house. It felt cold to her, and she grasped Franco’s hand more firmly. He squeezed her, the movement telling her it would be okay, that he wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

They moved into the living room and Tempest saw all the furniture pushed against the wall, except for one fainting couch that sat in the middle of the room. Candles glowed around it, and Pebbles and Rumer went to work, quickly lighting them all.

When they finished, Fletch turned off the overhead light, leaving the room bathed in candlelight.

“On the couch, you two.” Pebbles indicated they should move, but when Franco started toward it, Tempest stood still.

“Shouldn’t it just be me? Won’t Franco’s presence scare him off?”

“If you think I’m letting you go in there on your own, you’re nuts,” Franco said. “We’re in this together.”

“But if he gets angry...”

“He’s drained,” Martin said. “That’s why we left him alone for so long, so that he wouldn’t have any energy left to fight us tonight. He might have a little, but not a lot. And Franco’s right. There’s no way we’d let you go in there alone, not after what happened before.”

Tempest wanted to remind Martin that the beast had been feeding off her then, and he’d had power. She decided, though, not to fight. This was their bailiwick and she should follow their directions.

Franco lay down on the couch and guided her on top of him, caressing her sides before settling his hands on her hips. Her heart was beating like an overworked drum, and he reached up and stroked her cheek.

“Relax, darling Tempest. I’m here, don’t forget that.”

Yes, he was there, and now that she was on the couch, she was thrilled that he was. She wanted to be brave and say she should attract the demon on her own, but in truth, it felt right to be here with Franco’s arms around her.

She leaned down and kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck as he caressed her cheek with his thumb.

Tempest lost herself in the feeling, vaguely aware of words floating around her, of motion near the couch. Rumer, the witch, casting the circle.

Franco deepened the kiss, darting his tongue into her mouth, licking her gently as his hand stroked her cheek, her neck, her shoulder.

Soon everything was gone but the two of them. She wasn’t aware of the cold, the light or the other people. All that mattered was Franco, the man laying under her, the man wanting to protect her from the evil that had threatened her house, her very life.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips. “Can you read what I’m thinking?”

“Always.” The air around them stirred and Tempest heard a voice call her name. It was him. The demon. But she didn’t care. All that mattered was the man under her, who was now describing how their life would be together. “Home. Life. Babies. Us. Forever.”

“Yes.” She arched into him as he cupped her buttocks, then traced his fingers up her spine, causing tiny tremors of bliss to rush through her.

“I love you, too, Tempest.” He grasped her face between his hands and kissed her possessively. The air around them seemed burst with static and from what seemed like far away Tempest could hear chanting. It was Pebbles, or was it Rumer? Or was it both of them?

Frankly, she didn't care. Franco had flipped her expertly, his hands pulling up her shirt, roughly pushing up her bra. His lips found a nipple and she gasped, seeking to hold him as close as possible as he suckled her.

A male voice screamed "no" and the voices around them rose in anger. Tempest ran her hand down Franco's side, grasping his hips, then fumbling with the zipper on his jeans. He groaned in pain and she whispered she was sorry. When she finally had them undone, she grasped him tightly in her hands, stroking him up and down.

His own hands had found their way up her skirt, his fingers probing her wetness.

"It's working." The words barely registered with Tempest as she built toward climax. Energy seemed to run in circles around herself and Franco as they worked to bring each other to completion.

His cock pulsed in her hand as her clit twitched under his fingers.

"Now! Now!" That was the same voice she'd heard earlier. Pebbles.

Franco pressed his thumb into her clit and Tempest came, yelling out his name as she felt hot jets of semen soak her fingers.

The room grew quiet, and then there was a chuckle. "You weren't supposed to have sex," Dev said.

"We didn't." Franco's chest was heaving and he gazed down at her, his eyes filled with desire. "That was just foreplay."

The laughter increased and Franco sat up. Tempest looked at the people surrounding them. Their faces were as flushed as she felt right now.

