



Love comes at the turn of a card...or the crack of a whip.

Sandine would love to walk out of her ex-boyfriend's life forever. Except the sadistic bastard stole the ancient tarot cards her late mother gave her, knowing she'll do anything to get them back. Including endure his abuse on the stage of his sex club.

For the crime of trying to get her prized cards back, she's steeling herself for the public beating of her life. Knowing that no matter how much she screams, no one will come to her aid.

Harry Marshall should be immune to undercover work at sex clubs by now. From the moment he spots Sandine chained at the mercy of the suspected drug dealer he's after, his gut tells him something isn't right. He can't believe he'd risk blowing his cover by stepping in, much less his body's erotic reaction to inflicting pain on her luscious body.

Question is, how deeply involved is she in her ex's drug dealing—if at all? If she'd stay out of his way long enough to find out, he wouldn't have to put his own mission in danger to keep protecting her from her ex...and herself.

Warning: Contains lots of bondage, sex clubs, whippings, orgies, tree sex, m/m and a variety of other creative sexual scenarios that might surprise you. Oh, and the hero has a striking resemblance to Han Solo. Just sayin'.

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Sting of Desire

Lilli Feisty

Dedication

For R.G.

Chapter One

“Do you need anything, Mr. Marshall?”

Harry dragged his gaze from the nude woman chained from the ceiling to the semi-nude woman standing before him. She wore garter belts, black leather boots and a piece of orange fabric binding her breasts. She kicked out her hip, angling her compact body to its best advantage. Harry allowed his gaze to wander over her augmented breasts, then lingered for a moment on her blonde pubic hair, shaved into a scrolling L.

He returned his gaze to her face. “No, thank you, Linda. I’m fine.”

The blonde winked at him. “Anytime, Mr. Marshall. Just say the word.”

She sashayed away. Beautiful Linda did nothing for him, not with Sandine so close. Naked. Restrained. He should be used to this now, but like a schoolboy watching his first porn, he had a hard-on that wouldn’t quit. Hell, maybe he should give in and join the crowd below and jack off to the show of Sandine being flogged.

The thing was, he doubted he could passively watch.

Her S was perfectly shaped. He’d occasionally wondered if Sandine, like all the women who worked at Le Cheval, was required to sculpt the first initial of her name into her pubic hair. Now he knew the answer.

Moments ago he’d watched as Cain prodded her up the steps to the stage, then yanked her arms above her head to secure her wrists, enclosed in invisi-links, to a steel bar hanging on two chains from the ceiling. Cain was all about the invisi-links tonight. Probably because he thought he was the only one who held the code. Dumbfuck. Harry had broken the system on day one. Just in case.

Now he shifted in his seat, reached into his coat pocket and rubbed his fingers over the buttons of the tiny PDA that held all the security data for Le Cheval. The knowledge that he could release her whenever he wanted calmed him a bit.

Le Cheval was an old San Francisco opera house that had been completely restored to its original red-carpeted, gold-gilded glory. Only these days the venue was more likely to feature orgies instead of operas.

Ornately carved banisters led up either side of the large theater to separate balconies, and from where he sat in the upper left terrace, Sandine was almost fully exposed to his gaze, her arms stretched high above her head. He skimmed her naked skin, her ribcage and shapely breasts, over her ass and the small of her back—stretched to allow the full lengthening of her body...

She was beautiful. Her body, her face. The way she moved. He'd once watched her delicate, long fingers as she mixed a cocktail for a customer. As the general manager of the club, her duties included all sorts of things, from taking inventory to educating those new to the sex club world, and Harry enjoyed simply watching her. She distracted him, distracted him from the true reason he was there—to bust Cain's drug-dealing business. He had no idea if she was involved in it, but he planned on finding out.

And even if she was dealing, Harry couldn't suppress the urge to protect her from that psychopath, Cain.

Harry watched as the leather-clad asshole double-checked the restraints then, apparently satisfied with his handiwork, drew one fingertip over her skin from her wrist bone down to the underside of her pale arm until he reached her breast. He leaned in close to her face and pinched her nipple. She gasped, the muscles on her body visibly tensing. But she didn't back away. Instead she looked straight at Cain, a murderous expression in her eyes. The asshole twisted her nipple until she winced and only then did he walk away.

Harry realized he was standing. He had been about to jump over the balcony and shove that fucker's face into a—

Not good, Harry, not good at all. You almost lost your cool there. You cannot blow this case.

He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his inner coat pocket, took one out and lit it, inhaling deeply. When he was a small boy, cigarette smoking had been illegal. He thanked God for the scientist that had created these new reduced-odor, nicotine-free, non-carcinogenic versions. Lately Harry was going through about two packs a day. He blew the smoke from his lungs, calming himself before he acted irrationally.

Before he killed Cain.

Something wasn't right. Harry knew it, felt it in his gut. He sipped his drink and waited, trying not to fixate on Sandine's naked body.

Cain disappeared, leaving her chained from the ceiling and prey to the whims of the crowd. A voluptuous woman approached her, circling once before smacking Sandine's ass twice in quick succession. Over the next few minutes others approached, fondling her breasts, stroking her thighs. A few fingers may have strayed into indelicate territory, but Sandine didn't seem to mind the touch of the crowd. If anything she appeared to be calming under the caresses of the gathering. When a man knelt momentarily before her and placed a soft kiss at the bottom tip of her S, Sandine's body visibly slackened, and she closed her eyes.

Fuck. He had to go down there. See for himself what her skin felt like, tasted like. Now, while he had the chance. No one would blink an eye if he went to her, kissed her, knelt before her and touched her, licked her...

What was wrong with him? He'd seen more T&A since he'd been on this job than any man had a right to, he should be immune to the sins of the flesh by now. Yet every time he laid eyes on her it was if an electric current pulsed through his veins. Something primal took over his brain. His self-control disappeared.

But he wasn't the only one succumbing to the excitement of the night. A sense of anticipation filled this club like the haze of a hookah lounge. And in the center of it all was *her*.

He looked away and his gaze landed on one of the chairs placed around the stage. A man sat there, the pants of his exquisite black suit in a puddle around his ankles. A woman wearing high heels, the straps wrapping from ankles to knees, straddled him. They both faced the stage. With one finger the businessman lazily traced his lady's breasts as they awaited Sandine's punishment. His other hand caressed the inside of her thigh.

Harry couldn't get away. Everywhere he looked his gaze landed on couples in various combinations of sex. Taking a deep drag from his cigarette, he inhaled until the last ember disappeared in a slow burn.

Finally a hush fell over the crowd. Cain returned, his boots thudding on the black wooden floor. He held a crop at his side and, as he walked toward the stage, his eyes remained glued on Sandine.

She met his look, but only for a minute before lowering her eyes. Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Why? Why was he relieved she wasn't provoking Cain? Harry tipped his glass to his lips and drained the contents, using alcohol to suppress this feeling of... What? Protection? Yes. But why did it run through his veins with such force? Fuck if he knew, but he wanted it gone. It gave him the urge to behave impulsively. Not a good state of mind for an undercover narcotics agent.

"Turn around, Sandine."

Sometimes Cain would make a show of spanking a waitress if she spilled a drink, or lock one of the bartenders in a cage if he wrongly mixed a cocktail, but never had he punished Sandine. Most people assumed she was simply perfect, or preferred to keep things private.

Apparently not. The sense of sexual excitement in the place went up a few notches as they waited to see what he would do to her. The businessman drew apart the knees of the woman on his lap, spreading her even wider as they watched Sandine turn to expose her back and ass to Cain.

Harry nodded at the ever-attentive Linda, who appeared moments later with a fresh whiskey. It was half drained by the time Cain began speaking.

"Sandine has committed a grave crime—the crime of thievery—and she will be punished." He snapped his fingers, and immediately Cain's pretty boy appeared at his side. Cain dropped something metallic into the other man's hand and nodded toward Sandine. The bald man approached her and went about the task of attaching a set of nipple clamps to her breasts. They screwed shut like mini vise grips, and it took a few minutes for him to twist them on.

A woman bound with ropes, seated directly in front of Sandine, shifted in her chair, her cheeks flushed pink. Seemed like everyone was getting off on this show.

Everyone except Harry.

"Are they tight, Jeeven?"

"I think so, sir."

Cain laughed. “You *think*? Tighter then.”

She drew in a tight breath as he continued to screw the clamps onto her nipples, but she did not cry out.

“Thank you, Jeeven.” Cain took a few steps until he stood behind Sandine. Leaning forward, he whispered something into her ear. Fuck, Harry wished he had his earpiece on. He had no idea what Cain was saying, but whatever it was sent a visible shudder down her back.

Cain pulled aside her hair, exposing her long, pale neck. Then he leaned down and licked her shoulder.

The urge to throw a knife at Cain’s face was nearly overwhelming. One little flick of his wrist was all it would take and that fucker would never lay eyes on Sandine again.

He clenched his fists at his side. Christ, what was wrong with him? This type of play was common here, so why was Harry reacting this way? He needed to make the bust and get off this case ASAP. This dame was fucking with his head.

Yanking her hair, he jerked her ear toward his filthy mouth as if he was going to whisper something, but instead spoke loudly. “You attempted to steal from me, my dear Sandine, and you are to be punished accordingly. This is not a game.”

She raised her chin a notch. “I can’t steal what belongs to me in the first place, you fucking asshole.”

He raised his hand as if to slap her, but then held back.

She jerked back, an instinctive reaction, but it seemed Harry was the only one who wanted to rip Cain’s head off. His right hand went to the weapon at his hip while the man in the sharp suit slowly stroked the pussy of the woman on his lap. Her eyes were glued to Sandine’s nipple-clamped breasts, her mouth parted slightly as she watched.

Harry knew there was a signal in case the subject wanted out, but he had no fucking idea what it was. Hadn’t seemed an important thing to know. Each client had their own individual gesture or phrase, and one of the requirements of this club was that only Cain and Sandine knew what that indication was. Each member wrote it down after their membership had been accepted, and Cain kept that file under lock and key. So even if she had wanted to quit, only that controlling SOB would know it.

Harry clenched his left hand around his whiskey glass. He had thought that particular information unnecessary, and now Sandine was at Cain’s mercy.

Unless Harry decided to take matters into his own hands, which would be an incredibly stupid thing to do.

Cain bounced down the stairs and paced back about twenty feet. Turning, he removed a small item from his pocket. It was the remote control, the power to Sandine’s invisi-links. Cain turned the dial, forcing Sandine to inch her feet sideways until her legs formed a stretched out X.

Too stretched. Too wide.

By now Harry knew all about BDSM protocol, and it was obvious Cain wasn't following it. Sandine wasn't ready for heavy play, not yet, but Cain obviously didn't give a shit. That fucker didn't know what he was doing and didn't deserve her. That fucker who had ordered those nipple clamps so tight there couldn't be pleasure involved. That fucker who hadn't checked those wrist restraints for appropriate comfort. That fucker who was being handed a whip—

Harry's body tensed as he watched Cain take the bullwhip.

People were fucking stupid. Bullwhips could kill a person—even someone with advanced skill could do serious damage. He'd personally seen a trainee take out his own eye. It wasn't pretty. And Cain. Not only was he egotistical, pissed off and dangerous, but judging by the look of his dilated pupils, Harry suspected he was drugged as well.

And he thought to punish Sandine?

Case or no case, he couldn't allow it. However, if he rushed down the stairs, guns blazing, he would definitely blow his cover. No, there was a better way.

Harry set down his drink. He was just gonna have to whip her himself.

Chapter Two

Naked and chained from the ceiling. Again.

Only this time it wasn't for fun, despite the fact that about a hundred people were getting off on it. Sandine wasn't. Not long ago the erotic energy of those watching her would have been absorbed right through her skin and into her core, would have made her toes tingle and made her heart speed up from sexual excitement. And tonight, the sexual energy filling the room was practically an entity in and of itself.

For just a second she had managed to forget that she was here against her will, that Cain wasn't hell-bent on making her pay. For just a second she allowed the scents and sounds of sex to enter her mind, and her body welcomed the momentary pleasure. For just a second she had thought maybe his purpose was truly to play like they used to.

And she was sickened with herself for wanting it.

The fact was, she *was* here against her will and no matter what she did or said, no one would come to her aid. Cain was the master of role-play—she knew that better than anyone—and nobody had reason to doubt his ability. She could scream until her voice gave out, but it would just turn on the crowd even more.

And they were pretty turned on as it was. Her gaze skimmed the couples in the audience before landing on the woman bound to the chair just in front of her. A man knelt on the pine floor before her and Sandine focused on the back of his nodding head as he licked the woman's pussy. She moaned while looking Sandine straight in the eye.

The scene sent a jolt of excitement straight to her sex. She was such an exhibitionist, had been her entire life, and even now she couldn't ignore the thrill that shot up her back when she let her gaze roam the room.

She ignored it. She knew she had royally pissed off Cain, and he wouldn't be happy until he made her pay. They hadn't played in a long time—over a year. Since she'd called it quits when she discovered he had become addicted to D'sdaine. She had helped him kick the habit, suffering right there with him while he detoxed, holding him as his entire body shook from withdrawal.

She had loved him once, still did in a way. He knew her like no other, and she knew that deep down there was a good person in there somewhere... At least she still hoped so.

But her actions that night had made him angrier than she'd ever seen him—and that was saying something. And now that he was back on D'sdaine, he was more selfish, more bitter and more pissed off than ever.

Not a good combination.

And the worst part was it was her own damn fault. Looking back, she could see how stupid it was to try and steal the deck of Tarot cards he had hidden away from her. Sure, she was getting desperate to retrieve the one thing her mother had left her, but going in like that, without a plan, had been an incredibly stupid thing to do.

She never wanted to see him again, but he held ransom the one thing in the world she refused to abandon. Those cards simply held too much power to let them fall into the wrong hands.

That antique song “Been Caught Stealing” by Jane’s Addiction played as if on a loop in her head. Yeah, she sure had been caught, with her hand in his bottom desk drawer. And now she was going to pay.

Frozen in panic, she had stood there as Cain approached her. He had never beaten her in anger before, but that was what she had expected him to do right then. And just when she had shook off the fear, ready to fight, he had done the strangest thing—he’d kissed her.

And reminded her—for a split second—why she had loved him once. Together they had that rare thing—everyone said so—chemistry.

Next thing she knew she had fucking invisi-links slapped on her wrists, the translucent glow as hard as iron against her skin. Cain had been scowling at her, the evil gleam in his eye unfamiliar and chilling. He had summoned his latest boy-toy, Jeeven, to bind her ankles. And he didn’t seem at all concerned with the brutal way the little prick had treated her so far.

If she lived she was going to kick both of their fucking asses.

And then walk out of this place for the last time and take her ancient deck of Tarot cards with her.

Next time, she just needed a better plan.

The soft moans of a man being straddled by a voluptuous blonde drew her attention. Her throat swelled for a minute—she’d miss this place. Le Cheval had been part of her life for over five years. It was here she’d met Cain—they both had come to play out their voyeuristic fantasies. They’d explored that side together, learned how to push each other’s limits.

When the club had come up for sale, he’d purchased it, but it had been her vision to create a safe environment for those like her. Those who liked to watch and be watched. Those who needed a place where they could be totally free to explore their deepest fantasies. A safe, nonjudgmental place. And she’d seen her vision come to fruition.

But Cain was going to destroy it all. In fact, he had already started. The number of familiar faces dwindled a bit each night, replaced by a new generation of people. Sometimes she wondered if they were here for sexual fulfillment or for the drugs she suspected Cain was selling. She had called the cops once, but he must have paid them off because instead of arresting him they had issued her a warning for wasting their time.

She shifted her aching arms, her gaze drifting to a large male form in the upper balcony. Harry Marshall. He watched her intently—he always seemed to be watching her and every time their gazes met her skin tingled and her pulse jumped. He stood, and for a moment she thought he was going to come to her. But he just watched, sipped his whiskey, stubbed out his cigarette.

She closed her eyes. No one was going to help her. And the worst part was she had brought it on herself. Not that she regretted her attempt at stealing, even though it was utterly against her morals. She felt justified in this case. She hadn't stolen anything—she had attempted to retrieve what rightly belonged to her. What her grandmother and mother had passed down.

What she regretted was getting caught.

A sharp *crack* struck the floor about six inches from her left foot, shaking her out of her reverie. A whip. Cain had a whip. She didn't know if he meant to miss or not, but either way she wanted that thing out of his hand. He had very limited experience with the dangerous tool.

"Cain, you fucking idiot. Put it down *now*."

"No. The moment you decided to become a thief you gave up all your rights. I won't tolerate disrespect from you. Now brace yourself for your punishment—"

"Excuse me." Harry Marshall looked down at them, still and calm.

Like the eye of a storm.

She didn't know much about him—he never participated, just watched. But the mayor had requested they give him a membership, and Sandine hadn't hesitated in doing so. In this town you didn't disobey the mayor and expect to tell about it.

He rarely spoke, but she had the deliberate feeling no detail, no matter how minute, went unnoticed. He was an enigma. Even his clothing gave nothing away. His uniform consisted of faded jeans, a black T-shirt, steel-toed boots and a black trench coat he rarely removed.

When their eyes met for the second time that night her heart skipped a beat and her face warmed. What was he going to do?

What do you want him to do?

Every nerve in her body tingled, already on edge from all of the strange events of the night. Everything was taking on a surreal quality, as if she were dreaming.

And yeah. Harry Marshall was definitely dream material.

Her heart hammered as she watched Harry descend the curved stairway, his long legs moving with too much grace for a man of his height. His gaze flicked to hers for a moment before settling on Cain.

"I hate to interrupt," he said.

Oh my God. Cain's going to go ballistic.

Cain stepped forward, closing in on Harry. "What the fuck did you say?"

Harry didn't flinch. "I'm sorry to disrupt things, but may I respectfully ask to have a turn at punishing this thief?"

"And why would you want to do that?"

Harry shrugged. "I believe thieves should be disciplined, and I derive a special pleasure out of doing so." He spoke with reverence, but Sandine did not miss the spark of something else in his blue eyes, like sarcasm with a hint of amusement.

And this was *so* not amusing.

The two men stared at each other for what seemed like hours.

"Cain," she called, "stop—"

"Shut up." After a moment Cain continued, jerking his head to nail her with his steely gaze. "Sure! Why not? In fact, I think that is a fine idea. Why should I waste my energy when I can watch another carry out her sentence of ten lashings."

"Indeed," Harry said.

"Her name is Sandine."

"*Sandine*." His voice was deep and husky and made her heart race.

"She is very resistant, make sure to use full force."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Sandine jerked silently against her restraints. "Cain, get me the fuck down from here."

"I can't do that, my dear."

She refused to beg, not in front of an audience. Not to Cain. Not ever.

Harry looked her way. "I will administer her punishment as she deserves." She could have sworn he winked at her. "Is that okay, Sandine?"

Their gazes locked and she knew deep down that if she said no, he would walk away. Her intuition left no doubt about that. But then she'd be left once more to Cain, a victim for him to take his anger out on. Every instinct in her body told her Harry was the safer bet.

And she couldn't ignore the tiny surge of lust that pulsed through her. There was something about this man that made her body warm, made her want to give herself over. Made her want to close her eyes and let go.

Self-assurance radiated off him, in the way he stood, the way he moved. In his eyes she saw total confidence and right then she knew something. He knew what he was doing. Her intuitive ability had chosen a strange moment to reappear, but she welcomed it. Welcomed *him*.

Wanted him.

Maybe during all those silent weeks of watching from the balcony this is what he'd been waiting for. A chance to use the whip. Her pussy gave a sharp throb at the thought while fear sent a jolt of adrenaline through her veins. She began to tremble.

“Sandine? Are you ready?”

His simple words shot a tremor down her spine—his words and his direct, unwavering gaze. The crowd faded as she took a deep, calming breath. How strange that she wanted this. Despite her fear, she craved it. Longing settled deep in her gut.

“Fine.” Cain jerked a shrug, and Sandine realized Cain now had no control of the situation whatsoever. Harry did. “Here.” Cain lifted his arm to hand over the whip.

But Harry just smiled that crooked grin and reached inside his coat. “No thanks.” He pulled out a coiled piece of leather. “I prefer to use my own.”

The whip struck the ground inches from her bare feet, and Sandine’s body tensed in response. Her skin went cold even as her blood heated. Fear. She got off on it, always had. Even when there were no restraints or pain involved, it was scary to give one’s power to another. But that fear was what she craved, and the adrenaline hit her like a drug. She’d often wondered if this high was what it was like for Cain, the reason he preferred D’sdaine.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, waiting for the next strike, wondering where it would land. Near her other foot, behind her ankles, on her skin? But it didn’t come. Instead the scent of whiskey and sweet new nicotine reached her nose. Harry, the man she hardly knew but who was slowly gaining control of her mind and body, gently moved her hair aside, exposing her shoulder. It was here he placed a soft kiss, and her heart stopped momentarily from the sweet, gentle act. His lips were dry against her skin as he traced the scantest of lines to the back of her ear. It felt as if he was erasing the trail where Cain had touched her earlier.

“I’ve got you, Sandine. Trust me.” His voice was barely a whisper, but she heard him. Heard him everywhere. Her body responded to that voice, wanted to obey. Her legs began to tremble in want, in anticipation.

Her skin tingled as she felt his warm hand on her side, sliding over the bones of her ribcage until his feather-light touch skimmed her breasts. He unscrewed the clamps a little. The feel of his fingers over the tips of her nipples sent a shiver down her spine, the tight pinch of metal slowly turning from pain into tart pleasure.

Pressed against her, she felt his rock-hard erection against the small of her back as he continued to kiss her ear and neck. Heat from his chest burned against her shoulders through the fabric of his T-shirt. One of his large hands skated over her skin, moving over her stomach, tracing the S of her pubic hair, then sliding lower until she felt him cupping her between her thighs. Her legs, still open wide from the invisible links, could barely keep her upright as she felt every warm inch of his palm against her core.

Her head fell back against his shoulder. Through half-closed eyes she looked up into the balcony. Several people peered over the railing, watching her.

Her body quivered.

Everyone's gaze was on her. They watched and waited—eager to see what would happen next. What Harry would do next.

God, it had been so long since she had given in, been with a man other than Cain. A year was a hell of a long time for a girl like her. When Harry's hand left her pussy she almost begged him to put it back... *So long* since she had been touched like this... *So long* since a soft caress and a gentle kiss melted her body and her mind. And yet this gentleness came from a man who confidently held a whip in his hands. The juxtaposition nearly killed her.

She'd nearly forgotten what it was like to be properly dominated.

Her skin burned under the various gazes. She felt them watching her, staring at every inch of her body, knowing they were getting off watching her get off. They were right there with her in pleasure.

When he reached above her and slackened the invisilinks just enough to release the uncomfortable tension, she looked over her shoulder and silently thanked him.

Cain had disappeared, was probably off shoving powder up his nose, so he failed to notice when Harry subtly removed a miniscule gadget from his jeans pocket. Then the spreader-bar between her legs slackened. So he had the security codes in his PDA. She had no idea why or how, and she didn't care. All she knew was that someone other than Cain had the power to release her. Relief flooded through her at that knowledge.

She let Harry nudge her ankles closer together, where he wanted them. She sighed as her tingling toes came back to life. A tiny adjustment could make all the difference in one's comfort level. Too much distress could keep a submissive from being able to fully let go, to reach a place where she could take whatever the dominant wanted to administer.

And oh, how she wanted to reach that place. Now. With Harry.

He straightened, walked around her and placed himself directly in front of her body. His blue eyes were dark, and he gave her a little smile.

Just before he kissed her.

Her mouth was the only part of her body she controlled, so she used it to kiss him back, to taste him, to show him what she wanted—to open up and let him in.

She ran her tongue slowly across his. He tasted of whiskey, *her* whiskey, from the private stash she reserved just for him, because she knew he liked it. That little fact, that little part of her on him, turned her on even more, and she moaned into his mouth, pressed her breasts as close to him as her restraints would allow.

His fingers, so much longer than Cain's, reached between her legs, sliding directly into her, and she moved against his hand, silently begging him deeper. She was very wet now, and he had no trouble sliding

in and out of her body, a little deeper each time, a little faster. She had no idea how many fingers he used to fuck her with, but it wasn't enough.

"You're a cop." The words left her mouth on their own. She had no idea where the thought had come from.

He pulled away to stare at her. "How did you know that?"

Everything about this man made her thoughts spin, and she went purely on instinct. That was a forgotten feeling that she ignored for the moment. "I don't know."

He shook his head as if she had confused him and kissed her again. A long and deep kiss that mimicked the movement of his hand between her thighs.

When he released her mouth from his kiss she nearly fainted from desire. "Please. Fuck me right here, in front of everyone." She trembled, every nerve in her body subtly spasming.

Pulling his fingers out of her, he gave her that tilted grin. "I promised your friend I'd administer your punishment."

He kissed her once more and again she melted, barely feeling the feathery brush across her collarbones, over the tips of her pinched nipples, then skimming her sides... Somewhere in the mush of her brain she registered that it was the end of the whip he was using to tease her with, and when he lightly smacked her between the legs with it she gasped from the sting.

"Trust me." It wasn't a question. It was a command.

She wasn't scared. But when he walked out of her range of vision and the *snap* of his whip hitting the ground reached her ears, she shuddered. Not from panic, but from magic and erotic sensation and *trust*.

It was a thrilling combination, one she hadn't experienced in a long time. And it had never been like this.

She welcomed it.

He began to circle her, and when his whip snapped the wooden floor her body surged with lust. *Crack*. A jolt went straight to her pussy. *Crack*, this time the corded leather struck only inches from her toes. Then he came full circle to look her in the eye, and the whip snapped the air just next to her shoulder.

Yes. I'm all yours now. Whatever you want. To give him that control was bliss.

He stepped back about five feet from her and drew back his arm. With a flick of his wrist the leather circled her torso, hugging her in a soft, tight coil. Her moan joined several others in the room. She silently begged him to give her exactly what she wanted—to feel that sting on her skin.

He disappeared behind her and then leather struck, stung her thighs. Her pussy clenched. She inhaled sharply, allowing her body to welcome the bittersweet pain. But she was ready. Harry's soft kisses and arousing touch had excited her skin, erotic pinpricks tingled every nerve.

Out of the corner of her eye she watched John, his silk tie finally loose, as Crystal straddled him. Sandine's gaze fixated on her swollen sex as the woman lifted her body up, then slid down slowly onto his lap, impaling herself on his erection.

Another sharp crack, this time across her lower buttocks. Whoever he was, Harry knew exactly what he was doing. Knew exactly how to strike, knew exactly how much pressure to hurt just *enough*.

She could come from it. Not just from blissful pain or the utter faith she felt in him, but the freedom. Nothing to think about—nothing to control. The pain hurt as it brought her to life. Her body jerked as the whip once again seared her skin. He ruled her completely.

Another strike had her pussy juice dripping out of her. She wondered when she'd ever been so wet before. He was going to do it. He was going to make her come right there, just like that. Harry, a virtual stranger with a whip...

The next strike caused a loud moan to escape her throat. Not just her, but those around her also seemed on the verge of a climatic edge, a crowd of writhing, gasping forms. The scent of arousal hung heavy in the air.

So close... She was so close...

"You bitch!"

Cain's voice broke the spell. Her body shaking, she twisted to see the two men, staring at each other, facing off like two dogs over a bone.

Sandine took a deep breath, tried to calm her now shuddering body. "No, *I've* had enough. Stop thinking with that tiny dick of yours and let me *go*."

That was a stupid thing to say. This was a fact she realized one hundred percent but it came out of her mouth so fast—God, she couldn't *think*.

Cain looked murderous. His hands clenched at his sides in threatening fists. He started toward her.

Yeah, he's gonna kill me now. I'm gonna die naked, chained from a ceiling, because I told my ex he had a small penis.

But then Harry was there, had her down.

He turned to face Cain. Cain who had summoned all five of his overly armed bodyguards, each one pointing a gun toward Harry.

And her.

"Get behind me." He shrugged off his coat and handed it to her. "Wear this."

She shrugged the heavy fabric onto her shoulders. The thing weighed a ton but she immediately felt less vulnerable with her nakedness covered.

Le Cheval had gone utterly silent, and she slowly became aware of what every single other person other than she had already taken note of.

Harry.

In his T-shirt and jeans, he looked completely at ease despite the two sawed-off shotguns, three knives in various sizes and an old-fashioned Glock 9mm strapped to his body.

Oh, and the whip.

“Holy fuck. Do you always carry an arsenal on your body?”

“You never know.” He gave her that grin that made her heart stop. “I like to be prepared.”

Chapter Three

Well, now he had really gone and fucked up. First the invis-links and now the weapons. All that sex-play and he'd still blown his cover.

Um, chief? I blew my cover by taking off my coat. Yeah, there was this cold, naked lady. I had just beaten her into a sexual frenzy and I didn't want her to get a chill.

That was sure to go over well. And, he didn't really think the chief would approve of Harry handing over his Kevlar coat to a suspect.

Cain took one look at his artillery and within seconds five security morons stormed the room, a total of eight guns pointed at Harry.

And Sandine.

Fuck. Harry wasn't worried about himself—it wouldn't be the first time he'd taken on five dumb ogres with too many guns—but he would never forgive himself if Sandine got caught in the crossfire.

"Come with me."

He slipped his arm around her and followed Cain into his private office, the army of ogres following them. The small room was a mess of papers, discarded leather clothing and modern furniture.