"Is it gone?"

"Yes," Pebbles replied. "He's gone from your home."

"Is he dead?" Tempest noticed a slight hesitation on the other woman's part. When she finally nodded no one else challenged her, so Tempest decided she'd just imagined her misgivings.

"That's great news," Franco said. "Now, get the fuck out so we can turn foreplay into real sex."

The laughter increased and Tempest laid her head on his shoulder. The demon was gone, the house belonged to her and the man next to her was hers, too. Life was perfect, much more so because of the man sitting beside her.

Rumer instructed them to stay where they were until she'd done something with the circle she'd cast. When she'd said things were fine they stepped out. Franco headed for the bathroom, coming back moments later with a wet towel.

“Well,” he said. “As much as I'd like to stay here with my lady, I suppose a celebration is in order. “Dinner's on me, so let's head out.”

“Wait.” Tempest looked around the room. “How can we be sure he's gone?”

“Do you feel him?” Pebbles cocked her head and glanced at her.

Tempest closed her eyes and relaxed. All she could feel were the people around her, their love and friendship.

“No.”

“Then he's no longer attached to you,” Pebbles said. “You can relax and enjoy yourself. I promise.”

Epilogue

Two weeks later

Tempest hung Franco's shirt on a hanger, then placed it in the closet next to hers. It felt strange seeing it there. Strange, but beautiful. She smiled as the sounds of hammering reached her ears.

Mr. Melton was installing a bathroom in the master bedroom, not five feet away from her. She glanced over at Culo who washed his paws as he lay in the middle of the bed. In the open window, Pero watched the world go by.

The cats had come into the master suite their first night back. That alone told Tempest that the incubus was truly gone.

"It'll take another few days." She turned to where Mr. Melton stood, hammer in hand. "You sure about that claw foot bathtub? It's going to take up an awful lot of room in there."

"Yes, I'm sure." Very sure. I have this wonderful fantasy about Franco and me in there, having a great time together.

"All righty then, I'm leaving for the day. I'll be back in the morning."

After he left, Tempest walked over to the walled-off area, looking inside. It was definitely taking shape.

She ran her fingers up her sides, cupping her breasts at the thought of making love to Franco in the old-fashioned tub. As if on cue, the vibrator he'd placed inside her this morning turned on.

She shivered as she remembered him running it over her body before sliding it into her, slapping her ass and telling her how he was going to love knowing it was there while he was at work. The sensations spread through her, her clit twitching. She came out of the room and looked toward the doorway. Franco leaned against the doorjamb. He waved the vibrator remote at her, then turned it up.

“Hi.” She tweaked her nipples, then bit her lip. “How was your day, dear?”

“Darling, it’s about to get a lot better, for both of us.”

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

One of the things people ask me is where I come up with ideas for stories. In the case of *Come As You Are* the answer is easy: Personal experience.

My experience with a presence in the night is not something I've told many people. Until now. It's not exactly the one that Tempest had, but it does provide the basis for this tale.

One night, in February of 1992, I was living in a small apartment with myself and two cats. I'd lived in that apartment for almost a year, and had enjoyed it. It was one bedroom, with a kitchen, dining room, living room and bathroom. Just enough for one person while I searched for a small house.

Things had been going fine until one night, when I woke up around one a.m. The cat was lying next to me and his gaze was focused on the doorway. He didn't move from his spot, and when I stroked his fur, he hissed at me, something that was not a natural thing for him to do.

I pulled back my hand, figuring that the cat had just participated in a fight with his feline brother and was angry. Then I went back to sleep. This happened several more times during the week, waking up at one a.m. and feeling as if I were not alone in the room. Sometimes the cats would be there. Sometimes they wouldn't. But the feeling of being watched, of not being alone, was always the same.

About a week after this started things changed. I woke up at one a.m., as had been the norm during that time. Both cats were at the bottom of the bed, but both were awake. The presence I had sensed all this week was back, but this time it was in the bedroom, and moving toward the bed.

Seconds after I felt the presence at the bottom of the bed, both cats hissed and howled, running from the room, and a large weight came down on top of me, as if a man were placing his body over mine. I screamed and flailed out my arms, yelling at whatever it was to "leave me alone."

Then I ran out of the room to find the cats cowering in the corner of the living room. I sat down on the couch, shaking, and both felines jumped up, one on either side, as if to comfort me. I did not sleep in that room again, moving from the apartment a little more than a month later.

Was what I felt an incubus? Some of my friends are convinced that it was. Others are convinced it was just my overactive imagination playing tricks with my mind. I'm not sure exactly what I felt. I know that when I asked it to leave, it did.

In my research about incubi, I found that some are sinister, and some just want to provide physical comfort and companionship to their chosen companions. Which is the truth, and which is fiction? I wish I knew.

One good thing came out of it. A Spirit Seeker story that features an incubus that leans toward the darker side.

About the Author

Melinda Barron loves to explore Egyptian tombs and temples, discover Mayan ruins, play in castles towers, and explore new cities and countries. She generally does it all from the comfort of her home by opening a book.

Melinda loves to lose herself between the pages of a book. The only thing she loves more is creating stories from the wonderful heroes and heroines that haunt her dreams and crowd her head. She believes love is for everyone, not just those who are a size 2. Her books are full of magic, suspense and love, in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Mel currently lives in the Texas Panhandle, with two cats, and a file stuffed with new ideas to keep her typing fingers busy, and your heart engaged.

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***Nuit Aux Trois* by Melinda Barron**

Quinn's two roommates, lovers Fletcher Covair and Devlin St. Giles, have the perfect idea: Quinn will accompany them on a Halloween ghost hunt at a haunted plantation. Quinn agrees, knowing there's no such thing as ghosts and thinking the time away will give her time to assess her future job prospects, and if nothing else, a chance to relax.

But the plantation's resident ghost, Alison, has other ideas. She wants help in righting a long-time wrong, and it seems that the ghost has chosen Quinn, Dev, and Fletch to assist her. While Quinn's mind is reeling from the knowledge that there are really ghosts, she comes to another shocking realization: Dev and Fletch have more on their minds than ghost hunting, and Alison isn't the only restless spirit who wants to make contact.

***The Resurrection of Josephine* by Melinda Barron**

Martin Vandreen avoids graveside funerals at all costs—for good reason. As a spiritual medium with the ability to communicate with the dead, cemeteries tend to be filled with restless souls that want to chat with him. But when Martin makes an exception and attends the burial ceremony of his dear friend's departed father, he encounters a powerful entity that nearly kills him.

Rumer Rousseau and her lover Noah Hopper will do anything to stop the resurrection of Josephine, including forcibly enlisting the help of Martin. Martin reluctantly agrees to help find a way to destroy Josephine before the evil witch gains enough power to overturn the spell binding her spirit to her crypt, thus allowing her to return to the world of flesh and blood.

Suddenly, Martin's orderly, somewhat private lifestyle is turned upside down. But within the arms of Rumer and Noah, he's finds that he no longer desires the solitude he once treasured, and longs to have a relationship that can stand the test of time. But will the bond they forged together be strong enough to survive the resurrection of Josephine?

***Rules of Darkness* by Tia Fanning**

They tell me that I am special, that my ability to heal is a "gift" that should be treasured and appreciated. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not gifted...I'm cursed. Nothing in this life is free, not even gifts. There is always a price to be paid somewhere, somehow.

My healing gift came with twelve Rules of Darkness, rules that I must follow at all times, until the day I die. The rules are ingrained in who I am. They dictate how I live my life when I am awake, and they haunt me when I'm asleep. *Don't look into a graveyard, Katia. Don't touch the dead, Katia. Never seek out the lost, Katia...* It's enough to drive a person mad.