Cain took a seat behind his humongous glass desk. "How do you know my security code?"

Oh yeah. He had exposed that knowledge too. Chief was definitely going to kill him.

Okay. Time for Plan B. Unfortunately he didn't have a Plan B.

Yet.

Harry glanced at the ogres. "May we have a moment alone? There's something I'd like to discuss with you. A business proposition."

Cain scowled in his direction. "A business proposition."

"Yes. I believe I may have a client interested in something you sell."

The greedy light that sparked in Cain's eyes was telling. He waited a moment before answering. "If you disarm yourself, then I will agree to speak with you."

Harry hated to do it, but he began the process of unstrapping his numerous holsters, straps and belts. But Plan B was already forming in his head, and if the setup went accordingly, he could turn this gaffe to his advantage.

Ten minutes later a pile of weapons sat on Cain's desk. The ogres filed out, and Sandine made a move to follow them.

He grabbed the material of her coat, stopping her. “You stay.” He wasn’t about to let her out of his sight.

“Mr. Marshall, Sandine isn’t privy to all of my business practices. It’s best if she leaves the room. She won’t be harmed. Not that her well-being is any concern of yours.”

Relief flooded through his gut. Sandine wasn’t part of this.

But that begged the question—why did she hang out with this asshole? He intended to find out. Tonight.

“Harry.”

He looked up into her green eyes.

She touched his shoulder. “I’m fine.”

Torn. Torn between never letting her out of his sight and following through with his job.

She gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Thank you. I’ll leave your coat in my office.”

Reminding himself of his reason for being there, he unclenched his hand from the leather and let her go.

Cain pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his desk and lit one. “Now, Mr. Marshall. First, would you care to tell me why you brought such an array of weaponry into my club? And then you can enlighten me as to how and why you broke my security codes.”

Harry went to reach into his coat for his own cigarettes, but realized it was still draped across Sandine’s shoulders.

“I was sent here, Cain, to check you out.”

Cain took a deep drag off his cigarette. The acrid scent told Harry there was something stronger than nicotine burning there. “Is that so?”

“Yes. You see, I work for someone. And he’s interested in making a purchase from you.”

“And what type of purchase would that be?”

“The kind that would make you a very wealthy man.”

Cain’s hungry eyes lit up even more. But he hesitated. “How do I know you’re not a cop?”

Harry shrugged. “You don’t. But as I’m sure you can see by my earlier demonstration, I enjoy inflicting pain on others. Not something most cops can claim.”

Cain stared at him for a long moment. Harry knew the man was greedy and desperate. Which meant he would take chances.

“Okay. You have five minutes. Explain.”

And that was when Harry knew he had the bastard just where he wanted him.

Through the black-and-white closed-circuit TV, Cain watched Harry Marshall exit the front door, straddle his oversized black Harley Davidson, crank the thing until it sputtered exhaust and take off. After

the motorcycle disappeared Cain stared at the dark view of O'Farrell Street, empty except for a piece of paper fluttering in a foggy breeze, and contemplated his earlier meeting. If Marshall was telling the truth, Cain stood to make a lot of money. Maybe even enough to pay off Ramsey.

Cain opened a metal desk drawer and pulled out a glass vial. His hands shook—it had been almost two hours since his last bump and he could barely get the stuff to his nose without dropping the vial on the ground. Desperation steadied his nerves and he managed to spurt D'sdaine straight up his right nostril, then his left. Settling into his chair, he welcomed the sting to his nostrils that immediately followed, even though it seemed to singe his brain before settling into his veins. Ultimately the drug calmed his erratic heartbeat and cleared the blurring in the corners of his eyes.

Soon the familiar sense of tranquility descended over his nerves and he could think again. However when the vision of Sandine succumbing to the pleasure of Harry Marshall filled his head the habitual irritation came back. He helped himself to one more sniff.

He didn't understand it. Sandine hadn't shown any interest in sex for over a year—since she'd broken up with him. He knew this because he often followed her. She hadn't had any other lovers since him. Cain had attributed this to her still being in love with him, that he was the only one she could get off with. Lately she had shown signs of leaving him for good, which was why he'd stolen her deck of Tarot cards, and with it her ability to run off. Even if she rarely used the cards, she would never let them go. It was all she had of her female line.

Sandine had no idea how powerful she was, and Cain wanted to keep it that way. He had subtly played into her fear of being less talented than her mother, and encouraged her to give up reading Tarot. If she ever decided to utilize her gift she'd be whisked away by some hotshot CEO, or maybe a president. But Cain wanted her here, with him. The way things used to be.

Stealing her deck had been a last resort. She knew him so well, she always knew when he was using, and for some reason she hated him for it. He didn't understand why. It wasn't his fault—he had a disease—and besides, his personality wasn't that different on drugs, was it?

No, it wasn't. Sandine was simply selfish and unwilling to help. Even if he had wanted to kick the habit, how was he supposed to do it without her support? The only reason he'd done it before was because she was right there with him. This was *her* fault as much as his. It was her fault he used, her fault he couldn't quit and her fault he owed so much fucking money to Ramsey.

Cain tapped his fingers on his glass-top desk. The Ramsey situation was beginning to become worrisome. The guy was getting impatient and had sent several threatening messages his way. Problem was, Cain had given away or used most of the supply he was supposed to sell. But now this Marshall guy had walked in with a possible solution. Surely Mario would forgive some debt—at least temporarily—if he were to hand over a big fish?

“Jeeven!” Cain yelled into his wrist-com. “Come here, please.”

Cain stood and pulled a jar of lubricant off a shelf. He could have any woman in the club he wanted, but the only one that turned him on was Sandine. If he couldn't have her he wanted no female at all.

A moment later Jeeven poked his head into the office. "Yes, sir?"

"Close the door and come here."

Jeeven crossed the room, his black boots clicking on the wooden floor. Cain didn't miss the spark of excitement that flashed in the bald man's eyes, and he didn't even have to ask him to turn around, unbuckle his belt or bend over the desk.

"Good boy." Cain lifted Jeeven's shirt to expose the small of his back. The boy was lovely, all pale, hairless skin and tight muscles born of many hours at the gym. Cain caressed that skin, wanting to be gentle, to make up for his behavior with Sandine earlier. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but he had been furious at her for going through his things, for trying to get free. His heart had nearly broken at the thought of her leaving him and he had reacted badly.

He felt better now. The bump of D'sdaine had softened his anger, his frustration. He tugged Jeeven's leather pants until they bunched at his ankles and his ass was exposed. Jeeven, the lovely lad, even pushed his tight behind out a little, making it obvious what he wanted.

Cain reached down and took his own cock in his hand. Sometimes it was difficult to get it up right after a few bumps but tonight he had no problem at all. Probably a reaction to watching Sandine earlier. He had snuck into her office and watched through the one-way mirror. Her office was at the forefront of Le Cheval and had the best view of the stage. He had watched as members kissed her, stroked her S, spanked her. She had liked it, he could tell. She had been so excited for a moment Cain thought he could take over and have her.

She hadn't cooperated. And that had made him see red, which was why he'd become angry and ordered Jeeven to get the whip. But then he had struck out and missed, and the force of the weapon had scared him. God, he could have killed her with that thing. When Marshall had beaten him to the punch, Cain had almost been thankful.

But to watch her get off on that stranger had been torture. Torture because it had fucking made him hard as a rock and torture because he had wanted to kill the other man. Fuck, as Harry had whipped her, Cain had the strongest desire to join them, to kneel in front of her and feel her cunt as she bucked against his mouth. Because she would have. She would have fucked his face as Marshall whipped her...

In your dreams.

He shook the voice out of his head and concentrated on what was before him. There was nothing like the skin of a twenty-year-old man. So soft and firm... Jeeven's breathing became faster, louder. He thought the boy was falling in love with him, which was fine. He was more useful that way.

Sliding both hands over Jeeven's ass cheeks, he massaged him a bit before spreading him wide. He had a lovely asshole, he really did, and it felt even better than it looked.

Cain dipped his hand into the jar of lube and spread it over himself and Jeeven's asshole, sliding his finger into Jeeven's anus for good measure. The tight muscles clenched around his knuckle. After a moment he replaced his finger with the swift entrance of his cock and God, the boy was tight. His warm, slippery ass gripped Cain's cock, causing him to bite back a groan as he buried deeper. Thankfully sexually transmitted diseases had been eradicated ten years earlier, and the feel of flesh on flesh sent his high from the D'sdaine up a notch.

He closed his eyes and he could almost imagine Sandine was there, in the room, taking pleasure in the boy in her own way. This time it would be *her* on her knees, taking Jeeven's erection into her mouth, sucking him deep, her green eyes looking up and at Cain as he fucked the boy from behind, his hands steady on those sharp hipbones as he held Jeeven's body still...

"Oh my god!" Jeeven gripped the front edge of the desk, knocking papers and a stapler onto the floor in the process. Cain hammered into him, his balls slapping against the younger man's as their rhythm became harder, faster. One wonderful thing about the boy was that he could take it hard. Hard and fast and fierce.

Sandine used to be able to, too. God, once he'd fucked her until the headboard dented the plaster of her apartment building. She'd looked so lovely beneath him, her breasts swaying with his thrusts, her green eyes focused on him as he gave her pleasure...

If he angled just right the boy mewed, a soft kittenish sound that was very nearly identical to those Sandine had made when he'd brought her to climax.

The boy stiffened, whimpering vaguely as he glanced over his shoulder. His breath hitched, trembled like his shoulders, like that full bottom lip snagged between his teeth. The boy's face was bland, nothing spectacular really, but the intensity building between them contorted it, made it beautiful in its strain. Agony, ecstasy, the boy wore them both the same. Or maybe he didn't. Cain didn't care, as long as there was tight ass around his cock and a lean body at his hands.

But just moments after he came, reality greeted him with acidic clarity.

It wasn't Sandine he was fucking, and it probably never would be again.

Harry gunned his Harley up an almost vertical street. As he crested the top of F'illmont Street, the San Francisco skyline appeared, its multicolored lights reminding him of the Christmas trees his mother used to decorate many years ago. But even happy childhood memories couldn't knock the thoughts of Sandine out of his head. If anything, the contrast only succeeded in furthering the self-disgust that had settled in the pit of his belly, a feeling that had been fermenting ever since the adrenaline rush of being with Sandine had dissipated.

He eased up on the throttle slightly to rumble through a stop sign at the bottom of the hill. Why had she trusted him? Her trust—that was what had put him over the edge, that was what had gone straight to his

heart, his head. The smoky look in her eyes, the moan on her lips, the tremble in her legs. All of it killed him.

She'd submitted to him completely.

He hit the throttle, his black coat flying behind him in flapping waves. It didn't take a fucking shrink to figure out he was attempting to outrun his feelings.

His Harley wasn't that fast.

She had wanted him to do it. He knew that, just as he knew he liked his steaks rare and his showers hot. She wanted him to master her, and he had liked doing it too. A lot. But the guilt had sucked the lingering pleasure from him like a leech would fresh blood.

Nothing made sense.

Before he had started this case a file had been dropped on his desk. Sex Clubs for Dummies, he'd called it. But he'd read it—he always studied a case voraciously before he went in. He liked to be prepared, with weapons and knowledge. And so he had gone in armed with more than a whip, some guns and a few knives. He'd gone in with information.

Over the past three weeks he'd seen others engage in similar acts, and sometimes he'd felt a slight stirring of sexual excitement, but for the most part he'd been able to keep those feelings in check and stay focused. He'd been in control.

But nothing had prepared him for the overwhelming adrenaline rush of whipping Sandine. Which begged the question he'd been asking himself for an hour. Was it her or the act itself that had affected him with such intensity?

Or was it the combination?

Either way, what it came down to was he had beaten a woman and derived pleasure from doing so.

Inflicting pain—the act went against the very foundation of his ethical beliefs. Morals that had been drilled into his head ever since he could remember. His father had been a doctor, donating his time and services all over the world. The man had been a champion for those less fortunate than he. He'd been a spokesperson for peace. A hero.

Harry wasn't a hero, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he was a cop—a good cop—and shouldn't that mean something? What it *should* mean is that he didn't get off on that sort of thing. His father would roll over in his grave at the thought.

Yet, the feeling that had come over him while he did it—while he'd *whipped* Sandine—a sense of calm mixed with elation, was odd and thrilling and hit him like a drug. It was similar to the way his body reacted just before a freefall jump.

So, now you aren't satisfied with extreme sports, you need extreme sex too?

He gunned his bike up another hill, feeling like he was about to drive straight into the sky. All he could think about was holding her, making sure she was okay. Some primal, protective instinct beat in his chest, unlike anything he'd felt before.

He didn't understand it, any of it. Sure, he had done his research and knew the basic psychology of why Le Cheval held allure for so many people. But he had thought himself above all that. In fact, that was why the chief had picked him for this job. Unlike half the force, Harry's preferred flavor was vanilla.

Wasn't it?

Sandine eased into the claw-foot bathtub, closing her eyes as the water enveloped her tight limbs into its warmth. Taking a few deep breaths, she attempted to center herself. Something had happened tonight, a part of her mind had unlocked, and she needed to know what had triggered it.

All she saw was Harry, circling her, cracking that whip with a mastery that had melted her. And that was what he had done tonight—mastered her. Dominated her. Opened her up and let her go.

He amazed her. Her mind floated from how he'd played her earlier. Adrenaline thrummed lightly through her body.

And yet she had no idea who he was, this man who had saved her from Cain's anger.

Rubbing the scrapes around her wrists, she wondered how she could have been so stupid. A fucking Tarot reader, trained in divination from birth—how could she have acted so impulsively, with no pause to listen to her own intuition? What would have happened if Harry hadn't been there to intervene?

She sighed as the warm water lapped at the trace of a line where his whip had struck her outer thigh. The reddened skin would be fine by tomorrow, but she wanted the proof to remain. Wanted to see his mark on her skin.

It had been hours since she'd seen him and still her body tingled from the caress of Harry's lips on her skin, the feel of his large, warm fingers sliding into her body, the sting of his whip across her ass. Lightly touching her lip, she recalled the way his tongue had caressed the inside of her mouth. So natural, that kiss.

She had been *so close* to coming—simply thinking of the pleasure he had given her put her on the edge of an orgasm.

Again.

She closed her eyes, imagined him kissing her now, recalled his taste of whiskey. Whiskey and smoke.

She lightly pinched a sore nipple. Like a familiar lover, Harry had loosened the nipple clamps *exactly enough* to give her sharp pleasure. She raised her legs, rested her calves on the edge of the cold ceramic tub. She touched her ribs and moved lower, could feel the leather of his whip wrapping around her waist. The crack of the whip seemed to echo in her ear.

The water lapped at her skin as she submerged her hand to trace her shaved S, where she lingered for a moment before touching herself between her legs. Even in water her pussy felt wet and slick on her hand, and as she caressed her sex she pretended it was Harry's hand teasing her. His hands were lovely—long and confident, like the rest of him.

The look in his eyes as he had circled her, snapping his whip on the ground, reminded her of the lion trainer who had traveled in the *cirque* with her family. Like Harry, the trainer had been tall and lean, and even as a girl she had been fascinated with the graceful way the man had wielded his tool, the way he could coax a roaring beast into submission with a few controlled flicks of his wrist.

She slid her fingers to her clit, rubbed that throbbing point until she gasped, watched her toes go stiff. Her pulse began to race as she recalled the bound woman in the chair, the way her face had contorted in pleasure as the kneeling man licked her very center. Le Cheval had been throbbing with energy tonight, and Sandine had soaked it in like a plant does water. Her veins still hummed from the palpable excitement, feeding a long-forgotten part of her soul.

Ironically, despite her public display earlier, here she was alone, masturbating. But even this felt different, more exciting. She thought of Harry as she rubbed her clit and pinched her nipple, trying to find the exact pressure he had applied earlier. She couldn't get it right, damn it. God, if only he were here to do it again...

She remembered how she had wanted him to fuck her, how she had begged him for it.

Moaning, she slid her hand deeper into the folds of her sex, palming herself as he had done. It wasn't exactly right—her hand felt small in comparison—but at least it provided some degree of gratification. When she pushed two fingers into her body, working them in and out, she gasped in pleasure.

She wanted it all. She wanted Harry to fuck her, lick her, whip her—pain and pleasure—

She wanted *him*.

She climaxed, her body shuddering before each muscle froze, her legs spread wide and slung over the edge of the tub, his name on her lips. And as her heartbeat slowed and her eyes drifted open he was there, leaning against the sink. Watching her.

He gave her that crooked grin. "You called?"

Chapter Four

“You’re okay!”

A virtual stranger had just broken into her house, watched her masturbate, and this was her response? She was glad to see him? He’d been ready for a full-on assault.

He shook his head. “Of course I’m okay. What else would I be?”

She pushed herself up and stood, water splashing off her slim form. The tips of her wet hair brushed her breasts, and she tucked a braid behind her right ear. “I don’t know. I thought maybe Cain would try and kill you.”

Harry handed her a towel. “He’s lucky I didn’t kill *him*. Does he often treat you like that?” He couldn’t look at her one more second. He didn’t know why he was here—he had told himself it was because he wanted to check on her, make sure she was safe. And that was true. He admitted there was something else to it. It wasn’t that simple, was it? This need inside of him to see her was stronger than his self-restraint.

Fuck.

She wrapped the towel around her body. “No, never. We used to be lovers, but that’s over.”

“Then why do you stay?”

She sighed. “First how about you explain why you broke into my house.”

“Yeah, about that.” He looked at the top of his boot and then met her sharp gaze. “I apologize. But when you didn’t answer, I panicked. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sure you’re angry, and you have every right to be.”

“I am.” She shook her head. “But after the night we’ve had, I just don’t have the energy to do anything about it. And for some crazy reason, I trust you.”

“Instinct?”

She seemed to think about the answer and then, “Yeah. I guess so.”

They stared at each other and with each passing second his cock grew harder. With a monstrous effort of restraint, he did not throw her over his shoulder, stalk to the bedroom, throw her onto her bed and bury himself in that warm place he had touched earlier. He wanted to prove to himself that he was a gentleman, that he enjoyed an old-fashioned, pain-free fuck—tonight, as much as he did yesterday.

But now, inhaling the lavender scent of her soap, watching the damp tendrils of her auburn hair curl around her neck... Well, the stirring of his cock felt anything except controllable.

And then she raised the towel to dry her face and exposed the top of her thigh, which shouldn't have affected him the way it did, considering how much of her body he had already been exposed to, but that tiny peek of skin undid him. In a flash he saw her as she was before, naked and restrained. He clenched his hand, the hand that had held the whip that he'd used on Sandine. Everything came at him in a rush and it was too much. Except for the gun strapped to his left calf and the knife sheathed to his right, he'd come unarmed. Unprepared to deal with this kind of assault.

Somehow just being around this mysterious woman melted his self-control. What was wrong with him?

He didn't answer his own question. All his restraint had been used up, it seemed. Lifting her, he pulled her tight against his chest. "I want you. Wrap your legs around me." He settled her onto his body.

She looked him in the eye. "I want you too."

And when they kissed there was no holding back. There were only his lips against hers, his tongue tasting her. He was not gentle. Neither was she. She groaned against his mouth and his body responded by pushing his erection against the very center of her, the place he'd wanted to go all night.

When he broke away she was panting. "Where's your room?"

"Who the fuck cares?"

"Good point."

He fumbled with the towel, needing to eliminate that layer between them. Finally he dropped the thing on the floor, exposing her to his gaze. Her full breasts were lovely—pale and perfect and waiting. He bent forward to draw a nipple across his lips, his tongue darting out to tease the firm tip. She tasted of lavender soap and her unique skin, and he reveled in the feel of her in his mouth. Finally, he was able to do what he had wanted to do all night. Since he'd first seen her, bound and restrained. In that roomful of people, he had been restrained too. Now they were alone, free.

She sighed and gripped his head in her palms, her body squirming as she wrapped herself around him—hands, arms, legs, thighs—all grasping his body. She wanted him.

She moved against the button fly of his jeans. "Off. Take them off."

"If you insist."

He sat her on the edge of the pedestal sink for the one and a half seconds it took for him to undo his jeans and shove them to his knees.

He went to take her again, but she shook her head. "Shirt too."

He yanked it over his head.

She smiled as her eyes raked over his chest.

"Okay?"

"Okay," she said with a sweet grin.

He stepped between her legs, and she clutched his shoulders. "Now."

He paused, trying to get a grip on himself. This was what he wanted right? Vanilla sex? No whips, handcuffs or pain involved. And yet the last thing he felt was controlled. His cock, his brain, his heart. All were spinning a mile a minute but despite the chaos a sense of calm, of *rightness*, was there, just below the surface.

“I want you inside me. Now,” she repeated.

Because she was heaven, right there in the bathroom. And when he reached down to guide himself into her, she spread wide for him, until the outside of her calves touched the porcelain sink.

She looked up, smiled a little. “Go.”

She was such a contrast between light and dark, sweet and sexy. Sure and submissive. No doubt about it. She made him lose control.

Satisfaction. As he slid into her the sensation entered her body in a hot wave, settling into a sparkle in her belly. She had never connected with another’s energy this way. She allowed herself to enjoy the feeling, even if only for the moment. She could analyze everything later.

Because, with his hands clutching her hips as he moved in and out of her, she couldn’t think of much of anything at all, so overwhelmed was she by the feel of him inside of her. It was...magical.

She couldn’t have him deep enough, close enough. She tried to brace herself on the sides of the sink, but the ceramic slipped against her damp palms. “Lay me down.”

He glanced at the ground, tiled in miniature, antique ceramics, and she saw his hesitation. He had gotten off on whipping her, but heaven forbid she should scratch her back as he fucked her on the floor?

She ran a finger over his jaw. “It’s fine.”

Holding her to him, he picked her up and she gasped as the action put him deeper yet into her body. Yes, that’s what she wanted, him filling her. He dropped to his knees and she was straddling him. Her thighs clenched him, held him. She loved the checked strength of his arms under her hands, loved the way his pupils dilated into pools of dark brown as he watched her.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She raised a brow at that, sweetly aware of where his whip had landed on her skin. “Trust me. I just want to feel you inside of me—showing me how much you want me.”

“If I did that, I’d break you in half.”

“I’d put myself back together.”

As he lowered her onto the ground underneath him his dark gaze scanned her face. “Where did you come from?”

“The circus.”

He shook his head at that but began to move against her body, in and out of her. His hands were anchored to the floor on either side of her head, his arms like pillars holding him above her as his hips pumped in and out of her very core.

Still, he was holding back.

“Don’t think.”

The air in the room was damp from her bath and the heat from their bodies. His skin felt slick beneath her hands as she traced her fingertips over his back. “Harry, it’s okay. *I’m* okay.”

She put her feet on the ground, her knees bent next to his hips. She tilted her pelvis to feel him fully. “Trust me.”

He closed his eyes and pushed deeper.

“You won’t break me.”

He opened his eyes to lock onto hers. “Good.”

He retreated, and then his hipbones slammed against the insides of her open thighs as he rammed into her, the action sliding her a few inches over the floor. She welcomed the scrape across her shoulders, and couldn’t stop the low moan that came from deep inside her chest.

He withdrew and thrust into her again, never breaking eye contact. Little drops of sweat landed on her chest, her clavicle, and she wished she could reach up and lick the saltiness off his skin.

But he came at her, the force of his body pushing her over the tile, and she gasped, her legs falling limply to the side of him. Good. She wanted that, wanted to give him control.

“I fucking love...the feel of you.”

She had to break eye contact then, because he punctuated his sentence with another assault, and the combination of his words and his actions was...overwhelming. She looked past his shoulder to focus on a crack in the white plaster of the ceiling, attempting to hold off her climax. But the insides of her clenched at him, and her vision dimmed as she gasped, his name on her lips for the second time that night.

“Sandy, I’m...so fucking sorry...” He drove into her again, until there was no more room anywhere. She felt her head graze the baseboard. But she didn’t care because everything felt so *right*, and watching him over her, lost in his pleasure, filled her heart with something she couldn’t quite name. Unlike anything she had ever experienced, this connection. Spiritual and crushing.

He was nearing his climax. As if she’d been his lover forever, she knew this. She wanted to watch his face as he released, wanted to know what he looked like during the most intimate of acts. But, just as she felt the beginning of his ejaculation, a searing pain blinded her. Screaming, she squinted her eyes shut, but it only brought on a new type of agony. Because of what she saw.

Harry, naked, strapped to a table, unable to hear her, blood sticky under her bare feet...

Somewhere she was aware that he was coming inside of her, but that knowledge seemed foggy as she shook her head, trying to shake the vision from her mind.

"Too late, he's dead..."

Too late.

Harry wasn't sure how long he lay on top of her, collapsed and utterly spent. God, he had never lost control like that before. And yet there was a type of freedom in it, in trusting her, losing himself to her.

The scent of her neck was too good—he had to stay buried there a minute longer, even though he knew his weight was no doubt heavy on her body. But she clutched his head against her with such force he thought maybe she didn't mind. And she was so warm, still trembling beneath him.

But he should get up, he thought, as a drop of sweat slid down his cheek to land on his lips. Fuck, he was a mess—he'd have to bathe her again. As a bump in the tile dug into his knee, it began to dawn on him that the floor must be hell on her back.

He lifted his head, intending to pick her up, find her room and lay her on her bed, but as he caught sight of her face he sprung to his feet. "Holy fuck, what did I do?"

She lay there shaking, tears leaking out of her eyes. She hadn't been trembling from desire or anything like it, and he was a self-absorbed bastard to have thought so.

He was scum.

He yanked up his pants and buttoned them. "Sandy, I'm sorry, I—"

She lifted an arm to him. He was such a bastard he hadn't even thought to pick her up off the ground first thing. That oversight was remedied within seconds. Cradling her body against him, he kicked open the bathroom door and somehow found his way to her bedroom, the entire time murmuring to her how fucked up he felt. How could he have mistaken her fear for want?

She had been shaking her head at him.

As in *no*.

She reached up to stroke his face. "Don't apologize, you didn't do anything wrong."

The door to her bedroom was open, and he went straight to the four-poster. An old black and white quilt covered the mattress, and he placed her on it. He then took a red throw blanket off the chair in the corner and covered her nakedness. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes."

"Name it."

"Sit down and shut up."

He paced to the window, opened the curtains and looked to the street below. He eyed his Harley, suddenly wanting nothing more than to be riding the beast across the bridge, the damp San Francisco Bay air whipping across his face. He wanted to remove himself from her presence before he unleashed himself on her again.

"I need to go."

“Harry. You asked me if I needed anything. Are you going to follow through on your question or take the pussy way out?”

He turned to face her.

And nearly died. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying, her blue braid had come undone. Simply put, she looked a mess. She looked sad. And she looked at him.

“Come here.”

He eyed the door. The last thing he wanted was to be near a bed with Sandy on it because, despite the self-disgust that currently burned in his gut, he still had a hard-on for her. And so far his dick had done nothing but make him act like a crazy, out-of-control son of a bitch.

She sighed. “You’re a moron.”

“I was thinking a son of a bitch, but okay.”

“Come. Here.”

Taking a deep breath he approached the bed, his black boots falling softly on her imported rug.

She took his hand in hers and he couldn’t help but observe how well their hands pieced together. A perfect fit.

“You think I’m upset because of the way you treated me.”

“Yes, I fucking—”

“You’re wrong.”

“Sandine, don’t fucking patronize me.”

Catching him off-guard, she yanked him down. He barely caught himself before falling on top of her. He sat on the bed at her side.

“When you were inside of me, right before you—”

He cringed. “I’m sorry, if I could take that back I would. Truly, I somehow thought you were enjoying it—”

“I was.”

He almost laughed. “Yeah, sure looked like it when you were, you know, *crying*.”

Her eyes turned cold. “Do *not* tell me how I feel.”

“Then don’t lie to me. Those weren’t tears of ecstasy. Trust me, I know the difference.”

She dropped his hand. “You *are* a son of a bitch.”

“Yes, we established that.” He stood. “Now, can I go?”

God she looked weak. What had he done to her?

She closed her eyes as if too tired to look at him. “Yes. Go. Be careful.”

Now she was telling him to be careful? He wanted to *do* something but had no idea what. “Can I get you anything before I leave? Water? God, you must be starving, when did you eat last?”

“I’m not hungry.” Her voice was raspy, tired.

“Sandine,” he said, his voice a warning.

She waved her hand in dismissal. “Okay, water then. And aspirin, please.”

By the time he returned with a tall glass of iced water and the meds, she was sleeping. He placed the stuff on her nightstand, so she would have it when she woke up. He hesitated only a second more before he left.

Sandine could have slept all day, but her headache had other plans. The pounding behind her eyes slowly pulled her out of slumber and as she became conscious she had only one thing on her mind. Aspirin.

Luckily there were three on her nightstand next to a glass of water. She smiled as she saw the ring of condensation on a coaster. So someone had taught rough ol’ Harry manners.

“How are you feeling?”

Startled, she looked up to find Harry perched on the edge of a red velvet wingchair, his hands hanging between his spread knees.

“I thought you were leaving.”

“I did. I came back.” He ran a hand over his head. “I feel like a jerk, like I did something wrong last night.”

She shook her head. “No—”

He put his hand up, silencing her. “But then I realized that there was no way you could have been crying due to some lack of erotic skill on my part.”

Raising an amused brow at him, she pushed herself onto her elbows. “Really?”