And perhaps that's where I find myself now. A victim of a disease I can cure in others, but not in myself. It's madness to break the rules, and yet, I don't care. I'm tired of living my life this way. I'm tired of the rules. I won't do it anymore, and if that means I suffer the consequences, then so be it.

***Beyond Death* by Jinger Jackson**

Allana Simpson is cursed. Love only brings death to everyone around her. She longs for a normal life with one man that she can give her heart to without killing him.

Tom Haugan never believed in curses until he met Allana. She opens up a world for him that he never knew existed. A world he never wished to learn about.

Tom wants to protect Allana, to heal her heart and take away her pain. The closer he gets, the more "accidents" occur. He's not willing to give up on what they could have. Allana's longing for Tom and the dream of a future filled with happiness weakens her resolve to remain alone. She trusts him and decides to let him in. Now death stalks them both...

***Waking Sebastian* by Melinda Barron**

BBW Michelle Anderson is coming off a bad breakup. To help fuel her creative juices, the author accepts a friend's invitation to visit her new home in Florida. When she arrives she finds her friend gone, leaving Michelle to work and explore the old home and the beach.

While taking an early morning swim, Michelle has an encounter with a gorgeous man she thinks is a new muse. But this muse is different than all her others. For one thing he'd not Charles, her current muse. For another, he's interested in Michelle, and not her heroine. Not that Michelle's complaining. This new muse provides powerful stimulation that make Michelle's senses roll. She's just sure exactly what's happening when he appears.

Placed under a voodoo spell, Sebastian Maddox has been asleep for 186 years. He wakes for one hour each morning, in time to see the sunrise. He thinks the beautiful woman he finds on the beach is a figment of his imagination. Until he touches her and finds out she's very real. Once he convinces her he's not crazy, he's more than happy to share his morning sojourns with her. But he wants more, and he knows she does, too.

Can Michelle help break the spell and wake Sebastian?

***The Dance* by James Goodman**

Nearly a decade ago, Detective Tom Wiley worked a case that continues to haunt him to this day. But while the nature of The Puppeteer's horrific crimes will always remain in Tom's memory, it's the guilt of not catching the serial killer before he vanished that still weighs heavily on his heart.

Now the eight years of peace and quiet since the vicious killing spree has come to an abrupt and gruesome end.

The Puppeteer is back.

With the unwanted help of his newly assigned partner, Detective Anna Perez, Tom will stop at nothing to end The Puppeteer's latest reign of terror. But as the detectives follow the trail of bodies, they quickly realize that The Puppeteer may not be their deadliest enemy, and they're up against something far more sinister than the twisted workings of a serial predator.

Can Tom and Anna survive this world of insanity and death, of love and loss, of myth and magic, where the lines between good and evil are hard to discern? Or will they be forever swept away in *The Dance*?

***Eyes of the Dead* by Aleka Nakis**

What would you endure to find the cure for the disease that killed your mother? Exposure to venomous snakes? Raging rapids without a life jacket? Drug lords who dab in sex trafficking?

Would you relinquish control and trust your life in a dead man's hands?

Tiffany Jensen, a young breast cancer researcher, confronts her greatest fear and flies on a plane to a foreign country alone. Venturing into the dangerous terrain of the Mayan jungle, she is willing to do just about anything for the cure.

Antonio Francisco Fernandez, *aka* Agent AFFCROC, is open to only one possibility: getting Tiffany out of his territory and safely back to the States. Will his insistence deny her success, or struggling to find her way, will she come face to face with the eyes of the dead?

***Tuttle's House of Horror* by James Goodman**

Tyler Duke has a plan. With the help of his closest friends, he will open the doors to the infamous Tuttle House on Halloween and provide a weekend of thrills and chills for curiosity seekers. Why is the house infamous? It was the sight of the largest mass murder in the history of Northeastern Oklahoma.