He gave her a little grin. “Well, at the very least, I don’t think you’re the kind of girl to put up with something you don’t like unless you have to.”

“Very true.”

“And that will never be necessary with me. I will always listen to you.”

She met his gaze, his references to the future making her heart skip.

Stop that. She could very well have no future.

Pushing the thought away, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, then cringed as a shot of agony pierced her temple. The vision came back with heartbreaking clarity.

“Sandy, what’s going on? I don’t think it was my being here that upset you. Tell me what’s wrong. *Tell* me what happened.”

“Actually, I should eat something. I don’t do well taking aspirin on an empty stomach.” Her legs shaky, she stood, dropped the blanket and went to her closet. Her pulse quickened as she passed his seated form, his scent of fresh foggy air and motorcycle grease faintly reaching her nose.

Her vision had rocked her, and she wasn’t ready to talk about it yet. She felt weak, and her head still throbbed. She grabbed a tunic and leggings out of the closet, then turned to put them on.

Harry was staring at her naked body as if she had a flesh-eating disease.

“What?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

She pulled some blue lace panties out of a dresser and stepped into them. “What do you mean?”

For the first time she saw his self-confidence falter. “I’m just surprised that, after all I’ve done to you, you’d still trust me”—he waved at her exposed skin—“to stay in control.” He stood and paced to the other side of the room, as if distancing himself.

She pulled the tunic over her head. “God, Harry. First of all you didn’t *do* anything to me I didn’t want *done*. And second, I don’t believe for one minute that you can’t control yourself.”

“But—”

“Shut up. When you were inside of me last night I had a vision. A horrible, awful image. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before. That’s the reason I was upset. That and the mind-blowing headache it left me with. For the record, I loved it when you fucked me.”

She would have thought he was frozen where he stood, except his chest rose and fell with his deep, ragged breaths.

“Wow. I managed to shut you up.” She yanked on her leggings and stalked into the kitchen. Her headache was finally receding and her stomach was responding with a hungry growl.

“What was the vision?”

She hadn’t heard him follow her but his presence wasn’t a surprise. “I don’t want to think about it right now.”

“Did it involve you? Cain?”

“Seriously, *I don’t want to think about it right now*.” She gave a frustrated sigh. “I don’t know what it meant.” Flipping on the coffee machine, it gurgled to life. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Black and preferably thick as tar.”

“One black coffee and one double cappuccino,” she said into the little speaker. For once the metallic square contraption got it right on the first try, and within a moment two mugs of morning courage popped up. Yes. Caffeine would clear her head, help her understand what was going on.

“This is the first time you’ve experienced this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Any idea what triggered it?”

Her body immediately responded to the memory of him coming inside of her. But how would that relate to what she saw? She stared into her steaming cup. “I have no idea. My mother had them quite often, but I’ve never experienced anything like that before.”

“It really shook you up.”

“It did. Something’s shifted since last night... I can’t explain it.”

“Well, your ex-boyfriend did try and kill you in front of a roomful of people. Those kinds of things tend to affect a person.”

She smiled at his dark humor. “True.” But Sandine had thought it had more to do with Harry and the way she was utterly able to give herself over to him. Somehow that freedom opened her mind and it was unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

“Tell me what happened.”

“He stole the deck of Tarot cards my mother gave me on her deathbed.”

“Why did he take them?”

“To keep me nearby. He knows I’m ready to walk.” She stared into the steaming depths of the cup in her hands. “There is a certain degree of magic living in those cards. I promised my mother I wouldn’t let them fall into the wrong hands.” She stared into her coffee. “I guess I failed.”

He looked at her blue braid. “And you followed in your mother’s footsteps.”

She nodded. Each time a Tarot reader tested into a higher proficiency level, their scalp was implanted with colored hair follicles corresponding to their skill. Her mother had been the highest, gold. Sandine remained several levels under gold, and had no plans to move up.

She thought of her mother and what a failure she was in comparison. Her mother hadn’t needed the cards to tell people their future. At the *cirque* she had used them as a guide, but her intuition was so great she inevitably knew exactly what the cards would read before they were flipped over. It was only when her mother and father had left the *cirque* and gone on to become consultants that Mama had truly used them as a magical conduit.

She shrugged at his question. “I tried to take after her, but I burned out on it. I was working for a tech firm, and I just got sick of constantly trying to whitewash everything. The fact is people don’t really want to hear anything other than what they want to hear.”

“So, you gave it up to work in a sex club.”

She grinned. “Yeah. Originally I went there as a release.” Her face heated as she continued. “I’ve always found that, with the right partner, a certain type of power exchange keeps my mind open.”

“Power exchange?”

“Yes.” She glanced into his dark stare. “For me it means submitting to another. Sometimes sexually, sometimes not.”

“With Cain?”

She shook her head. “I stopped trusting him over a year ago, but originally it was sexual. At first it was great, we had this connection and he could—”

“I get the picture.”

She bit back a smile. She liked his jealous streak—maybe too much. “I met Cain at the club. He bought it shortly thereafter, and I went to work for him.”

"And stopped reading?"

"Yes."

"You can't go back there."

She looked up sharply. "I have to."

He took his mug to the sink and began washing it out. Yes, someone had definitely taught Harry Marshall good manners. "It's dangerous for you," he said. "Cain is a loose cannon."

"I've known him for years, I can handle it—"

He glanced sharply over his shoulder. "Like last night?"

"I made some bad decisions last night. I won't do it again."

"I know because you won't be seeing him." He took a kitchen towel off the counter and began drying the mug.

"If I don't show up tonight he'll just come here."

"Speaking of which, you have some pretty intense security around this place. It took me twenty minutes to get through, and that was with my top clearance."

"My neighbor, Lucy, who lives in the front cottage, is a security specialist. Sometimes she gets a bit...paranoid."

"Well, she knows her shit. Does Cain have the code?"

"Not anymore."

"Good. Because I don't want you near him."

"I'll be careful."

"This isn't open for discussion."

Her headache surged like a tidal wave behind her eyes. "*Open for discussion?* Just because of what happened last night does not give you any right to tell me what to do today."

She thought he might hurl the mug he clenched in his fist at the wall. Instead he took a deep breath and the cup joined a plate and bowl propped in the stainless steel dish drainer. "I wish I could take that back, Sandy, I really do."

"Take what back?"

"How I treated you—*whipped* you."

"You've never topped anyone before?"

"Um." He shifted uncomfortably. "No."

"Wow."

"What?"

"You're really good."

Oh, she could see him try and suppress a glint of male pride at that. He shifted some more, ran a hand through his hair. Then looked up through his dark lashes. "Really?"

“Really. In fact, that was probably one of the best sexual experiences I’ve had.”

“No shit?” He actually grinned a little.

“You knew exactly what you were doing.” Her gaze drifted to his waist where the whip was coiled against his belt. She could practically hear it snapping next to her ear and a little erotic flutter went straight to her sex. In all her years at Le Cheval it had *never* been like that.

She wanted to do it again.

“Well, it was all in the line of duty.”

“Speaking of which, what, exactly, *is* your line of duty?”

“I’ll explain later.” He moved past her and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “I gotta hit it. The chief needs his report.”

“Wait, Harry.” She jogged down the hall after him. “When will I see you again?” God did she really just say that. *Why don’t you just get on your knees and beg?*

And why did that send a surge of lust through her?

“I have to go back to Le Cheval tonight. If I don’t, Cain will destroy my cards.”

She thought he might argue with her and irritation bubbled in her chest. One thing she could not stand was being smothered. She’d had enough of that with Cain. She hoped Harry was different.

“Fine. But let me take care of retrieving them for you.”

She hesitated. She hated asking others for favors.

“It’s the only way, Sandine. The only way I’ll let you near him.”

His tone and expression left no room for argument. “Fine.” The words managed to make her feel lighter somehow. She didn’t want to admit it, but it actually was a relief to have some help when it came to Cain.

He took her chin in his hand, tilted her face up a bit. Lowering his lips to hers, he kissed her until her knees went weak. When he pulled away she nearly collapsed, but his fingers were still on her chin and his light touch held her steady. “I’ll be watching you.”

“Good. I like to be watched.”

Was it her imagination or did he stumble over his boots as he hurried out the door?

“What the fuck did you do?”

Harry folded himself into the miniscule metal chair facing his boss’s desk. Considering the size of most of the men on the investigative force, one would think they could spring for chairs that didn’t belong in a first grade classroom. He hunched over knees that were practically shoved into his chest. “I participated last night.”

The chief’s eyes glimmered with that eerie golden glow. “And why the fuck did you do that?”

Harry thought he'd better nip this interrogation in the bud before the chief covered all five of the W questions. "I had no choice. I couldn't stand by and watch a civilian be beaten."

"Marshall, I thought you were above all that 'kinky sex shit'."

I thought I was too. That was before a certain female with the hair the color of ripe cherries entered the picture. "I was—I *am*. But I had to step in and save the female."

The chief leaned across his ancient metal desk. "And how did you do that?"

Harry looked to the window where the mid-morning sun cut through the blinds in bright vertical slices. "By whipping her, sir."

Silence.

"I had to play the role of—"

"Shut the fuck up. It's irrelevant now, isn't it?"

Was it? His head was so messed up over everything that had happened Harry really didn't know what was relevant and what was not.

And that was not a good feeling for a cop to possess. "I did not blow the case."

"Yet." The chief leaned back in his chair and let out a deep breath. "Tell me one thing, Marshall."

"Sir."

"Were you in control of the situation?"

He thought of Sandine, so trusting and responsive to his touch, his kisses, his whip. He pictured her body jerking as he had snapped the leather on the ground next to her, the way her legs had quivered as he circled her. The not-so-quiet moans that escaped her throat each time he had struck her.

His answer surprised him. "Yes, sir. I was."

The chief glared at him, his amber eyes unblinking. Harry thought, not for the first time, that he was glad to be on the same side of the law as his boss. Those insane eyes of his were even more unnerving than his size. And those tattoos? Harry was used to them now, but those first few weeks on the force he hadn't been able to stop staring at the swirling dark ink marks across the chief's face, under his eyes. No one knew the exact origin of the tribal marks, but the swirling design definitely represented some sort of ancient clan.

Abruptly the chief snapped his gaze to the files in front of him. He shuffled some papers. "And Cain still trusts you?"

"I believe so."

"Good. Then go back tonight and set up the deal."

"Yes, sir."

The chief glanced up through a lock of overly long, light brown hair. "And don't fuck it up."

He pictured Sandine. Wrists bound in front of her shaved S, prodded up the stairs while some fucking minion poked at her back. Rage came on sudden and harsh, and he gripped his knees to keep from fisting his hands in the chief's presence.

He took a deep breath and forced the image from his head. “I won’t, sir.”

Anticipation fluttered in Sandine’s belly as she pulled a red dress from her closet. It was a uniform of sorts, and as she ran her hand over the silken fabric she wondered how much longer she’d be wearing these dresses. *Not long.* The words floated through her mind with alarming certainty, and she closed her eyes as fear caused her heart to skip a beat.

Visions. Since when did she have visions? Never, which was why she had decided to discard the whole thing from her head. Her mother had the power, not her. And she definitely wasn’t her mother.

Harry would be fine.

Harry. Just the thought of his crooked smile made her belly feel as if little butterflies had taken flight inside. Tonight. She would see him again tonight. They would have to be careful, of course. She couldn’t let Cain know how deep her feelings for Harry had gone. Who knew how he would respond?

A knock on the door interrupted her musings, and she padded across her apartment in bare feet to the entryway. She peered through the small eyehole to see Lucy, her neighbor and best friend, staring up at her, one of her sharp brown eyebrows raised in question.

Sandine smiled and opened the door. Lucy lived alone in the small cottage facing the street. A courtyard separated their buildings, and they had bonded over their shared love of container gardening. Of course, Sandine grew nasturtiums and Lucy grew five different strains of Pennyroyal, but they had enjoyed many summer hours digging in the dirt together. Not to mention, although it was illegal to grow produce at home, they shared an illicit tomato plant in the back corner. Lucy made the best tomato sauce Sandine had ever been fortunate enough to taste—totally worth going to jail for.

Her friend entered the apartment in her usual manner, as if she were gliding across the floor, and went purposefully to the kitchen. “I need a reading.”

Sandine shut the door and followed Lucy into the kitchen. Her friend had plopped down at the copper dining table, her dainty hands folded neatly in her lap. None of Lucy’s features stood out as particularly beautiful on their own—light brown hair, blue eyes, pale skin—but there was something alluring about her nonetheless. Her long hair was always piled on top of her head in a haphazard fashion, her clothes were just left of funky, and her eyes gave nothing away. She was petite, almost childlike, which only added to her charm.

And she was a witch. A very powerful, very bright witch.

“What’s going on?” Sandine sat opposite her friend.

“Not sure. I just want a reading. I feel like my witchcraft has become stagnant, I’ve hit a plateau. I need some insight.”

Sandine shook her head. “Go to Ethan. He’s brilliant.”

“I want you.”

“You know I can’t do readings anymore, I don’t even possess a deck.”

“I know.” Lucy always wore an apron, and she reached into one of its deep pockets. “That’s why I brought you this.”

Sandine shook her head. “Lucy, no—I, no.”

Her friend slid her hand across the copper table, the item hidden under her palm. “Just look.” She pulled her arm back to her body, leaving a rectangular item on the table.

Frozen, Sandine stared at the cards before her. Her voice came out almost a whisper. “Lucy, where did you get these?”

Her friend shrugged. “I figured if I was going to convince you to start reading again I had to give you a good reason.”

“This is a Tarot de Marseille, and original Dodal... It must be three hundred years old.”

“I believe they date to 1701.”

“My mother spoke of these, said his illustrations were divine—but I’ve never seen one in person, they’re...*amazing*.”

“Go on. Touch them.”

She wanted to. She was surprised at how strongly her fingers tingled to trace the antiqued paper, how her gaze caught at the renaissance images printed there. She *wanted* to read them.

But she knew she’d never do them justice.

“I went through a lot of trouble to get these, you better use them.”

“I can’t, it’s been too long.”

Lucy held her gaze. “Try.” The petite witch not only had the look of a child but also the stubbornness of a two-year-old. She wouldn’t give up.

And the temptation was too much. It had been so long, and some deep part of her seemed to be begging her brain to do this reading. Her palms damp, Sandine reached across the table and placed her hand on the deck.

And then jerked away from the electric shock that sparked her skin. Her gaze flew up to meet Lucy’s. “What did you do?”

Her friend shrugged, but couldn’t totally contain her self-satisfied smile. “I told you. I blessed them.”

“Uh-huh. With what? An electro-shocker?”

“A witch never spells and tells.”

“I need to ground myself before I touch those again.”

“Well, I did use maximum strength ingredients. But I know you. You can handle it. Try again.”

Sandine eyed the deck. Her heart slammed as if she’d just downed a triple espresso. She hadn’t attempted a reading in so long... God, she was *scared*. Actually scared. Her gut twitched as her nerves began to panic, and suddenly she felt as if her throat was going to close down—

“Breathe, Sandine. Just breathe.”

Breathe. She closed her eyes and followed the witch’s orders. What was wrong with her? Wasn’t this what she had been trained to do? A few more deep breaths and the anxiety began to lessen. She opened her eyes.

Energy radiated off the worn paper, almost tangible. She couldn’t believe Lucy had brought her such a gift and she would have thanked her friend, but looking away from the top card was not a possibility. The ancient image was totally foreign as befitted a hand-colored woodcut print over three hundred years old, but Sandine recognized the faded pagan star.

She reached toward the cards. Although a part of her brain resisted touching that piece of electricity again, she discovered she was unable to keep her hand to herself. This time when her fingers brushed the delicate paper she felt only the slightest buzz at her fingertips. She stayed like that for a moment, allowing the energy to sink into her skin. Then she pushed the cards across the table.

“Shuffle.”

Lucy flipped the cards between her fingers like a blackjack dealer and then pushed them back.

Silently, Sandine fanned them out face down on the table. She asked Lucy to draw five. Once she had done so, Sandine turned each card face up. She looked at them for what must have been five full minutes before she began to speak. “Temperance, on its head. Alchemy...normally a strong, fire card, but the Queen of Cups weakens it.”

Lucy inhaled. “Alchemy.”

“The cards are rivals.” Sandine glanced up momentarily. “You are a perfectionist and the best at what you do. But you know this, and your arrogance keeps you from reaching a higher level.”

Sandine closed her eyes, brushed her fingertips over the brittle paper and worked at channeling her intuition through the cards. “You’re too focused on science, you don’t know how to deal with the emotional part of witchcraft. If you ever learned how to do that you’d be... Wow. Powerful. You need to discover how to blend fire and water by learning how to unify these two elements. You’ll never access your full potential until you learn how to do this.”

Sandine’s lids drifted open to find Lucy staring across the table, transfixed.

Sandine pointed to the third position. “The King of Swords is strong, the strongest in the reading. This is where you will find help. Your natural abilities and intuition revolve around fire energies, and this is making it hard for you too.” She grinned at her friend. “You need less balls.”

Lucy nodded.

“One more interesting thing about this reading. You have no earth energy at all. Are you paying attention to yourself? Maybe you should do yoga, get a pedicure. When was the last time you meditated?”

“Um...”

"You need a person. A person represented by air. The Knight of Swords can help you blend your fiery side with water. God, imagine what you could do if you got yourself harmonized!"

A sort of calm had descended over Sandine as she spoke the words. Her headache had all but disappeared and for the second time in twelve hours a feeling of rightness descended over her. First with Harry and now with the Tarot.

"You okay?" Lucy was staring at her.

"Yes. I think so." Was she?

"You looked really spacey for a minute."

"I'm sorry, I just—" In a rush she jumped up and embraced her friend in a giant bear hug. "Thank you."

It took a moment before she felt Lucy's stiff bones loosen in her grasp. "You need to stop doubting your abilities." The tiny witch punctuated her pronouncement with a few solid pats on her back. Sandine tried not to grimace. Her petite friend was freakishly strong.

"I think you're right. Thank you." She returned to her seat and gently gathered the cards into a neat pile. Her hands remained cupped over them. She wasn't ready to abandon their energy quite yet. "I don't know why I went crazy trying to get my other deck back," she said absently.

"Honey, your mom gave them to you on her deathbed. I can see why you want them back."

The thought pierced her heart. She wanted to move on, she really did. But there was a large part of her that felt it was wrong to do so. It was all she had of her mother after all.

But it wasn't worth suffering any longer under Cain.

"Lucy, would you stay one more minute?"

"Sure, what's up?"

She took a deep breath. "I want to do one more reading. For myself."

Lucy settled back in her chair, smiling. "Of course. I think that's an awesome idea."

Closing her eyes, Sandine embraced the images that floated through her conscience. Her mother. Her cards and Cain. Her attempt at stealing and subsequent beating. Harry. She shuffled the cards and pulled one out.

And knew what the card would be even before she flipped it over.

"Seven of Swords," she murmured. "The Seven of Swords is the card of punishment and deception, of stealing... The sky is overcast, a foreboding surrounds this deed and the person is only making off with five of the seven swords. Why? Why does he not have them all? He has to sneak away... 'theft by deceit brings sorrow and grief'. And punishment. Stealing from someone who has the motivation and capability to punish you is unwise... If you must compromise your ethics to reach your goals, you should look at your morals or reevaluate your goals..."

Lucy leaned forward. "Sandine? You okay?"

Sandine closed her eyes. “Yes. Very much so.” Because, in an amazing moment of clarity, she knew exactly what she had to do.

Chapter Five

The sun reflected brightly off the glossy red door. Sandine couldn't remember the last time she'd seen it in the daylight. With her right hand she reached toward the gleaming brass knob, and with her left she touched the handle of the dagger hanging on her belt. It wasn't unusual for her to carry the weapon—with the exception of when she wore her red dress at the club, the knife was nearly always strapped to her body. But after last night she was unsure of what Cain was capable of.

She'd kill him if she had to.

Her heart pounding, she stepped into the club.

Cain immediately emerged from his office, rubbing his nose. "Sandine, what are you doing here?"

She just looked at him. For the first time in nearly a year she felt nothing. No leftover affection, no remaining concern for him as a friend. And no sympathy for his addiction. The only thing she experienced was a sense of disgust at herself for putting up with him for so long.

"I've come to clean out my office. I'm quitting. Effective now."

His eyes widened in something that looked like fear, but then he laughed. "What? You won't leave. You love this place."

"No, I used to love this place. Now I hold no fondness for it at all, you made sure of that." She moved past him toward her office.

He followed. "I know why you're doing this."

She ignored him. She really only had a few things to recover—her address book, a few pictures... She started shoving the items into the black backpack she'd brought with her.

"It won't work."

She glanced to where Cain stood leaning against the doorframe. She realized she'd barely looked at him lately and hadn't noticed the new creases lining his eyes. He was aging. Fast.

She shoved a notebook into the bag. "What won't work?"

"This threat. You think I'll give you your Tarot cards if you threaten to leave."

"No, Cain. I just can't take this anymore. Take *you* anymore."

"Take what? You love me."

She looked him in the eye, wanting to be clear. "I don't love you. Not even a little bit. In fact, I despise you. So much so I'm willing to walk away without my cards if it means never seeing you again." She held his stare until he looked away.

“Sandine, stop. You don’t mean it.”

One final glance around the room told her she had everything she valued from the club. “I’m sick of letting you control me. You took the one possession that meant the world to me and used it to manipulate me. But you know what I realized last night when you were treating me like a fucking dog? That’s all you had over me—a fucking *thing*, an object, and in the end I don’t need it. I don’t need *you*.”

As she spoke the words, she wanted to believe them. She really did. But she couldn’t stop the image of her mother shuffling those cards as if they were an extension of her own hands. Her mother, who even in death, radiated energy through the very cards her only daughter was about to give up.

The cards were her last connection to her family...

She pictured the faded image of the Seven of Swords. *Stealing from someone who has the motivation and capability to punish you is unwise.*

“Goodbye, Cain.” She moved past him, crossed the stage, and jogged down the three steps. Almost gone...

“Wait.”

She kept going, across the empty bar area, eyeing the door. She wanted to run but didn’t.

“I’ll give you your deck back.”

Only a few more steps...

“I’m not kidding. I’ll give it back.”

She stopped but didn’t turn. “Don’t fuck with me, Cain.”

“I’m not. Look at me.”

She did and hated herself for it.

He brushed at his nose. “I have to go away.”

“So go.”

“I’ll be back in a few days, five at the most.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“If you run the club while I’m gone, I’ll give you your damn Tarot deck when I return.”

“Why do you need me to do this?”

“You’re the only one I trust.”

“Why should I believe you? You’ve been holding this over me for months.”

He walked toward her slowly, as if he were afraid he’d frighten her away. Her hand went to the dagger at her side.

“I know. I’m sorry. Do this one thing, and I promise to free you.”

Her grip tightened on the hilt of the knife. She had never stabbed another human being, but she was currently experiencing a sudden urge to start doing so. Instead she took a deep breath and attempted to calm the anger pumping in her chest. “I’ll free myself, you bastard.”

A spark of rage flashed through his eyes. When he spoke his voice was smooth as butter. “I understand why you’re angry at me. I just... I just couldn’t let you go. I know I’ve done everything wrong.” He ran a shaky hand over the top of his head. “Let me make it up by returning your cards.”

“You could do that right now.”

“I know, and I would. But then you would leave, and I need you here while I’m away.”

She barked a laugh at him. “You are such a hypocrite. You say one thing and then turn around and do another.”

“I know. I know that, but don’t forget I...I really care for you. Sandine, you’re the only one I have faith in.”

She stared at him. Tempted, so fucking tempted. He met her gaze as if he had nothing to hide. It seemed like forever that she’d been putting up with his shit. Now he was claiming to give her the one thing she wanted...

And oh, how she fucking wanted it. She’d put up with so much this past year—what were a few more days if it meant retrieving that one connection she had to her dead mother? If it meant keeping a deathbed promise.

He wouldn’t even be present at Le Cheval...

Then her heart stopped as reality hit her in the chest. He was going to get drugs, or do something illegal. When he returned, Harry was going to bust him. In essence, if she agreed to this she would be helping Harry send Cain to jail. The knowledge hit her like a punch in the gut.

For a split second she experienced a desire to warn Cain. But of course she couldn’t do that, especially after last night. He needed to be incarcerated.

Still, could she really help send him to prison?

“Where are you going, Cain? You never leave town.”

He rubbed his palms on his pants, and she knew he was craving a bump. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to incriminate you.”

“Incriminate me how?”

“Listen, I’m trying to fucking—” He took a deep breath and looked her in the eye. “Just do this for me, Sandine. *Please.*”

Harry parked his bike in front of the small blue cottage that fronted Sandine’s building. He had decided it would be a good idea to knock on Sandine’s door and wait for her to answer instead of letting himself in like the night before. An investigator of his level carried a security breacher that allowed him to open the doors of ninety-nine percent of the city, but after last night he wanted to prove to himself that he was a nice, normal guy. A guy who knocked on a girl’s door instead of breaking into her bathroom. And

besides, what if she was in the tub again? That had not gone well. Heck, she was probably bruised from the damn bathroom floor.

Despite what she said, it was wrong to inflict pain on others—under *any* circumstances. And the fact that he had actually enjoyed doing so ate away at his insides. He had left his whip at home. He'd been unable to look at the thing. The fact that he had used the weapon to purposely hurt a woman—and enjoyed it—made him wonder what was going on in his head.

It was wrong. An investigator should not enjoy shit like that. Obviously, he needed an outlet. He had scheduled a midnight jump for later that night with the hope that an extreme skydive would get this bizarre urge out of his system.

He went to the side of the cottage where a path enclosed by a rose-covered arbor led the way to Sandine's place. Because he hadn't exactly entered her house in a traditional fashion the night before, he had no idea that the walk to her front door included a journey through a small oasis.

The tinkling sounds of hidden fountains reached his ears as he wound his way around a sculpted hedge. A mixture of fruit trees gave shade to lush green plants, and herbs were planted in various sunny patches.

A pebbled trail led to what must have been the steps to Sandine's house, but the front of her building was partially obscured behind the flora. He paused to inhale the scent of a large basil plant. Leave it to Sandine, the professional Tarot reader who enjoyed being tied up and whipped, to have a secret garden in the middle of San Francisco.

"Harry!"

He looked up to see Sandine's legs as she bounced down her steps. The sound of her voice made his pulse ratchet sky-high. When she saw him she smiled.

She wore a green knee-length smock and black boots that laced up to her knees. Her hair was pulled back in a high ponytail, her braids wrapped around the top of her head in a kind of blue crown. The afternoon sun gleamed golden on her skin as she walked toward him.

He crossed his arms over his chest in an attempt to keep his hands off her. Again, that schoolboy feeling.

She strode right up to him and smiled. "Hi."

"Hi."

They stood there for a minute, staring at each other, the only sound the soft lull of tinkling water. Harry thought he should say something clever but fuck it if he could think of anything. Finally he moved his gaze away and noticed the sheathed dagger on a belt by her side. "Is that a Mason '87?"

"Yes."

"A classic. You throw knives?"

In response she unsheathed the knife, drew back her hand and flung the blade at a round wood target that had been hung on the opposite end of the courtyard for just that purpose.

She hit it dead center.

“Nice.” He withdrew one of his own knives and threw it. The blade landed exactly one inch to the left of hers.

“Ditto.”

They stood looking at the knives for a minute and he knew that, like him, she was enjoying the symmetry of their throwing skills.

He’d never met a girl like her, not even close.

She wandered down a little stone path that led to the target and withdrew both blades from the wood. And fuck if the sight of her handling those weapons with such easy confidence didn’t give him a hard-on.

He was a sick bastard.

On her way back to him she plucked two apples off the ground.

“Watch this!” She tossed an apple in the air and shot her knife at it. The blade cut the fruit nearly in half before landing, once again, dead center of the target.

He stared dumbly at her as she returned his knife to him. He wanted to know everything about her—where she came from, who her parents were. Everything.

“Your turn.”

Instead of interrogating her he turned around and threw the knife over his shoulder. He heard a satisfying *thunk* as the blade landed where he wanted it to, one-eighth of an inch above hers.

“Cool.”

Twenty-four hours ago he had barely spoken one word to her. Now she seemed to have invaded his head and as she stood there, smiling at his vibrating knife with true appreciation on her face...he wondered if he was done for.

And then she was looking up at him with those green eyes that nearly killed him. “Harry? Are you okay?”

He yanked her to him. He tried to be gentle but then her arms went around his neck and she clung to him, pushed herself against his body, and he couldn’t stop himself from reaching under her ass and pulling her off her feet. He settled her onto his hips and her legs wrapped around him, under his coat and over his holsters in a clenching embrace. His erection pushed almost painfully against the center of her. He inhaled her lavender scent and lust pooled deep in his gut. He had to have her.

He was losing control.

Her dress hiked up high enough to allow him to feel her. He knew what her panties looked like, knew that scrap of blue lace wasn’t going to stop her from feeling every inch of him, and he knew she liked it. It was Heaven to be with a woman who knew what she wanted.

She moaned into his mouth in that particular way of hers he was beginning to crave. He backed her up to the apple tree, until she had nowhere to go except into him. He had no idea why this woman affected him this way, had no idea why he couldn't stop himself from taking her right there in the garden, but that was exactly what he wanted to do. She did that to him. Made him lose control. Made him want to be in control at the same time.