If all goes well, Tyler and his friends will earn enough money to spend spring break in Cancun, but unbeknownst to them, someone has taken up residence in the old mansion, and he has a plan of his own.

Bobo hopes the weekend brings people in droves. Nothing would make this twisted clown happier than to put gaping smiles under the faces of the house's patrons. If he can just maintain control of his inner demon until the grand opening, it will be his greatest achievement: a night so brutal even the Fallen will take notice.

Will Tyler and his friends discover the killer in their midst before it's too late? Or will they become the main attraction in *Tuttle's House of Horror*?

Find Melinda Barron's *Desires of the Lamp Tales* at
www.ResplendencePublishing.com

Wish Me Up, Rub Me Down

With no love life to speak of, BBW Anya Bartholomew lives only for her job. This dedication has paid off. As a successful advertising agent, she has risen in the ranks of her firm to be the top money-maker.

But at the insistence of her two best friends, who claim she needs a break from work, Anya takes a weekend vacation to the small town of Pleasant, Maine. While shopping at an antique shop, she rubs a lamp that looks as if it could belong to Aladdin himself.

Things will never be the same.

Back at work on Monday morning, Anya finds that her boss has given her a new account...for a lamp factory. However, her clients—two very handsome, very sexy men—are more than what they seem.

They're Pleasure Djinn. And they have come to fulfill five of Anya's most secret sexual wishes.

Aliya Baban and the Cave of Pleasure

Advertising agent Aliya Baban is beautiful with a capital B. Unfortunately, she's also a witch with a capital B. In her twenty-eight years of life, she's managed to offend almost every woman she has ever met.

But she doesn't care, really. That's just the way life is.

When her boss tells her to get the *Cave of Pleasure* account, or else get a new job, Aliya takes her party invitation—and the strange lamp she's received—and attends the nightclub's grand opening, ready to do battle for her livelihood.

Matuse is more than just the owner of the *Cave of Pleasure*...he's a pleasure djinni. And Aliya has rubbed his lamp. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. Though he intends to bring intense pleasure to her body, it's also his job to make sure his "she-devil" changes her wicked ways.

Will Matuse be able to help Aliya overcome her painful past? Or will Aliya fail to make the five heartfelt apologies she needs to make to the five women she has hurt the most.

To Rub, Honor and Obey

Moreen McGee is a perfect example of how poor decisions made in youthful rebellion can haunt someone for life. Now on probation for ten years, she serves her court-ordered community service at a center for troubled teens, in the hopes of stopping other kids from taking the wrong path.

But when one of her young charges pickpockets a wallet from her high school nemesis, Aliya Baban, Moreen decides to put the illicit skills she learned as a teenager to good use...by breaking into Aliya's apartment to return the stolen wallet, thus keeping the kid who stole it out of trouble and out of jail.

However, once she's in the opulent Manhattan flat, Moreen can't resist the urge to take one small token from the woman she still blames for her own downfall—an old, neglected oil lamp that she's sure Aliya will never miss.

Moreen accidentally summons a gorgeous demon-turned-pleasure djinni named Paran...and he's not too thrilled with the theft of his property. Moreen has rubbed his lamp, the contract is sealed. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. And Paran intends to use this time to help his little felon learn some very important lessons, including the true meaning of the words *honor* and *obey*.

Smoke, Fire and Desire

Scientist Rhylie Dawson works hard, but when it comes to play she's pretty reserved. Until her friends take her to the *Cave of Pleasure* in New York City. She's there to celebrate her birthday, and maybe, just maybe, get lucky.

What Rhylie doesn't know is the *Cave of Pleasure* is run by Pleasure Djinn, and they're eager to show her that there's more to life than just work. On stage in front of a bevy of male dancers, Rhylie is told to choose one for her special birthday dance.

She picks the fireman, and quickly learns that where there's smoke, there's fire, and a great deal of desire.

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