Too much. He'd condemn himself later. "I want you. Upstairs."

"No. Here."

"God..." *God*. He wanted to.

She reached between them to take one of his nipples between her fingers. "Yes. Here." And then she pinched him until it hurt. The pain was unexpected and sharp and it made him grind into her.

"You like it?"

He shook his head, but when she did it again he closed his eyes and let the sting of her actions add to his pleasure, let himself have this glimpse into what Sandine enjoyed. The pain gave him a heightened awareness of what they were doing, making him gasp aloud when she nipped his lips with her teeth.

If he could react this way from a love bite, he could only imagine what Sandine must have experienced under his whip.

He set her on the ground.

"Harry, I'm sorry, I thought you liked it—"

He shrugged off his coat and began unbuckling his belt. "Turn around." He unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down his hips.

Her gaze drifted south for a second and when she realized what he was about to do her eyes went dark with desire.

She turned around and reached under her skirt.

"Leave your panties on."

She let her dress fall back into place.

"Reach above your head and with both hands, grab hold of the tree." Something about ordering her around like this made his cock throb. He'd never been gruff with a woman before, but the way she obeyed him so willingly turned him on like nothing else. And the fact that she seemed to like it turned him on all the more.

Her arms formed a long, graceful line as she assumed the position. Her smock rose with her action, not quite exposing her ass, but instead giving him a view of the backs of her thighs. The sight was so fucking beautiful he could have come right there into a pile of apple blossoms with a simple flick of his wrists.

Instead he dropped to the ground and placed a soft kiss behind her knee. She trembled, and he steadied her by wrapping his hands firmly around her hips. He kissed her again. "I love the taste of your skin."

He traced his lips up the back of her thigh, slowly, as slowly as he could, until he reached the edge of her smock. His breath was ragged as he moved the fabric. Then she was right there, exposed to him.

"Gorgeous." He pulled her hips toward him until she was bent over slightly.

He tugged her panties aside and nearly lost it. She glistened for him, waited for him. When he inserted one finger into her she pushed back against his hand, her legs visibly shaking now. And she was wet. For *him*.

"Please, Harry."

"I like it when you beg me." He did. He had no idea why but he did.

"I like it when you make me beg."

This time he used two fingers to slide into her and gently circled her clit with the pad of his thumb. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes, Harry. Please."

His voice sounded hoarse when he spoke. "Stand up straight."

"Yes."

He stood and pressed his body against her back, hedged her until she was practically wrapped around the tree, trapped. He kissed her neck, tucked a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. "Can you feel the tree through your dress and your panties?"

"Yes." She squirmed a bit, sighed. "But I want to feel you inside of me, Harry."

"You will."

Reaching around her body, he took her breasts into his hands, felt the weight of them in his palms. When he pinched her nipples through the fabric of her dress and bra she gasped, still begging, but silently.

He raised the back of her smock and moved her panties to the side. When he lifted her into his arms she felt light, her bones fragile beneath his hands. "You okay?"

"Yes." And when he slid her down onto him she sounded anything but fragile.

Clutching a limb, he watched the muscles in her arm flex as she supported the front of her body against the tree. "Yes! Harry, oh my God..."

He buried himself inside of her, pushed until she threw her head against his shoulder, until the center of her was caught between his cock and a tree trunk. And somewhere in his head he remembered she could handle him, she liked it, liked what he did to her.

"Harry, you're fucking brilliant." She was writhing now, moving against him and the tree. "You really are."

"And you are..."

“What?” She gasped. “What am I?”

He thrust into her again and again, until the sounds that emerged from his throat sounded animalistic. He’d never heard himself like that before. But fuck, he’d never felt like this before either.

“Harry? What am I?”

“Mine,” he ground out. “That’s what you are. You’re mine.”

She couldn’t stand. When Harry put her on the ground she had to hold onto the tree for support as her legs were trembling too much to hold up her body. She heard him pulling up his pants, buckling his belt. Heard a shuffling sound and concluded it was him shrugging into his coat. Her heart had stopped beating a mile a minute and now a sense of calm such as only satisfying sex could bring washed over her.

Mine. That’s what he had said. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. The last thing she wanted was to belong to a man—especially after her previous experience with Cain. But there was simply no comparison between the two men. Anyway, she would worry about that later because now Harry had smoothed down her dress, picked her up and was carrying her up the stairs to her apartment. Soon they were inside the bathroom, and he had set her on her feet. He turned on the water, testing the temperature on his wrist like a mother would milk for a baby.

She wanted to smile at his kind action but the sense of regret radiating off his body hung heavy in the air. He wasn’t drawing her a bath to care for her, but to wash something away instead.

“Harry. What’s wrong?”

He adjusted the hot water. “Hmm? Nothing.”

“We just made love, and you won’t even look at me.” She had to speak loudly over the rush of water gushing out of the ancient brass pipes.

He glanced over his shoulder, seemed to be making a decision as to what to say to her. Finally he took a deep breath and spoke. “I’m confused. I—one minute I feel normal around you and the next I’m totally out of control.”

“Harry, you are never out of control. Trust me.”

“Take off your dress.”

Okay, that was unexpected but when his gaze remained unwavering on hers she did as he ordered. He watched her fingers as she slowly unbuttoned the front of her smock. After a minute she pushed the fabric down her arms until it landed on the floor.

Crazy, but, standing there in her bra, panties and knee-high boots, she felt a little naughty, which was strange considering all they’d done over the past twenty-four hours, all he’d seen of her during that time.

His eyes darkened as he skimmed her form.

“Turn around.”

She turned and faced the wall. She felt his fingers unhooking her bra, and he pulled a silky strap down one arm, then the other. The feel of his warm fingers on her skin gave her goose bumps.

Then he was gone, leaving her cold.

After a minute she heard the squeaky sound of her bathtub faucet being shut off, and then the few remaining drops of water falling into the full tub. The *drip drip drip* seemed deafening in the silence.

Minutes went by and finally she turned to face him only to discover he wasn't looking at her at all, but had his forehead buried in his palms. She wanted to go to him but, looking up, he stopped her with a sharp glance.

"What?"

"Sit."

She sat on the toilet seat, and Harry came to her and began unlacing her boots.

He scowled at the tile floor. "Your back looks raw."

"It's fine."

"Because of me."

"Harry, don't go there. It's getting old."

He continued unlacing her boots, unwinding the long strings of leather around the hook and eye fasteners. "I don't want to hurt you."

She shook her head. "You won't."

"It's too late. You have bruises and scrapes, a laceration from my whip."

"I don't mind, Harry. You don't understand. I love to see your marks on me."

His hands were gentle as could be as he pulled off her boot, then her sock. "I like to see them on you too." He shook his head. "It's like a sense of ownership." But his voice sounded raw and confused.

"Then I don't understand."

"It's wrong." His nimble fingers went to work on her other boot. "It's wrong for a cop to like such a thing. To enjoy inflicting pain on another."

"Why? Are you saying I'm wrong for liking it?"

He shook his head. "You're not a cop."

"So, I should find a civilian to fuck me?"

He looked up sharply, his eyes practically sparking, and she thought he might burst. But then he took a deep breath and seemed to calm himself. "This is dangerous on many levels."

"I don't even know who you are. I don't know what you were doing at the club."

"You know I'm a cop."

"That's it."

"You're trained in listening to your intuition. What does it tell you?"

She reached down and brushed a lock of brown hair off his brow. "That you're a brave, honorable man."

He pulled off her other boot and sock. "And?"

"What else do I need to know?"

He shook his head. "Not much, Sandy. Not much."

"But I do have questions."

"Like?"

"Like how deep is Cain into this shit?"

He lifted one leg and kissed the top of her calf. "Deep," he whispered as he placed a kiss to her collarbone.

His hot breath on her skin sent a shiver down her spine. Would she ever get used to his touch? In a sense, she hoped not. She loved the way he excited her and never wanted that to end.

"And is anyone else under suspicion?"

He nodded, his lips still tracing hot kisses along her skin.

"Me?"

Standing, he took her hand and pulled her up. "I'll tell you as much as I can." Then he pushed her panties down her legs until they joined the pile of clothes on the floor.

"First, will you do something for me?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Let me bathe you?"

"Yes," she breathed.

He needed this, she thought, as he helped her into the warm water. He needed this ritual to make up for the wrongs he thought he'd committed. He was being eaten alive by guilt. She wanted to know what had happened to him in his life that made him resistant to his own pleasure, to letting go. He was telling himself it was about the pain, about inflicting pain on her, that was bothering him. But Sandine had a feeling it was something else, something he probably wasn't aware of. She just hoped he could get over it because she was learning to like Harry Marshall.

Yes, she thought, as he lowered her into the warm water. She liked him very much indeed.

She'd told Cain she wouldn't be at the club until the next night when he would be gone. So she enjoyed her free time by cooking Harry her specialty—wheat-meat stew. He'd been called away around midnight, but not until after they'd made love two more times. He'd worn her out. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so soundly.

Then, the next morning she'd sat at her computer and started searching for jobs. Jobs as a Tarot reader. Now that she'd made up her mind about what she wanted to do she was excited to start her new life. Excited and anxious to begin this new chapter.

A little tingle of excitement fluttered through her chest, but she ignored it. It was the thought of Harry being a part of this new phase of her life that had caused that flutter, but it was too early to be thinking that way. If he could only get rid of that guilt complex of his...

She pushed away from her desk to get dressed for the night.

She had promised Cain she'd be at Le Cheval by nine that night. Wearing a black bra, black panties and fishnet stockings, she stood staring into her closet, wondering what to wear. The red dress was out, that was for sure. In fact, she planned on taking those dresses into the courtyard and burning them. She'd have Lucy cast a cleansing spell while she watched the dresses burn. Yes. She'd like to fill the garden with the scent of a purification ritual. Sage.

She decided to go with the sex club mistress look. After all, that was exactly what she was going to be that night. The thought sent a little pulse of excitement through her. It had been a long time since she had played this role. She'd almost forgotten that she liked it. Not that she planned on taking part tonight. For some reason the thought didn't excite her as it once had. She realized that, for the moment, she really only wanted to play with Harry.

Ignoring the thought, she pulled on a long-sleeved, tight black shirt that buttoned up the front to just above her cleavage. She loved the sleeves—they had long, oversized cuffs that brushed her fingertips. She then stepped into a long, full black skirt. The hem tapered from the tips of the front of her knees and fell to the floor at the back of her ankles. The skirt buttoned to just the tops of her thighs. She then stepped into the highest, pointiest shiny black shoes she owned to complete her mistress-of-the-night look. For the first time in a while she felt good. Young. She found that she was actually glad to have these last few nights at the club. Now when she left it wouldn't be with the shadow of what Cain had done to her hanging over her head. She was leaving on her terms.

And she was going in armed. She strapped a black belt around her hips and inserted three of her sharpest daggers. She picked up a fourth, spun the hilt in her hand in three rapid rotations before letting the thing fly at the piece of wood she had hung in the corner of her bedroom. She liked to practice in here—the small room forced her to keep her short-range skills polished.

It was ironic that lately she'd spent more time throwing knives than reading Tarot. Her mother would not be happy. As a child in the *cirque*, Sandine had been in awe of her mother's skills, as was anyone who knew Madam Fae. The last ten years of her life Mama had quit the *cirque* entirely to work strictly for the leaders of the world. The elite of the elite begged her services, flew Madam and Sandine's father all over the globe to have her read for them. Papa had quit his job as the *cirque's* knife thrower to accompany his wife on her important missions.

They should have stayed in the *cirque*. They'd still be alive.

Sandine shook the unwelcome thoughts out of her head. She didn't want to think about her parents, especially after what she had let happen to her mother's treasured cards. But she still had a chance to get them back.

She hadn't done a reading on Harry. She was scared of what she'd see—or wouldn't see. But for some reason she knew they would be connected for a long time. They had a strong bond. That was obvious. Every time she was near him her heart got confused—it thought she was running a marathon. She didn't need cards to tell her he was loyal and brave and intelligent. And he'd made it more than obvious he found her attractive. But why did he fight his attraction to her? She slung her black messenger bag over her shoulder and slapped her datawatch onto her wrist. She wouldn't try and figure out Harry right now. She had a job to do.

Her circus background had most definitely influenced her style choices when she had redecorated Le Cheval. She had wanted a surreal, performance-like feel for the place and as she entered the club, empty except for a few waitresses and bartenders preparing for the evening, she thought she had accomplished her vision. One curvy, red velvet sofa lined a twenty-foot section of the wall opposite the bar. Ten small, round tables fronted the sofa and on each table a tiny candle flickered.

Hanging above the sofa were various paintings. At first glance one would think the art was simple circus-related themes—acrobats, animals and their trainers. But closer inspection would reveal the figures in various states of sexual activity—one scene depicted a group of five people, all on the giving or receiving end of oral pleasure. But Sandine's particular favorite piece was the one where a woman was strapped to a wall, gagged with a purple scarf, her eyes exaggeratingly wide as a masked man threw knives at the wall around her. Her legs were spread wide and right at her apex was one long dagger stuck in the wall.

Sandine loved that painting. She had purchased it because it reminded her of her father's apprentice, Laazar, who had been her first love.

Sometimes she wondered if something was wrong with her. From the very beginning she had craved sex with an element of danger. Whenever she met a man who could provide that, while still remaining trustworthy, she was done for. She liked the risk of pain that went beyond pleasure, to give over that control. It was the ultimate in trust and she had no idea why her brain craved it. Her parents had been perfectly normal—well, as normal as circus performers could be. And although it had been obvious from the beginning that their love for each other took precedence over their feelings for their only daughter, they had done nothing to overly traumatize her. All in all they had been loving, caring parents.

And then, when Sandine was twenty, they had died.

She shook her head and turned from the painting to cross the old theater toward her office, entering the room containing the stage. Here, she had wanted to create the feel of a circus tent so she had draped long, red and amber striped fabric from the center of the ceiling. The colorful silk fell in billowy waves to the back wall. Directly over the stage hung an oversized iron chandelier that glowed with low-wattage amber bulbs. The lighting was subtle, diffused.

Next to the light fixture hung a bar—the metal bar to which Sandine had found herself strapped to two nights previously. She ignored this piece of metal and continued to her office. On her desk was the list sheet for tonight's requests. People signed up for their voyeuristic preferences weeks in advance—there was quite a waiting list. Tonight was Martha and Liam's turn. They had requested the bed, as usual.

She spoke into her watch to summon Jeeven.

"Yes, Miss Sandine?"

She glanced up from her desk briefly before returning her gaze to the papers before her. He had carried out Cain's orders a bit too enthusiastically, and she didn't trust him.

"Prepare the bed, please."

"Yes, miss." He hesitated as if he wished to say something else.

"Is there something else?"

"I just wanted to apologize. For the other night."

She looked up again. The boy's body really was beautiful, almost too beautiful. She could see why Cain had taken an interest in him. But God he was young. If she hadn't filed his employment paperwork herself she would have questioned the legality of his being there.

She smiled. "It's fine, Jeeven, I understand. You were only doing as Cain asked."

His body visibly relaxed. "Thank you. I'll set up for tonight."

It was only when he was gone from her office, the door shut behind him, that the smile disappeared from her face. Her skin had begun to tingle as if some invisible being had touched the back of her neck.

She would be on guard around that boy.

As Harry walked toward the door of the club he did a subconscious weapons check. Whip, guns, knives—all strapped to his body, all in place. He didn't expect any trouble tonight, but his role required him to pretend to be checking in on things, and with drug-addicted sadists, one could never be too careful.

He'd like nothing more than to be locked in his bedroom with Sandine. No Cain, no drugs, no club. He sighed as he opened the heavy red door. Yes. A bed. Maybe later tonight after she'd gone home, he'd pay her a visit, make love to her properly, on sheets and blankets, with her hair strewn over her pillows—

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

He turned to find the woman of his fantasies stepping out of Cain's office.

His hand went automatically to clench the coiled whip at his side. He pushed past her and kicked the door to the office open. It slammed against the back wall as he barged inside the room. If that fucker had hurt one hair on Sandine's head he was going to rip his Goddamn heart out.

"Um, Harry?" She stood looking up at him with one raised eyebrow.

His chest heaved as he attempted to draw in air.

Fuck. He was losing it.

She took his hand and led him to an upholstered settee in the corner of the bar. They both sat and a minute later Linda brought over a tumbler of whiskey. He tried not to gulp it but didn't succeed.

She reached out and stroked his knuckles. Glancing down, he noticed how small her hand looked next to his, how fragile the bones looked under her pale skin. Delicate. But when he looked her in the eye it was obvious this woman was anything but weak.

He blew out a breath. "I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That Cain had hurt you."

"Why?"

He inhaled the last few drops of whiskey and felt them burn their way down his throat. "I saw the way he looked at you. He's obsessed, he's insane, he still loves you—"

"He's not here."

Not here. *Of course.*

"He left town for three days to—"

He held up a hand. "Stop. Don't tell me any more. I don't want you to incriminate yourself."

She shrugged. "I don't know any more. He wanted me to watch the club for three days while he's away."

He shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She looked pointedly at his hands, clenched tightly on the table.

She drew a finger softly across his knuckles. "I knew you wouldn't like it, me being here."

"Why didn't you say no to him?"

"I did. I quit. I told him I'd do this one last thing for him and then I was leaving."

"I don't want you here. I don't want you in danger."

Another glass of whiskey was placed in front of them and this time it was Sandine who took a deep sip. She waved her free hand around the club, now beginning to fill with the evening's guests. "Are they in danger?"

"I don't know."

"How can I leave then? If you don't want me here for the good of my own safety how can I walk away from these people? If you want me to leave I'm shutting down the club."

“That would blow the case.”

“It’s your choice.”

Her gaze was steady on his. She wasn’t going to back down and the thing was, if he were in her shoes, he’d probably be doing the exact same thing. He respected that. And he hated it too.

“Then I’m going to be here with you.”

She gave him a little smile. “Okay.”

And damn it if his heart didn’t skip a beat at that. He lit a cigarette and filled his lungs with smoke, tried to regain control of his nerves, himself. He couldn’t help but think that if someone tried to harm Sandine—

Well, he had no idea what he was capable of.

Not a good state of mind for an investigator in the middle of an undercover operation. Not good at all.

Chapter Six

Sandine took Martha by the hand and led her up the small set of steps to the bed at the center of the stage. Earlier, Sandine had covered the mattress in a purple silk sheet, and now the fabric glistened like an amethyst under the soft light as they approached. Martha's sexual energy radiated into Sandine's fingertips, and she repressed a shiver.

Sandine released the woman's hand. "Lay down."

Martha climbed onto the bed and lay down on her back. Her gaze followed Sandine as she went to a corner of the bed frame, lifted a heavy leather cuff that was chained to the post, and buckled it around Martha's ankle.

Sandine had been so removed from the activities of the club over the past six months the act of securing the woman to the bed seemed new and thrilling. And yet somehow it felt wrong to touch another person in such a manner, as if she was being unfaithful to Harry.

Her gaze met his across the room. He held her stare for a moment before subtly nodding. She released a breath of air. No, she didn't want to do this without his permission, but knowing he watched sent an instant throb to her pussy. Suddenly she was performing for him, and that was a thing she had always loved to do. It surprised her that he'd allow it, but she didn't question it either.

Slowly, she walked to the other corner of the bed, but before she restrained Martha's other ankle, Sandine softly ran a finger across the woman's skin, from her knee to the tips of her toes. Martha shuddered under her touch.

Her wrists were next. Sandine massaged her skin a moment before tightening the cuffs. The metal chain clanked lightly, punctuating the act of what she was doing. Soon all of Martha's limbs were chained to the bed, her arms and legs spread wide. Sandine had left her very little room for movement.

"Okay?" she asked, brushing Martha's hair off her forehead.

Martha nodded, her skin flushed pink, her pupils dilated. Sandine looked the naked woman over. She was lovely, all gentle curves and olive skin. She had freckles scattered across her stomach.

Sandine glanced to find Harry's dark gaze on her. He looked at Martha's naked body, then back at Sandine. Again, he nodded his approval and a thrill shot through her body. How far would he want her to go?

Sandine leaned down and ran a kiss across the woman's ribcage. The woman trembled beneath her lips, and as Sandine felt her own fingertips caressing soft female skin—the dip of her waist, the ridges of her ribs, the curve of a breast—Sandine's own sex clenched.

She took the taut nipple between her fingers and pinched. Martha gasped, her eyes going wide as she fixed her gaze on Sandine. This was what Sandine enjoyed, preparing the subject, making sure she was ready.

And Martha was ready. Sandine twisted the woman's nipple again, until Martha moaned, bucked her hips off the mattress as if her pussy wanted something. Sandine could smell the tart scent of her arousal.

She heard the clink of a glass hitting a wood table, and Sandine knew it was time to go. Harry had given her a signal of sorts to stop. And she was glad. Because no matter how erotic it was to set the stage, she had no desire to make love with anyone other than Harry.

She looked up to meet the gaze of Martha's husband, Liam. He stood on the steps, fully clothed. He had watched what Sandine did to his wife, his erect cock visibly pushing at the fabric of his cotton chinos. Another man stood behind Liam, and at Sandine's nod they both approached the bed. Then the men were stroking Martha, touching her, playing with her, as Sandine faded into the crowd. By the time she reached her office the long, drawn-out erotic moans coming from Martha's throat mingled with the hum of those gathered in the club.

This was Martha's fantasy. To be tied to the bed as her husband and another man made love to her. They could do whatever they wanted as a crowd of strangers looked on and took their own pleasure in watching.

Sandine slammed the door to her office shut behind her. Her pulse was racing and there was a dampness between her legs. She walked to the one-way window. Liam was kneeling between Martha's legs, and Sandine could see him working his long fingers in and out of her pussy as she jerked against the restraints. The other man stood next to her face, his cock in his hand as he stroked himself, the head of his dick just inches from her open mouth. Her tongue darted out, licking her pink lips. Then he took his cock and slid it into Martha's mouth. She took him so deeply Sandine could see her throat fighting it.

The sexual energy in the club was thick, so thick it seeped into Sandine's skin, made her feel free. On a night like tonight, it was like a drug and she had a contact high.

She didn't hear Harry enter the room, but she felt him behind her. His breath was hot on her neck, and she sank into him. "I need you, Harry."

"You were perfect out there, Sandy. You loved knowing I was watching, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I was watching you and all I wanted to do was to tie you down to that bed, do to you exactly what I wanted..."

"Yes," she breathed, her pussy throbbing at his words.

She heard the sound of his coat dropping to the floor in a heavy thud.

“...and I don’t care who would see. I would do that. I’d fuck you in front of a crowd so everyone would know who you belonged to.”

He reached around and undid the few buttons of her skirt until it fell off her hips. Her shirt was next and then, just like that, she stood there in her black lace panties, bra and thigh-high stockings. And her pointy shoes.

Looking through the one-way mirror, she moaned at the sight before her. She *wanted* to be on that bed, she wanted Harry to be doing those things to her, wanted his fingers inside of her, wanted his face between her legs. She pressed her hands against the glass.

“I missed you today.” He reached around her body to palm her sex.

Her knees went weak, but he held her steady.

“Spread your legs more.”

She did.

“Step back.” Then he was on his knees in front of her and his hot breath was soaking right through the thin silk of her panties. She focused on Martha, on Liam who was licking her clit, fucking her with his hand, and then Harry, bless him, was doing those things to *her*. Her eyes never left the orgy on the other side of the window, but she heard him withdraw a knife and felt the steel as it slipped under the black lace stretched across her hip, and then there was the soft sound of the fabric being sliced.

“Don’t move.”

The heels of her pumps were planted on the floor, her hands glued to the glass and her gaze locked on Martha’s body. Then Harry kissed her once more through the lace of her panties before she felt him slice through the fabric on the other side. His blade was so sharp it seemed the material simply disintegrated on contact.

Like what happened to her head every time he looked at her, touched her.

And then he was there, opening the lips of her pussy to his gaze, licking her clit, stroking her everywhere, from the edge of her anus to the inside of her vagina and she was fucking him back, pushing at his mouth, moaning and begging and all the while watching...

Through the glass, Sandine watched as Liam got to his feet, releasing Martha’s ankles and wrists. Martha’s chest heaved as Liam sank onto the bed and pulled his wife on top of him.

The other man joined them, climbed onto the bed and knelt between the couple’s legs. He covered his erection and her ass with lube. Lust washed over Sandine as she watched the threesome, watched as both men entered the woman sandwiched between them. And during it all, Martha’s gaze remained locked on her husband’s and the look that passed between them was so trusting, so intimate, so...

“Oh God, Harry...”

Then he was on his feet, standing behind her and pulling her ass toward him until she was fully bent over.

“Yes, Harry. Please.”

“Do you have anything?”

She knew what he wanted. “Right-hand top drawer.” Her body quivered as she waited his return, her palms damp against the window. Soon warm liquid poured onto her skin, covering her buttocks, dripping sticky between her cheeks. She felt the head of Harry’s cock sliding between her legs, until he was cupping her entire pussy with the length of him.

“I’m going to give you what I know you want,” he whispered into her ear.

She couldn’t talk.

She felt something unfamiliar pressing against her sex and when she looked down, Harry was caressing her with the handle of his whip. She closed her eyes as the ribbed leather glided across her pussy, from her clit and back again until she was fucking the handle. “Oh, oh my God...”

She was so wet and ready that the whip slid in easily. At first the weapon felt unfamiliar inside of her body but when Harry reached around to pinch her clit she couldn’t help but gasp and welcome the foreign object.

“Reach between your legs and hold the handle inside of you.”

She took the solid piece of leather in her hand and was surprised at how heavy it was. Pushing it a little deeper, she moaned as every nerve on her body responded to the intrusion.

“That’s my Sandy. Go ahead and fuck it, I want you to.”

She was. Shaking, she slid the thing in and out of her pussy. And as she did so, she watched Martha being fucked by two men. She cried out. It was too much. She was going to come.

But not yet. She stilled as she felt the tip of Harry’s dick pressing at her anus, and she threw her head back and screamed from want. But then, oh God, he was entering her, filling her, stretching her...

Yes, she was full. Her heart raced and her body trembled from it, from him. His stomach pressed at the small of her back as he moved against her, pulled out and went deeper.

He grabbed her hair, pulled a fistful just hard enough to send her over the edge and then he came, too, his roar so loud she was sure it was going to blow off her office door.

After the last shudder rocked her body she would have collapsed onto the floor like a ragdoll, but he held her steady, then lifted her and carried her to the sofa. He sat on the soft leather, cradled her in his lap.

“Harry...that was...”

“What?”

She thought about the whip, what he’d done. “Did I mention you’re brilliant?”

“You’re a kinky girl. I’m always going to have to use my imagination with you.”

She took a deep breath. “Always?”

There was a long pause before she felt him place a soft kiss at her temple. "I like you a lot, Sandy."

She kissed him. "That's a good thing, I think."

A long moment passed before he answered. "Yes. I think so too."

"What's the status on the Cheval case?"

Harry was a few minutes late for their lunch briefing at the cafeteria, and the chief hadn't bothered waiting. Taking a seat across from his boss, he eyed the remnants of what may have once been a meatball sandwich on the other man's tray.

"Cain's gone for a few days. I assume getting the shit."

"When's the bust going to go down?"

Harry watched his boss take a huge bite of his second meatball hoagie. Harry had never known a man who consumed as much food as the chief, yet the man stayed lean as a whip.

Harry ordered a cheeseburger and then turned to the chief. "I'm thinking within forty-eight hours." The sooner this thing was done and Sandine's ties with Cain were severed, the better. The bastard was scheduled to return tomorrow which meant this was Sandine's last night at the club. He'd been gone three days, and Harry had been at Sandine's side the entire time. He was like a fucking mother hen, following her around, suspicious of any unknown that walked through the door. But he knew, better than most, what drugs did to people. And who knew whom Cain was selling to? Anyone could walk through that door.

"I'll get the team ready."

Harry took a deep swig of his coffee. Chief polished off his second sandwich in about one minute before settling back in his chair and taking a long look at Harry. A few patrons in the public cafeteria skirted the table. The chief, with his overly long hair, brown suede coat that brushed the floor and tattooed face, was a little much for some. The chief ignored the stares.

"What?" Harry finally asked.

"Something's up."

The man didn't miss anything, damn him. "Why do you say that?"

"You're fidgety. You keep tapping your toe. After five years of bossing you around I know that means you have something on your mind."

Harry blew a breath out of his chest. "I don't know. I just have a feeling I'm missing something here."

"Then walk away."

"Because of a hunch?"

"You've been in the game for a long time, Marshall. Trust your instincts."

But this was different. Everything had changed since he had met Sandine. She was in his head, and he couldn't separate instinct from his overwhelming desire to keep her safe. He had a feeling this hesitation was more to do with her—and keeping her out of Cain's grasp—than an actual gut feeling.

He looked his chief directly in the eye. They had been working together too long for any bullshit. They'd been through a lot together and the only way their relationship worked was through brutal honesty. Anything else could get someone killed.

"I'm not sure I can right now."

Chief simply raised a brow at that. "I don't suppose this has anything to do with the female?"

"It has everything to do with her."

"Then remove her from the situation."

"She refused to go."

"And you allow this?"

"She left me little choice. She's independent and stubborn and—"

"Does she know you're an investigator?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell her this?"

"She's a Tarot reader, she knows things."

"I see. Maybe she can use her intuition to give you perspective on this hunch of yours."

"I'd rather not go there," Harry mumbled.

"Oh?"

"I want to keep her as uninvolved as possible."

"I see."

"I know what you're thinking. That it's too late, that it was stupid to get involved with a civilian during a case."

"Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking. But what's done is done, and I have a feeling you care about this woman."

Harry nodded slowly, ran his hand over his head. "I don't want to blow this case now."

"It's not worth you getting injured. Or coming back in a black bag."

Harry leaned across the table. "Even if I closed the case early, I wouldn't relax. Cain is psychotic. I want him behind bars."

"Then it seems you've made up your mind."

"I guess I have."

Chief gave him one more long, hard look, his amber eyes practically glowing in the well-lit dining room. "Be careful."

Harry nodded. He didn't have a choice. He had to be careful, for Sandine's sake.

"Miss?"

Sandine looked up from her desk. She'd been working on the books, but things were so screwed up there was no way she'd get it cleared up before she left. Obviously, Cain had been funneling money away from the club, and she was fairly certain she knew exactly where that money was going. What surprised her was the amount of cash missing—obviously Cain's problems were larger than she had imagined.

She couldn't wait to be gone. She wasn't worried about getting a new job, and, for the first time in awhile, she was anxious to return to her roots reading the Tarot.

Looking back she could see how Cain had played right into her insecurities about her mother and she couldn't believe she'd let him. He'd taken advantage of her vulnerability, and she'd been so blinded by her insecurities she hadn't realized what he'd been doing.

"Miss Sandine?" Linda looked at her with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Linda. Thank you, I was just catching up on some accounting. What's up?"

"We need more tequila elixir and no one but you has a key."

"Oh, okay." Sandine rose from her desk and picked up a keycode remote. Due to his overactive paranoia, Cain kept everything he thought held even the tiniest of value in locked boxes in his office. And despite everything, Sandine was the only one he trusted with the means to unlock the club's assets. "I'll be right out with the elixir."

"Thanks, Miss S."

She unlocked Cain's office and turned on the light. Uncharacteristically, he'd left it kind of a mess, papers scattered across his desk and drawers slightly open. Just one more sign that he was losing it. Crossing the office to the enormous safe in the corner, she held the keycoder to the remote box and punched in the code. A second later she heard six successive clinks as each box's lock popped open. She reached for the second door down, thinking that was where he kept the club's bar supplies.

When her hand was inches from the grey steel handle, her fingers began to tingle. Lightly at first, as if she was touching an electric recharger, but then the sensation grew more intense as her fingers moved closer to the door.

Her heart started racing and her throat closed down. Here. They were here, behind the door...

She'd found her cards.

It's over, right here, right now. She was free. Suddenly, she had an image of herself as a prisoner emerging from her cell after months of torture. Okay, that was a little melodramatic, but it still seemed an appropriate image.

Her hand trembled as she touched the handle. A spiky current shot up her arm, the energy radiating through the metal and into her skin, sinking into her veins.

She opened the door.

The box was empty.

The disappointment that flooded her gut nearly made her vomit. They'd been right here the whole time, right in this box, and judging from the vibration throbbing through her she concluded it hadn't been long since they'd been removed.

"Miss Sandine? What are you doing?"

It was Jeeven. The last thing she wanted was that boy seeing her shaken up, on the verge of tears.

"I'm looking for the tequila elixir, Jeeven." She slammed the door shut and opened the top cabinet. "Oh, here it is."

"Should I take it to the bartender?"

She took a deep breath and pasted a smile on her face. When she turned to face Jeeven she did the best she could to appear cool and calm. As if the rug hadn't just been ripped out from under her. "Yes, thank you."

He took the brown bag from her, but didn't go. "Did you need anything else out of here?"

"Pardon me?"

"Are you finished in Cain's office?"

What, now the little bastard was trying to kick her out? She was at the end of her fucking rope.

Instead of hurling a knife at his head, she kept smiling as she spoke. "No." She raised the keybox to show him exactly who had power in this place. "Thank you for taking the elixir to the bar. I'm sure they're in a hurry to have it."

He hesitated a few more seconds before turning on his booted heel and exiting the room.

"Prick," she muttered as soon as the door shut.

She began pacing the office, the pistons of her brain going nonstop. She had been ready to walk away, she really had. She should have, but it was too late. Now her mother's energy was once more flowing through her veins, and she couldn't give up. Not now. She spun back to the cabinet, opened the doors. She ripped all the contents out of each space, tossing papers and elixirs and sex toys into random piles on the floor. When the safe was devoid of anything, she stared at the empty boxes, panting. It had to be here somewhere. There had to be a clue in this office. The cards had *just* been here. She could still feel them.

She closed her eyes, slowed her breathing. Panic coursed through her blood, her throat was closing down. She was never going to tune into her intuition if she kept this up. Christ, what kind of fucking Tarot reader had panic attacks? She was fucking hopeless—

Stop it.

The words slammed into her head. She had no idea where they came from but there it was. *Stop it.* Yes. She crossed the room until she was behind Cain's desk. She kicked his chair to the side and sat cross-legged on the floor. What was wrong with her? *No.* No more negative thoughts. That was exactly what had gotten her in this situation to begin with. Her own self-doubt had allowed Cain into her head, given him the ability to manipulate her.

No more.

She closed her eyes, focused on her breathing. Slow down, in and out. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. She could do this. She just needed to concentrate. Focus. Focus on the energy in the room.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there with her eyes closed, centering herself on the air coming in and out of her lungs. *Breathe.*

Soon the energy in the room began to blur until tiny points of feeling started poking at her. Her arm began to move, guided by an invisible force, to a place underneath Cain's desk, just left of center. Her fingers brushed a piece of paper. She scrambled under the desk and scrunched her body around until she saw a scribbled note taped to the metal. She carefully removed the paper and unfolded it.

Ramsey Rameriz

Av Del Palmar

Sayulita

Mexico

Flight 50C

"Sandine?"

She jerked up and banged her head on the bottom of Cain's desk. "Ow! Fuck!"

"Oh shit, are you okay?"

Harry. She heard his boots thudding across the floor, then his bent knees came into her line of sight, followed by his head. "What happened? Do you need a doctor?" He reached into his trench coat pocket and she knew he was going for his PDA.

"No, stop. I'm fine. You just startled me, and I hit my head."

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry." He reached toward her. "Come here, let me see."

She crawled out from under the desk and he took her into his arms. "You sure you're all right?" He placed a soft kiss on the crown of her head.

"Yes." She handed him the paper. "Look at this."

He read the note and was quiet for a minute. Finally he looked up, his blue eyes guarded. "Mexico?"

"Yes. What do you think?"

He shook his head. "No idea."

"He took my cards with him."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

He stared across the room, toward the closed-circuit TV. "Obviously he was afraid you'd find them when he was gone. Or..."

“Or what?”

“Or he went to sell them.”

“Sell them? *Sell* them?” Sandine jumped to her feet. “He’ll probably trade them for a fucking shot of real tequila.”

Harry’s gaze was direct on hers. “Sandy, how much are these cards worth?”

She wanted to scream. Instead she yelled, “They’re priceless!”

Harry followed her out the door. “Wait.”

She flung the door to her office open, grabbed her coat and bag. “That little *fuck!*”

“Sandine. You are not following him to Mexico, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

As she strode past Jeeven, she tossed the keycoder at him. “Here. It’s all yours.” And then she was out the door. She marched down the street, her arms swinging sharply at her sides. “I can’t fucking believe this. That little *prick!*”

She was about to step into a crosswalk but Harry grabbed her arm, jerking her back onto the sidewalk. A taxi blared its horn as it blew past them.

“Hey! Do you realize you almost just got run over by a bloody taxi?”

His blue eyes sparked with irritation. She lifted up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for saving me.”

“Lord. You’re trouble, I knew it from the minute I saw you chained from the ceiling, waiting for a beating from your idiot of an ex-boyfriend.”

“True. So you need to decide right now what you want to do.”

He shook his head at her, his brown hair gleaming under the fluorescent streetlamp. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to Av Del Palmar, Sayulita.”

“Three days ago you were ready to walk away. Now you’re going to another country to get back your cards. I don’t get you.”

She took his hand in a firm clutch. “I know it seems crazy. I know I was ready to give it up. But that was before. Before I felt the energy sink into me. My mother’s energy, Harry. It’s back in my veins. I can’t ignore it.”

He was already shaking his head. “No. No, you are not going to fucking Mexico.”

“And it was before Cain sent me over the edge with this last lie.” This time she looked both ways before crossing the street. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

She heard him behind her, his boots crunching on the cracked cement street. “What do you think? You’re just going to show up and he’s going to give you what you came for?”

“No. I don’t think that at all.”

He was beside her now. “Then what? Tell me. What’s your plan?”

She touched the knife strapped to her side. Her fingers still tingled with her mother's force. It was slowly fading, but she could feel it. It fueled her. "I'm going to do what I should have done ages ago."

"Oh God."

"I'm going to reclaim what belongs to me."

"That's not going to happen."

She stopped and faced him. "Excuse me?"

He was shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but there is no way you're crossing the border alone."

She got right up in his face. "Try and stop me."

He closed his eyes as if he were tired. "I wouldn't dare."

"Really?"

"No. Even if I wanted to, you're holding a fucking knife and it's pointed at me."

She looked down. Damn it, she had withdrawn her blade and hadn't even realized it. Her cheeks heated. "Sorry."

"Don't be. It's your legacy."

"This is your fault, you know."

"Oh?"

"If you hadn't set him up he wouldn't have had the catalyst for any of this."

"True, but don't forget he's had your cards for months. And he's researched who would buy them. Obviously he's been planning this for awhile."

"He's a fucking prick."

"You picked him."

"He wasn't always like this."

"Whatever."

She started again toward home. "Do you think he's still there?"

"I don't know, I'll run a check through V'track when we get to your place. But first I need to get my bike."

"Go, I don't need an escort home. I'll meet you back at my place."

"I'm walking you home. We're almost there."

"Fine, but you really don't need to. I'm perfectly safe."

Just then three dark figures emerged out of an alley. She could have sworn she heard Harry murmur "Really?" but then they were surrounded by the group of punks and there was no time for questions.

The men were young, barely out of their teens, but the sense of misery surrounding them was nearly palpable. Desperation and poverty. She would have felt sorry for them if she had any doubt of their intent.

The blond one took a step toward them. His dark gaze bored directly into her, and she suppressed a shudder. "Dude, you leave us with your woman and we won't cut your dick off."

She was too pissed off to let this little punk fuck with her. “Why don’t you beat it and maybe I won’t cut *your* dick off.”

She could tell Harry was smiling when he spoke. “She’s feisty.”

Blond Guy caught a crowbar one of the other thugs threw at him.

Sandine snorted. “Wow. You guys are as coordinated as a fucking ballet.”

Totally thrown by her comment, they just looked at her, stunned.

And then there was the sound of steel being withdrawn from sheaths and Harry went for them, a long knife in each hand as he spun, aimed and stabbed. Sandine threw her dagger at the third punk, taking him down with one flick of her wrist. She hadn’t actually taken a life with her knife, but she wouldn’t hesitate to if need be. This wasn’t the first time she’d had to protect herself on the walk home. It was one of the downfalls to coming home at all hours.

She turned to assist Harry, but it was clear he didn’t need her assistance. So she watched him fight, and thought he was beautiful and brilliant. She’d known he was trained in weaponry, but she would have never guessed the extent of his ability.

And to think she held all that checked strength between her legs whenever they fucked. The thought sent a little jolt straight to her sex.

When the attackers lay scattered on the cement just minutes later, Harry turned to her. “You were saying something about being perfectly safe?”

Two steps and she was there. She jumped at him, and he caught her as she wrapped her legs around the outside of his coat. She felt his arsenal of weapons under her thighs. He hadn’t even used most of them to take down the punks.

His mouth was on hers, attacking her with his tongue, nipping at her lip. He’d never kissed her that way before. With such fierceness.

“I don’t want to need protection,” she said against his lips.

He was walking, backing her up until she hit a wall. “You’re getting it anyway.”

“I’m going to Mexico.” She wanted to touch his chest but it was impossible to get under all the damn holsters he had strapped to his body.

“I know.” He reached under her shirt and cupped her breast. “Can I fuck you right here?”

“Yes, but take me in the alley. I can still see the...bodies.”

He stilled. “Oh fuck. I’m sorry, Sandy, I don’t—I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

She kissed him. “Shut up and fuck me.”

He pulled back. “No. *No.*” He shook his head before easing her onto the ground. “I’m taking you home. But first, let me, um...”

“What?”

“Retrieve your dagger.” He pulled her knife out the slain body and wiped the blood on the clothes of the attacker. After he had handed it back to her they started on the walk to her home.

After a minute he spoke. “We need to talk instead of...”

“Fuck?”

“Yes. I really, really want that. I want to explain things, who I am. I want to know more about you.”

“Then come to my house.” As they walked she took his hand. “But I’m leaving in the morning, okay?”

He shook his head. “I hope you have whiskey.”

“Yes, Mr. Marshall. Anything for you.”

Ten minutes later they were seated on opposite ends of her black velvet sofa, she with her legs tucked beneath her body, and he facing her, one knee bent and resting on the oversized cushion. He took a sip of drink, noticing it was the same type she served him at Le Cheval. “Who provides you with this? It’s unusual to have so much genuine whiskey, you must go through barrels at the club.”

She shrugged, tucked her braid behind her ear. “My grandfather owned a distillery, before they were outlawed.”

“He must have left you quite a supply.”

She had changed into a black sleeveless smock that ended just above her knees. Underneath the long shirt she wore tight, stretchy black pants.

Shifting, she brushed the back of the sofa. “For some reason I didn’t see you as a Calocarb drink guy, so I told the waitresses to serve you from my private supply.”

He paused. “Really?”

She nodded.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t even serve it to Cain.”

Satisfaction settled deep in his gut. Him. She had singled him out from the beginning. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He took a sip of whiskey. “You know what I wanted to know more than anything?”

“What?”

“If you were shaved like all the girls.”

“Well, now you know.”

His eyes darkened. “Yes.”

She cleared her throat. There was something in the way he spoke, the way he looked at her. He was fearless and strong and every ounce a man. Yet he seemed to respect her need for independence, and didn’t mind that she wanted to take care of herself.

“Is there any reason the girls are all shaved? Er, down there?”

“It was my idea. You know, with all the sex clubs that popped up around 2020? I wanted something to distinguish us.” She shrugged. “I dunno. People seemed to like it. Especially initiation night.”

“Initiation night?”

“Yes. Whenever we’d hire a new girl, we would tie her to the bed and sculpt her pubic hair. It was quite popular.”

“You don’t do it anymore.”

She shrugged. “Haven’t hired anyone in awhile. Haven’t had to. But no, I think that tradition is about to die. Anyway, I’m done with Le Cheval. I certainly won’t be shaving girls anymore.”

Harry laughed and withdrew a cigarette from the case in his pocket. “This is a very strange conversation.”

Smiling at him, she said, “Yeah, but when you do what I do, you tend to have a lot of those.”

“You’ve never really told me the full story, exactly what happened that night. When he chained you up.”

She reached across the sofa and helped herself to his whiskey glass. “He had hidden them well. I searched several times but...I was so out of touch with myself I couldn’t sense it, even though it was right there the whole time.

“And then I caught him giving D’sdaine to Anna, and I wanted out. I knew I had to leave, so I went into his office, determined to find that deck.”

“And he discovered you.”

“He caught me stealing from him.” She took a deep sip of whiskey and ignored the image of the Seven of Swords that flashed through her head. “And I’m going to do it again, if that’s what it takes.”

“And if he catches you?”

She looked him right in the eye. “I’ll be prepared this time.”

Harry inhaled long and hard from his cigarette. It was a good thing the nicotine sticks were safe nowadays, cause he would surely be toxic otherwise. Sandy gave him the most incredible urge to smoke.

His gaze soaked up the details of her face. Until last week he’d never really been close enough to count the freckles scattered over her nose, or appreciate the light shade of emerald green of her eyes, or notice the way her blue braid started at the exact point of her temple.

His arm was long enough to reach over and pluck the glass of whiskey out of her hand. “So, he’s been holding these cards over your head, knowing you won’t leave until you get them back.”

She nodded.

He drained the glass. “I’ll go to Mexico and get them for you. You stay put.”

“No.”

He took another deep drag of smoke. "What do you mean, no?"

"This is my deal. Cain is my problem."

"No. The minute I was assigned to bust him he became my problem."

"Were you assigned to get back a deck of cards when you busted him? Go to Mexico?"

"No, but—"

"Listen. I know where he is. He's not expecting me."

"You are a stubborn girl."

"Now I'm stubborn *and* pissed."

He just shook his head. "Cain's about to be put behind bars for a long time."

She stood, crossed the room and pulled the whiskey bottle from the cupboard, along with a second glass. "You never officially confirmed what I said before." She poured herself a shot and downed it. "Are you a cop?"

"Yes. I'm an undercover narcotics investigator."

"And you're going to bust Cain?"

"Hopefully more than just him. He thinks I'm there to buy a huge amount of drugs from him. We know he's in deep, but we don't know who his connection is. We think somewhere up north."

"And that's who you're really after? His connection?"

"Yes."

"So, if you did go to Mexico, you'd blow your cover?"

"Yes."

"You'd do that for me?"

"If that's what it takes to keep you safe."

"You can't do that. I won't let you."

"And I won't let you go alone."

They stared at each other for a long moment before she reached out and touched his hand. "You'd do that? Blow it all for me?"

"Yes."

She returned to his side and refilled his glass with amber liquid. "That's just...really nice of you. I don't know what to say."

Yes, he'd do that. The chief was going to kill him, but he'd do it.

"Harry, listen. How about you go with me, but let me deal with Cain. Then you'll know I'm safe, but you don't need to blow your cover. I can't let you do that for me."

God, he needed to change the subject. There was no way he was going to let her go alone, but he also hated to blow this case. He'd worked long and hard to take these fuckers down.

He stood, shook his head, pushed it all out of his mind. “I don’t know how much longer I can sit here staring at that face of yours without taking you right here on the sofa.”

She shifted a bit, looked up at him. “And what would be wrong with that?”

“Come here.” He reached for her but she jumped up, darted out of his grasp. He caught up with her in the hallway, jerked her against his chest and pushed her back against the wall. His cock nearly exploded from the simple pressure of his body against hers.

She wrapped her hands around his head and pulled his mouth to hers, but before she kissed him she spoke against his lips. “I want you inside of me. Soon.”

In response he kissed her, pulled her body up until her legs were wrapped around his hips. “I want to be inside of you. Soon.”

Closing her eyes, she settled herself onto his erection. “Good. I’m glad we agree.”

Clutching her to him, he somehow found his way into her room, walking and kissing her until finally, he found the bed, onto which he promptly tossed her.

She looked up at him, her hair mussed up, her lips swollen and her green eyes dark with desire.

For him.

“You know what?”

“What?” She sounded breathless.

“I’ve seen a lot of sex.”

She raised a brow. “Okay.”

“Some amazingly erotic things, gorgeous women.”

“I get it.”

“But right now, with you looking at me that way...”

The smile spread slowly across her face. “Then come here and do something about it.”

He dropped his coat on the ground. “Take off your clothes.”

She began unbuttoning her smock. “Gladly.”

Next he began the laborious process of unstrapping his weapons.

“Hey, Harry?”

He looked up from his knife holster. “Yeah?”

“Is it true you’ve never done that before?”

“Done what?”

“Whip a woman like you did the other night... You’re very, um, good at it.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve never experienced anything like it before.”

God, was Sandy actually blushing? Cool. “Oh, well. Good.”

“I can’t believe you’ve never played like that before. With a woman.”

“Or, with a *man*.” He grinned, unbuckling his double shotgun holsters. “But, I won’t say I haven’t used my talent to remove a bra or two.”

Her voice was all breathy. “Really?”

He dropped the last holster onto the ground. “Yup.”

Her fingers toyed with the button of her smock. “Can you whip a bra right off a woman?”

“Yes.” He chuckled, idly running his finger at the coiled leather attached to his belt. “Oh, and once I whipped the buttons off a girl’s dress.”

She leaned back on the bed a little. “You did?”

“Sure did.”

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“I am so incredibly turned on right now.”

She was? Harry’s erection felt like the Eiffel Tower was in his pants. Never in his life had he met a girl like her. She’d made him aware of this side of himself he’d never known existed. With her he wanted to test his limits, wanted to test hers. She was sexy and funny, stubborn and brave.

He wanted her to submit to him, like she had that night at the club. He should feel guilty for wanting that, but he didn’t. No, it was impossible to feel guilty when she was lying there, looking at him that way. Her eyes were wide as she watched him de-weaponize himself. Her chest rose and fell with her sharp breaths. He was coming to realize she got off on this edge of danger. He was also coming to realize she trusted him totally to bring her there. And having that trust was a heady feeling indeed.

He jerked his T-shirt over his head. “Be a good girl and take off your clothes.”

She leaned back onto her elbows. “Why don’t you be a good boy and do it for me.”

He grinned down at her. “Gladly.”

God, that smile sent a flutter right to her gut. She wondered if she’d always feel that way.

Always. There was that word again. She pushed it out of her mind.

“And then after I whip your clothes off, I’m going to make love to you on the bed.”

Her pussy dampened at his words, at the weapon in his hands and at the way his eyes dilated when he spoke. “Yes,” she breathed. “On the bed.”

Snap. A button popped off her dress, causing her to jerk slightly. “I didn’t even see you—”

Crack, next to her ear. “Quiet. I’m concentrating.” But the side of his mouth tilted a bit as he spoke.

“Yes, sir.”

“Be still.” He flicked his wrist a few more times and buttons went flying over the bed.

She looked up at him. “Damn. You’re good.” And each time the tip of his leather licked at her she became more and more wet, her nipples zinged tightly, and when he had her shirt hanging open, her black bra exposed to his gaze, she shuddered.

“Whip it off. Please.”

“As you wish.” He took a few steps back and lifted the whip handle. “Don’t move.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. For some reason her thoughts went back to when she was eighteen, and she recalled how she’d modeled for her father’s apprentice. Naked, perched on the wooden pegs, spread in a wide X as Ethan threw knives at the five points of the red star painted on wood behind her.

But this was different, even better. She could feel something other than the wood thundering behind her exposed skin. She felt the tiniest flick whenever he struck her. She knew when he hit her bra. Her nipples tightened as the lace fell away to her sides, exposing her flesh to the air and him.

“You’re fucking beautiful like that.” She heard the whip drop to the floor, then heard him walking. Away.

“Where are you going?”

“Be right back.” A moment later he returned holding something in his palm. “You have a well-stocked laundry area.”

“What do you have?”

He came to the side of the bed and opened his palm to reveal two old-fashioned wooden clothespins. He raised a brow at her.

She shrugged off the remains of her bra and smock down her shoulders. “Take off your clothes.”

He unbuttoned his jeans and dropped them on the floor. His erection was huge, the head a swollen purple plum she wanted to shove in her mouth and devour, suck and nibble until the juice slid down her throat. She licked her lips.

He climbed onto the bed and knelt between her knees and then leaned over her to take a nipple into his mouth. Suckling and licking, rapidly increasing pressure until his bite was a stinging pleasure, until she spread her legs to feel the wonderful friction of his belly against her pussy.

She’d never had actual clothespins on her nipples before—only cold metal clamps—and the feel of raw wood on her sensitive flesh made her skin tingle all over. Every thing that touched her—the raw pads of Harry’s fingertips on her ribs, the slick skin of his legs between her thighs, his breath hot on her nipples—it all hit her skin like an electric shock. She trembled from overwhelming sensation.

He snapped the other clothespin on her unadorned nipple and she gasped at the sensation—it hurt just blissfully—but then Harry climbed off the bed, picked up his whip and hit the end of the clothespin with a sharp crack. Her pussy clenched in response, and she opened her legs and nearly bucked at thin air. God, she fucking wanted him... But she couldn’t move. She had to be motionless. Utterly frozen.

He was whipping the clothespins, one side and then other, quickly, back and forth and she was trying so hard not to lose control, for if he missed, the pain that followed would be excruciating.

He must have known when she couldn't take it any more because he climbed onto her, right into her, and then, finally, he was fucking her. Ramming into her and for once he didn't hold back and didn't seem to be second-guessing himself.

"Harry, yes..." She wanted to reaffirm to him he was safe, that he couldn't hurt her.

And she thought he knew that. Yes, she could see it in the way the vein at his temple throbbed. He flicked at her pinched nipples with his fingertips and he wasn't gentle about that either, thank God. She reached behind her head to grasp onto the headboard in order to keep herself solid for him. She wanted this, wanted him so deep and so hard. She'd never wanted to be fucked so hard before. And when he lowered his head toward her breast she cried out, screamed his name...

"Sandy..."

"Bite me, Harry!"

He slapped a clothespin off, and then immediately took her sensitive nipple into his mouth. He bit. The sting coursed through her veins, taking over, and the pain hit her somewhere deep inside her body, made her pussy throb for him, her Harry.

Just before she climaxed, a tiny pinprick of pain flashed behind her eyes, but through some force of will she pushed it back. She wouldn't let anything ruin the connection bonding the two of them. Harry had finally given into his wants, and she refused to ruin it by ending the episode by turning into a shaking, crying leaf.

When he came his gaze never left her.

Lying in bed with Harry was as close to Heaven as she'd ever been. Her back tucked against his torso, and his face buried in her hair. She could stay that way forever, but knew that wasn't an option. She was still determined to go to Mexico.

But for now she was starving. She was contemplating getting up and making a sandwich when she bolted upright. "Someone's in the garden."

Within seconds Harry was on the ground and had pulled her down with him. He tugged on his jeans and picked up his Glock. "Stay here."

She pulled his T-shirt over her head and grabbed one of his knives off the floor. "No."

He just closed his eyes and sighed. Finally he whispered, "Fine. But at least stay behind me."

Then three loud thuds alerted them that whoever was there didn't mean to sneak into her house. No, the visitor was knocking at the door. Loudly.

She moved past him. "It might be Lucy."

He grabbed her and pushed her behind him. "Yeah, or some psycho off the street." Holding the gun at his chest, he moved quietly toward the door.

"Lucy has spells all over this place. Only an intruder with super high clearance could get past them."

Harry threw a scowl over his shoulder and continued. About three feet from the door he stopped abruptly. "Fuck."

"What?"

"It's the chief."

"The who?"

Harry tucked his gun into the back of the waist of his jeans. "My boss."

"Um, your boss is paying us a visit at three a.m.?"

"Yup." He reached for the door. "This can't be good."

He yanked open the door, and Sandine inhaled sharply before taking three instinctive steps back.

A wizard stood at her front door.

Chapter Seven

Fuck. It was never good when the chief made a visit, but when the call happened to come in the middle of the night when you were with a woman you met on a case and were sleeping with and happened to be right after you scheduled a secret flight to Mexico, it was really not a good thing.

Harry took two steps backwards as the tall man stomped into the apartment. Sandine flicked on a lamp, illuminating the living room in a soft yellowish glow. The chief walked straight to the cupboard as if he owned the place, removed the bottle of whiskey, a glass, and proceeded to pour himself a good size shot.

“You’re a wizard.”

The chief paused with his tumbler halfway to his lips, glancing at Harry. Harry shrugged. He hadn’t told Sandy anything. Most likely it was her magic abilities allowing her to see below the surface. Furthermore, with his long, shaggy hair, seven-foot frame and exotic facial tattoos, it wasn’t as if the guy looked exactly normal. The word animalistic came to mind.

Still, although Harry had suspected his boss came from a place a tad mystical, he’d never actually said that out loud to the guy.

“You’re the Tarot reader.”

She nodded. “Yes.”

The chief downed his whiskey in two gulps. “How do you know what—what—I am?”

Harry stepped forward. Not that he thought for one second that the chief would harm a woman, but he couldn’t stop the overwhelming urge to place himself next to her. She had her arms crossed across her chest, and he gently touched her elbow.

She didn’t flinch. “It’s what I do.”

Chief ignored her and turned to Harry. “I hear you’re taking a little trip.”

“Yes, sir. The suspect’s taken a little trip. He has gone to Mexico, and we’re going to track him.”

“We?”

“Sandine and me.”

“Why?”

“I believe he went to sell something that belongs to Sandine. I’m just hoping we’re not too late to intervene.”

“Do you have any idea who he’s selling to?”

“Sandine found a name and address. Rameriz—”

The chief stilled. “*Ramsey Rameriz?*”

“Yes—”

“When were you going to enlighten me, Marshall?” The chief began to pace the room liked a caged animal. “You have an address?”

“Yes, Av Del Palmar, Sayulita.”

“Fuck. Ramsey Rameriz.”

Harry silently watched his boss cross the living room. The man was mumbling to himself as if he were trying to work something out. Harry waited. He knew the chief would spill eventually.

Suddenly he froze and nailed Harry with his amber stare. “Ramsey fucking Rameriz is ex-Union. Why the fuck would he go down there?”

Ex-Union. The Union was the most powerful country in the world until ten years ago when the government was taken over by a violent *coup*. The leaders who weren’t killed went into hiding. The pieces suddenly clicked into place. Picking up the cigarettes that lay on the coffee table, he eyed the chief. “Fuck.”

“Exactly.”

Sandine looked at Harry. “Can someone please explain what’s going on?”

He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. “You’re ex is going to Mexico to sell your cards to an ex diplomat. My guess is that the guy’s going to pay top dollar for them.”

“Do you think we’re too late?”

The chief nailed him with his gaze. “We?”

“Yes. I’m going.”

The wizard turned to Harry, his amber eyes glowing softly. “For fuck’s sake. You’d blow this case to get back some fucking Tarot cards.”

“He’s not going. I’m going alone.”

“No!”

Sandine stepped back. The men had spoken in unison. Loudly.

The chief took a deep gulp of whiskey. “You have the Aeroplane booked?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go.”

“What? No—”

“I’ll go and take care of this myself. You can’t blow your cover.”

“Men. I can do this myself.”

Harry had almost forgotten Sandine was in the room and it took a moment to process what she’d said. “No.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Hey. Aren’t you guys narcotics? This isn’t even your division.”

He exchanged a look with the chief. Yes, technically they were narcotics, but due to a serious lack of personnel, the force was basically a free-for-all. Plus, they just liked busting criminals.

But if the Suits found out they were going rogue, they definitely wouldn't be happy. Oh well. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

"I started this. He's gone to sell *my* shit. I'm going."

"I'm sorry, but that is not going to happen."

"How are you going to stop me? I have the fucking address."

"By the time you cross the border without me—wait, you are not crossing the border without me." The thought sent a jolt akin to fear right to his gut. The stories of what happened to women crossing the border alone were more than disturbing. Rape was common, and sometimes murder. Oftentimes women just disappeared.

"Sandy, be reasonable—" His sentence was interrupted by the door bursting open. A tiny woman stood in the entryway, her hair a messy pile on her head. She held some sort of smoking stick in her hand and as she entered, she waved it around her head.

Harry looked over her strange black outfit. She wore some type of oversized apron. "Who the fuck are you?"

The small female marched up to him. "I'm the one wondering who broke all my security codes."

Sandine stepped forward. "Lucy, calm down. This is Harry and his boss."

Lucy's body stiffened as she noticed the chief. She visibly recoiled at the sight of him. "Those symbols under your eyes. They're marks of protection, to guard you from witches."

Waving her smoke stick, she marched right up to the chief. Next to his towering frame, she looked even smaller than he'd originally thought. Was it Harry's imagination or did the guy back up a little against the wall?

"Yes."

"Is it working?"

He lowered his head toward hers. "Is there someone I need protection from?"

"Depends if you've come to hurt my friend."

Sparks burst between them—her sage stick was going crazy.

Sandine went to her friend, gently took her by her shoulders and led her to the sofa. Taking her bouquet of burning weeds out of her hands, she firmly pushed the smaller woman until she was sitting.

Sandine straightened her smock. "Let's all take a deep breath and relax, shall we?" She made a show of inhaling, exhaling. "Okay. Lucy, no one is here to hurt anyone. But I found out where my Tarot cards are, and we're going to get them back."

"No *we* are not—"

Lucy's eyes widened. "What? Where are they?"

“Mexico.”

“Oh Goddess. Where in Mexico?”

Harry took a step toward the women. This was getting out of hand. This witch didn’t need to know the details of where they were headed. The less the women knew the better, for their own safety. “Why don’t you ladies go to bed? It’s late and…”

The words died in Harry’s throat. The icy stares the “ladies” were simultaneously shooting at him were downright scary.

“Where in Mexico?” Lucy asked again.

“Sayulita.”

“Are you taking an Aeroplane?”

“Yes. Harry has one reserved. We leave at seven.”

“No *we* do not. Why can no one hear me?”

Lucy reached into one of the huge pockets of her apron. “I’m going with you.”

The chief pushed away from the wall. “Enough.”

The women turned their frightening gazes on the wizard, looking at the seven-foot-tall man as if he were an unruly schoolboy.

“Do you girls honestly think we’re going to take a couple of civilian women down to Mexico to confirm that we’ve just found a diplomat on the run?”

Sandine lifted her chin. “This diplomat will never know I’m there.”

The chief just shook his head. “Fuck’s sake.”

Lucy stood and approached the chief. “How long did it take you to break my security coding?”

“Ten minutes. And I should give you a fine, by the way. You’re way over the allowed bandwidth.”

“I’d be using a lot more, but anything higher would have alerted you.”

“What are you getting at?”

“This is what I do. Security spells.”

“So?”

She shrugged. “So I can break them in like ten seconds.”

“So?”

“*So* I can get you wherever you need to go. Just get me within five miles of this guy’s place, and I can break the security like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“Why? Why do you want to go to Mexico?”

“It’s no concern of yours, *wizard*.”

“What did you call me?”

“What you are, or used to be.” She practically spat the words. “*Wizard*.”

The chief scowled at Harry. “Who *are* these women?”

“That one came from the circus.”

“Harry. I just want to retrieve what belongs to me. It’s something I need to do. They aren’t expecting us. I just need to get Cain alone and then I’m going to persuade him to return my Tarot cards.”

He shook his head. Why was he even arguing? She was going to go down there regardless of what he said.

The girls stood solid next to each other. More than anything he wanted her to stay home, safe. But there was no guarantee of her remaining unharmed, even here. If Cain returned on time, that would mean Sandine would be in the same town with that bastard and Harry wouldn’t be around if something went down.

Sighing, he ran his hand through his hair and eyed the chief. The guy was looking at the witch as if she was the devil herself. From what Harry had seen so far he wasn’t exactly convinced she wasn’t.

“Witch, are you certain you can break the codes?”

“Of course.” She breezed past them and headed out the door. But not before throwing some last words over her shoulder. “Back when the villa was owned by a nice old retiree from Old Canada, I installed them.”

Sandine hauled her knapsack up the old metal stairs and into the Aeroplane. The thing looked decrepit, but Harry swore the insides were in tip-top shape. He and the chief were currently loading a small arsenal into the belly of the ship.

Lucy was already inside the plane, and Sandine quietly placed her bag in a closet and took a seat beside her. The witch had her eyes closed, and her hands were wrapped around a crystal stone.

Sandine removed her deck of Marseilles Tarot cards from her pocket and quietly drew three.

“You girls ready?” Harry took a seat at the front of the ship. He started flipping switches and checking gauges and soon a multitude of neon green LEDs lit up the cockpit.

“Door?”

The chief entered and slammed the door shut behind him. “Check.” He took a seat across the aisle from the girls. Sandine could feel the fear radiating off him. It seemed the big, tough chief was afraid to fly.

“Look here.” She pointed to the cards on the tray in front of her. “The Fool, The Star and the Ten of Cups. It means today is a good day for our journey. Hope and Harmony. Yes, no need to worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

Lucy looked over. “Anyway, if we crash you could always dogpaddle, what with your huge paws and all.”

Sandine punched her shoulder. “Stop it. Why don’t you do something useful and give us a safety spell.”

The chief clenched his armrest. “No! No witch magic.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “You know your chances of dying in a fiery Aeroplane crash are practically nothing. I think the last accident was back in ’15. You know, the one where that ship crashed into the side of Mt. Rushmore?”

“Enough, witch.”

“Poor old Washington lost his nose.”

“Lucy!” Sandine said. “Enough!”

“Oh all right.” Lucy closed her eyes, put her fingertips together and generally made a show of her spell casting. The chief looked horrified, and recoiled as far as he could into his seat cushion. Then, when the Aeroplane began making the *whizzing* and *whirring* sounds of engines coming to life, the tattooed man began rubbing his palms on the knees of his jeans, back and forth, back and forth.

Lucy extracted a black pouch out of one of her apron pockets.

*“Sacred Salt protect this ship,
Keep it safe from wind and shit
Protect all those who ride within,
Even wizards with too-tan skin.”*

She repeated the spell three times then dipped her fingers inside the bag and flung salt over her shoulder.

“For Heaven’s sake, woman. Stop.” Sandine had no idea why Lucy was egging the poor man on, and she gave him credit for ignoring her. His ambers eyes were beginning to glow in a most eerie way, and Sandine decided she didn’t want to be seated between them and all the strange energy that was colliding around her. Shaking her head, she collected her cards and put them in her pocket.

“I’m going to check on Harry.” She went to the cockpit.

Pulling on a long lever, he glanced over his shoulder. “Hey. Buckle up, we’re about to take off.”

“Can I sit here? Things are getting weird back there.”

“Yeah? I just found out some interesting information on your ex.”

Sandine settled into her seat and buckled the harness across her shoulders.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Turns out he owns a huge villa in town.”

She froze. “What?”

“Yeah. On the other side of town from Ramsey’s address.”

She closed her eyes, ignoring the little tug at her heart. How long had Cain been hording money stolen from Le Cheval?

“You girls really should not be here.” He flicked some more switches, scowling.

“Everything will be fine. So, tell me how you learned to fly one of these things.”

Harry adjusted some dials above his head. “My father was a doctor, but he was also a pilot. He traveled the world helping those less fortunate, and eventually bought his own Aeroplane to get us places. Most areas don’t have huge runways, and you can pretty much land one of these anywhere.”

“Wow. You must have seen a lot of the world.”

“Yup.”

“What happened to your parents?”

“They died ten years ago.”

Sandine reached over to touch his arm. She realized she knew very little about him, and was glad they had a few hours together to talk. “How did they die?”

He adjusted a pulley and with a thunderous boom, the ship shot straight up into the air. Within seconds the ground became a distant maze of the San Francisco cityscape. Only when they had cleared a group of puffy clouds did he answer her question.

“They died in an Aeroplane crash.”

Three hours later they landed safely in a high-elevation valley, about five miles from town. Stretching, Sandine walked into the cabin of the plane to find Lucy reading and the chief sprawled across three seats.

Lifeless.

Sandine immediately looked at her friend. “*What* did you do?”

Lucy looked over the rim of her round, black spectacles. “Whatever do you mean?”

Nodding at the unconscious man, Sandine glared at her friend. “Lucy. What. Did. You. Do?”

She looked to where Sandine was pointing. “Oh, I just gave him something for his phobia. His panicky energy was keeping me from being able to concentrate on my book.”

Sandine glanced over her shoulder. “Can you wake him up?”

“Do I have to?” she whispered.

“Lucy!”

“Oh, fine.”

“And hurry up before Harry sees what you’ve done.”

Sliding the spectacles off her face, Lucy stood. “All I’ve *done* is slip a little *Valeriana Officinalis* into his tea.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s not my fault he’s a big, old lightweight.”

“Well undo it.”

“Fine.” She placed her book on the seat bench. Approaching the chief, she began murmuring something to herself that did not sound anything like a spell. She bent over the large man’s form and glanced over her shoulder. “He’s the size of a house, isn’t he?”

Sandine growled in response.

Lucy said something into his ear and then straightened. "He'll wake up in a few seconds."

"I'm going to put the stairs down and check things out."

Startled, the girls whipped around to face Harry.

"Okay!" they both said, smiling.

He raised a brow at them, but opened the door. "Where's the chief?"

"Just waking up," Lucy said. "He fell asleep during the flight."

"Really? That's strange."

Lucy looked out the window and pointed. "What's that?"

"You girls stay here, I'll go check things out."

When he had gone, they turned back to the still lifeless body of the chief.

Sandine picked up his arm. It was limp. "Oh God. Is he going to be okay?"

Lucy clapped her hands loudly next to his ear. Nothing. If his chest wasn't rising and falling Sandine would wonder if he was actually alive. "Hmm. I don't understand. I've given that dose to many, myself included. I mean I guess he could have had some allergic reaction..."

"What the fuck is going on?"

They spun around to see Harry looking over their shoulders. Lucy pulled her bag off a shelf and removed a book from inside. "I gave him a relaxant to calm him down, and I'm wondering if he had a reaction to it." She looked up sharply. "Where is he from?"

Harry opened one of the chief's eyelids. "Shit. What the fuck did you give him?"

"*Valeriana Officinalis*." She leafed through the big black book. "It's a common herb, used for calming the nerves."

Harry peered into the chief's other eyelid. "I'm surprised he even asked for it. He's always been very opposed to any kind of medicine. He doesn't even drink coffee."

Sandine crossed her arms over her head, tapped her foot.

Lucy quietly scanned the pages in her hands.

The silence grew.

"He did know what you gave him, right?"

Lucy didn't look up. "How do you mean?"

"Please tell me he voluntarily took the herb."

"Sometimes people don't know what's good for them."

Harry flung his hand toward the unconscious form beside them. "And this is good for him? Tell me he's going to be okay." He stalked toward Lucy and lowered his face right to hers. "He better fucking be okay."

Sandine reached out and pulled Harry back. "Lucy didn't mean any harm."

He spun to face her. “Didn’t mean any harm? First you girls beg and threaten us to let you come here, and we agree, despite the fact that we’re in one of the most dangerous regions of the world. And now your fucking friend has slipped my fucking partner a Goddamn roofie or some shit.” He ran a hand over his head. “See? I can’t think anymore. You shouldn’t even be here.”

“Harry, wait—”

He shook her hand off. “Just have your fucking witch bring my partner back to life, would you?”

He stomped past her and disappeared from the cabin.

Lucy’s eyes were big and worried. “I’m so sorry. I just...nothing like this has ever happened to me before.”

Sandine pushed her anger to the side. She was irritated with her friend, but it wouldn’t do any good to start arguing about it. “Can you wake him up?”

“I don’t know. I mean, he will eventually, but I need to know what caused this reaction before I give him anything else. If it’s what I’m beginning to suspect, well...”

“Well what?”

“He’ll remain like this until I find a very specific herb.”

“Lucy. What are you thinking?”

She sighed. “It’s a chance in a million.”

“Lucy!”

“If he’s a descendent of the Ó Nuallain tribe he’ll react to any herb given by a witch of the Zephyr line in an extreme way.”

“That’s your line.”

She nodded. “But those markings on his face are not of that tribe, so I’m unsure.”

“But if that is the case, what do you do?”

“Find the herb counterpart.”

“And that would be?”

“*Erythroxylon Coca*.”

Sandine closed her eyes. “Oh no.”

Lucy nodded. “Or, what we now call a very pure D’sdaine.”

“Fuck.”

“Exactly. But at least we know where to find a whole bunch of it.”

Harry checked his weapons for the twentieth time and then tucked another knife into his boot, for good measure. He could not fucking believe this situation. He was in the middle of hostile territory, with two civilian women—one of whom he was beginning to have deep feelings for—preparing to spy on a politician on the run.

And he couldn't turn back now. For all he knew Ramsey could be here for a short time. He had to find out everything he could ASAP.

And he was going in single-handedly because a witch had drugged his wizard boss.

Oh and he had to make sure to bring some of the illegal drugs back to the Aeroplane because that was the only thing likely to wake up sleeping fucking beauty.

"Fuck!"

"Harry?"

He turned to see Sandine descending the stairs. "I know this isn't ideal."

"Are you fucking kidding?"

"I'm sorry about the chief."

"Sorry? You're fucking sorry?"

"Yes, Lucy didn't mean to cause any harm."

"Well she did some anyway. I never should have let you come. This is exactly what I was talking about."

She walked slowly toward him. They had landed in a desert area, and her boots crunched on the rocky ground. "What do you mean?"

He tapped his forehead. "You make me lose it up here. I can't think. I can't control things." He took a deep breath, tried to calm his irritation. "I've scanned the area. No one has been anywhere near this place in a long time. You should be safe."

"What do you mean?"

"If your fucking friend can disarm the security from here, I can go in and scan the place for Ramsey's fingerprints."

"By yourself?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to bring him back?"

"No. That's not my job."

"You can't go alone."

"Yes, I can."

"What about my cards?"

"I'll get them too."

"I'm going with you."

"No fucking way. You're unprepared."

"See that rock?"

"Yeah?"

She picked up a shotgun, aimed. "I'm going to hit that little yellow spot." She pulled the trigger and a minute later the mark exploded into a million shards. "I'm not a helpless female. I can back you up."

"No."

"It's two different houses. Two different addresses. We'll get my cards and then you can do your recon at this Libre's place. Easy-peasy."

"Gah."

"Harry. You can't go in alone. What if something happens to you?"

"It won't."

"But what if it does? How are we going to get out of here? Neither Lucy nor I can fly an Aeroplane."

"I can't bring a civilian into this."

"And you can't go in alone."

"It's not like I haven't done jobs like this before. And I plan on getting in and out before nightfall. I can't have the chief vulnerable one second longer than necessary."

"Okay. Let's go."

"Goddammit, woman." This female was making him crazy.

"If you go without me I'll follow you."

Silently he stalked away. Stalked back to her but then walked away again. God, she was right. It was stupid to go in alone and leave the women vulnerable here. And the fact was Sandine was an excellent backup. She was good with a gun and could throw a knife almost as well as he could. Still, it was a bad situation.

When he was about ten feet away he turned and nailed her with his gaze. "Come here."

Her eyes didn't leave his as she approached him.

"You have to listen to me and do everything I say."

She nodded, her blue braid swinging next to her head.

"I mean everything."

Her green eyes darkened at his words. "I promise."

"Starting now. Follow me."

He walked to the back of the plane where a tree branch gave them some shelter from the hot sun. He heard her footsteps behind him.

He had no idea why he was doing this except he needed some affirmation that she would obey him when it came down to it. He also needed to feel her. After everything that was happening he wanted to be reminded of life, and when he made love to Sandine this way his every nerve in his body screamed with life.

"Kneel." He unbuckled his belt.

She sank to her knees in front of him.

“Put your hands behind your back.”

Steadying herself, she positioned her arms as he instructed. Her skin was flushing under his gaze.

“You have to listen to me, do exactly as I say.”

Looking up at him, she nodded, her eyes wide and pupils dilated.

“I want to know that you can obey orders. Show me that you can obey orders, Sandine.”

“Yes. I can.”

His cock was hard as the rock she had shot, and when he removed his erection from his pants she licked her lips, stared at the head, already dripping. He stroked himself for her a few times, loving the way her gaze followed his hand.

“Open your mouth, Sandy. That’s good, I want to feel your tongue on my dick.”

She closed her eyes, and he let her suck him, directed the head of his cock across the roof of her mouth, around her cheeks. She took him deeper than any woman ever had.

Within minutes he was on the precipice of climaxing. He looked down her back and saw that her fingers were entwined, the veins in her arms clearly visible as she maintained her position. He told himself that if she moved at all he would call it off, would *make* her stay here when he went to Rameriz’s.

Her moan reverberated right into his cock but still, she didn’t move.

He took her head in his hands, pushed until his dick was deep, so deep he felt the back of her throat. But instead of protesting she seemed to welcome it, tilted her neck a little to accommodate his length and still, she held her position just as he had directed.

He thought the ground must be hard on her kneecaps through the material of her pants, but for once he didn’t worry about it. Her flushed skin glistened, and her hips bucked as if she wanted something between her legs. Whatever discomfort she felt was overridden by her pleasure of giving him head.

His orgasm came at him suddenly, his balls tightening, followed by hot jets of fluid that he shot straight down her throat. And even then she didn’t complain, kept her hands in place as if rope bound them there. Looking up at him, her eyes wide and dark with desire, she swallowed.

He ignored his racing heart, took a few deep breaths. “That was very good. Are you going to obey orders so well during our mission?”

She nodded.

“Good. You can get up.”

If she expected him to pleasure her, she gave no indication. Never in a million years would he have ever thought to leave a woman less than satisfied, but for some reason he wanted to use this as a way to show her he was in charge. He wanted that power during whatever occurred over the next few hours. And the fact that Sandine wanted to give him that power filled his heart with something he didn’t want to think about.

No, he couldn't think like that. Not yet, probably not ever. It was too risky, this feeling. He couldn't handle anything happening to Sandine, and ever since that first night at Le Cheval, she'd been constantly at risk.

As soon as they returned and this thing with Cain was settled, he could not see her anymore.

"You know what to do?"

Lucy didn't respond, which was very unusual. Sandine had never seen her friend so worried. Or speechless. The witch obviously felt awful, and, although Sandine was justifiably irritated, she couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Lucy rarely—if ever—made mistakes with her spells and potions, and to do it now, at the worst possible moment, must be tearing her apart.

Lucy picked up a gun, weighed it in her hands. "Thanks for the shooting lesson."

Harry nodded. "If any one approaches, shoot first, ask questions later."

"Right."

"Remember, you just punch 6969 into that PDA and it will immediately notify me that you're in trouble."

Harry had given her the chief's datawatch and instructed her on how to contact help if need be.

"So, I'll signal you when it's time for you to break the security field."

"Harry, I know. We've been over it a million times."

"I just want to make sure because if something happens to him..." He couldn't finish the sentence. Sandine reached out and took his hand. This whole thing was killing him. Harry had called for a team, but it would be at least eight hours before they arrived, and there was still no guarantee they'd have a warrant for arresting Ramsey. If the man was still here.

Sandine hoped they weren't too late. If she didn't retrieve her cards, she knew in her heart she'd never see them again.

Lucy placed herself in the seat opposite the chief, the gun resting across her knees. "I promise. Nothing is going to happen to him."

Harry nodded. "We'll be back."

Sandine leaned down to give her friend a hug. "It'll be all right."

Lucy took Sandine's hand and sprinkled some dust into her palm. "Be careful."

And then they were hiking across the barren land, armed to the hilt and on alert. As they marched west, Sandine thought how strange it was to be there. One week ago she had been sinking into a sort of depression and she hadn't even known it. Then one night everything had changed. Harry had walked in and saved her—saved her from more than a beating at Cain's hands.

She followed his sure strides. She knew it killed him to have her along, but there was no way she was going to send him into the unknown by himself. And it wasn't like she couldn't shoot a gun or throw a

knife. She had been doing the latter her entire life. Thinking of her father made her picture her mother, which immediately brought to mind her deck of cards. She wanted them back, of course. That had been the catalyst for this entire series of events. She wouldn't let that desire overrule her keeping safe. Because she knew that if she put herself in danger it would be over. Harry would put her well-being above anything—even his own safety. She wouldn't allow anything to harm him.

Before long the ocean appeared, the blue expanse stretching beyond miles of jagged cliffs. Soon Harry was checking his PDA and leading them down a steep, rocky path toward sea level. She was thankful he didn't show extra concern on their descent because she was a woman. She needed him to trust that she could take care of herself.

Soon enough the town appeared, the scent of limes, food stalls and a variety of other delicious aromas making her stomach growl. The four-mile hike had drained her belly, and she was suddenly ravenous.

Walking side by side, Harry glanced her way. "You're hungry."

"Aren't you?"

He smiled. "I'm fucking starving, and it's been a long time since I've had good produce."

He sent a type-mail to Lucy to check the chief's status.

"Fuck." He stared at his datawatch.

"Nothing?"

"He's still out."

They found a small outdoor café and seated themselves at a table in the back. Sandine didn't care what she ate as long as it wasn't in the form of some kind of dehydrated food, so she didn't protest when Harry ordered for them in fluid Spanish. Moments later two glasses of tequila were placed in front of them.

"Real tequila." Sandine picked up the small glass of gold liquid.

"*Salud*." They clinked their glasses and then simultaneously drained their contents. Harry immediately ordered another round. "Good shit."

He settled back in his chair and looked around. "Sometimes I think about moving to Mexico, you know, to retire."

"Really?"

"Yup. Mexico is the only place you can find pure water, or fresh limes to go with real tequila."

"I haven't been here in so long." She looked around, taking in the colorful booths and lively cafes. "Makes San Francisco look pretty depressing, doesn't it?"

"Sure does."

They sat in silence until the waitress appeared with their orders—plates of chicken mole, rice, beans and fish with zucchini flower sauce. Sandine's mouth suddenly started watering. She hadn't seen food like this since she was a child and on tour with the *cirque*. She took one bite and decided she'd died and gone to heaven.

They ate in silence, reveling in the amazing sensation of non-government modified food. Groceries were still available in the north, but with the death of agricultural land, the U.S. depended on the southern states for anything fresh. Which of course meant everything fresh was obscenely expensive. Produce was considered a luxury item.

But not in Mexico. Harry slapped down a few pesos after they finished their meal and discussed their plan of attack. First they'd go to Cain's and see if he still had the deck.

After asking their waitress where the *baños* were located, Sandine stood. "I'll be back."

He watched her until she opened a rickety door. Before she stepped inside, she turned and gave him a strange look, like she was checking to see if he was okay. He thought she might come back, but at his smile she disappeared inside the bathroom. God, he hated that she was here, hated that he'd allowed her to come with him. She was a stubborn woman, and he understood why she wanted to end this thing with Cain. Harry admitted that there was a part of him that wanted her to sever any and all ties with her former lover.

He'd already decided his cover was blown. He had trusted the chief to take her to Cain, but now that the man was out cold that left only Harry. Cain didn't need to know he was a cop, but when he turned up with Sandine, there was no way the guy would do business with him. Oh well. Sandine's well-being was more important. And if he discovered the whereabouts of Ramsey at least he would have achieved something.

His gaze hadn't left the rickety wooden door with the word *Señorita* painted on the chipped wood. He figured Sandy should be done by now and suddenly his pulse picked up a notch. His chair fell to the floor in a clatter as he stood, and the other patrons glanced at him as he ran toward the back of the restaurant.

"Sandy?" He banged three times on the wood and when she didn't answer he kicked the door open.

And then his heart stopped. She stood there, washing her hands. Looking up she frowned. "What's wrong?"

He just shook his head, stepped into the small room and pulled her against his chest. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Taking you to visit your psychotic ex-boyfriend's villa in Mexico."

Looking up at him, she searched his eyes. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Just promise me you'll be careful."

"I always am, sweetheart. I always am."

The door to the villa faced the dirt road. White, huge and three stories tall, the structure blocked any view of what lay on the other side, but the roar of the sea pounding the sand was a good indicator of how close the ocean was.

Walking up the path to the front door, Harry whistled. "Cain seems to be doing okay for himself."

"So it would seem."

Harry lifted the large iron ring that served as a doorknocker and rapped the wood three times. He looked to her. "Ready?"

"And able."

Cain opened the door. It took him a second too long to comprehend who had come to visit, and Harry's booted foot stopped the door from being shut in their faces.

Harry leaned forward. "You know why we're here. Why don't you make this easy on yourself and let us in."

"Fuck you."

"No, fuck you." Harry drew his arm back and punched Cain in the nose. Pushing inside, Harry drew Sandine behind him into the villa. Standing there, holding his nose as blood dripped onto his loose white shirt, Sandine almost felt sorry for him. But when he looked up and shot her with those drugged-up, hate-filled eyes, all sympathy disappeared. He'd brought this on himself.

"Where are the cards, Cain? You know I'll find them eventually, so can we just cut the bullshit?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he glared at her. "You stupid bitch."

Harry jerked forward, but Sandine stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "He's not worth it. Let's get my cards and get out."

Cain stalked across the terra cotta tile to the kitchen and pulled a tray of ice out of the freezer. "If you're such an amazing psychic, why don't you find them yourself?"

She shrugged. "Fine. Have it your way." She walked across the room, climbed onto the sofa and removed a large painting of a woman holding a bouquet of flowers. Smiling at Cain, she raised her leg and smashed the canvas over her knee. "Nope. Not in there."

"No!" He dropped the ice onto the counter and rushed toward her, only to be stopped by Harry stepping in front of him. "She has to stop."

Sandine jumped down from the sofa. "My psychic abilities are a little rusty, so I'm just looking around." She picked up a colorful urn off a side table, peeked inside and let it drop onto the tile floor where it shattered into a million shards. "Not there either."

"Stop or Ramsey will kill me!"

"What?" Harry had Cain's shoulders in his grasp. "What did you just say?"

"The guy who owns this place—he's a fucking psycho with OCD. When he sees what you've done he'll—"

Harry jerked Cain to the sofa then shoved him into a seating position. "This is Ramsey's house?"

Cain looked up at Harry. "Y-yes. He owns it."

Harry pulled his coat aside, and Cain's eyes widened when he was reminded of the amount of weaponry Harry carried around with him. "And where is the man himself?"

"I don't know, probably at his house."

Sandine touched Harry on his arm. "Wait." She stilled, her eyes going toward the front door. A subtle jolt of electricity was humming on her skin. And the feeling was getting stronger, like her Tarot Cards were moving, getting closer...

"Harry!"

He looked over his shoulder. "What?"

"We have to go. Now."

He whipped around to face her. "Get down. Now!"

She jumped behind the kitchen island and got on her knees. They came from all directions—the front door, the sliding glass door that led to the beach, the staircase. Harry was fluid in his movements, taking down two with his serrated dagger, while simultaneously popping shots off with his Glock. She quickly realized that altercation with the punks back in San Francisco had been nothing. Harry had experience in battle. Lots of experience.

Strangely, as she crouched on the floor, watching him fighting, she couldn't help but think it was a beautiful thing. Maybe later she'd be shocked at the death of those around her, but for now she appreciated the beauty in the way he fought.

Her knife was in her hand. She'd throw it if necessary, but as Harry whipped around, using not only his knives, guns and whip as weapons, but also his legs, feet and hands, he didn't need her help.

"Drop it." An arm slid around her neck and then she felt something snap into place around her neck. A stun collar.

"Drop your knife." The words were whispered closely into her ear. "Now."

Fuck. She'd been preoccupied watching Harry and the thugs and had totally forgotten about Cain. She wanted to reach behind her head and stab him in the eye, but even a low voltage jolt from the collar would have her immediately writhing on the ground. And that would distract Harry from his fight.

She placed her dagger on the floor. "You lied. You didn't want me to come here so we could be together."

He was quiet for a moment and then, "Would it have made a difference? Judging by the fact that you brought your boyfriend, I assume you came strictly for one purpose. Your fucking Tarot cards."

"You set me up. You knew I'd follow you here."

"Yes."

He jerked on her neck chain. "Of course I lied. I don't want you."

"Then what do you want?"

"You should have helped me with my D'sdaine habit when you had the chance." He stood, yanking her to her feet with the leash attached to the collar. "Now you're the only way I'll be free of Ramsey."

"What are you talking about?" Why was there a deep, nauseating fear manifesting in her stomach?

"Wait and see."

She watched as Harry turned a slow circle, obviously bracing for more enemies. When none came his gaze searched out hers. And when he saw her, standing there with a collar on her neck and Cain holding the remote, the rage that flashed through his dark eyes made her cringe.

She shook her head, utterly mortified and petrified. She couldn't believe she'd allowed herself to be captured this way.

"You prick." Every vein in Harry's forehead looked ready to burst, but he remained planted where he stood. "Nice fuckin' way to treat the woman you claimed you loved."

"*Loved*. Past tense. But the bitch had to go and ruin everything and now I see her as simply a means to an end."

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

"I knew when she found out those damn cards were here, she'd come running and of course she did." He laughed, an evil, bitter bark. "I knew when I gave you the keys you'd go into my office and realize your cards had been there. I even left you a note as to where to find them. And me. Now, not only am I debt free, but Sandine will be mine forever."

"What are you talking about?"

"I believe I can explain that part."

She looked to the front door to where a tall, thin man stood. Arms crossed over his chest, the man entered the room, sidestepping the body of one of his henchmen who was bleeding out of a gash at the side of his neck. Maneuvering around the bodies of his dead bodyguards, the tall man approached Sandine. "Oh, you didn't lie, Cain. She is lovely."

"Who are you?" Every nerve in her body recoiled as he moved in on her.

"I'm Ramsey Rameriz, and you are the lovely and talented Sandine."

Harry looked ready to kill, but Sandine knew he was restraining himself because of her collar. "What do you want from her?"

Ramsey held out his hand, and Cain placed the remote in the other man's palm. She hated Cain. But he was preferable over this man when it came to who had the power to shock her to death. She instinctively knew that not only would Ramsey do it without hesitation, but also he'd enjoy it. She suppressed a shudder.

Harry pointed a gun directly at Ramsey's temple. "Don't even think about it."

"Too late, I already have. I'm picturing her body on the ground, spastic in pain as I shoot five thousand volts of electricity into the veins at her neck. She'd probably bite her tongue off. Pity, that. All because her ignorant boyfriend couldn't lower his weapon."

“What do you want from us, Ramsey?”

“Us? I don’t want anything from *us*. I wanted her and for some reason I’m getting you too.” He ran his hand idly over the dial of the control in his hand. “Who are you anyway?”

“A man who just killed twenty of your best men and is getting extremely pissed off.”

“I have a feeling you’d be a lot more *pissed off* if I were to kill your woman. Now, *disarm*.”

Here she was again. Restrained, at the mercy of men who wanted to harm her. As Ramsey and Harry stared each other down, she felt like the biggest idiot alive. She really needed to stop getting herself into these situations.

Harry slowly placed his gun on the floor and immediately five men surrounded him. For a moment she wanted to tell him to stop, to tell him to fight. But she knew he wouldn’t, not if it would cause her harm.

The guards began stripping him of his weapons and when they were finished two flanked him, their stun guns jabbing into either side of Harry’s torso.

Ramsey took a step toward Harry. Fire practically spit from his eyes as Ramsey inspected the watch on Harry’s wrist. Unstrapping it, he smiled. “Well, what do we have here? An investigator’s special wristwatch. Isn’t that interesting.”

“What?” Cain whipped around to face her. “He’s a fucking cop?”

Sandine looked him in the eye. “Fuck you.”

The slap he gave her caused her vision to dull for a moment. “You were going to turn me in?”

Harry lunged toward her, but immediately a bodyguard shot him in the side with a stun gun. He fell to the floor in an unconscious heap.

“Were you going to tell me you were fucking an investigator who was going to bust me?”

The anger that manifested itself felt as if it were going to blow her chest open. She returned her stare to Cain. “No. I wasn’t going to tell you *shit*.”

He raised his hand to hit her again, but Ramsey stepped forward. “Stop. I don’t like bruised women.”

With one last look of hate Cain turned away from her. “Fine. But don’t forget our deal.”

Ramsey went still. “Don’t tell me what to do, *amigo*. I’m not the one who led a cop here.”

Cain only nodded and stepped back. “I had no idea who he was. I thought he wanted a sale.”

“Here’s the deal. I have no idea if he’s here alone or if there are more.” He waved at his guards. “Take him to the cellar and see what he knows.”

“No!” Sandine leapt forward only to be jerked back by the leash. Her vision slammed into her head with dizzying clarity.

Her fault. She turned to Cain. “It’s him, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Ramsey. He’s your dealer.”

“Of course he is.” Cain waved his arms around the room as if showing her something. “You think I could afford this by myself? I need him.” He jerked her neck once again. “And he needs me too.”

“Enough with the explanations already.” Ramsey poked Harry in the side with his sandaled foot. “Hopefully he tells us what we want to know. Before we have to get the information out of you.” He ran a finger over the blue braid hanging next to Sandine’s face. “You’re so pretty. I’d hate to have to hurt you.”

And then he put a black hood over her face and led her away.

Chapter Eight

“Would you like to see your cards, my dear? I’m sure you miss them.”

Sandine followed a short woman into a large living room. One wall was made up entirely of windows, and just beyond the glass a full moon brightly illuminated ocean waves crashing against the sandy shore. In any other circumstance it would have been a beautiful sight. Now, all she could think about was freeing Harry.

Ramsey sat on a sofa in the center of the room. The short woman tugged on the rope hanging from the collar on her neck until Sandine stood before him.

She’d been shoved into a vehicle and then had been taken to this house. The hood had been on her head the whole time so she had no idea where she was. Only when they’d arrived had she been unmasked. Then she’d been allowed a private shower. When she’d emerged from the bathroom her clothes were nowhere to be found. Instead a black lace teddy set, complete with crotch-less panties and demi-bra, lay on the bed. It was the kind of thing Cain had always wanted her to wear, but she’d refused. She’d rolled her eyes and put the ridiculous outfit on.

Now, head held high despite the lingerie, she allowed herself to be seated on the opposite sofa. “Why am I here?”

Ramsey poured some wine into an empty glass sitting on the coffee table. “Cain traded you in exchange for his rather large debt.”

A hysterical burst of laughter erupted out of her mouth. “What? He can’t just fucking trade me. I’m not a fucking dog.”

Looking pointedly at her collar, he handed her the glass of red liquid. “Are you sure?”

She ignored his offering and he placed the wine onto the table between them. “Are you going to tell me why I’m here or not?”

“I need a full time Tarot reader.” His accent was odd, Latin with a hint of the New Soviet thrown in.

“Put an ad in the paper.” She eyed an ornately carved box on the table. Her cards were in that box.

He sipped his wine. “I need special talents. I need you.”

She looked down at her barely covered skin. “You need a Tarot card reader who dresses like a hooker?”

“No. You know your friend, the investigator?”

She straightened. “He better be unharmed.”

“Unfortunately he’s proving very resistant to our methods. You better hope he talks soon, or you will join him.”

She moved toward him but was immediately yanked back onto the seat. The little old lady had locked her leash to the sofa’s wooden leg.

“If I had had your services to begin with none of this would have occurred. You see, this is exactly why I need a strong Tarot reader. To alert me before I enter into unsafe situations.”

“So you’ve gone from diplomat on the run to drug dealer?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Pretty much.”

“Why me? Why do you need me?”

He shrugged. “You’re the best.”

Sandine laughed. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. If I was so good I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

“You stopped believing in yourself.”

“Listen, I don’t need a fucking drug dealer analyzing me.”

“I knew your mother.”

She froze. “What?”

“Yes. She used to read for me. Don’t look so shocked, I haven’t always used my powers for evil.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I used to be an ambassador. How do you think the New Soviet became such a super power? Your mother played a large role in that.” He gently removed the cards from the box. “Yes, I’ve personally seen how much power these cards hold.” He pushed them across the table. “But only in the right hands.”

“I’m not going to help you.”

He sighed. “You might change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

“I promised Cain he could use you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It was part of our deal.”

She picked up her wine glass, tilted the thing to her lips and drained the contents in a few quick gulps. She set the glass onto the coffee table with a hard clink. “Listen to me very carefully. I am not a fucking animal. I don’t belong to Cain, and he can’t *give me away* to you or anyone. So let me go, and I won’t kill you.”

She was trying to sound tough but the fact of the matter was she had no idea how she was going to get out of this. She just knew she would. Harry needed her.

“That’s nice talk, there’s no way out of here and now you’ve become tiresome. Your boyfriend awaits.”

He pushed a button at his side and after a minute a figure appeared at the door. She gasped in surprise as a familiar bald man walked into the room.

“Jeeven. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to take you to Cain.”

Her heart stopped. This was not happening. *Please tell me this is not happening.* But the reading she’d done for herself came back with crystal clarity.

Stealing from someone who has the motivation and ability to punish you is unwise.

“No.”

Smirking, Jeeven approached her. “Yes. Oh, yes.”

She backed away, but then Ramsey was handing him the remote for her collar and he was unlinking the leash from the sofa leg.

“If you’re going to bruise her, try and keep it away from her face. You may be fucking her, but I have to look at her.”

Jeeven yanked her to her feet. “No investigator around now, is there?”

She looked him in the eye. “Nope. Just me.”

Jeeven laughed and looked over her almost nude body. “Actually, it’s not just you. Come along.”

Ramsey’s villa was a monstrosity of stairs, and landings, and it took a good ten minutes before Jeeven tugged her into a room somewhere far from Ramsey’s living room.

“Welcome, Sandine,” Cain said as Jeeven tugged her into the room. It was a large bedroom suite with peach paint and traditional Mexican furnishings. Long, pale drapes waved beside an open glass doorway and despite the darkness, the moonlight illuminated a good-sized patio.

Cain leaned against a far wall, covered only in a pair of flowing pants.

Sandine scowled in his general direction. “I see you’ve embraced the tropical, drug-lord fashion of dress.”

His eyes flashed a moment of anger, but he quickly recovered and smiled. “You know, I’ve become so tired of your smart mouth. You were such a lady when we first met.”

“And you hadn’t gone crazy with drugs.”

He pushed himself off the wall and approached her. Then he was only inches from her face and she somehow refrained from spitting at him. The last thing she needed was for him to get so pissed he rendered her unable to get away from him. Because she *would* get away. The vision she’d experienced last week haunted her. The need to escape and find Harry flowed through her veins, and she knew she would do whatever it took to free herself.

Cain lifted a finger and brushed her cheek. He leaned forward until his mouth was a breath away from her ear. "You're right. I am crazy from D'sdaine. Unfortunately you let that happen. If you'd helped me detox, I wouldn't have gotten into this mess. Now I owe Ramsey so much money I've become desperate."

"What about the deal you were going to make with Harry?" Sandine looked around the room, counting exits. There were only two, the door through which she had entered and the balcony.

He jerked away. "Irony, isn't it? He was the one who inspired me to come here and sell you. You see, Ramsey's had his eye on you for awhile."

"I can imagine. I can imagine he let you sink yourself so far into debt you had no choice."

"Exactly. I thought to myself—you can keep making deals out of this club until you get busted, you could run and wait for Ramsey to find and kill you or you could trade your ex-cunt girlfriend for freedom and live the rest of your days in paradise with her as your sex-slave."

He lurched forward and reached between her legs. "You always liked it rough." He shoved a finger between the crotchless panties and fingered around her pussy.

She jerked from his assault only to back into Jeeven's solid form. She suppressed the instinct to fight. Jeeven held the control to her collar, and with one little flick of the dial she'd have at least one thousand volts of electricity shoot straight into her. Then they could do whatever they wanted, and Harry would have no one.

She recoiled as Cain leaned toward her face. She thought he was going to kiss her, but instead she felt his slimy tongue sliding from her chin to her temple. The air was cool on the trace of saliva he left in his path. His finger was now inside of her, and she couldn't believe that she had once been in love with this disgusting stranger. Bile rose in her throat, but she bit it back.

Then he took the leash at her collar and yanked her until she was next to the bed. "Get on your knees."

She slowly sank onto the floor and waited as Cain secured the leash to the post of the bed. Out of the corner of her eye she watched as Jeeven put the remote control on a side table about six feet from where she knelt. Out of reach.

Cain turned to Jeeven and raised a vial to the other man's nose. "Here you go. I know you're overdue." Jeeven took a deep sniff and after a minute his eyes took on a glazed, unfocused look.

God, she needed away from these two. Now.

"Sandine gives the most amazing blow jobs. Just wait, I know you'll agree." He helped Jeeven tug his shirt over his head and pulled his pants to the floor. Cain stepped back and said, "Doesn't he have the most amazing body? So young, so supple."

Cain took the younger man's dick in his hand and began to stroke. "Yes, that's it. I want your dick nice and hard before you shove it into Sandine's throat." Jeeven closed his eyes and began moving his hips, thrusting against Cain's hand.

The last thing she was going to do was panic. Jeeven's eyes were shut, and Cain's gaze was locked on what he was doing to the other man's cock. While they were distracted, Sandine tugged on her leash. It didn't budge. *Okay. You can do this.* Somehow, she needed to immobilize the men, unleash herself and get to Harry.

"Okay, do it." Cain pushed Jeeven toward her. His dick was huge and he wasted no time getting it near her mouth. She couldn't help but turn her head as he came at her, and he ended up poking her cheek. She thought that if he got that thing in her mouth there was a good chance she'd puke on it.

It wasn't the slap across her face that made her see stars, it was her temple smashing against the hard wooden post that did her in.

"Good boy, Jeeven. She does like it rough." Cain leaned against the other bedpost, arms crossed casually in front of his chest. "Look at her on her knees, chained like a slave." Cain spit at her but his aim was so off he missed and hit Jeeven's foot. The boy didn't seem to notice however. His glazed eyes were fixated on the burning spot of her face where he'd just hit. Not good. Obviously his first venture into violent sex was going well for him.

Sandine took a deep breath. She wouldn't let this happen. She wouldn't...

"Open up, our little bitch." Then Cain was holding her head, still aching from the recent blow, steady as Jeeven shoved his dick into her mouth. She began to gag, and fury burned its way up her throat. Her vision flashed before her watering eyes, crystal clear. Harry, naked on a table, bleeding...

Too late.

She bit down until she tasted blood. Holding his privates, Jeeven collapsed onto the ground, crying and repeating, "She bit me! The bitch bit me!"

She looked into Cain's face. He was stunned into silence, simply staring at the bloody mess that was once his lover's dick. Finally he knelt next to his boy-toy, trying to get the man to move his hands away from his crotch. Looking over his writhing body, Cain looked her straight in the eye and the hatred that burned in his gaze caused Sandine to recoil. That was when she knew. He *would* kill her.

"Jeeven, let me see how badly you're hurt. I fucking hope we don't need a doctor."

As he tried to get a closer look, Sandine subtly inched toward them. Her leash only allowed her a few feet of room, but she thought it would be enough. It was hard to wait, knowing that every second counted. The sooner she reached Harry the sooner she could save him. But she only had one chance. One chance.

And then with a prayer to the Goddess for strength, she reached out and slammed Cain and Jeeven's skulls together. With a loud clunk, their brains shut down and they collapsed onto the ground. For the first time she thanked God for D'sdaine. It made knocking people out much easier.

But she only had a few seconds. She stood and, still going on adrenaline, used every muscle in her body to pull the bed across the floor toward the remote on the table. With a silent thanks to whatever maid had polished the terra cotta tile to a nice sheen, she moved the large piece of furniture with surprising ease.

And then she held the remote in her hands. Two seconds later the collar unlocked with a *click*. She took it in her hands, wanted to throw it against the wall. Instead she wrapped it around Cain's throat. She turned the dial to five and gave his unconscious body one good-sized jolt. His fingers and toes spasmed for a minute before he went totally lax. Then she removed the collar and repeated the process with Jeeven. Only when she was satisfied they wouldn't be following her anytime soon did she run to the balcony and toss the remote into the ocean.

Her outfit was totally useless. After she'd washed the taste of Jeeven out of her mouth, she took a minute to steal a pair of tan pants and a T-shirt from the closet. Couldn't rescue her man in crotchless panties. Luckily, the newly acquired pants were stretchy because she could barely get them on. They must have been made for a young boy. After a minute of huffing and puffing she managed to get herself dressed. She even found a black belt to sling around her hips.

Her feet were bare, but that was okay because it allowed her to remain silent as she descended the stairs, retracing her way back to the living room. The villa was now dark and silent, and the living room where she had had her meeting earlier with Ramsey was empty. She kept to the walls as she skimmed the perimeter of the room. Satisfied she was alone, she quickly walked to the coffee table, opened the gilded box and removed her Tarot cards. The familiar energy immediately sank into her blood, but she didn't pause to enjoy her reunion. Instead she tucked the cards into her back pocket and aimed for the kitchen. Once there, she picked up four kitchen knives and tucked them into her belt. Because she had no sheath, she made a mental note not to sit while the sharp tools were affixed to her waist.

Harry. She paused for a moment and closed her eyes. She couldn't risk running all over the damn place looking for him. She needed to ground herself, to feel his energy. He was already there, just barely, but there. She knew he was in the building, knew he was not far...

She began to walk, through the opposite door of the kitchen, down a long hallway. She ducked into a pantry alcove when she heard what sounded to be the footsteps of two men. Unaware of her presence, they continued past her and faded into the night.

She stepped back into the hall and continued until she reached a door at the very end. Her heart pounded, and her palms were sweaty as she opened the heavy iron door. She knew she would find Harry on the other side.

And she knew she would discover if her vision had come true.

Chapter Nine

A small lamp on the other side of the room was the only illumination, but she didn't need any more light to know who lay on the table. Slowly, she walked toward the figure.

"Harry?" she whispered.

No response.

"Harry! Please answer me." Something sticky tacked onto the soles of her bare feet when she got closer, but she refused to look down. "I'm here, Harry. We can go."

But he didn't move, not at all. He just lay there, his eyes closed. His arms motionless at his side, palms facing up. Thick leather cuffs restrained his ankles, wrists and neck.

Sandine put a hand to her mouth, fighting back a sob. "*No.*"

His skin was so pale it looked blue. He wore no clothes, and she saw gashes across his torso. But that wasn't where the blood came from. The blood dripped from cuts in his arms, two lines, straight up his veins.

They were bleeding him to death. "No," she repeated. "No, I am not *too* late."

She pressed her ear to his chest and the faint pulse of his heartbeat told her he was alive.

She went about unbuckling his restraints, barely aware of the tears dripping onto the black leather as she did so. He wasn't dead yet. She needed to be strong and figure out how she was going to get him to the plane. Every second they were in this villa was a second too long. She just needed to figure out a way to sneak Harry's six and a half feet of deadweight out of here. And she needed to be quiet about it too.

The wall exploded. Using her body as a shield, she covered Harry as debris shot across the room. Stucco, stone and plaster landed at her feet but she didn't move. She had no idea what was happening, but she would protect Harry no matter what. Rocks were still crumbling when she turned to face the damage, her knives already in her hands.

"What the—?" A huge, green, ancient military tank filled the gaping hole.

Then the tank's door burst open and a tiny figure jumped out. "Sandy. Get in here."

"Lucy?"

Her friend ran toward her. "Oh Goddess, I'm so glad you're okay. When you didn't send a message I was so worried." Lucy wrapped Sandine in her freakishly strong arms, nearly suffocating Sandine in the process. "What happened?"

"Cain set us up—"

“Get in the vehicle. *Now.*” It was then Sandine noticed the chief stalking around Harry.

Sandine looked at Lucy in question. How had she awoken the chief? But Lucy shook her head. “I’ll explain later. Right now we better do what he says.” Sandine just raised an eyebrow at her friend who so very rarely did what anyone said, but she didn’t question. Instead she turned to the chief. “Can you get him in the car?”

He was already picking up Harry’s unconscious body. “Yes. Where are his clothes?”

Sandine saw the pile sitting on the floor in the corner and was about to gather them in her arms, but at that moment two bodyguards burst through the door. The sight of the tank in the room stunned them long enough for Sandine to whip the two knives at the bodyguards, spearing each smoothly in their chests.

“Let’s go.” The chief had Harry in his arms as he marched toward the tank. This time three guards burst into the room, each armed with 11mm stun guns. Sandine pulled two more knives off her thigh holsters and threw them, eliminating two guards. The third one aimed his gun at her and was about to shoot.

A sudden explosion at his feet had him dropping his gun and reeling back into the hallway. Sandine looked over to where Lucy stood, embers sparking out of her palms.

She wiped her hands on her apron. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Sandine reached into her back pocket and pulled out her cards. “I have to do something first.” Walking toward the fire, events of the past week, the past year—the past decade—flashed through her mind. These cards had controlled her. She had allowed them to control her, and as long as they were on this Earth, she ran the risk of that happening again.

She didn’t want to live in her mother’s shadow any longer, didn’t want anyone to ever have something to hold over her. They had motivated her to steal. They had led Harry to death’s door.

She tossed the cards into the fire. She half expected a burst of flame to erupt on contact, but instead the paper simply blackened and curled until there was nothing left.

“Get in the vehicle. Now,” the chief ordered.

Sandine jumped into the tank to help the chief lay Harry across the backseat. She then settled herself next to Harry, taking his head and shoulders and resting them in her lap. Lucy climbed in on the other side. She must have grabbed Harry’s clothing because she dropped them onto his naked groin.

A second later the chief had the tank in reverse, and they were climbing out of the rubble.

Lucy removed two scarves from her apron and began wrapping the bloody cuts on Harry’s arms. “Oh Goddess,” was all she said.

The tank tipped precariously to the side as they climbed a steep hill, but by some miracle they didn’t tip. They kept climbing. “Where did you get this thing?” Sandine asked.

“In the garage.”

“Nice.”

"Funny, but it was here when I did the original security fifteen years ago," Lucy yelled over the thunderous rumble of the engine.

Sandine looked to her friend. "How did you find us?"

Lucy took Sandine's right hand and opened it. When she looked down her breath caught. Her palm was sparkling. That was what Lucy had been doing before they parted earlier. She had sprinkled her with tracking powder.

"Hold on!" the chief shouted over his shoulder. And then there were stars, directly in front of their windshield. It seemed the chief was headed straight up the cliff they had hiked down earlier that night.

Sandine braced herself. "Holy shit. I can't die now, not after tonight."

Lucy had her feet planted on the back of the seat in front of her as she wrapped Harry's other arm in a green scarf. "What the fuck did they do to him?" she yelled over the loud engine.

"I think they tried to bleed him to death." Harry hadn't stirred during the ride. He was fading. She could feel it.

Too late.

She turned to Lucy. "You need to do a spell on him."

Lucy shook her head. "You know I don't do medicine magic."

The tank crested the cliff and landed with a stomach-dropping descent on the other side. "You girls okay back there?"

"Yes!" they shouted.

"Please, Lucy. He's lost so much blood. I—" She closed her eyes and willed the tears away. "Please."

The chief glanced over his shoulder. Sandine watched Lucy recoil under the large man's ember gaze.

"Fix him, witch."

Lucy nodded. But Sandine knew that for a witch like her, healing spells were the most draining, and Lucy couldn't predict the outcome. For her or for Harry.

They both looked at the lifeless form lying between them. Sandine's hands shook as she brushed a lock of hair off his forehead.

Lucy inhaled deeply. "I'll see what I can do." She removed a crystal from her pocket and, clutching it in her fist, she closed her eyes. Sandine watched her lips move, although she said no words aloud. The tank bumped along, but the terrain must have smoothed a bit. The ride had become much less jarring. Sandine knew they would be reaching the Aeroplane soon.

A moment later Lucy took both of Harry's hands in hers. She spoke silently and, as Sandine watched her lips, she realized the witch was repeating a spell. It was a long one, and just as Lucy whispered the last sentence of the spell the third time, Harry opened his eyes and looked directly at Sandine.

His lips were cracked and dry and when he spoke his scratchy voice was barely audible. "Are you okay?"

The tears streamed out of her eyes, dropping onto his face in great, big drops. She leaned down to kiss him all over, tasting her own salty wetness. A big lump in her throat prevented her from answering.

He was going to be okay.

She looked over to thank Lucy. Her friend was resting in the seat with her eyes closed. The spell must have utterly drained her. Sandine made a vow to make it up to her as soon as they were safe.

The tank suddenly stopped and the chief whipped his large frame around to look at them. "He okay?"

Sandine nodded. "I think so. Lucy did a spell on him."

The chief paled a little, but just said, "I thank her. Now we need to go. I estimate we have about five minutes before they reach us."

Harry pushed himself up. "I can fly."

"Good." The chief hopped out of the tank and opened Lucy's door. Unconscious, she fell into his arms. He caught her but looked a tad scared at touching the tiny witch. "What's wrong with her?"

"Whenever she does healing spells it drains her. She'll need some time to recover."

The chief looked down at Lucy's face and Sandine could have sworn she saw his face soften just a tad. Did she actually see some affection for the woman who knocked him out with Valerian?

Sandine climbed out of the tank, then held out her hand to assist Harry down. He was very weak, and his knees buckled as he landed on his feet.

"Careful. You were practically dead five minutes ago."

He rested an arm across her shoulders and winced. "You sure I'm not?"

"I hope not because we need someone to get this ship in the air within the next few minutes, and you, my friend, are the only one who knows how to do that."

Harry took a wobbly step forward. "Can I put my pants on first?"

"If you insist." She helped him up the stairs and, when they entered the Aeroplane, Sandine helped him step into his jeans. "Better?"

"Much." He climbed into the cockpit and started flipping buttons. His arms were obviously sore. She caught several grimaces. Sandine helped him pull the resistant levers to help him prepare for flight.

A moment later the chief popped his head in. "Three vehicles across the valley. About sixty seconds 'til they reach us."

Harry turned a dial and the Aeroplane rumbled to life. "No problem."

Sandine pulled a seatbelt over her shoulder and looked at the chief. "How's Lucy?"

"Out of it. You sure she's going to be all right?"

How strange that he cared. Sandine nodded. "I hope so."

Harry scanned the various gauges before him. "Twenty seconds."

The chief disappeared and just as three assault vehicles crested the hill across the clearing the Aeroplane shot shakily up into the sky.

They were safe.

Three hours later they rumbled back to earth. It was hard to believe only twenty-four hours had passed since they had departed from this exact location. The passengers were silent as they descended the metal stairs into the chilly fog.

Harry leaned his shaky form against Sandine's body. Both were barefoot. Lucy couldn't walk yet. She looked like a child in the chief's arms.

Once on the ground they found a taxi and gave the driver directions to drop them off at the girls' place. Sandine was so exhausted she thought she may have dozed during the ride, but wasn't sure. Her life was beginning to take on a dream-like haze, and it was hard to determine reality. But one thing was certain. Harry was alive and was going to be fine.

Once they arrived the chief took Lucy into her cottage. She was awake now, but weak. Sandine trusted the chief to see her to bed safely.

Harry tugged Sandine's arm and led her to a stone bench next to a fragrant rose bush. They sat, and he took her hand in his. "You have to go."

She stared at the apple tree where they had made love. Was that really less than a week ago? "I know."

"Cain will come looking for you here."

"I know. I don't want to leave, though. I love this house, and Lucy."

"You should move out of San Francisco."

She turned to face him. "I can't leave you."

He stared at their entwined hands. "You don't have a choice."

"I can stay with you—he'll never hurt me there."

He shook his head. "No. It's more than that. I can't be with you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you see? I can't take care of you."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it? Then tell me what happened after Ramsey's men electrocuted me?"

"Harry, don't do this—"

"Tell me!"

"Nothing happened! I mean..."

"You mean what? Did he touch you?" She watched his jaw clench. "*Did he?*"

"Yes, but that has nothing to do with you."

He threw down her hand and stood. He stumbled and clutched the branch of a tree for support. "It has everything to do with me. I never should have taken you there. I can't think when I'm around you."

She jumped to her feet. “Don’t give me that shit. This wasn’t about you. That was something I needed to do. For me. I had to get those cards back and destroy them before they did any more damage. Don’t you *see*? I’m finally free.”

“Yes. You are.” He pushed away from the tree. “I’ll arrange for you to relocate.”

“Harry, wait!”

“You should be contacted shortly.”

“Don’t do this. Don’t be so fucking stupid!”

His legs looked wobbly as he walked away. “Goodbye, Sandine.” She wanted to run after him. She wanted to smack him, tell him what a stubborn idiot he was. But her body simply wouldn’t obey. She was tired. She was tired and emotionally depleted. She loved Harry. She’d do anything for him.

Anything except beg. She’d been through too much shit to give a man that kind of power over her again. *Never* again. If he wanted to be an ignorant male, hell-bent on denying his own happiness because of some testosterone-induced idea of what constituted control, than that was his decision.

Sandine forced her feet to carry her up the stairs to front door. She thought about the fact that her cards were gone forever. She thought about the fact that no man controlled her. She thought about the fact that she was free.

Free. She opened her door and went straight to her bedroom. After a nap, she’d start packing.

Chapter Ten

He'd do one drive-by, just to make sure she was safe.

That's what Harry had told himself about an hour ago. Since then he'd circled Sandine's block at least fifteen times. He could have assigned a rookie to watch the house, but for some reason he just couldn't bring himself to have a stranger looking out for her.

Furthermore, he didn't need to watch her any longer. The chief had managed to get prints of Ramsey's fingers and had made a positive identification. Twelve hours later a Special Forces team had stormed the place and captured Ramsey and Cain. They'd found enough D'sdaine to put both men away for good. And Ramsey was in a special place, just for war criminals. Sandine didn't need to worry about either man coming after her.

So why was he still driving by her house?

Because he was pathetic. He couldn't even go twelve hours without seeing Sandine.

He was making a turn at the end of her block when he glanced one last time in his mirror. He skidded to a halt. A tall, lean form had emerged and was walking in the opposite direction of where he had stopped his bike.

Sandine. Dressed in what she had worn that night at the club. Black shoes, black skirt, black top. Her hair was loose around her shoulders. He punched a handlebar.

Drive on, idiot.

He parked the Harley and jumped off. She didn't go far. About ten minutes later she showed her wristwatch to a man sitting in front of a big black door and entered the building. Harry reached the entrance a few seconds later and read the sign.

Madam Cherry's Club for Sexual Deviants

She was already out looking for action. Wow. She didn't wait long, did she? With jealous anger pumping through his veins, he paid the bouncer and followed her inside. She went to the bar where a guy with too-white teeth immediately bought her a drink. And she let him. She moved on, and Harry took her place at the bar. He lit a smoke, tried to calm his fury. How could she search out another so quickly? Had he meant nothing to her?

"Sick, isn't it?"

He glanced to the man who'd bought Sandine her drink. "What?"

White Teeth nodded toward a couple on the other side of the room. A short, overweight man was chained to a post and a woman dressed in a black leather dress slapped his ass with a wooden paddle. Each time she struck his buttocks he screamed out and begged her to do it again.

"Those people. Enjoying masochistic, abnormal behavior."

"If you don't like it why are you here?"

He shrugged. "I'm writing an article on deviant behavior."

"I don't think it's deviant—"

The guy held up his hands, palms out. "Sorry, dude. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't. But what's the problem? You have two consenting adults, people who agree they like something. I don't see what the problem is."

"No?"

"No, I—" *Shit*. Wasn't that what Sandine had been trying to convince him of all along? Maybe he should take his own advice.

Harry clenched his fists at his sides. "Excuse me." He jogged after Sandine. Stupid, he was *so* stupid. He'd let his own guilt and overwhelming sense of duty override his desire for her, a desire he'd never even known he'd possessed until he'd met her. And now, how could he possibly think he could push that side of himself away? The fact was he loved controlling her pleasure. It gave him a high unlike even the most extreme sport could. She melted under his whip, melted for him.

As he followed her trail, he looked around the room. His pulse thrummed with anticipation. As soon as he found her he was going to show her exactly how much he loved playing her. And then he was going to take her back to her place and love her until she couldn't think about anything but him.

But she had disappeared. Unlike Le Cheval, this club was made up of different rooms, apparently each with a different theme. Of course, his sweet Sandy went straight for the Naughty Deviant room. Harry followed her inside.

Two redheads were on her, unbuttoning her black shirt, pulling off her skirt. Harry's cock immediately grew hard at the sight of her standing there in nothing more than her bra, panties and pointy shoes. And the redheads weren't exactly hard on the eyes, either. But Sandy's beauty outshone them.

Despite his dick's response to the scene before him, a part of his head wanted to throw his coat over her exposed skin and whisk her away from here. But something had changed in his head. He couldn't deny that there was a part of him that found the whole thing erotic. No, he couldn't deny it. The question was what was he going to do about it?

The taller redhead softly slipped a black blindfold over Sandine's eyes, then took her by the hand and led her to a contraption Harry knew to be called a spanking bench. Le Cheval didn't own such a thing, but

he'd seen pictures in his research. At the time he'd thought the contraption crude. Not now. Now his pulse hammered as he watched Sandine approach the implement.

It was a large wooden block with five padded shelves, two on either side of the lower backside of the bench. Sandine climbed on and put one knee on either side of the leg supports. The redheads immediately strapped her calves down. Harry's pulse went crazy at the sight of her kneeling there, her skin flushed in excitement. Then she lowered her body forward, her stomach and breasts pressing against the leather cushion. The women surrounded Sandine on either side and proceeded to secure each of her arms to a padded restraint.

Harry thought back to that first night he'd seen Sandine exposed. Like then, he wanted to take over things. Watching redhead number one pick up a black and red leather flogger, he shifted his stance. She was so beautiful. Straddling the oddly shaped chair, her legs spread and restrained, he knew she was wet. Her black lace panties looked damp and Harry wanted to take his knife and cut them off of her. He wanted to fuck her as the other women teased her with their toys.

But he didn't.

Not yet.

The self-control he showed was impressive, he thought. Obviously Sandine was enjoying herself, and so was he. No other man would get near her, that was a no-brainer, but as long as the redheads kept up their sensual act of touching Sandine, Harry would allow himself to watch. And even enjoy.

The female dragged the long, thick tails of the flogger over Sandine's shoulders, her back, over her exposed buttocks. With a slight shudder, Sandine raised her head a bit and looked over her shoulder. If she hadn't been wearing an eye mask she would have met his gaze, but of course she had no idea he was there watching her. The black silk wrapped snugly around her head. But he could see the way her cheeks flushed, and how her lips parted slightly as the second redhead ran a fingertip over Sandine's black panties.

Sandine moaned softly at the touch.

Harry removed his coat. Tonight his weapons were concealed beneath his pant legs, so he didn't frighten anyone away by exposing his T-shirt. He knew he should be feeling guilty for enjoying this, but he didn't. Why not? He didn't want to think about it. No longer was he angry that she'd come here so soon after breaking up with him. He knew that this was how she dealt with what went on in her head. By giving up control. And when Harry played her he realized he had total control, control over each little nerve on her body. And she loved every minute of it.

He loved *her*.

The woman with the flogger smacked the tails against Sandine's buttocks sharply. She jerked in response, and Harry watched her hands flex on the wooden handles. *Harder. She likes it hard.*

The redhead kept going, alternating between both of her ass cheeks and Sandine moaned a little each time the leather struck her skin.

“You need a harsh punishment, don’t you, Sandine?” the other woman asked just before whacking her once more.

Sandine took a deep breath. “Yes, please.”

“What?”

“Harder, please.”

Harry went around the bench to watch her face. Her lips were open and gasping, and he reached for her, pushed his index finger into her mouth. She immediately started sucking him, deeper and deeper every time the redhead’s leather tool struck her skin.

The second woman stepped between her bent knees. She pulled Sandine’s panties down as far as they would go over her bent legs. But it was far enough. Harry looked down the pale expanse of Sandine’s back as the woman lifted a large, white penis-shaped dildo and pushed the implement into Sandine’s pussy.

She moaned deeply against his finger. He leaned down to kiss her temple and inhale her sweet, lavender scent.

She writhed again as the woman continued to use the dildo on her. Every inch of his body was hard, rigid. Rigid from wanting her. He wanted to feel her mouth on his cock instead of his finger.

The two women alternated between flogging her bottom and fucking her with the dildo. Just when Harry knew she was going to come, he removed his finger and stepped around to the back of her.

Her back rose and fell with her deep breaths, but she didn’t say anything. Harry unbuckled his belt and stepped between her legs. Her thighs trembled underneath his touch. The two redheaded attendants surrounded her, watching her.

He didn’t blame them. Tied to the bench, her legs spread to reveal her glistening sex, she waited for him. She was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

If that made him a sick fuck he was just going to have to deal.

He raised his hand and smacked her ass with his palm. She jerked back and moaned and he watched, mesmerized, as a pink blush appeared on her pale skin. The flogger hadn’t raised her skin the way his palm just had. *He’d* caused that mark. Him.

He thought he should feel guilty about it. He should feel terrible about marring a woman’s flesh with his hand but he didn’t.

She was begging him to do it again.

He smacked her and stared at the pink blush as it blossomed into a red stain on her flesh. Why did that turn him on? Why did that make his balls tighten and his cock jerk? He’d had it all wrong. He’d never been so in control in his life as he was when he played like this with Sandine.

It was euphoria.

As he entered her she jerked around him, moved back as far as the restraints would allow. He nodded at the redheads and as he began fucking her they were with him, striking her with the tails of the flogger,

pulling back her hair. Harry lost track as he thrust against her wetness. She was utterly helpless but groaning so loudly there was no doubt that she was enjoying this as much as he was. And when she started begging him to fuck her harder, he obliged.

The shorter redhead went to the front of Sandine, standing so her naked pussy was directly at Sandine's level. He knew she would be smelling the other woman's scent, knew that being so close to that female flesh would be bittersweet torture for Sandine.

Bright pink stains blushed over Sandine's ass from his palm. Fuck, but the sight gave him a new erotic thrill. Harry held onto her hips as he pumped into her wet pussy and knew that he hadn't much time before he lost himself in her.

Sandine's moans were loud, animalistic even, and he knew she was close.

"Harry..." she cried, and that was what sent him over the edge.

"I'm here, baby."

Her blindfold had disappeared, and her gaze was direct on his. "I know."

Afterwards, cuddling on a loveseat in the corner in the After Deviant Room, Sandine snuggled against Harry's solid chest.

He tucked a blue braid behind her left ear. "I can't believe you lured me here."

"Well, I realized after you'd circled the house for the fifth time maybe you weren't as ready to walk away from me as you thought you were."

"I can't believe you knew I was watching you."

"Honey, your Harley isn't exactly low-key. And Lucy notices pretty much everything. She called and told me."

They were quiet for a minute before Harry spoke. "I've decided not to let you go."

Sandine kissed his shoulder. "And I've decided not to let you go either."

"Good. But there is one thing?"

"Yes?"

"Can I shave you? I don't want to see his mark on you any longer."

She brought his face to hers, kissed him softly on the lips. "I have a straightedge at home. Would you like to go back now?"

He settled her against his chest. "In a bit."

Smiling, she snuggled against his warmth, inhaled his smoky scent. "Fine. Later."

Looking up into his brave, brown eyes she smiled. "We have lots of time."

Then he was kissing her mouth instead of her finger. His lips were dry against hers and so gentle her heart swelled with love.

"Yes, my Sandy. We have the rest of our lives."

Epilogue

“I don’t want to go to bed. I’m fine, wizard.”

“I don’t care what you want.” He gave the disgruntled woman a gentle nudge on her chest, and she fell back onto her mattress. “You’re not going anywhere until we have a little chat.” Despite her feisty nature, he could see the day’s events had drained her energy much more than she wanted to admit. Not that he cared about the witch’s well-being. She had, after all, nearly killed him only a few hours ago. The only reason he was still here was because he needed information.

Eyes blazing, Lucy popped back up again. “I’m fine. And, don’t tell me what to do, you big oaf.”

He pushed her back down, this time using more force. Damn, for such a small female she had the strength of ten men. But this time she stayed down, although he saw her hands twitching. Probably working to cast some sort of hideous spell on him. Well, he could take care of that. A witch was powerless without her hands.

Glancing around her cottage, he looked for something to secure her with. Her place was not big, but it was packed with stuff. Glass jars filled with God-knows-what lined various shelves and random nooks. Old quilts were scattered across a well-worn sofa and several wooden chairs. The space was open, and he could see into her kitchen. He blinked. Several pairs of shoes were sitting where one would normally keep things like plates and other kitchen goods. He wondered what was in the oven. Underwear?

Suddenly, a vision of Lucy in black lace panties and matching bra invaded his head. Where had that thought come from? He glanced at her outfit. She wore some sort of black smock, buttoned up to her chin, black tights and black boots. And that apron. He nearly groaned aloud. He hated that apron—it had *things* in it. Witch things. Things that had made him pass out on a plane while on duty.

“Don’t even think of tying me up.”

Fists clenched, he turned back to the witch. “Who are you?”

She sat up again, the stubborn female.

“I’m Lucy,” she said.

He stalked toward the bed and leaned over her. “I know your name, woman. What I want to know is where you’re from. How did you manage to knock me out?”

Rising, she pushed past him and pulled a huge book off of a shelf. As she opened it, he noticed the ancient-looking tome was wider than she was.

How could someone so small be able to do so much damage?

She pulled a pair of big, black glasses from her apron, and slipped them onto her face. After flipping through some pages, she glanced up at him over the big rims. "Are you from the Ó Nuallain line?"

He straightened. "Why?"

"Just answer the question, wizard."

"Maybe."

Her mouth formed into a condescending smile, as if she were dealing with a stubborn toddler. He fought down a bite of indignation. He was the Chief of Narcotics Investigations in San Francisco. He walked into a room and men cowered under his gaze. So why was she treating him as if he were an unruly child?

After skimming a few pages, she slammed the book shut with a thud. "Listen. I'm not one of your underlings."

How had she known what he was thinking?

"So you can glower with those yellow eyes at me all you want, but it won't do any good."

"I don't glower."

"Oh, you do. But see. It won't work with me."

"I *don't* glower."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Anyway, I think I know the problem."

"You're an evil witch?" he said. But, damn it, something about her got to him. Even now, after she'd drugged him and made him useless, he couldn't totally ignore the way his body responded to her. Primal. Staring at her, he felt his claws pushing at him, wanting out. He clenched his hands. But there was no way to repress the way his balls tightened, the way his cock stirred.

"I really don't like you, witch. Just explain yourself. I want to know how you have such power over me."

She slid the huge book under her arm and looked at him, the black frames of her glasses framing her emerald-green eyes. "Are you the last of your line?"

After a second, he nodded. Unused to sharing the details of his heritage, he shifted uncomfortably. But if he wanted answers, he realized he was going to have to give some himself. "Yes. My clan came from Ireland, many centuries ago. All were killed during the War of Beings."

He could have sworn he saw a flicker of compassion in her eyes, but then it was gone. "Yes, it says here that your line died."

"Yes."

Something in his tone must have actually got to her because her sassy look flickered for a second. Silently, she looked at him. The silence stretched, the only sound being the occasional vehicle or motorcycle passing by outside her cottage.

Finally she shrugged. "Here's the thing. If no one knows who you are, it leaves you very vulnerable."

"I'm not vulnerable." He'd fought in fourteen wars. He'd killed all kinds of beings. He'd faced death many times and survived. He'd outlasted his entire clan. "I'm not at risk of anything." *Except you.*

"Oh?" she said, sliding off her glasses and replacing them in her apron pocket. "Interesting statement, considering I knocked you out cold only a few hours ago."

"That's because you're evil." He figured if he said it enough times he'd begin to believe it. Because even though she was a witch, even though she'd rendered him utterly useless during a mission, part of him didn't think she was evil. Pure evil, anyway.

"No, it's because of a very random chance of events," she said.

"And the sneaky methods of a witch."

"I was only trying to help you."

"By putting me, my partner and our females in danger?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Our females? *Our?*" She laughed. It was more of a guffaw, really. "You really are ancient, aren't you? See, in today's world, women don't belong to men."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Yes. You did."

"Listen, you irritating *female*. Just give me some answers so I can leave. I want to make sure something like that never happens to me again."

"I can't promise you that."

"I don't want your promise, I want information. I can take care of the rest."

She tossed the book onto a table, where it landed with a loud thud, and came at him, her hands on her hips. "Here's your information. You, my dear wizard, are vulnerable to an array of spells because, if a witch like, say, *me*, doesn't know your background, she can accidentally poison you."

"Well, now you know who I am and you will not do that again."

Raising her chin, she met him head on. Why wasn't she intimidated by him?

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. Now that I know who you are, I could have you on your knees in seconds."

He stepped forward and leaned down. Way down, until he was inches from her face. "I'd rather see *you* on *your* knees, witch." Good God. Why the fuck had he said that.

"Well, that's never going to happen, wizard. I don't suck dog cock."

"Sweetheart, I promise you'd do it. And like it."

"Don't fuck with me, you overgrown lug. I have power over you."

He got even closer. "Is that so?"

"Totally."

He grabbed her. He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her against his body. And she was on him, clinging to his body like an oyster to a rock. He kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, and she

wrapped her legs around his hips. She kissed him back, using as much force as he did. He groaned as she clutched at him tighter. Her breasts were small and firm against his chest—his cock was hard against her sex.

He wanted her.

When he pulled back her eyes drifted slowly open. She looked dazed. Good. He'd finally knocked that cocky expression off her face.

"You sure you don't want to get on your knees, witch?"

Her eyes cleared, but she didn't climb off of him. "Quite sure. I don't like you. One bit." And she kissed him again. This time he held her closer, grinding against her so she felt exactly how hard his *dog cock* actually was.

She moaned into his mouth before finally tearing herself away. "This proves nothing. I still have power over you." But her voice was breathy. "Total power over you."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. And if I do, that could mean others do too." Her expression softened. "And if anyone hurts you, I can help."

"But that won't happen, will it? I've survived this long, just fine. Until I met you, that is. And you're the only one who knows my background, so there's no problem."

"Yeah, about that..."

He stilled. "About what?"

She looked past his shoulder. "Um..."

"Lucy. You are the only one who knows about this, right?"

"Well, I may have told a few people."

"What? When?"

"Um, when you were in the cockpit talking to Harry?"

He dropped her. "You what?" He tried not to roar, but the wind that blew a few of her stray hairs implied he hadn't succeeded.

"I may have sent a text to a couple of people."

Everything in him went cold. "A couple of people."

"I had to, it's part of my oath."

"Your oath?"

"As a witch. We have oaths, ya know. Rules to live by. Codes of conduct. Things like that."

"So. Now all the witches know who I am?" He was going to ring her tiny neck.

"Probably not yet," she said. "But soon."

Running a hand through his hair, he turned away. "I don't fucking believe this."

"If you would have just been honest from the start this never would have happened."

He whipped back around, and, to his satisfaction, she actually cowered a bit. Good. “If you hadn’t *secretly drugged me* this never would have happened.”

“Yeah. Can we not mention that part to anyone? It’s kinda against my oath.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“Sorry?”

“Not yet. But you will be.”

“Don’t bully me.”

“You will fix this,” he stated.

“I can’t undo the information. It’s already out there. But don’t worry. Most witches are good and won’t use this against you.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really, we’re quite a nice bunch, once you get to know us.”

He loomed over her but she didn’t step back. “Witch. You don’t get it. If this leaks back to Ireland, it could be devastating.”

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic.”

“Tell that to the coven in Europe who’s been hunting my family for centuries!”

“Centuries?” she squeaked.

“Yes, centuries. Lots of them!”

“Oh no.”

He just shook his head, feeling the shaggy strands of his hair on his shoulders. The back of his neck was prickling, and he was fighting the change hard. Anger boiled through him, and his teeth ached with the need to sharpen.

“I can help you,” she said.

“How? Do you have some vampires you want to call? ‘Cause they’re a lot of fun too. Almost as fun as burning in hell.”

“No, not vampires. I don’t care for them much either.”

“Good God, witch. I really do want to throttle you.”

But she’d walked away and was grabbing a coat and scarf off a rack near the door. “No time for that. We need to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with an evil witch like you.”

“You don’t have a choice, wizard. You’re coming with me.”

“Where?” he asked dubiously.

Sliding into her coat, she met his gaze. “To Madam Cherry.”

“Madam Cherry?” Was he dreaming? This had to be a dream.

“Yes. Come one. We’re going to consult The Deviants.”

After a minute, he followed. After all, what choice did he have?

As they were about to go through the door, she turned and faced him. "What's your name, anyway? I can't just call you the chief."

"Ardara," he said. "Ardara Cladough Phaiden Ó Nuallain."

"Okay, Ardara. Let's go."

About the Author

Lilli Feisty expected to write typical boy-meets-girl tales. But so often the characters wanted to be tied up by each other. Lilli had to oblige. Her love of writing spicy romance evolved, and next thing she knew, she was published. Her first erotic novella was released in March 2007, and she's been consistently pursuing her passion ever since.

Lilli was born in the San Francisco Bay Area. She spent the majority of her twenties working just enough to pay for extended trips to Europe. Some of her fascinating employment titles included makeup artist, secretary, and perpetual student. She owned an art gallery for several years, holds a degree in Creative Arts and was just a thesis short of her MA when she decided to drop out of school to write romance.

For more fascinating Feisty information go to www.lillianfeisty.com

Her darkest fantasies are about to come true...

Reinventing Jane Porter

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Jane Porter Series, Book 3

Jane's weekend of mind-blowing sex is drawing to a close. Only one event remains—a masquerade ball. Her masters, Antonio and Santos, will be her escorts, but the party isn't the only item on their agenda. They plan to show her what it really means to live the life of a prized submissive.

After tasting the heady decadence of true sexual freedom, Jane wonders if she can ever go back to her everyday life—or if Beauty will, finally and permanently, be freed from her shell.

Then there's the issue of a former lover lurking in the wings...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Reinventing Jane Porter:

"My heart wasn't broken."

His brow rose.

Busted.

"You're not a very good liar." The corner of his mouth hitched.

"Pfffft." Jane rolled her eyes. "You and Lily must've been talking behind my back."

"It didn't take more than an hour in your company to know you don't fit the profile of a woman who attends an affair such as this, *Belleza*." He shook his head. "Contrary to the signal you're putting out, you're not looking to scratch an itch."

Now it was her turn to be surprised. While she'd spent the entire day with Santos and Antonio, their conversations had been limited thanks to their sexual gymnastics.

"You're very astute, but I'm not looking for a permanent relationship." She reached for another pin.

"Maybe not right now, but that is your ultimate desire."

"Which makes me no different than most of the people here this weekend."

"Trust me," his voice dropped. "You are like none other."

"So you've been thinking about me." She began to smile. "That makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

"I can't speak for Santos, but you've been the only thing on my mind since you walked into the ballroom."

"Right..."

Capturing her chin, he forced her to look at him. The look in his eye told her he was serious. Her palms began to sweat.

"I was in the gallery overlooking the ballroom when you walked in on Jean Jacques' arm. Your beautiful hair drew my attention." He twined an errant curl around one finger. "But it was your smile that held me captive."

Quivering, she held her breath as he caressed the curve of her cheek. Her nipples hardened when he stroked her lower lip with his thumb. Her breathing deepened.

"You were looking at Jean Jacques as if he'd set the sun in the sky. You were unguarded, open." His fingers traced an imaginary line along her jaw leaving only goose bumps behind.

"There was nothing false or rehearsed about you. It was a private moment between two friends, not meant to be witnessed by the man soon to become your lover."

Through her cotton chemise he touched her right nipple. Back and forth he stroked until the tip was visible beneath the thin material.

"Seeing your body and the way you moved made me ache. Confident, sexy." His hand landed on her thigh. "You have the envious figure of a mature woman. Full breasts, hips and those long beautiful legs. All I wanted was to feel your legs locked around me." His smiled. "Or over my shoulders as I licked your sweet *coño*."

A fine sheen of sweat dampened her skin. Listening to him left Jane's body on fire. Her pussy throbbed and against her hip his cock throbbed. Much more of this and she'd come without her *coño* even coming out to play. Gently, he began stroking her thigh with his thumb.

"But you probably knew that."

His faint smile held just a touch of shyness, leaving Jane with the urge to give him a big hug...before throwing him to the ground and fucking him into unconsciousness.

"No, I didn't."

"I've attended a few scenes—"

"Only a few?"

"—and I've learned most people are here for two reasons." His gaze moved over her face as if he was committing it to memory. "For some it's what they do. Like butterflies they move from one event to the next, and their list of lovers is extensive. Their goal is to come as much as possible and avoid emotional entanglement while doing so. Sex is their hobby, a diversion from their daily lives."

His other hand landed on her lower back. The warmth of his palm seared her skin. She felt surrounded by him, wrapped in a thick blanket of male appreciation. More than ever she felt the pull of his personality, his desire for her, and Jane wanted nothing more than to answer his call.

"On rare occasions I've met women similar to you. Beautiful, mature and confident, you know yourself and your place in the world." He shrugged. "Most women think being sexy means showing their *pechos* and the men come running..."

"Some do." Jane gestured toward her breasts. "We don't call them the orbs of power for nothing."

The best laid plans can come back to bite you in the ass...

Whatever It Takes

© 2009 Sydney Somers

Spellbound, Book 3

Government Operative Gideon Bishop thrives on high-risk situations, but even his most volatile mission is nothing compared to coming face-to-face with his past. He's spent the last four years trying to forget Tate Calder and their scorching affair, but the only way to get the information he needs is to keep her close—and keep his hands off her. Because the only thing riskier than protecting a woman who insists on hiding the truth is giving in to the attraction that still crackles between them.

All Tate wants is a quiet holiday with zero interruptions from her family, and even fewer from the witches' council bent on recruiting her. Instead, she finds herself on the run from lethal mercenaries and the police with the one man she never expected to see again. To protect her family's secrets, she'll do whatever it takes to keep Gideon from learning the truth.

Even if it means risking her heart to seduce him—over and over again.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Whatever It Takes:

Tate craned her neck for any glimpse of flashing lights through the rear windshield. The only thing worse than fleeing a murder scene would be getting caught in the act.

“Turn left.”

Gideon jammed the pedal to the floor and shifted as they swung around the corner and up a narrow driveway.

“Around back.” She pointed to the far side of the white building without taking her eyes off the road behind them. Even if someone had noticed what direction they fled in, no one knew what car they were driving. Still, a car like this got noticed and it was just a matter of time before it garnered the wrong kind of interest.

When he pulled up alongside a parked tractor-trailer, she climbed out of the car and jogged to the small garage a few feet away.

She held the closed padlock in her hand. “*Patefacio.*”

When the lock disengaged, she pushed the double doors open and motioned for him to drive inside. With the car parked, he slid from the vehicle, no longer masking his pain as well as before.

She used the inside door connected to the clinic, pausing to enter the security code before proceeding.

“This is a vet's office,” he said, scanning the pet care posters and shelves packed with vet-recommended food.

Tate shrugged. “I did suggest a real hospital, but you passed.”

He followed her into one of the rear exam rooms which had windows facing the ocean. Should anyone pass by this way they wouldn't notice any lights on inside and get curious. Since the body count had doubled, she imagined few of Les's men would be getting much sleep tonight.

"Take a seat."

He didn't move past the doorway, instead watching her root through drawers for the necessary supplies. "You pull a lot of bullets out of people?"

Unsure if he asked because he could see her hands shaking, she countered with, "Do you put that many in people?" She regretted the question almost instantly, certain she didn't really want to know the answer. Talking might keep her from thinking about what she had to do, but there had to be smarter topics than his bullet-to-kill ratio.

He hadn't elaborated on what he did for the government, so either he was lying about that to begin with or he worked for some branch of the CIA or another obscure agency.

As if the whole situation could feel any more surreal.

She motioned to the stuff she'd laid out. "What else do I need?"

"Besides a medical degree?" He surveyed everything with no small amount of skepticism.

"Take off your shirt."

"How about we slow down for a second, Florence Nightingale."

She scowled at the second crack about her on-the-fly nursing skills, but noticed he sounded more strained than before.

"Take off your shirt," she repeated. "I'll be right back." She ventured down the hall until she came to the office. In its usual cupboard, she withdrew the bottle of whiskey Lena kept here for her husband. The older couple were friends of her father's and the reason she'd fallen in love with living on the island to begin with.

She stopped, glanced at the phone. Hesitating another moment, she snatched it up and punched in Sawyer's number.

"Not a good idea."

She jumped as Gideon's hand closed over hers. He replaced the phone, but didn't back off when she turned around. She flattened a palm on the desk, needing all the support she could muster with Gideon breathing down her neck—literally. While she had always been able to hold her own with her brother and cousins, she didn't know how much fight she had left in her tonight.

"If I don't let my family know I'm okay, they'll go on the warpath."

He gave her a doubtful look.

"You don't know my family." Or the Tribunal.

"You can call them when we're off the island," he conceded.

"That won't be until morning."

“And there’s no way to know how long these guys have been interested in you. We can’t rule out the possibility they’ve already done their homework and know who in your family to watch.”

She frowned. “Now you’re talking like more than a couple guys are involved in this.”

“Maybe. Maybe not, but we’re better off not taking that kind of chance.”

“Okay,” she managed, though if a phone call was out, that meant she’d have to wait for an opportunity to make a personal visit without Gideon knowing.

He opened his mouth, but she shook her head. “If you’re about to say that I need to trust you, save your breath.”

A half smile caught the corner of his mouth, and she realized he had stripped off his shirt. The bandage wrapped around his biceps was dark red, and she couldn’t help but wonder how the night would have turned out if the bullet had struck another few inches to left.

“Hey.”

Between his soothing tone and proximity, she should have known better than to raise her head and meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry you got caught up in this, Tate.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll figure this out and you can get back to your life.”

“And pretend none of this happened?” Pretend her friend hadn’t been murdered today? The excitement of the last hour caught up with her, piling on top of everything else the last twelve hours had delivered, and a tear slipped down her cheek.

She reached up to brush it away, but Gideon beat her to it. Instead of his using his hand, he caught the tear with his lips.

A shockwave rippled through her, the sensation intensifying the longer his lips lingered against her skin. His mouth moved lower, but before he could reach her lips, a creak sounded in the hall.

Gideon whipped around so fast her head spun, his gun in his hand and pointed at the silhouette standing in the doorway.

“Someone want to tell me what the hell is going on in here?”



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